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SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

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SPORT SPONSORSHIPS AND EFFECTS ON EMPLOYEES IN SPONSOR CORPORATIONS

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SUMMARY

This doctoral study investigates how corporate sport sponsorship influences employees' attitudes and behavioural intentions within organisations that provide sponsoring. While the majority of sponsorship research has traditionally focused on consumer-related outcomes, this research shifts the analytical lens inwards by examining employees as critical internal stakeholders. Grounded in Social Identity Theory, Signalling Theory, and Weick's Sensemaking Theory, the study explains how employees cognitively interpret their company's sponsorship practices and the way these interpretations shape organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay.

A comprehensive review of the literature on sponsorship and organisational behaviour informed the development of two research questions. To answer these questions, and drawing on the literature, a model was constructed to explain how employees' general beliefs and attitudes regarding corporate sponsorship influence employee outcomes and behaviours. The research design employed a mixed-methods approach. The qualitative phase comprised 17 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior executives. The interviews were transcribed, translated, and analysed using NVivo, enabling the identification of key themes related to sponsorship goals, sensemaking processes, decision-making routines, evaluation mechanisms, and success factors. These qualitative insights were used to refine the constructs and assured strong contextual validity.

Analysis of the qualitative data helped with refining the survey research methodology. In the subsequent stage, a survey methodology was implemented. A pilot study involving 183 participants was first conducted, and the findings were used to refine the survey instrument (twelve items were removed). Following the pilot study, the main study was conducted as an online survey distributed to employees through the internal communication channels of ten participating sponsor companies in Slovenia. The quantitative phase employed a large-scale survey with 499 usable responses. After pilot testing and instrument purification, the data were analysed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were rigorously assessed, confirming the robustness of the measurement and structural models.

The qualitative findings provide the primary lens for understanding the internal dynamics of sport sponsorship. Senior executives consistently portrayed sponsorship as a strategic platform for internal branding, identity construction, and organisational storytelling rather than as a short-term marketing expense. Executives consistently described sponsorship as a vehicle for articulating corporate values, shaping organisational narratives, and fostering a shared meaning among employees. The findings also indicate that decision-making and evaluation processes play a pivotal role in sponsorship success. Leadership commitment, cross-departmental collaboration, and systematic appraisal mechanisms were identified as

critical enablers. These insights are subsequently reinforced by the quantitative findings, which empirically demonstrate that employees' awareness and perceived effectiveness of sponsorship activities shape employee outcomes along two distinct pathways: awareness is associated with organisational identification and perceived effectiveness with employer brand image, both of which predict intention to stay.

Based on structural equation modelling with a sample of 499 employees, the quantitative analysis reveals that Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) significantly enhance Organisational Identification (OI), while Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) significantly strengthens Employer Brand Image (EBI). The measurement and structural models demonstrated acceptable fit indices, confirming the proposed model's adequacy. Both mediating constructs are strongly associated with intention to stay. Organisational Identification significantly predicts Intention to Stay (ITS), while Employer Brand Image is the strongest predictor of Intention to Stay. Finally, multigroup analysis reveals significant differences in the strength of structural paths between the benchmark organisation and the group for comparison, indicating that the impact of sponsorship on employee outcomes is context-dependent and subject to how deeply sponsorship is embedded within the organisation's systems.

Together, the findings reinforce the view that sponsorship becomes impactful only when it is institutionally embedded within the corporate strategy and internal communication systems. The study makes several theoretical contributions. The primary contribution of this study is the support it provides for the argument that the employees of a corporate sponsor constitute a non-external audience whose attitudes and behaviours are influenced by the sponsorship activities. From a managerial perspective, the findings provide actionable guidance for organisations seeking to leverage sponsorship to create internal value. In conclusion, this study provides compelling evidence that sport sponsorship is not merely an external marketing investment, but a powerful internal strategic mechanism capable of reshaping how employees perceive, identify with, and commit to their organisations. This dissertation offers a comprehensive, theory-driven explanation of the way sport sponsorship functions as a powerful internal mechanism that impacts employee identity, employer brand perceptions, and retention, thereby redefining sponsorship as a core element of organisational strategy rather than a peripheral marketing tool.

KEY WORDS: Corporate Sports Sponsorship; Employee Attitudes and Behaviours; Organisational Identification; Employer Brand Image; Intention to Stay; Sensemaking Theory; Human Resource Management (HRM)

POVZETEK

V svoji doktorski disertaciji raziskujem, kako korporativna športna sponzorstva vplivajo na stališča in vedenjske namere zaposlenih v sponzorskih organizacijah. Medtem ko se je večina dosedanjih raziskav sponzorstev tradicionalno osredotočala na učinke na strani potrošnikov, ta raziskava analitični fokus usmerja navznoter in obravnava zaposlene kot ključne interne deležnike. Raziskava, utemeljena na Teoriji socialne identitete, Teoriji signaliziranja in Weickovi teoriji ustvarjanja pomenov (Sensemaking), pojasnjuje, kako zaposleni kognitivno interpretirajo sponzorske prakse in kako te interpretacije oblikujejo organizacijsko identifikacijo, zaznano podobo znamke delodajalca ter namero ostanka v organizaciji.

Celovit pregled literature s področja sponzorstev in organizacijskega vedenja je predstavljal osnovo za oblikovanje dveh raziskovalnih vprašanj. Na tej podlagi in ob upoštevanju obstoječe literature je bil razvit konceptualni model, ki pojasnjuje, kako splošna prepričanja in stališča zaposlenih do korporativnih sponzorstev vplivajo na njihove izide in vedenja. Raziskovalni načrt je temeljil na mešanem metodološkem pristopu. Kvalitativna faza je obsegala 17 poglobljenih polstrukturiranih intervjujev z višjimi vodstvenimi delavci. Intervjuji so bili prepisani, prevedeni in analizirani s pomočjo programa NVivo, kar je omogočilo identifikacijo ključnih tem, povezanih s cilji sponzorstev, procesi oblikovanja pomenov, rutinami odločanja, mehanizmi evalvacije in dejavniki uspešnosti. Ti kvalitativni vpogledi so prispevali k izpopolnitvi konstruktov in zagotovili visoko kontekstualno veljavnost raziskave.

Analiza kvalitativnih podatkov je omogočila nadaljnje izboljšave anketne metodologije. V naslednji fazi je bila izvedena kvantitativna raziskava. Najprej je bila izvedena pilotska študija z 183 udeleženci, na podlagi katere je bil anketni instrument prečiščen (odstranjenih je bilo dvanajst postavk). Po pilotski fazi je bila glavna raziskava izvedena s spletno anketo, razdeljeno zaposlenim prek internih komunikacijskih kanalov desetih sodelujočih sponzorskih podjetij v Sloveniji. Kvantitativna faza je vključevala obsežno anketo s 499 veljavnimi odgovori. Po pilotnem testiranju in čiščenju instrumentov so bili podatki analizirani z uporabo preiskovalne faktorske analize (EFA), potjevalne faktorske analize (CFA) in modeliranja strukturnih enačb (SEM). Zanesljivost, konvergentna veljavnost in diskriminantna veljavnost so bile strogo preverjene, kar je potrdilo robustnost merskih in strukturnih modelov.

Kvalitativne ugotovitve predstavljajo temeljno izhodišče za razumevanje notranje dinamike športnih sponzorstev. Višji vodstveni delavci so sponzorstva dosledno opisovali kot strateško platformo za notranje znamčenje, oblikovanje identitete in organizacijsko pripovedništvo, ne pa kot kratkoročni marketinški strošek. Sponzorstva so bila predstavljena kot sredstvo za izražanje korporativnih vrednot, oblikovanje organizacijskih pripovedi in ustvarjanje skupnega pomena med zaposlenimi. Ugotovitve dodatno kažejo, da imajo

procesi odločanja in evalvacije ključno vlogo pri uspešnosti sponzorstev. Kot ključni omogočevalci uspeha so bili identificirani vodstvena zavezanost, medoddelčno sodelovanje in sistematični mehanizmi ocenjevanja. Te ugotovitve dodatno potrjujejo kvantitativni rezultati, ki empirično dokazujejo, da zavedanje zaposlenih o sponzorstvih, in zaznana učinkovitost sponzorskih aktivnosti pomembno vplivajo na organizacijsko identifikacijo, podobo znamke delodajalca in namero zaposlenih, da ostanejo v organizaciji.

Kvantitativna analiza, izvedena s pomočjo modeliranja strukturnih enačb na vzorcu 499 zaposlenih, razkriva, da zavedanje in poznavanje sponzorstev (Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge – SAK) statistično značilno krepi organizacijsko identifikacijo (Organizational Identification – OI), medtem ko zaznana učinkovitost sponzorstev (Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness – PSE) pomembno krepi podobo znamke delodajalca (Employer Brand Image – EBI). Merski in strukturni modeli so izkazali sprejemljive kazalnike prileganja, kar potrjuje ustreznost predlaganega modela. Strukturne povezave kažejo, da SAK statistično značilno vpliva na OI. Oba posredovalna konstrukta močno vplivata na namero ostati v organizaciji. Organizacijska identifikacija pomembno napoveduje namero ostati v organizaciji (Intention to Stay – ITS), medtem ko je podoba znamke delodajalca najmočnejši napovednik namere ostati v organizaciji. Nadalje analiza več skupin razkriva statistično značilne razlike v jakosti strukturnih povezav med referenčno organizacijo in primerjalno skupino, kar kaže, da so učinki sponzorstva na izide zaposlenih odvisni od konteksta in stopnje institucionalne vpetosti sponzorstva v organizacijske sisteme.

Skupaj ugotovitve potrjujejo stališče, da športna sponzorstva postanejo učinkovita šele, ko so institucionalno vgrajena v korporativno strategijo in sisteme interne komunikacije. Raziskava prispeva več pomembnih teoretičnih prispevkov. Osrednji prispevek študije je empirična potrditev teze, da zaposleni v sponzorskih podjetjih predstavljajo ne-zunanjo ciljno javnost, katere stališča in vedenja so pomembno oblikovana s sponzorskimi aktivnostmi. Z managerskega vidika raziskava ponuja uporabne usmeritve za organizacije, ki želijo sponzorstva izkoristiti za ustvarjanje interne vrednosti. Sklepno ta študija ponuja prepričljive dokaze, da športna sponzorstva niso zgolj zunanja marketinška naložba, temveč močan interni strateški mehanizem, ki lahko preoblikuje zaznave zaposlenih, njihovo identifikacijo z organizacijo in njihovo zavezanost. Disertacija tako ponuja celovito, teoretično utemeljeno razlago delovanja športnih sponzorstev kot pomembnega notranjega mehanizma, ki oblikuje identiteto zaposlenih, zaznano podobo delodajalca in namero ostanka ter s tem ponovno opredeljuje sponzorstvo kot pomemben element organizacijske strategije in ne zgolj kot obrobno marketinško orodje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: korporativna športna sponzorstva; stališča in vedenje zaposlenih; organizacijska identifikacija; podoba znamke delodajalca; namera ostati v organizaciji; teorija ustvarjanja pomenov; menedžment človeških virov (MČV)

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGFI	Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index
AIC	Akaike Information Criterion
AMOS	Analysis of Moment Structures
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
BTS	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
CMV	Common Method Variance
CR	Composite Reliability
C.R.	Critical Ratio
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DV	Dependent Variable
EBI	Employer Brand Image
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
EP	Employee Pride
ECVI	Expected Cross-Validation Index
GFI	Goodness of Fit Index
HTMT	Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio
HLM	Hierarchical Linear Modelling
HRM	Human Resource Management
IFI	Incremental Fit Index
IMC	Integrated Marketing Communication
IV	Independent Variable
KMO	Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy
MGA	Multi-Group Analysis
ML	Maximum Likelihood
NVivo	Qualitative Data Analysis Software
OI	Organisational Identification
PCA	Principal Component Analysis
PSE	Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness
P-value	Probability Value
ITS	Intention to Stay
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
RMR	Root Mean Square Residual
SAK	Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
SLIM	Sponsorship-Linked Internal Marketing
SPQL / SQlP	Sponsorship Quality Perception

SPQN / SQnP	Sponsorship Quantity Perception
SRMR	Standardised Root Mean Square Residual
TLI	Tucker–Lewis Index
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor
USC	Use of Social Commerce
Z-score	Standardised Score

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Research

Corporate sports sponsorship has been continuously moving towards becoming a strategic business tool. Its multifaceted traits keep influencing the internal dynamics of the sponsoring firms, even far beyond the brand publicity or public engagement. By associating their brand with popular sports teams or events, companies can alter the way they are perceived by typical consumers (Zdravkovic & Till, 2012), ultimately producing an effect on their internal employees' attitudes and behaviour (Javalgi et al., 1994). In business studies, examining the impact of such sponsorships on the attitudes and behaviours of employees within the sponsoring company reveals significant benefits for the organisation (Javalgi et al., 1994). This relationship encompasses increased employee pride, job satisfaction, and loyalty, along with heightened engagement and identification with the organisation. Moreover, aligning sponsorship activities with corporate values and culture can reinforce positive internal perceptions and foster a sense of community and involvement among employees (Trägårdh & Jönsson, 2003).

By examining the relationship between corporate sports sponsorship and organisation-embedded attitudes and behaviours of employees, we can determine how such initiatives influence various aspects of the employee experience. Such exploration includes understanding the nature and benefits of corporate sports sponsorship, the key attitudes and behaviours it affects, and the specific impacts on employee organisational identification, pride, perception of the employer’s brand and intention to stay. In addition, we observe how sponsorship activities align with corporate culture and values, enhance internal communication and marketing, and provide opportunities for the development of skills and networking. Through case studies and empirical research among ten Slovenian private corporations, we highlight the strategic implications for businesses and offer insights into best practices for leveraging sponsorships to foster a more engaged, satisfied and loyal workforce. To comprehensively understand the effects on internal employees, it is essential to first examine the processes underlying decision-making factors and the sponsorship mechanisms that influence decision-makers while assessing potential sponsorship opportunities.

1.2 Types of Corporate Sports Sponsorship

Sports sponsorship by corporations is considered to entail strategic partnerships. A company provides financial or in-kind support to an athlete, sports team, event or organisation (Bello, 2016) in exchange for promotional benefits, such as brand visibility, advertising opportunities, and positive brand association with the sport (Ratković, 2023). The benefits or impacts of sponsorship largely depend upon what type of sponsorship, for example, team,

event, or individual athlete sponsorship (Berrett & Slack, 1999), that a company is opting for. Team sponsorship by a company involves a business providing financial support, products or services to a sports team in exchange for various promotions and the associated benefits. Adidas provides the team's kits and has a considerable branding presence (Wildfeuer, 2018). Overall, team sponsorship is a mutually beneficial arrangement that helps companies enhance their brand visibility and reputation while providing sports teams with essential resources and financial support (Bloxsome et al., 2011).

Title sponsorship, in contrast, is where the sponsor's name is integrated into an event's name, providing maximum brand visibility (O'Reilly et al., 2019). One example is the "BNP Paribas Open" tennis tournament (Sağlam, 2016). Presenting sponsorship is a type in which the sponsor is recognised as the presenting sponsor, often with the words "presented by" being added to the event name; for example, the "Rose Bowl Game presented by Northwestern Mutual" (Jensen & Cornwell, 2017).

Exclusive sponsorship is a type of sponsorship whereby the sponsor is the exclusive provider of products or services within their category at the event, such as Coca-Cola being the exclusive beverage sponsor of the FIFA World Cup (Coburn & Mccafferty, 2017). Another practised, yet the least studied, type of sponsorship is when the sponsor is recognised as an official partner, gaining significant branding opportunities and involvement in event activities, for example, Visa as an official partner of the Olympic Games (Fuchs & Bodet, 2020). With the in-kind type of sponsorship, the sponsor provides products/services instead of or alongside financial support (Carrillat & d'Astous, 2012; Kiraguri, 2007); for instance, a technology company that supplies equipment and support for the event's digital infrastructure.

Individual sponsorship by a company involves it supporting an athlete financially or materially in exchange for promotional benefits (Wagner, 2016). This type of sponsorship focuses on leveraging the athlete's popularity, achievements, and public persona to enhance the sponsor's brand (Sukma & Ariyani, 2024). A long-term endorsement deal with Nike led to the LeBron James signature shoe line (Morones, 2003). Wilson sponsors Serena Williams by supplying her with tennis equipment and featuring her in promotional campaigns (Ifekwunigwe, 2008).

Corporate sponsorship of sports events involves businesses providing financial support, products or services to sports events in exchange for promotional benefits (Nuseir, 2020). Such sponsorship is a strategic marketing tool that helps companies enhance their brand visibility, reputation, and customer engagement while supporting the success and reach of a sports event (Ko et al., 2016; Slåtten et al., 2017). Pepsi sponsors the halftime show, gaining extensive brand exposure during one of the most-watched TV events in the USA (Levy, 2016; Russell et al., 2003). Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) is the title sponsor of the New York City Marathon, and benefits from the global exposure and association with this prestigious event (Footprint, 2018; Rajeev, 2023).

Field sponsorship refers to the display of a logo on sports equipment or billboards at a sports venue (Quester & Bal, 2013).

Broadcast sponsorship entails a corporation offering financial backing for the transmission of a given sports event in return for promotional benefits. Such sponsorship guarantees that the sponsor's brand is displayed prominently during television or online streaming of the event. Television broadcast sponsorship typically offers an extensive audience reach, frequent brand impressions, adaptable advertising formats, and comprehensive performance metrics, in turn serving as an effective instrument for increasing large-scale brand visibility and engagement (Lardinoit et al., 1998; Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001).

Corporate sports sponsorship should not be confused with advertisements (Hoek et al., 1997) as it varies from the latter in a number of ways, involving an indirect strategy to secure customer attention. Sponsoring firms that portray a sports-supportive image earn customers' goodwill and loyalty (Smolianov & Shilbury, 2005). By establishing an association with sports, companies indirectly accomplish their marketing objectives. Unlike advertisements, corporate sponsorships are often long-term, lasting for one or multiple seasons, achieving sustained brand visibility and a deeper association with the sport/event (Cheong et al., 2018). They follow the strategy of Return on Investment (ROI), which is measured by brand visibility, engagement metrics, fan loyalty, and long-term brand equity (Masterman, 2007). In contrast, advertisements are evaluated based on direct metrics such as impressions, clicks, likes, conversions, and sales data, which offer more immediate feedback on their effectiveness (Bala & Verma, 2018). Foremost, advertisements are invariably aimed at external audiences, whereas sponsorships can also be oriented to internal audiences. A good example of the latter is sponsorship-linked internal marketing (Varey, 1995).

1.3 Roles of Managers and Directors

Decision-makers influence corporate sports sponsorship through strategic planning, financial oversight, risk management, contract negotiation, stakeholder engagement, implementation, monitoring, and support for CSR initiatives (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014). Their ability to align sponsorships with business objectives, manage risks and foster collaborative relationships is crucial for maximising the benefits of sports sponsorship for the organisation (Farrelly et al., 2006; Henseler et al., 2011). Decision-makers ensure that a given sponsorship is consistent with the company's broader marketing strategy and business objectives. They set clear goals for what sponsorship should achieve, such as brand awareness, customer engagement, or market penetration (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014).

Decision-makers evaluate whether the sport, team, or event aligns with the brand’s identity, values, and target audience (Jensen & Cornwell, 2017). They make sure that sponsorship enhances the brand image and does not conflict with the company's values or other marketing initiatives. They are also tasked with the allocation and approval of budgets for sponsorship

agreements. It is imperative to assure the investment is justified by potential returns and in harmony with the overall marketing budget. Metrics for determining the return on investments in sponsorships must be clearly defined. In addition, an analysis of potential financial outcomes should be conducted, encompassing both direct revenue impacts and intangible benefits, such as brand loyalty and awareness (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014). Decision-makers engage in negotiations on the terms of a sponsorship agreement with the sponsor, covering aspects such as duration, exclusivity and deliverables. They ensure the contract incorporates terms advantageous to the company and includes explicit exit clauses (Chadwick & Thwaites, 2005). Moreover, the decision-making processes undertaken by managers/directors are shaped by their perceptions of the potential impact on the organisation's internal employees (Wilson et al., 2013).

While discussing the role of decision-makers, Weick's theory on sensemaking emphasises how internal employees interpret and create meaning from their firm's sponsorship (Djaballah et al., 2016). In this context, decision-makers play a key role in facilitating this process by helping employees and stakeholders appreciate the value of a sports sponsorship through effective communication and storytelling. They construct narratives that align the sponsorship with the organisation's goals, guiding how the sponsorship is perceived internally and externally. Such sponsorship is frequently characterised by uncertainty, including fluctuations in team performance and market reactions. Managers involved in the sponsorship decision-making process must address such unpredictability by providing frameworks and strategies that assist employees and stakeholders with understanding the sponsorship's impact and relevance. Effective sense-making by these managers leads to a cohesive understanding of the sponsorship's role, adding to employee engagement, brand alignment, and strategic coherence.

From a marketing perspective, as described in Weick's narrative, decision-makers employ sports sponsorship as a strategic marketing instrument within the framework of sense-making. They select sponsorship opportunities that are consistent with their brand values and target audience, in turn serving to reinforce brand identity and enhance market positioning. Through internal marketing initiatives, managers assure that employees comprehend and engage with the sponsorship. This internal alignment cultivates a sense of pride and connection with the brand, thereby boosting employee morale and commitment.

Wagner and Nissen (2015) offer a different view on sports sponsorship, stressing the role of organisational structure and strategic integration over individual sense-making processes. They argue that effective sports sponsorship requires formal integration into the organisational structure. Such a step involves clear roles, responsibilities and methods for managing sponsorships rather than relying solely on informal sense-making or marketing narratives. Their perspective emphasises aligning sports sponsorship with broader organisational strategies via formal mechanisms, such as dedicated sponsorship teams or departments. According to Wagner and Nissen (2015), managers should prioritise

quantifiable results over subjective sense-making and brand narratives. Moreover, their framework gives emphasis to structured evaluation processes to assess the effectiveness of a sponsorship. This includes setting clear objectives, measuring performance against these objectives, and using data-driven insights to guide future sponsorship decisions.

The role of decision-makers in sports sponsorship can be understood through both Weick's sensemaking framework and the structured approach proposed by Wagner and Nissen (2015). Weick's perspective highlights the importance of creating meaning, managing ambiguity, and using marketing to align a sponsorship with an organisation's goals. In contrast, Wagner and Nissen advocate a formalised approach that focuses on structured integration, measurable outcomes, and strategic alignment. Both perspectives provide valuable insights into the effective management of sports sponsorship, stressing the equilibrium between interpretive flexibility and strategic rigour. By integrating elements of both frameworks, managers can add to the efficacy of sports sponsorship, assuring there is alignment with the organisation's values while simultaneously achieving tangible business outcomes.

1.4 Objectives of Sports Sponsorship in the Corporate Sector

Corporate sponsorship of sports constitutes a highly effective marketing strategy, yielding considerable advantages for both the sponsoring entity and the sports event itself. Companies always pursue goals and objectives by sponsoring sports directly or indirectly (Copeland et al., 1996). The objectives of sports sponsorship can vary depending on a company's goals and the nature of the sponsorship (Abiodun, 2011). Objectives can also vary according to decision-making factors (Schönberner & Woratschek, 2022). The personal inclination of a firm's director or CEO towards sports may act as a catalyst for initiating a sports sponsorship. In certain instances, the objective of such sponsorship is to ensure compliance with policy. In addition, promoting the brand to an internal audience can be another goal of sports sponsorship. Regardless of the motivating factors, the objectives and mechanisms of a sponsorship are likely to influence the attitudes of internal employees of the sponsoring corporation (Batt et al., 2021). It is essential to comprehend the primary objectives and role of decision-makers in the context of corporate sports sponsorship.

Several common objectives are apparent in the literature, including brand awareness and visibility, brand reputation, adherence to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), customer loyalty and retention, marketing, business relations and networking, global reach and market access, brand differentiation, and engagement with the target audience, whether internal employees or an external population. Sports sponsorship is a powerful strategy for boosting brand awareness and visibility (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006). Brand awareness and visibility are achieved by way of increased exposure and massive recognition (Tsordia et al., 2017). Visibility is increased by the strategic display of logos and branding at sports events, on team uniforms, and via media coverage. Sports events attract substantial audiences both in person

and through various media channels. Prominent sporting events such as the Super Bowl, FIFA World Cup, and the Olympics garner billions of viewers globally. Even local and regional sports events command significant attention (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006). Such visibility is not limited to the duration of the event; it often extends both before and after the event via advertising, media coverage, and social media interactions (Radicchi, 2014).

Corporate sports sponsorship frequently serves as a vehicle for achieving CSR objectives (Buck et al., 2015). Associating with the positive attributes inherent in sports, such as community support, teamwork, excellence, and fair play, permits sponsoring organisations to cultivate a favourable brand image and reputation. CSR through sports sponsorship is a broadly adopted strategy among companies aiming to enhance the image of their brand, support community development, and promote healthy lifestyles (Miragaia et al., 2017). Notable examples include Nike, Adidas, McDonald's, BMW and Heineken, which have engaged in CSR initiatives through sports sponsorship (Meenaghan et al., 2013). These corporations leverage their sponsorships not only to augment brand visibility but to make positive societal contributions by promoting sports, health, and community well-being.

Another strategic aim of corporate sports sponsorship is to engage target audiences either demographically or by way of fan interaction (Walker & Kent, 2009). The ultimate purpose of sponsorship is to build brand awareness, foster customer loyalty, and promote positive brand associations (Biscaia et al., 2013; Madrigal, 2000). Companies attain brand loyalty and retention by building emotional connections with customers by supporting their favourite sports and teams (Mason, 2005). Customer retention is further increased by making sure sports events are memorable or positively associated with them (Schönberner & Woratschek, 2022). The creation of distinct and memorable sponsorship activations that leave a lasting impression on customers, or the integration of technology such as augmented reality or virtual reality into a sponsorship, can significantly add to customers' experiences and engagement with the brand. Employing these strategies allows companies to effectively utilise sports sponsorship to build strong emotional connections, offer exclusive value, and cultivate a sense of community and shared values, all of which contribute to greater customer loyalty and retention (Lee et al., 2013).

Some companies sponsor sports to achieve sustainable access to new markets (Dolphin, 2003), entailing a multifaceted objective that follows various techniques. Reaching specific demographics based on the subject sport's demographic, such as age, gender and interests, is the dominant technique (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Aligning with popular sports assures the brand is seen in contexts consumers are passionate about, increasing the likelihood of engagement (Papadimitriou & Apostolopoulou, 2009). Integrating sports sponsorship into promotional campaigns, such as limited-time offers, discounts and contests, can drive immediate sales. Offering product samples or integrating products into the sports experience (e.g., beverages at stadiums) can boost sales (Dees et al., 2022). Sponsorship of international sports events or teams can facilitate a brand's entry into and establishment within new

markets, while simultaneously adding to brand awareness. By aligning with a sport that possesses a broad and diverse fan base, a brand can expand its appeal across various consumer segments (Kim & Trail, 2011).

Product or service promotion is directly performed for a captive audience at sporting events (Dees et al., 2022). Sales are boosted through targeted promotions, discounts, and special offers related to a given sponsorship. The market for the products of sports sponsoring firms is expanded by branded merchandise (Almaiman et al., 2023): selling or giving away branded merchandise (e.g., jerseys, hats) at events builds brand visibility and loyalty. Brand differentiation is essential for achieving a competitive advantage as it enables a company to distinguish itself from its competitors by establishing a unique identity and value proposition. Differentiated brands frequently cultivate stronger brand equity (Alexander, 2009), thereby adding to their overall value and their resilience to market fluctuations.

Corporate sports sponsorship can also serve as a powerful tool for the growth of business-to-business relationships. Sports events often attract key decision-makers from various industries, providing opportunities for networking and relationship building (O'Reilly et al., 2011). Sponsoring major sports events or teams provides companies with visibility among a large audience, including potential business clients who share the same values (Morgan et al., 2014). Aligning sponsorships with industry trade shows and conferences boosts brand visibility in professional settings. Sports events provide informal settings for networking, allowing companies to connect with important decision-makers and industry influencers (Waśkowski, 2016).

In a bid to make positive connections with customers, firms largely rely on strengthening their links with sports (Kosík, 2011). Aligning with sports entities allows companies to target specific demographics, build a positive brand image, and create meaningful connections with their audiences (Ferrand & McCarthy, 2008). Nike has a long-term partnership with the NFL, providing uniforms, gear and apparel for all the teams (Li, 2023). Such visibility puts the Nike brand in front of millions of viewers during the games. As an official sponsor of the FIFA World Cup, Adidas gains global exposure during one of the most-watched sporting events in the world (Kang et al., 2012). Red Bull sponsors extreme sports events like the X Games, Formula 1 racing, and its own Red Bull Air Race, targeting young, adventurous audiences (Gorse et al., 2010).

Sponsorship provides distinctive marketing opportunities, including hospitality and direct engagement in sports activities. In the United States of America, the sports business industry has become a billion-dollar industry (Evans & Shapiro, 2024). The significant growth in sponsorship-based marketing generates substantial revenue by enhancing brand equity, customer retention, and employee loyalty. Sponsorship-linked internal marketing is primarily a co-objective of a firm's sports sponsorship, with the goal of engaging its internal audience (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020).

1.5 Previous Case Studies on Sports Sponsorship

Although a limited number of case studies specifically investigated the influence of sports sponsorship on the attitudes of employees of the sponsoring company, numerous examples and research studies demonstrate how sports sponsorship and related activities can impact various aspects of employee attitudes, including morale, engagement and loyalty. Coca-Cola is a long-running sponsor of the Olympic Games. Olympic sponsorship has helped it build a strong internal culture of pride and engagement, demonstrating how large-scale sports sponsorship can positively impact sponsoring companies' employee attitudes (Gavrilović et al., 2023). Coca-Cola uses the Olympics as an opportunity to engage employees globally through special events, internal campaigns, and game-related incentives (Bruhn & Rohlmann, 2024). Such sponsorship cultivates a sense of pride and connection among employees, many of whom express pride in being associated with a brand that supports such a prestigious global event. This association results in greater morale, a stronger sense of belonging, and a more positive attitude to the company. A pertinent example is Adidas which, by aligning its brand with the World Cup, has bolstered its employees' engagement and morale, thus illustrating how sports sponsorship can enhance internal culture and attitudes. As a major sponsor of FIFA and the World Cup, Adidas leverages its sponsorship to add to its employees' engagement and morale (Wilton & Biscoe, 2023). The company leverages the event as a way to foster unity among its global workforce by distributing branded merchandise, engaging employees in promotional activities, and organising internal events associated with the World Cup. Employees report feeling more connected to the brand during the World Cup period, with a sense of excitement and pride about being part of a company involved in one of the world's biggest sporting events (Wu et al., 2020). This sponsorship is also in harmony with Adidas' core values of sportsmanship and global reach, reinforcing positive employee attitudes.

Deloitte's sponsorship of the Paralympic Games exemplifies how sports sponsorships that align with a corporation's values can enhance employee pride, morale, and commitment to the organisation. Deloitte has been a sponsor of the Paralympic Games, using this partnership as a platform to engage its employees and reinforce the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion (Gillooly et al., 2017). Deloitte actively involves its employees in Paralympic-related activities, including volunteering and athlete support. Sponsorship exerts a substantial positive influence on employee attitudes, particularly by fostering a sense of pride and alignment with the organisation's values. Employees feel that the company's support of the Paralympics reflects its dedication to inclusivity and social responsibility, which resonates strongly with their own values (Bretherton et al., 2014). This has led to higher levels of engagement and loyalty among employees.

Similarly, Heineken has maintained a long-standing sponsorship of the UEFA Champions League, leveraging this partnership to engage with both consumers and employees. As part of its sponsorship initiatives, the company organises internal competitions, hosts viewing

parties, and distributes tickets to employees. Employees passionate about football feel a strong sense of pride and excitement during the Champions League season (Grimaldi, 2014). Internal activities related to the sponsorship also help build camaraderie and team spirit among the employees. Consequently, there is an increase in positive attitudes, morale and engagement within the company (Walraven, 2013). Heineken's use of its UEFA Champions League sponsorship to engage its employees illustrates the way sports sponsorship can be leveraged to add to internal culture and employee satisfaction.

1.6 Research Questions

Derived from the above introductory literature review, this thesis addresses the relationship between corporate sports sponsorship and organisation-embedded attitudes and behaviours of the employees of sponsoring firms by seeking to answer the following research questions and sub-questions:

1) *How do marketing directors and managers who are responsible for sponsoring make sense of sponsoring sports?*
a. *What are the mechanisms for enacting a sports sponsorship?*
2) *How does the mechanism of corporate sports sponsorship affect outcomes of the organisation's employees?*
a) *How does corporate sports sponsorship affect organisational identification?*
b) *What is the relationship between corporate sports sponsorship and the outcomes of the organisation's employees?*

1.7 Scope of the Research

Corporate sponsorship of sports is a widespread practice in the corporate sector that has an influence on both the internal and external environments of sponsoring organisations. Internally, the employees of a sponsoring firm are inevitably affected. This research aimed to elucidate the impact of corporate sports sponsorship on attitudes and behaviours of the organisation's employees. The dissertation in particular examines employees' perceptions and engagement with their company's sports sponsorship activities and the subsequent effects on organisational identification, employer brand image and intention to stay. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the presented study involved conducting personal interviews with 17 marketing and sponsorship managers from 17 prominent corporations that sponsor sports in Slovenia. Subsequently, a quantitative survey was administered to 499 employees from 10 of the 17 corporations.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine how corporate sport sponsorship influences the attitudes and behavioural intentions of employees of sponsoring organisations. The data collection was concentrated exclusively on internal organisational dynamics and employees' experiences. The findings of the research hold significant management implications across

a number of industries. Chiefly, the study offers guidance for human resource professionals for evaluating the internal benefits of sports sponsorship concerning its impact on employee behaviour. The results reveal a notable shift in employee cognition, with their perception, reasoning, communication and decision-making being influenced by their organisation's sports sponsorship. In addition, the research findings are advantageous for individuals in decision-making roles, providing new dimensions to consider prior to making decisions. Further, marketing managers can gain insights into employees' perceptions to more effectively leverage sports sponsorship as part of a broader brand strategy. The findings also bridge the gap between external marketing and internal effects on employees' attitudes, behaviours, and overall organisational performance. Nevertheless, this study has some limitations. It lacks geographical implications and does not identify the most popular sports for sponsorship within the study area. Local culture is also a significant factor in sports sponsorship decision-making, yet this study does not address its role. In summary, the presented research has enduring impacts on productivity, employee attachment to the organisation, and the boosted social prestige of firms engaged in sports sponsorship, notwithstanding the study's limitations in scope. Definitions of the key terms are provided in Appendix B.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Concept of Sponsorship

Sponsorship, when accurately conceptualised, is defined as "the provision of assistance in terms of either cash or kind to an activity by a commercial organization, with the aim of achieving commercial objectives" (Meenaghan, 1983). The effectiveness of sponsorship is contingent upon the environment in which it operates and the essential components of the sponsoring firms (Amis et al., 1999). It constitutes a strategic alliance (Cobbs & Groza, 2020) between two parties, wherein one party (the commercial organisation) provides resources such as funding, products, or services (Mccarville & Copeland, 1994) to another party (such as event organisers in education, science and technology, sports, or showbiz) in exchange for specific benefits. These benefits may include brand exposure, access to target audiences, or alignment with particular values or causes (Olkkonen, 2001). Sponsorship is distinct from donation or philanthropy as it typically involves mutual gain, with both the sponsor and the sponsored entity seeking measurable outcomes or returns.

The sponsorship process comprises two primary stages. The initial stage involves obtaining sponsorship rights by ensuring the alignment of objectives between the involved parties (Kończak, 2020). This acquisition of sponsorship rights necessitates several strategic steps to achieve congruence between the sponsoring entity and the sponsored organisation (Dróżdż, 2021; Khedir, 2018). The initial step involves defining explicit sponsorship objectives, such as enhancing brand awareness, targeting a specific demographic, or increasing sales. The second stage is the activation of sponsorship, which translates the contractual agreement into practical implementation. This stage begins with the development of a creative activation plan, thereby actualising the outcomes of the first stage while maintaining alignment with strategic objectives.

In recent years, a significant portion of corporate sponsorship has been allocated to sports sponsorship (Eagleman & Krohn, 2012). Industrialists distinguish sponsorship for philanthropic purposes from other forms of sponsorship (Mandrikov et al., 2020). The prevalence of sports sponsorship has increased due to its provision of a non-intrusive advertising environment (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). There has been a noticeable rise in the number of companies engaged in sponsorship activities, as well as in the financial investments made in sponsorship (Bruhn & Rohlmann, 2024; Hewlett et al., 2010). This trend is attributed to the ability of sports sponsorship to provide companies with a platform to enhance brand equity by associating with popular teams, athletes, and events that resonate with target audiences (Chanavat et al., 2010; Sibiya, 2019). Corporate sponsorship is a marketing strategy wherein a company provides support, either financially or in kind, to an event, individual, organisation, or activity, often within the realm of sports, in exchange for brand exposure and alignment with the objectives or audience of the sponsored entity (Bello, 2016; Cousens et al., 2006; Pope & Voges, 2000). This approach serves as a means for

businesses to enhance brand image, increase visibility, build consumer loyalty, and demonstrate corporate social responsibility (Cho & Kelly, 2013; Ratković, 2023). It is important to distinguish corporate sponsorship from donations because the former involves commercial agreements with anticipated mutual benefits (Wang et al., 2008).

Sports sponsorship offers distinct advantages for sponsoring corporations compared to other forms of sponsorship (Fahy et al., 2004). It allows for multiple points of entry into a property, facilitated by comprehensive negotiations (Renard & Sitz, 2011). Within a fixed budget, the sponsoring entity gains access to international markets through sports sponsorship (Fenton, 2009; Kwon & Shin, 2020). This form of sponsorship enhances brand exposure (Kwon & Shin, 2020) and sustains brand recall (Kwon & Shin, 2020). In addition, it publicises the organisation's policies. Sports sponsorship can also eliminate competition for the sponsoring organisation within a specific territory or location (Lei et al., 2010). By engaging customers, sports sponsorship facilitates future planning regarding product manufacturing and sales trends (Appiah Sarpong & Zungu, 2025). Moreover, involving employees in sports sponsorship activities strengthens internal communication, which positively influences the behaviour of the internal audience (Marjavaara & Nilsson, 2008).

2.2 Stakeholders in Sports Sponsorship

In recent years, corporate employees have emerged as significant stakeholders in the process of sports sponsorship (Miragaia et al., 2017). Stakeholders, defined as any individual or group affected by a company's objectives (Krstić, 2014), hold considerable importance in both inter- and intra-organisational activities (Ewing et al., 2002). Effective communication with these stakeholders has become a top priority due to their strategic role in the financial domains of companies (De Bussy et al., 2003). They serve as representatives of the company in society and convey societal perceptions back to the firm. As boundary-spanners, it is crucial to maintain communication with them, as they often function as internal customers of the organisation (Korschun, 2015). Their feedback on company policies can determine the success or failure of internal marketing efforts (Williams, 2012). In addition, their perception of the company's image is directly communicated to society. The cognitive skills of these stakeholders are of significant concern for the human resource department since the ultimate success of the firm largely depends on them, particularly the internal employees (Armstrong et al., 2011).

In summary, it is of significant concern how a firm's engagement in sports sponsorship may influence its internal employees and boundary spanners. Concurrently, sponsorship can serve as a means to positively convey the company's image to these boundary spanners (Mäkelä et al., 2019). Employees with an interest in sports are likely to develop a strong association with their firms through sports sponsorship (Hickman et al., 2005). It is the employees who, if they interpret their employer's sponsorship actions positively, can readily foster a positive attitude among their colleagues (Mlakar et al., 2024). Active participation

in sponsored events can assist employees in enhancing their skills in areas such as communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and collaboration.

Given these circumstances, the objective of this literature review is to examine sports sponsorship by the corporate sector and its effects on internal audiences, specifically employees. The primary aim is to elucidate the predominant objectives of sports sponsorship (Lough & Irwin, 2001), and how these objectives foster new professional behaviours among internal employees (Eshghi, 2021). Traditionally, sports sponsorship has been linked to targeting consumer loyalty and enhancing brand awareness (Ungerman-Sears, 2015). However, companies are now also utilising sports sponsorship to influence the behaviour of their internal employees (Marjavaara & Nilsson, 2008). This review will thus trace the historical development and strategic application of sports sponsorship, highlighting the transition from solely external communication strategies to more integrated approaches that consider internal stakeholders, such as employees.

Numerous studies investigate the influence of organisational actions, which are not directly related to job functions, on employee attitudes and behaviours. These actions include corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and sponsorships (Hickman et al., 2005; Potocan et al., 2013; Setyaningrum & Haryono, 2018; Tian & Robertson, 2017). This area of research is particularly pertinent as sports sponsorship often intersects with brand image, corporate responsibility, and employee engagement (Khan et al., 2013). In addition, several studies provide comprehensive reviews of the historical evolution of firms' strategic objectives in sports sponsorship, highlighting a shift in focus from external audiences to internal employees (Bruhn & Rohlmann, 2024; Kinney, 2009; Nader, 2020). However, the theoretical framework linking corporate sponsorship to outcomes related to internal employees is insufficiently addressed, as much of the extant literature emphasises consumer responses and brand equity. This leaves a significant gap in understanding the impact of sponsorship on employees. Consequently, the subsequent paragraphs will explore the theoretical framework concerning the essence of sports sponsorship and its effects on the attitudes and behaviours of internal employees.

2.3 Theoretical Foundations Supporting Sponsorship and Employee Outcomes

In terms of theoretical development, corporate sponsorship of sports aligns comprehensively with social exchange theory (Baldwin, 1978; McCarville & Copeland, 1994; Tyrie & Ferguson, 2013). Advocates of this theory have consistently argued that power and justice (Liao, 2008) are essential for a comprehensive understanding of value and the seamless exchange of activities between sponsorship parties (sponsor and sponsored) (Baldwin, 1978; Cropanzano et al., 2017; Liao, 2008). Exchange theory suggests an evolving bond of trust and commitment between parties with a balance of power, as its key features include trust, commitment, equity, and power dynamics (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ko & Hur, 2014). These features significantly influence the sustainability and satisfaction within interpersonal or

organisational relationships (Khalid & Ali, 2017; Yin, 2018). The theory embodies a common notion of reciprocity, as it involves the exchange of activities that may be either tangible or intangible (Voss et al., 2019).

Given that sponsorship extends beyond mere profit generation (Meenaghan, 1998; O'Keefe et al., 2009), it constitutes a strategic, ongoing collaboration based on mutually agreed terms and conditions between two parties (Jensen & Cornwell, 2017). In the realm of corporate sports sponsorship, social exchange theory provides a robust framework for analysing the relational dynamics between sponsoring firms and sports entities (Giannoulakis et al., 2015; McCarville & Copeland, 1994). This theory posits that parties aim to maximise benefits while minimising costs in their interactions (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Within the context of corporate sports sponsorship, the theory elucidates the rationale behind companies' decisions to invest substantial resources in associating their brand with sports teams, athletes, or events, and how these relationships are cultivated and reinforced over time (Czekanski et al., 2021; Dees, 2011).

Another significant theory in the context of corporate sector sponsorship of sports is CSR, namely, corporate social responsibility (Miragaia et al., 2017). CSR refers to the ethical obligation of corporations to contribute positively to society while operating within legal and economic frameworks (Carson, 1993). Historically, business activities were primarily focused on profit through buying and selling. However, contemporary successful companies are increasingly expected to give back to society, with corporate social responsibility serving as a step towards fulfilling this obligation (Falck & Heblich, 2007). CSR entails a business's obligation to adhere to policies that benefit society (Tamvada, 2020). While profit generation remains a primary objective for any business, numerous theories have emerged over the years to explain and support CSR practices, each providing a distinct perspective on corporate responsibilities (Mehedi & Jalaludin, 2020).

The evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is closely linked to the emergence of the stakeholder concept (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008), which refers to the various individuals and groups potentially affected by a company's activities (Friedman & Miles, 2006). Stakeholders encompass a firm's internal employees, customers, the environment, and society at large (Barić, 2017). Firms adhering to CSR principles are consequently obliged to address stakeholder concerns and engage in activities that strengthen their relationships with these groups (Sirgy, 2002). This approach ultimately fosters a robust connection between firms and both their internal employees and the broader external environment (Neubaum et al., 2012). Over time, this has been the trajectory of CSR's development (Mosca & Civera, 2017). The primary objective of CSR is to meet stakeholder expectations by investing in societal welfare (Garg & Gupta, 2020). This strategy is a reliable means of ensuring a firm's sustainability because it enhances customer loyalty towards the sponsoring firms (Kim et al., 2020). When a company contributes to the community or supports social causes, customers often reciprocate with increased loyalty (Stojanović et al., 2020). This practice fosters goodwill and strengthens relationships with local communities,

governments, and non-governmental organisations (Księżak, 2017). In summary, CSR serves as a mechanism for acquiring social influence and attracting lucrative investment opportunities.

Although the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has long been established, it has only recently gained prominence within the field of sports management (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Bradish & Cronin, 2009; Ward & Smith, 2007). Companies such as Nike and Reebok have set a precedent for CSR practices in other sectors of sports management (DeTienne & Lewis, 2005). Concurrently, sports organisations are engaging in collaborative ventures with business entities to fulfil their social responsibilities (Irwin et al., 2003; Kern, 2020). From a research standpoint, the professional sports industry offers a fertile context for examining CSR as the majority of organisations in this sector are involved in such initiatives. The formalisation and regulation of CSR, guided by standards such as ISO 14000, AA 1000, and GRI, are continually evolving (Sethi et al., 2017). The concept and its application remain dynamic, diverse, and context-specific (Lodhia, 2012).

Organisational behaviour is a relatively recent theoretical development within the social sciences (Glushchenko, 2022). Despite some ambiguity regarding its boundaries, the core concept of this theory pertains to the organisational world (DuBrin, 2013). One dimension examines the influence of individuals on their environment, while another considers the impact of organisations on the society and environment in which they function (Aithal & Kumar, 2016; Luthans et al., 2015). Organisational behaviour transcends mere philosophy (Altman et al., 2013); it constitutes a complex branch of the social sciences. To elucidate the term organisational behaviour, several interrelated concepts are introduced. The first is organisational theory (Miner, 2002), which focuses on the environment in which an organisation operates. The second is organisational science (Miner, 2015), which primarily aligns with the concept of organisational behaviour (Aithal & Kumar, 2016; Luthans et al., 2015).

On a broader scale, organisational theory, as a multidisciplinary field within the social sciences, examines how organisations develop and establish symbiotic relationships with their environments (Baum & Ingram, 2002). Encompassing sub-fields such as sociology, psychology, economics, and management science, this theory provides a framework for analysing organisational structure, behaviour, and dynamics (Baum & Ingram, 2002). In contrast to earlier classical theories, such as Taylor's scientific management and Weber's bureaucratic model, which emphasise hierarchical structures, recent advancements in organisational theory suggest that an effective organisational structure is contingent upon both external environmental factors and internal processes (Ehiobuche & Tu, 2012; Glushchenko, 2022). The current perspective within the theory posits that organisations, as open systems, must adapt to evolving technological, economic, and social conditions to ensure their survival and prosperity (Piórkowska & Goldowska, 2016).

Throughout its development, organisational theory has integrated insights from institutional theory, resource dependence theory, and sensemaking (Takahashi & Sander, 2017). Institutional theory emphasises the role of cultural norms, regulatory pressures, and legitimacy in shaping organisational behaviour, ultimately leading to isomorphism among firms within the same sector (Krajnović, 2018). Concurrently, resource dependence theory posits that organisations must achieve a balance of power to secure essential resources (Dunbar & Ahlstrom, 1995), highlighting the importance of strategic management in minimising external dependencies (He et al., 2008). In this context, the emergence of network theory and complexity theory has been noted (Meyer, 2010), reflecting a growing interest in non-hierarchical, dynamic systems that underscore the significance of interconnectivity, adaptability, and emergent behaviour in organisations. These contemporary approaches underscore the importance of innovation, collaboration, and responsiveness in the face of globalisation, technological disruption, and rapid societal change (Cullen et al., 2014). Collectively, organisational theory offers essential tools for understanding and guiding the design and governance of organisations, particularly in the context of organisational behaviour influencing sports sponsorship and the conduct of internal employees.

The three theories previously discussed are likely to impact corporate sponsorship and employee perceptions of the sponsoring firm. Social exchange theory, which incorporates the reciprocal exchange of costs and benefits, advises organisations to focus not only on marketing or brand imaging but also on all stakeholders, including society, the environment, and employees (Albasu & Nyameh, 2017). These stakeholders, particularly employees, reciprocate with positive perceptions, loyalty, and commitment to their firm during and after sports sponsorship (Slack et al., 2015). This theory aids in anticipating outcomes and assists sponsoring firms in prioritising strategic sponsorship motives (Ko & Hur, 2014). It also influences sponsorship decisions, which are typically aimed at fostering long-term trust and reciprocal goodwill among stakeholders, such as the internal employees of sponsoring firms and the sponsored entity (Slack et al., 2015). The theory provides a dynamic mechanism for setting outcomes for both internal and external audiences of the sponsoring firms, particularly in understanding the internal impact of sports sponsorship on employees (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). These outcomes benefit both the individual and the organisation, creating a virtuous cycle of reciprocity that enhances workplace culture and performance.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) theory is increasingly central to the objectives of sports sponsorship by firms (Miragaia et al., 2017). While it ostensibly enhances the social image of a business entity, it also significantly influences the perceptions of its internal employees (Kim et al., 2020). From an organisational perspective, the aim of sponsoring sports within a CSR framework is to align the firm's brand with positive values such as teamwork, perseverance, health, and community development (Kim et al., 2020; Plewa et al., 2016). This alignment not only reshapes the company's public image but also solidifies

its reputation as a socially responsible entity (Kim et al., 2020; Le et al., 2024). CSR initiatives ensure teamwork and prestige within the community in which the sponsoring entity operates (Cao & Lee, 2023). For the contemporary corporate sector, CSR-driven sports sponsorships serve dual purposes (Uhrich et al., 2014). First, they enhance corporate reputation externally (Plewa et al., 2016). Second, they foster a more committed, engaged and satisfied workforce internally (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2021). These sponsorship-oriented initiatives resonate deeply with employees, who increasingly expect their employers to bring about positive societal change (Trivellas et al., 2019). By formulating sponsorship objectives in accordance with CSR principles, companies not only contribute to societal well-being but also cultivate a connected work environment where employees feel valued, motivated, and aligned with the organisation's mission (Loor-Zambrano et al., 2022).

Similarly to the aforementioned theories, organisational theory also claims that a firm's objectives influence sports sponsorship (MacIntosh & Burton, 2024) and its impact on employees (Hickman et al., 2005). It offers valuable insights into how a firm's engagement in sports sponsorship affects the behaviour of its internal employees (Khan & Stanton, 2010). The alignment of corporate objectives with employees' interests in sports fosters an enhanced organisational behaviour (Dum & Wagner, 2017). Employees' cognitive skills, such as communication, decision-making, time management, teamwork, and goal setting, are improved (Amoako et al., 2012; Batt et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2019). This results in enhanced teamwork, increased job satisfaction, and a more positive organisational culture, thereby boosting productivity and progress (Zepf, 2008).

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives – Social Identity Theory (SIT)**,** Signalling Theory, and Weick's Sensemaking Theory – to explain how corporate sport sponsorship influences employees' attitudes and behavioural intentions. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups and organisations (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When employees perceive their organisation as prestigious or socially responsible through visible sport sponsorships it engages with, they are more likely to internalise this positive image, leading to stronger organisational identification and commitment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hickman et al., 2005). Signalling Theory further explains how sponsorship functions as a strategic signal that conveys unobservable organisational qualities such as credibility, values, and long-term orientation to internal stakeholders (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 1973). Well-executed sponsorships signal authenticity and investment in corporate identity, thereby shaping employees' perceptions of employer brand image. Finally, Weick's Sensemaking Theory emphasises that employees actively interpret and construct meaning from organisational actions (Weick, 1995). Sponsorship activities become sensemaking cues through which employees form shared understandings about what their organisation stands for, influencing how they emotionally connect with the firm and decide whether to remain with it. Together, these theories provide a robust explanatory framework for understanding

the psychological mechanisms via which sport sponsorship affects organisational identification, employer branding, and intention to stay.

2.4 Objectives and Strategic Motives of Corporate Sports Sponsorship

Corporate sector involvement in sports sponsorship has evolved into a contemporary platform for achieving multiple objectives. Primarily, it serves as a marketing strategy aimed at maximising brand visibility (Jalleh et al., 2002), enhancing consumer loyalty (Grimaldi, 2014) and securing stable market positioning (Fahy et al., 2004). In this marketing approach, companies provide financial or in-kind sponsorship to support sports events, teams, or athletes in exchange for promotional opportunities (Amis et al., 1999). The literature indicates that firms engage in sports sponsorship not solely for goodwill or social service, but as a strategic tool to fulfil various commercial objectives (Irwin & Sutton, 2008; Nufer & Bühler, 2010).

The primary objectives of firms engaging in sports sponsorship are to enhance brand awareness and visibility. Sports sponsorship provides companies with the opportunity to reach large and diverse audiences (Greenhalgh et al., 2021), allowing them to showcase their brand during live broadcasts, through stadium signage, and via social and digital media (Breuer & Rumpf, 2015; Lee et al., 2022). This extensive level of brand exposure is particularly effective in reaching advanced demographic groups that are typically more challenging to engage (Demir & Söderman, 2015). The association of firms with prestigious sports events enhances the brand image among sports enthusiasts (Cobbs & Groza, 2020). The alignment between the sports entity and the sponsoring company fosters consumer loyalty and engagement with the brand (Javani et al., 2024). Similarly, another significant objective is to cultivate consumer loyalty and emotional engagement. By aligning with fans' passion for specific teams or athletes, sponsors establish emotional connections with the audience, which can translate into brand preference and long-term customer loyalty (Yun et al., 2021). This alignment is particularly pertinent to the sponsorship of team sports, where repeated exposure and emotional identification can shift fan loyalty towards sponsoring firms (Varea-Calero et al., 2025). Another critical objective is market differentiation, which plays a vital role (Doellman et al., 2021). In highly competitive industries, organisations engage in sports sponsorship to distinguish themselves from competitors (Eshghi et al., 2021). For instance, an Emirates airline company sponsored a top-tier football event to differentiate itself from competitors by projecting a more dynamic and vibrant image within the community (Mazzucco & Alexander, 2024).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) serves as a pivotal factor in a firm's sponsorship of sports. Conceptually, CSR is structured as a pyramid comprising four layers of responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic, which reflect the expectations society places on organisations at any given time (Martens & Kleinfeld, 2022). The latest iteration of CSR emphasises its integration into every strategic initiative since it can

simultaneously benefit both society and the company (Abidin et al., 2025). By aligning the company with the positive attributes of sports, such as commitment to community support, teamwork, excellence, and fair play, sponsoring organisations can cultivate a positive brand image and reputation (Fosu et al., 2024). CSR through sports sponsorship is a prevalent strategy for many companies to enhance their brand image, support community development, and promote healthy lifestyles (Kim et al., 2010; Viererbl & Koch, 2022). Concurrently, firms aim to expand business-to-business (B2B) networking through sports sponsorship. High-profile events, such as the Olympics or Formula 1, especially facilitate the development of these B2B relationships (Peycheva & Sandanski, 2024). These platforms offer opportunities to establish partnerships and conduct corporate hospitality activities in exclusive settings (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021; Siegfried, 2023). This B2B objective extends beyond mere brand marketing or visibility, aiming to build sustainable relationships with industries such as finance, technology, tourism and hospitality, and logistics (Schönberner et al., 2024). The outcomes of such sponsorships foster self-regulating business relationships (Leng & Zhang, 2023).

Sponsorship-linked internal marketing (SLIM) represents a significant objective within the realm of sports sponsorship (Mlakar et al., 2024). This approach serves as a potent marketing instrument targeting internal audiences, specifically employees (Batt et al., 2021). It constitutes a strategic framework that integrates both internal and external audiences to enhance brand awareness and foster customer and employee retention, particularly within competitive industries (Batt et al., 2021; Jensen & Cornwell, 2021). SLIM influences employees by modifying their perceptions, boosting morale, fostering team cohesion, and enhancing social prestige (Michulek & Križanová, 2022; Rodrigues & Sousa, 2025). The success of sports sponsorship is contingent upon the alignment between strategic objectives and execution tactics. A prevalent strategy is targeted sponsorship, wherein companies select sports properties that resonate with their target audience. These events offer access to a demographically aligned audience characterised by high levels of physical activity, a commitment to wellness, and a propensity for health-oriented lifestyles (Bortolotti et al., 2024). To enhance the effectiveness of sponsorship, another strategy employed is activation, which involves additional marketing efforts by firms to leverage their association with sports (Kumar & Ayodeji, 2021). Within this additional marketing strategy, Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategies are also crucial (Blakeman, 2023). Firms frequently integrate sponsorship into broader marketing initiatives to ensure consistent messaging across all channels. This synergy can reinforce brand recall and amplify the impact of the sponsorship (Chaniago & Ariyani, 2023).

In essence, sports sponsorship functions as a multifaceted strategy within the corporate sector, aiming to fulfil marketing objectives such as brand awareness, brand equity, customer retention, and market differentiation (Buser et al., 2022). The relationship between sports sponsorship mechanisms and employee outcomes is characterised by a complex interplay of sense-making, formal integration, and strategic alignment (Douvis & Kyriakis, 2022). When

employed as a Human Resource Management (HRM) tool, sports sponsorship enables managers to enhance employee engagement, morale, and organisational culture (Bjerke & Elvekrok, 2021). Effective sense-making facilitates employees' connection with the sponsorship's narrative (Tinaz, 2024), while structured processes ensure alignment with company goals and measurable outcomes (Schönberner et al., 2022). Continuous feedback and evaluation are crucial for refining and maximising the sponsorship's impact on employee satisfaction and engagement, thereby fostering a more cohesive and motivated workforce (Baup et al., 2025). The literature underscores that aligning the objectives and strategies of sponsorship can contribute to sustainable development for the sponsoring corporation.

2.5 Employee Attitudes and Behaviours in Relation to Sport Sponsorship

Employee attitudes and behaviours within an organisation are crucial to its development. Traditionally, employee attitude pertains to an individual's feelings towards their work, colleagues, and the organisation as a whole (Abun et al., 2021). Key components include job satisfaction, organisational commitment, work motivation, and engagement (Abdullah et al., 2021). Employees' behavioural aspects are also influenced by organisational activities (Pan et al., 2022). Employee behaviour refers to how individuals act or conduct themselves in the workplace (Na-Nan et al., 2021). Common elements include work performance, communication, teamwork, punctuality and reliability, and ethical conduct (Akpa et al., 2021). These elements of attitude and behaviour significantly influence productivity, teamwork, job satisfaction, and the overall organisational culture (Akpa et al., 2021). In addition, these elements are affected by a company's sponsorship of sports (Batt et al., 2021). Employees' attitudes and conduct are profoundly influenced by their employer's sponsorship of sports (Khan et al., 2013).

Corporate sponsorship of sports activities has been shown to enhance employee job satisfaction, subsequently increasing their engagement with the organisation (Khan et al., 2013). Employees who take pride in their employer's support of sports are more likely to contribute positively to the organisation's well-being (Karjaluoto & Paakkonen, 2019). Sponsorship initiatives provide employees with opportunities to participate in events, attend games, and engage in related activities, thereby boosting morale, fostering a sense of community, and enhancing overall job satisfaction (Mohamad & Fatemeh, 2013). During sponsorships, initiatives focused on employees, such as free tickets, stalls, and branded merchandise, contribute to employees feeling valued, which in turn enhances their job satisfaction (Kończak, 2020). A sense of belonging to a larger, purpose-driven organisation is associated with increased job satisfaction (Edwards, 2017). Typically, sponsorship involves employee participation in sports, which facilitates positive engagement and supports employee retention (Wagner et al., 2019). Employees are inclined to remain with organisations that provide platforms for conducive social activities (Hickman et al., 2005).

In addition to the role of decision-makers, most of the objectives of sports sponsorship shape the attitudes and behaviours of employees of the sponsoring firm (Walraven, 2012). The phenomenon in question is commonly identified as organisation-embedded attitudes. To comprehend the determinants and impacts on the attitudes of sponsoring organisations, it is essential to understand the concept of attitude and its integration into employees. Organisation-embedded attitudes denote a collective set of beliefs, values, and behavioural norms that are deeply ingrained within an organisation's culture, influencing employee cognition and behaviour (Sankar, 1988).

Attitudes are complex psychological constructs that encompass an individual's evaluations, feelings, and behavioural tendencies toward objects, people or situations (Haddock & Maio, 2004). Attitudes are generally considered to have three main components: affective, behavioural, and cognitive (Svenningsson et al., 2021). These three components are often referred to as the ABC model of attitudes. The affective component involves an individual's feelings or emotions about the attitude object (Svenningsson et al., 2021). The affective component is all about the emotions and feelings an individual has towards something (Bagozzi, 1994). The behavioural component refers to the way attitudes affect a person’s actions or behavioural intentions (Petty & Krosnick, 2014).

In the ABC model of attitude, the last component is cognitive. This part encompasses the beliefs, thoughts, and knowledge an individual has about an attitude object or issue (Minton et al., 2016). An employee might believe that a certain project management tool increases productivity and efficiency, forming a cognitive basis for their positive attitude towards using the tool (Aithal & Aithal, 2019). These components do not function in isolation; they interact and influence each other. For example, positive beliefs about a company's ethical practices (cognitive) can lead to positive feelings (affective) and supportive behaviours (behavioural) (Aithal & Aithal, 2019).

There is often consistency among these components. If someone has positive beliefs and feelings about something, their behaviour is likely to reflect that positivity (Lam, 2008). Still, inconsistencies can also occur, leading to cognitive dissonance, where beliefs and behaviours are not aligned (Van Harreveld et al., 2015). By considering affective, behavioural, and cognitive components, attitudes can be better analysed and addressed in various contexts, such as marketing, organisational behaviour, and personal development (Van Harreveld et al., 2015). When a sports sponsorship exerts a positive influence on the affective, behavioural and cognitive components of the ABC model, it generates a synergistic effect that can substantially enhance employees' attitudes, behaviours and cognitions (Nader, 2020). Employees who establish an affective connection are generally more engaged in their work and organisational activities, demonstrating behavioural involvement, and maintain positive cognitive perceptions of their employer. Among these three components, the most significant impacts on employees encompass job satisfaction, organisational commitment, engagement, performance, loyalty, communication, morale, memory, and overall temperament.

Job satisfaction is acquired through the emotional responses that employees develop toward their work environment (Walraven, 2012). Positive emotions, such as prestige, pride, happiness, and contentment, lead to higher job satisfaction. When a company engages in sports sponsorship, it can evoke positive emotions (Teal et al., 2019) among employees, particularly if they are fans of the sport or team being sponsored by their organisation. Such a positive emotional connection can increase employees' sense of pride in the company, thereby enhancing job satisfaction (Decrop & Derbaix, 2009). When employees feel emotionally connected to their company through sports sponsorship, their overall emotional state improves, leading to higher job satisfaction (Hickman et al., 2005). Sponsorship acts as a catalyst for positive feelings, reinforcing the affective component of the ABC model.

Conversely, if such sports sponsorship does not resonate with employees' interests or is perceived as a misallocation of resources and time, it may result in adverse effects (Cortsen, 2014), potentially diminishing job satisfaction. When sports sponsorship positively influences the affective, behavioural, and cognitive components of the ABC model, it leads to stronger organisational commitment. Emotionally connected employees engage in behaviours that reinforce their loyalty (Alhadad, 2019). They rationally believe that staying with the company is in their best interests. High levels of organisational commitment often result in lower turnover rates (Hickman et al., 2005), as employees committed to the organisation are less likely to leave. The positive feelings, behaviours, and beliefs fostered by sports sponsorship make employees more inclined to remain with the company, contributing to long-term retention (Mohamad & Fatameh, 2013). When employees are committed, they are more likely to align their personal goals with the company's objectives, leading to better performance and a more cohesive organisational culture (Chai et al., 2017). Sports sponsorship that resonates with employees can serve as a powerful tool for building and sustaining this alignment. Employees feel connected to the company because of its association with their favourite teams. They actively participate in sponsored events and proudly display company-branded sports gear, reinforcing their loyalty (Papadimitriou et al., 2008). Employees perceive the company's engagement in community sports as a reflection of its robust values, which align with their own beliefs. As a result, employees cultivate a robust organisational commitment, characterised by a deep emotional attachment, active participation, and a rational decision to remain with the company. This commitment is likely to lead to increased job satisfaction, improved performance, and reduced turnover, thereby benefiting both the employees and the organisation.

In addition, the emotional responses elicited by sports sponsorship, such as pride, excitement, and enthusiasm, enhance employees' dedication to their work. When employees feel emotionally connected to the company through sports sponsorship, this emotional bond can increase their motivation and enthusiasm at work (Papadimitriou et al., 2008). Motivated employees are generally more engaged, focused, and productive, leading to enhanced performance (Fahy et al., 2004). The behavioural component reflects how employees' actions and behaviours are influenced by their attitudes towards sports sponsorship. They

see new opportunities to participate in sponsored events, engage in team-building activities, and take pride in representing their company (Cunningham et al., 2009). These activities can foster teamwork, collaboration, and a sense of shared purpose, all of which contribute to improved performance (Amis et al., 1999; Dolphin, 2003). Employees who are engaged are more inclined to exert additional effort, offer innovative ideas, and assist their colleagues, thereby enhancing overall productivity. Analogous to performance improvement, affective loyalty is influenced by the emotional connection employees have with their organisation. When employees emotionally identify with their company's values and external activities, such as sports sponsorship, they are more likely to remain loyal to the organisation (Hickman et al., 2005). Loyalty involves the actions employees take that reflect their commitment to the organisation, such as consistently showing up to work, positively promoting the company, and staying with the company long term (Meschke & Meschke, 2021). Sports sponsorship can reinforce these behaviours by fostering a sense of community and belonging among employees. When employees actively participate in company-sponsored activities, it strengthens their connection to the company and encourages loyalty through continued positive engagement (Mirvis, 2012).

Sports sponsorship impacts the cognition of internal employees. Their communication skills, morale level, memory, and temperament are fine-tuned when employees feel emotionally attached to their firm’s sponsorship of sports (Batt et al., 2021). Positive emotions, such as those generated by pride in the company’s sports sponsorship, can lead to more open, enthusiastic, and constructive communication among employees (Liu et al., 1998). When employees feel positively about their company, they are more likely to engage in meaningful conversations, share ideas, and collaborate effectively (Mishra et al., 2014). Sports sponsorship often encourages team-building activities, social events, and shared experiences (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). These activities possess the capacity to enhance communication by creating informal channels that facilitate interaction and collaboration among employees. The sponsorship of sports can further enhance communication by fostering positive emotions, encouraging collaborative behaviour, and aligning employees' cognitive beliefs with the organisation's communication culture.

Employee morale is intrinsically linked to the emotional responses that individuals experience in relation to their work and the organisation. The boost in morale from sports sponsorship is driven by positive emotional experiences, increased engagement in positive behaviours, and the cognitive alignment of employees' beliefs with the company’s values (Cunningham et al., 2009). Positive emotions, such as those fostered by successful sports sponsorship, can significantly boost morale (Dolphin, 2003). When employees experience pride and enthusiasm regarding their company's engagement in sports, their overall sense of well-being and job satisfaction is enhanced, consequently leading to improved workplace morale. High morale often manifests in positive behaviours, such as increased participation in company activities, willingness to go the extra mile, and supportive interactions with colleagues (Dutton, 2003). Sports sponsorship can enhance these behaviours by offering

opportunities for shared experiences that elevate group morale. From a cognitive standpoint, employees who hold a favourable perception of their organisation are more likely to experience a heightened sense of purpose and commitment, thereby enhancing overall morale.

Emotional experiences are closely linked to memory retention (McGaugh, 2013). Sports sponsorship activities are more likely to be positively remembered when they elicit strong emotional responses, are reinforced through repeated engagement, and are cognitively valued by employees. The positive emotions generated by sports sponsorship can result in more robust and vivid recollections of associated events. Repeated participation in sports sponsorship activities can reinforce memory through consistent behaviour (Mao et al., 2013). This can create lasting positive associations with the company and reinforce its commitment (Zdravkovic & Till, 2012).

Temperament, which encompasses an individual's typical mood and emotional response (Nigg, 2006), can be positively influenced by emotional experiences linked to sports sponsorship. Positive temperament is supported by emotional satisfaction, behavioural engagement, and cognitive alignment (Wildermuth et al., 2013). Employees who experience positive emotions, such as excitement and pride, from their company's sponsorship activities (Hickman et al., 2005) may exhibit a more positive temperament. Employees who regularly engage in these activities may develop a more positive and collaborative disposition, leading to improved interactions with colleagues and a more harmonious work environment (Slåtten et al., 2017).

Moreover, when employees regard sports sponsorship as an essential element of a comprehensive corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy, it positively affects their attitudes toward the organisation. This favourable perception can lead to increased job satisfaction, improved morale, and a stronger emotional attachment to the company. Employees who perceive their company as socially responsible are more likely to be loyal and committed (Edwards, 2015). There is a strong relationship between corporate image, sports sponsorship, and employee perception. Companies' sponsorship activities influence consumers' overall perception of their corporate image (Khan & Stanton, 2010). A study concluded that employees who perceive their company's sports sponsorship as enhancing the corporate image are more likely to have positive attitudes toward the organisation (Alexandris et al., 2007). It also paves the way for sponsorship-linked internal marketing (SLIM), which is found to be very effective for employee satisfaction and retention (Farrelly et al., 2012). The study found that when companies effectively communicate the goals and successes of their sports sponsorship activities internally, employees are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the sponsorship and the company itself (Pichot et al., 2008). This internal communication can lead to improved employee morale, increased loyalty, and stronger alignment with the company's objectives.

In addition, sports sponsorship can exert a comprehensive and beneficial influence on various facets of employee well-being and performance when analysed through the ABC Model. These effects contribute to a more positive work environment, enhanced job satisfaction, and increased organisational commitment.

The sponsorship of sports significantly influences employees' cognitive skills (Wagner et al., 2019). The commonly affected characteristics include critical thinking, communication, decision-making, time management, work motivation, and perceptions towards the organisation and new responsibilities (Abdullah et al., 2021; Bjerke & Elvekrok, 2021; Karjaluoto & Paakkonen, 2019). Critical thinking is defined as the ability to evaluate and process information analytically to make reasoned judgments, particularly when solutions to complex situations are required (Paul & Elder, 2019). During sports sponsorship, employees' critical thinking is enhanced, thereby improving their performance by enabling them to approach tasks with clarity and logic (Hewlett et al., 2010). Enhanced critical thinking contributes to innovation, effective communication, and improved collaboration, both during and after the period of sports sponsorship (Inoue & Kent, 2012).

Sports sponsorship significantly influences the decision-making capabilities of employees within sponsoring organisations (Van Heerden, 2001). Employees involved in sponsorship activities tend to make prompt decisions characterised by impartiality and inclusive thinking (Schönberner et al., 2021, 2022). This engagement fosters a more comprehensive and inclusive problem-solving process (Amis et al., 1999). Sponsoring a sports entity effectively communicates the sponsor's values, thereby enabling employees to make decisions that are congruent with these values (Lamont et al., 2011). When values are clearly articulated, decision-making becomes more inclusive and purpose-driven (Thjømøe et al., 2002).

Sports sponsorship significantly influences the communication skills of employees at both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels (Mueller & Roberts, 2008). The nature of sponsorship, which necessitates teamwork, a collaborative environment, and timely decision-making, enhances employees' communication channels (Choi & Yoh, 2011). Sports sponsorship acts as a catalyst for improved employee communication by exposing workers to extensive social interaction, shared values, and cross-functional collaboration, particularly when companies pursue B2B partnerships under the sponsorship framework. It serves as a medium to communicate organisational values and goals, reinforcing the company's commitment to its employees (Barez et al., 2007; Santomier, 2008). Effective internal communication regarding the sponsorship can enhance employee morale and foster a shared sense of purpose (Pichot et al., 2008).

In addition to the aforementioned impacts, a change in perception constitutes a significant effect on employees (Batt et al., 2021). Sports sponsorship can modify employees' perceptions of their sponsoring company, presenting its values, leadership, culture, and reputation in a positive light (Khan et al., 2013). These enhanced perceptions directly foster a new wave of motivation, loyalty, and engagement among the employees of sponsors

(Demirel et al., 2018; Edwards, 2017). Prioritising sponsorship for prestigious sports can instil a sense of pride and respect for their firm among employees (Khan et al., 2013). In addition, this improved perception enhances job satisfaction, which ultimately contributes to employee retention.

Nevertheless, sports sponsorship can have adverse effects on employees of sponsoring firms (Crompton, 2015). If such sponsorship does not resonate with employees' interests or is perceived as a misallocation of resources and time, it may result in diminished job satisfaction (Abratt et al., 1987; Cortsen, 2014). Consequently, it is imperative for organisations to ensure that their sports sponsorship strategies are congruent with the values and interests of their employees to optimise positive outcomes (Vance et al., 2016).

2.6 Mechanisms of Sponsorship Affecting Employee Outcomes

To examine how sports sponsorship affects employee outcomes, it is necessary to understand the mechanisms through which sponsorship activities influence employees' attitudes, behaviours, and overall job satisfaction (Farooq et al., 2016). This analysis can be further enriched by integrating Weick's sense-making theories with the structured approach proposed by Wagner and Nissen. By combining Weick's theory of sense-making with Wagner and Nissen's structured approach, we can develop an integrated framework that incorporates both narrative construction and formal evaluation. Managers can craft compelling stories about the rationale behind their firm's sports sponsorship decisions (Weick, 2012) while narrating clear objectives and marking the metrics for measuring its impact on the internal workers of their organisation sponsoring sports (Wagner & Nissen, 2015). By collecting employee feedback and analysing performance data, decision-makers can integrate sense-making narratives with structured processes. Through the effective management of both narrative and structured elements of sports sponsorship, sponsoring firms can achieve desired employee outcomes. Managers can enhance employees' sense of connection to the organisation by fostering pride in the company's sponsorship activities and articulating clear, measurable benefits that align with employees' values and expectations. Effective sports sponsorship, underpinned by robust sense-making and structured processes, can lead to increased organisational commitment. Employees who perceive clear value in sponsorship and its alignment with organisational goals are more likely to feel invested in the company's success and remain committed to their roles.

In addition, the mechanisms by which sports sponsorship influences employee outcomes represent a synthesis of approaches employed by both authors. Karl E. Weick's sense-making framework highlights the importance of narrative construction, managing ambiguity, and enhancing organisational coherence (Weick, 2012). Wagner and Nissen's structured approach emphasises formal integration, strategic alignment, and measurable outcomes (Wagner & Nissen, 2015). By integrating these two perspectives, managers can formulate a comprehensive strategy that not only facilitates employees' understanding of the

sponsorship's purpose but also ensures alignment with the company's objectives, thereby delivering measurable benefits. This integrated approach enhances employee engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty.

To examine the relationship between sports sponsorship mechanisms and employee outcomes, particularly as an HRM tool, it is essential to analyse how sponsorship initiatives impact various aspects of employee experience. Sports sponsorship offers employees opportunities to participate in events, attend games, and engage in related activities, which can enhance morale, foster a sense of community, and improve overall job satisfaction among employees.

These initiatives not only strengthen employees' connection to the organisation but also promote team spirit, pride, and loyalty, ultimately contributing to a more engaged and cohesive workforce (Papadimitriou & Apostolopoulou, 2009). This participation can strengthen employees' emotional attachment to the organisation, resulting in increased levels of engagement. By integrating sponsorship activities into HRM practices, companies can foster a sense of pride and belonging among employees (Wagner et al., 2019).

Managers employ sports sponsorship as a strategic tool to convey organisational values and objectives, thereby reinforcing the company's commitment to its workforce. Effective internal communication about sponsorship can improve employee morale and create a shared sense of purpose (Pichot et al., 2008). Sponsorship-related mechanisms are integral to cultivating a positive work environment. For instance, organising company-sponsored sports events or team-building activities associated with sponsorships can significantly enhance team cohesion and promote collaboration among employees. These activities afford employees the opportunity to engage with one another outside their customary work roles, thereby fostering improved relationships, a more enjoyable work atmosphere, and a heightened sense of belonging within the organisation.

By aligning sports sponsorship with organisational values and missions, companies can effectively reinforce their corporate culture. Sponsorships that reflect a company’s values can enhance cultural alignment and create a stronger organisational identity (Fahy et al., 2004). Sponsorship events provide opportunities for employees to share their experiences outside the typical work setting. These shared experiences can strengthen team bonds and improve the overall organisational culture, as seen from the HRM perspective (Sarvaiya et al., 2016). The formal integration of sports sponsorship into HRM involves clear strategies for implementation and communication (Stahl et al., 2019). This involves establishing objectives regarding the influence of sponsorship on employee outcomes and employing structured methodologies to assess and manage its efficacy. Ensuring that sponsorship is aligned with broader organisational strategies enhances its impact.

When employees recognise that sponsorship supports the company's strategic objectives, it reinforces their sense of purpose and commitment. Managers can use feedback mechanisms

to gather employees' perceptions and experiences related to sports sponsorship (Woisetschläger et al., 2017). This feedback facilitates an understanding of the influence of sponsorship on employee outcomes and enables modifications to enhance its efficacy. Structured evaluation processes assess the impact of sponsorship on employee outcomes, including engagement, satisfaction, and loyalty. By analysing these metrics, managers can refine their strategies to ensure that sponsorships yield tangible benefits. In conclusion, the interaction between sports sponsorship mechanisms and employee outcomes is characterised by a complex interplay involving sense-making, formal integration, and strategic alignment. When utilised as an HRM tool, sports sponsorship aids managers in enhancing employee engagement, morale, and organisational culture. Effective sense-making enables employees to connect with the sponsorship narrative, while structured processes ensure alignment with organisational objectives and measurable outcomes. Continuous feedback and evaluation are essential for refining and optimising the sponsorship's impact on employee satisfaction and engagement, thereby fostering a more cohesive and motivated workforce.

2.7 Research Gaps and Justification for the Current Study

There exists a substantial body of research concerning the objectives of sports sponsorship by organisations. However, there is a notable paucity of research regarding the influence of such sponsorships on the attitudes and behaviours of internal employees. Most firms concentrate on external stakeholders (e.g., fans, customers, competitors) and tend to overlook the impacts of sponsorship on internal stakeholders (employees), resulting in a significant gap in understanding the altered behaviour of employees (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020; Mlakar et al., 2024). The SLIM (Sponsorship Linked Internal Marketing) approach emphasises the use of sponsorship for internal marketing and employee retention, positing that aligning sponsorship objectives with employee orientation can enhance the sponsor's progress (Madill & O'Reilly, 2010). In addition, the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) approach also considers the effect of sponsorship on employees of sponsoring firms (Marques et al., 2020). Nonetheless, there remains a conspicuous absence of empirical or systematic research in this domain.

Another gap is the lack of a theoretical/conceptual framework (Demir & Söderman, 2015; Grimaldi, 2014). While theories, for example organisational behaviour theory, social identity theory are relevant to examine employee perception and engagement etc. (Mason, 2005; Slack & Parent, 2006), yet their application on employees' altered conduct vis-à-vis sports sponsorship by their employer remains disconnected. Also, measurement of these behavioural changes is another challenge (Dean, 2002). Above all these hindrances, another major hindrance in the research is the non-availability of a comprehensive test model, tool, and questionnaire (Grohs et al., 2004; Walraven, 2013) covering all or maximum changes in conduct of employees after the sport sponsorship by their corporation. Also, there are no standardised scales or tools for assessing this effect on behaviour of employees (Quester, 1997; Reiser et al., 2012).

The scarcity of research on the internal employee effects of sport sponsorship can be attributed primarily to disciplinary fragmentation. Sport sponsorship research has historically been situated within the sport-marketing and consumer-behaviour disciplines, where attention is directed towards external audiences — fans, spectators, consumers and communities. The internal organisational consequences of sponsorship — its effects on employees, organisational culture and human-resource outcomes — fall within organisational behaviour and human-resource management, fields that have not traditionally engaged with sponsorship as a research stimulus. The two scholarly communities rarely intersect, producing a gap at their boundary.

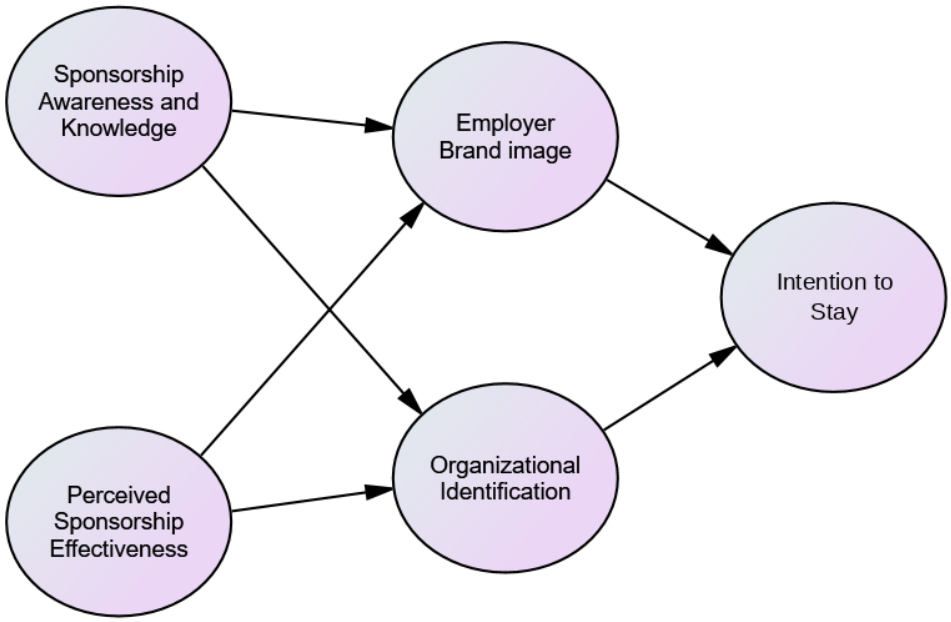
This gap is not identified by the present author alone. Farrelly et al. (2006) and Farrelly et al. (2012) called for research into the strategic application of sponsorship within organisations, observing that the internal alignment between sponsorship strategy and organisational culture was understudied. Walraven (2012) noted the near-exclusive focus on external audiences in sponsorship-effectiveness research and called for studies of internal-stakeholder responses. Batt et al. (2021) responded directly by testing a sponsorship-linked internal-marketing model among employees of a Swiss retail company — the first empirical study to treat employees as the primary audience of sponsorship effects. Demir and Söderman (2015) reviewed fifteen years of sport sponsorship research and identified the absence of internal organisational perspectives as a structural gap, while Grimaldi (2014) noted the lack of theoretical frameworks connecting sponsorship to organisational-behaviour constructs and Hofer and Grohs (2018) examined sponsorship as an internal branding tool among employees of an Austrian firm. Taken together, these contributions demonstrate that the gap addressed in this dissertation is recognised across multiple research groups and has been only partially and incompletely addressed. The present study is one of the few multi-method investigations of this gap to date, integrating a decision-maker qualitative phase and a large-scale employee quantitative phase within a single theoretical framework.

2.8 Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework of the present study is grounded in social identity theory, signalling theory and Weick's sensemaking theory, and illustrates the hypothesised relationships among sponsorship awareness and knowledge, perceived sponsorship effectiveness, employer brand image, organisational identification, and employees' intention to stay. As depicted in Figure 1, the framework proposes that employees' awareness and understanding of their organisation's sponsorship activities, together with their perceptions of sponsorship effectiveness, serve as key antecedents shaping internal branding outcomes. Specifically, sponsorship awareness and knowledge and perceived sponsorship effectiveness are theorised to influence employees' employer brand image perceptions and their level of organisational identification. These internal psychological states, in turn, are expected to function as proximal predictors of intention to stay. By positioning employer brand image and organisational identification as mediating mechanisms, the framework recognises that

sponsorship initiatives do not directly translate into retention outcomes; rather, their effects are transmitted through employees' sensemaking processes, emotional attachment, and evaluative judgments about their employer. This integrated framework thus provides the theoretical basis for the development of the study hypotheses presented in the following section.

Figure 1: Proposed Model of the Study



Source: Own work

2.9 Theoretical Underpinnings of the Hypothesised Relationships

Before the individual hypotheses are formulated, this section outlines the theoretical mechanisms that underpin the hypothesised relationships, bringing together the integration of the three theoretical perspectives, the rationale for the selected mediators, and the roles of employer brand and organisational identification.

2.9.1 Integration of the Three Theoretical Perspectives

The three perspectives that underpin this study — Weick's sensemaking theory, signalling theory (Spence, 1973) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) — are not competing explanations but complementary lenses that together form a multi-level explanatory framework, each addressing a distinct dimension of the sponsorship–employee relationship.

At the organisational level, sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) explains how senior decision-makers interpret ambiguous sponsorship environments, construct shared meaning and

translate strategic intent into institutional action. In this study sensemaking operates as the antecedent process: it explains why organisations engage in sport sponsorship, how decision-makers frame its purpose, and through which internal narratives sponsorship is legitimised and communicated. The qualitative phase — 17 semi-structured interviews with senior executives — captures this process across six interrelated constructs and provides the organisational context within which employee-level effects unfold.

At the communicative level, signalling theory (Spence, 1973) explains how sponsorship decisions, once institutionally framed, generate observable signals — visible investments, events and brand associations — that convey information about the organisation's values, quality and strategic priorities to internal audiences. Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge captures employees' capacity to receive and decode these signals, while Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness reflects their judgement of signal quality. Signalling theory thus bridges the organisational layer of sensemaking and the individual psychological layer of identity formation.

At the individual level, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how employees process sponsorship signals through the lens of group membership and self-concept. When signals are strong and congruent with personal values, employees internalise organisational prestige as part of their own identity, enhancing organisational identification and employer-brand image, which in turn shape the intention to stay. This multi-level architecture addresses a gap identified by several scholars (Demir & Söderman, 2015; Grimaldi, 2014; Walraven, 2012): the absence of frameworks that simultaneously account for the organisational context of sponsorship decisions, the communicative mechanisms through which sponsorship reaches employees, and the psychological processes through which it produces behavioural change. This integration constitutes the primary theoretical contribution of the study.

Although person–organisation fit is not a formal pillar of the framework, the logic of value congruence that underpins it (Kristof, 1996) is implicitly present: the effectiveness of the sponsorship signal and its translation into identification are amplified when employees perceive the values communicated through sponsorship as congruent with their own. In effect, person–organisation fit moderates the signal-to-identity pathway even where it is not explicitly modelled, which represents a productive direction for future research. The study does not claim that sport sponsorship is the dominant determinant of the intention to stay; rather, it is one of several organisational signals that jointly shape identification and brand perception, and the observed effects are of moderate magnitude, consistent with the expectation that the intention to stay is multiply determined.

2.9.2 Theoretical Justification for the Selection of Mediators

The two mediators — organisational identification and employer-brand image — were selected on grounds of theoretical necessity, prior empirical support and the conceptual

architecture of the study's framework. A direct relationship between sport sponsorship and the intention to stay is theoretically insufficient: employees do not remain in, or leave, an organisation because it sponsors a team, but because of how they feel about and relate to the organisation. Sponsorship is a stimulus and the intention to stay a distal outcome; psychological mechanisms must intervene to translate the former into the latter. The study posits two complementary pathways: an identity pathway and an evaluative pathway.

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) provides the basis for organisational identification as a mediator. When employees become aware of and knowledgeable about their organisation's sponsorship, they receive signals about its values, standing and prestige; where these are congruent with their own values, a process of social categorisation incorporates the organisation's identity into the employee's self-concept. This heightened identification reduces the psychological distance between individual and organisation and renders departure emotionally costly. The mechanism is empirically supported by Hofer and Grohs (2018), who showed that sponsorship perceptions enhance employees' brand identification, and by Batt et al. (2021), who showed that sponsorship quality influences brand commitment through image perception.

Signalling theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011) provides the basis for employer-brand image as a mediator. Sport sponsorship functions as an observable signal communicating the employer's reputation, values and community investment to current employees; those who judge their organisation's sponsorship to be effective translate this judgement into an updated, cognitive-evaluative appraisal of the employer brand. A strong, positive employer-brand image acts as a retention anchor, raising the perceived opportunity cost of leaving. This mechanism is supported by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), who conceptualised the employer brand as a retention-relevant signal, and by Lievens and Highhouse (2003), who showed that employer-attractiveness perceptions predict job-pursuit and intention to stay.

Job satisfaction and organisational commitment were considered but not adopted as primary mediators. Job satisfaction is a broad, multi-dimensional construct shaped chiefly by immediate work conditions and would dilute the sponsorship-specific pathway, while organisational commitment, though related to identification, is more behavioural (Mowday et al., 1979) and would overlap conceptually with the outcome variable. Organisational identification and employer-brand image were selected precisely because they are theoretically proximate to the sponsorship stimulus yet remain conceptually distinct from the intention to stay.

2.9.3 Employer Brand and Employee Decision-Making

The employer brand operates as a multi-dimensional evaluative framework that shapes employee decision-making through three interconnected mechanisms: reputation signalling, psychological anchoring and comparative evaluation. As a reputation signal, employer-

brand image conveys what it means to work for a particular organisation — a composite perception of its reputation, culture and employee value proposition (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004); a strong brand provides positive social proof that reinforces the decision to remain and reduces information asymmetry. As a psychological anchor, an internalised positive brand image makes departure more costly, consistent with prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979): employees frame the decision in terms of what would be lost by leaving a highly regarded employer rather than only what might be gained elsewhere, and an additional sponsorship-specific EBI item (EBI5), subsequently removed during pilot validation, was designed to capture how sponsorship contributes to this anchoring by enhancing perceived employer-brand quality. Through comparative evaluation, employees implicitly benchmark their current employer against alternatives; a strong employer-brand image raises the standard a competing employer must meet, which is consistent with the signalling function described by Lievens and Highhouse (2003) and helps to explain why employer-brand image significantly predicts the intention to stay in the structural model. The four elements captured by the final EBI construct — organisational reputation as an employer, workplace attractiveness, employee pride and peer-perceived desirability — correspond to the symbolic (identity) and instrumental (functional) brand dimensions identified by Lievens and Highhouse (2003).

2.9.4 Organisational Identification and Alignment with Vision, Mission and Strategy

Organisational identification theory (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that, as employees identify more strongly with their organisation, their behaviours, values and decisions become progressively more congruent with its mission, vision and strategic goals; identification is not mere satisfaction or loyalty but a cognitive redefinition of the self in terms of the organisation. This logic underpins the proposition that sponsorship-driven enhancement of identification produces more strategically aligned behaviour. The present study can provide directional evidence of this connection but cannot establish definitive causal proof: the design is cross-sectional, the quantitative model measures the intention to stay rather than observed behaviour, and a direct test of whether individual decisions align with corporate vision would require a longitudinal, matched design incorporating performance and strategy data. The qualitative phase offers the closest available evidence: senior executives consistently framed sponsorship decisions as an expression of strategic identity, selecting recipients on the basis of "fit" with the company's mission, and several accounts were consistent with the values formulations documented in publicly available annual reports reviewed during sampling, providing partial triangulation. A rigorous future test would require a longitudinal design measuring identification at time 1 and strategically aligned behaviour at time 2, a matched organisational design pairing individual identification scores with strategic documents, or an experimental manipulation of sponsorship communication.

2.10 Development of Research Hypotheses

Building on the theoretical underpinnings outlined in the preceding section, the following hypotheses are developed.

Based on the synthesis of the existing literature and the identified research gaps, this section develops the hypotheses of the present study. The hypotheses are grounded in social identity theory, signalling theory and Weick's sensemaking theory, which collectively explain how sport sponsorship activities can shape employees' perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural intentions. Each pattern is theoretically justified and empirically supported through prior studies, establishing a clear rationale for the proposed relationships within the conceptual framework.

2.10.1 Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Organisational Identification (OI)

Employees' awareness and knowledge about the initiative of sports sponsorship influences the level of organisational identification in them. In organisational psychology, organisational identification (OI) is a term used to describe the extent to which employees feel a sense of connection with their organisation's identity (Prati & Zani, 2013). Common indicators of this identification are employees' emotional attachment as well as behavioural alignment with its culture (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). The awareness and knowledge of sport sponsorship is the fluency and frequency of communication of the organisation's policies to the employees (Pichot et al., 2008). The active level of communication with employees enables them to be more connected to the organisation. It infuses a sense of pride, social recognition, and psychological ownership – hence strengthens their feelings of organisational identification. At a general level, organisational identification is employees' feeling part of the organisation by integrating their own identity with the identity of their organisation.

Here, in this research, the role of sponsorship awareness and knowledge (SAK) in making a positive effect on Organisational Identification is posited to explore whether awareness and knowledge of sport sponsorship by the company generates a positive impact on employees' sense of organisational identification. There are many studies which have investigated different aspects and with different terminologies of this role (Carmeli et al., 2011; Ertürk, 2010; Javalgi et al., 1994). The current study posits a hypothesis (shown in Figure 2 below) to find whether information about the activity of sponsorship and the understanding of the motives of this activity create a positive image, improve the company's impression on employees, make them feel more favourable toward their employer, increase their emotional connection, make them included and valued. All these feelings eventually infuse a sense of belonging with their company and they start calling it 'we' rather than 'they'. In short, investigating the proposed hypothesis (H1) enables us to assess the role of enhanced

awareness and knowledge of sponsorship in strengthening employees' organisational identification, altering perception and bringing pride.

At the same time, the roots of this hypothesis (H1) also stem from signalling theory and social identity theory. According to signalling theory, knowledge and awareness of sport sponsorship serve as a signal to the internal employees of the sponsoring firm (Jensen et al., 2020). This signal communicates the organisation's priorities and values to employees, who are likely to internalise organisational identity, reinforcing positive engagement, emotional connection, and loyalty. Secondly, according to social identity theory, since employees integrate their identity with their organisation, they perceive the action of sports sponsorship as the company's priority for social values and prestige (Todd & Kent, 2009). This enhances employees' sense of belonging and pride, strengthening organisational identification. With this background, we can postulate that awareness and knowledge of sponsorship can have a positive impact on employees' sense of belonging or organisational identification.

> ***H1:*** *Sponsorship awareness and knowledge (SAK) is positively related to Organisational Identification (OI).*

2.10.2 Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Employer Brand Image (EBI)

Awareness and knowledge of sports sponsorship alter the image of sponsoring firms amongst their employees. Employer Brand Image (EBI) refers to the perception and evaluation of a company by its employees. It reflects their view of overall attractiveness as an employer (Hoppe, 2018). When a company sponsors sports, it secures a positive reputation amongst its employees. This prompts the need to verify a postulation that sponsorship awareness and knowledge (SAK) are positively associated with employer brand image (EBI). This aims to identify whether awareness and knowledge of sponsorship among employees of the sponsoring body generate a positive impact on employer brand image. This postulation aims to identify employees' response on SAK vis-à-vis organisations' reputation in society, desire to work with it, image improvement after sports sponsorship. It would gear the research towards evaluation of how employees improve their perception about their company after getting awareness and knowledge about its involvement in sports sponsorship. This increased awareness can infuse feelings of confidence and satisfaction with their employer. As a result, their overall evaluation about their employing firm becomes more positive. The same, with different aspects, has been established by various studies (Biscaia et al., 2013; Javalgi et al., 1994; Karjaluoto & Paakkonen, 2019).

In the background of this relationship, there lie signalling theory and social identity theory. The former theory suggests that every internal activity and external engagement of an organisation serves as a signal to its employees who interpret it to build the company's image in their minds (Chen et al., 2023). Sponsorship of sports acts as a positive signal to employees who perceive it as the company's social commitment, ethical obligations, and financial stability. It is positively associated with employer brand image. Likewise, social

identity theory propounds that when an organisation sponsors sports, especially a reputable one, its image in society gets improved and the employees of such an organisation strengthen their identity with it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). They feel prestige to be linked to a socially reputable and admired entity. Thus, the theoretical grounds say that the knowledge and awareness of sponsorship enhance employer brand image, as hypothesised below.

> ***H2:*** *Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) is positively related to Employer Brand Image (EBI).*

2.10.3 Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) and Organisational Identification (OI)

This postulation sets the ground for a unique observation. It focuses on perception of employees about quality of sponsorship and builds a link of their perception with enhanced organisational identification. Employees feel that being part of such a society-oriented organisation would bring them social prestige – ultimately enhancing their personal image (Yassin & Beckmann, 2025). Such perception makes employees see the company's success and reputation as part of their own identity. They develop feelings of "we" instead of "they" (Onkila, 2015). To enquire the perception about sponsorship, an assumption is made (Figure 2 below) which examines how employees feel about the firm's engagement and how they find it from the eyes of society and social media campaigns. This evaluation is congruent to the indicators of organisation identity; positive perception strengthens organisational identity and vice versa.

From a theoretical perspective, the signalling theory asserts that sponsorship effectiveness is significantly dependent on employees' perceptions (Walker et al., 2011). If they perceive the signal – the act of sports sponsorship – as a positive and credible act of the company, they find it a quality engagement in society. On the contrary, if they perceive the signal as misaligning with their personal or social orientations, they interpret it as low-quality work and hence their perception would remain stagnant. Here, in the perspective of social identity theory, high perceived quality ensures stronger organisational identification and positive attitudes (Hogg & Terry, 2000), while poor perception weakens these outcomes. Amongst employees, organisational identification (OI) increases when they observe that the company's image in society reflects well on them as individuals, and high-quality sponsorships build that image. With this background, a hypothesis is as under.

> ***H3:*** *Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) is positively related to Organisational Identification (OI).*

2.10.4 Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) and Employer Brand Image (EBI)

This statement suggests that employees' evaluations of the quality of their organisation's sponsorship activities have a direct and favourable effect on how they perceive the

organisation as an employer. Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) refers to the employees' subjective assessments of credibility and alignment of the sponsorship activities by their organisation (Kim et al., 2011) to their personal values. When they feel these sponsorship activities as high in quality, they interpret them as organisational commitment to prioritise social responsibilities (Batt et al., 2021). This interpretation hones employees' overall perception about their firm's proclivity for social welfare, public interest, generating in them a desire to work in it. Such positive perception is termed as employer brand image. Thus, the quality perception of organisation's sponsorship of sports contributes to a positive employer brand image. Also, the hypothesis is derived from two theories: social identity theory and signalling theory. According to Signalling Theory, organisational sponsorship of sports works as a signal of communication (Woźniak, 2014). Socially acknowledged and credible activities of sponsorship increase its quality. It enhances organisational image amongst its internal employees who find it a financially stable and reliable place of work. The relationship is also congruent to the Social Identity Theory which says that employees integrate their own identity with the identity of their organisation (Stets & Burke, 2000). In this way, when the organisation gets good repute in society for its sports sponsorship, a sense of reflected prestige is infused in its employees. High-quality sponsorship improves the organisation's reputation. The employees tend to identify themselves with the organisation heightening the employer brand image in their minds. This assumed relationship is posited as under.

> ***H4:*** *Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) is positively related to Employer Brand Image (EBI).*

2.10.5 Organisational Identification (OI) and Intention to Stay (ITS)

Intention to stay is a measurement of the tendency of any employee to continue work for his organisation (Ahmad, 2018). The intention is grounded into many aspects. The foremost among them is organisational identification which refers to the integration of employees' identity with the identity of the organisation. There are many studies finding influence of organisational identification on intention to stay of employees (Bharadwaj & Yameen, 2021; Cole & Bruch, 2006; Van Dick et al., 2004). The intention to stay is commonly identified by enquiring if and for how long the employees want to continue working with their current organisation. The same style of investigation of ITS is followed in studies (Ahmad & Azumah, 2012; Ghosh et al., 2013; Veloso et al., 2014).

The relationship between the two factors is supported by signalling theory (Spence, 1973), and social identity theory (Turner et al., 1979). The proponents of the latter theory say that when employees of a firm make their organisation a part of their self-identity, they start imbibing its internal values, social prestige, and objectives etc. (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2014). The scale of intention to stay gets high when employees feel valued, supported, and psychologically safe. In return, they feel obligated to reciprocate with loyalty

and commitment. Intention to stay reflects this reciprocal relationship. Likewise, the signalling theory asserts that organisational identification itself is a signal to enhance employee retention (Celani & Singh, 2011; Taj, 2016). Thus, OI strengthens a sense of mutual obligation, which positively influences employees to stay with the organisation. In this background a hypothesis, as under, is concluded.

H5: *Organisational Identification (OI) is positively related to Intention to Stay (ITS).*

2.10.6 Employer Brand Image (EBI) and Intention to Stay (ITS)

Another important factor influencing intention to stay is employer brand image. From a psychological perspective, a positive employer brand brings certainty and enhances employees' relation with the employer (Hoppe, 2018; Sandeepanie et al., 2023). When employees perceive their employing firm as socially prestigious and financially stable, they generate a bond of trustworthiness and loyalty for it. This bond paves the way for employees' retention in their present organisation. Also, it rules out possibilities for searching alternative employment. Employees prefer to remain with an employer that enhances their personal identity, offers recognition, and signals long-term career prospects (Yang, 2025).

Moreover, employer brand image functions as a signal of organisational support, fair treatment, and investment in employees (Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019). This makes the relation directly congruent to the signalling theory. As a reciprocation to this signal, the employees make commitment of loyalty and long-term retention. Similarly, when employees perceive the brand positively, as valuable and socially credited, they associate their identity with it (Hameed et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2010). In a bid to continue the prestige in society, and to enjoy stability and certainty, they tend to work for such a popular organisation. In short, to find how employer brand image influences the retention scale, a hypothesis (H6) is written below.

H6: *Employer Brand Image (EBI) is positively related to Intention to Stay (ITS).*

2.10.7 Mediation Effect of Organisational Identification (OI) and Employer Brand Image (EBI)

While prior research has established direct relationships between sponsorship-related variables and employee outcomes, emerging evidence suggests that such effects are rarely immediate or mechanical. Instead, employees interpret and internalise organisational actions through cognitive and affective mechanisms that shape their subsequent attitudes and behavioural intentions. In the context of sport sponsorship, sponsorship awareness and knowledge as well as perceived sponsorship effectiveness do not directly determine employees' intention to remain with the organisation; rather, these perceptions are filtered

through employees' sensemaking processes regarding who the organisation is, what it stands for, and how closely they feel aligned with it.

Organisational identification represents a key psychological mechanism through which employees translate sponsorship-related signals into personal meaning. When employees are aware of and knowledgeable about sponsorship initiatives, and when they perceive such initiatives as effective and authentic, they are more likely to develop a sense of pride, belongingness, and shared identity with their organisation. This heightened identification strengthens emotional attachment and loyalty, which are well-documented antecedents of intention to stay. Thus, organisational identification is expected to transmit the influence of sponsorship-related perceptions onto employees' intention to remain with the organisation.

Similarly, employer brand image functions as an evaluative lens through which employees assess the symbolic and reputational value of sponsorship activities. Employees who perceive their organisation's sponsorship efforts as credible, socially responsible, and strategically aligned tend to form more favourable employer brand perceptions. These enhanced perceptions elevate the attractiveness of the organisation as an employer, reinforcing commitment and decreasing turnover intentions. Consequently, employer brand image is posited as a second mediating pathway linking both sponsorship awareness and perceived sponsorship effectiveness to intention to stay. Taken together, this study proposes that the impact of sponsorship awareness and knowledge and perceived sponsorship effectiveness on employees' intention to stay is not merely direct, but is primarily channelled through organisational identification and employer brand image. On the basis of this reasoning, the following mediation hypotheses are formulated.

> ***H7a:*** *Organisational Identification (OI) mediates the relationship between Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Intention to Stay (ITS).*
>
> ***H8a:*** *Employer Brand Image (EBI) mediates the relationship between Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Intention to Stay (ITS).*
>
> ***H7b:*** *Organisational Identification (OI) mediates the relationship between Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) and Intention to Stay (ITS).*
>
> ***H8b:*** *Employer Brand Image (EBI) mediates the relationship between Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) and Intention to Stay (ITS).*

2.10.8 Comparative analysis of the benchmark company and the comparison group (Multigroup Analysis)

Although the proposed structural model specifies theoretically grounded relationships among sponsorship awareness and knowledge, perceived sponsorship effectiveness, organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay, it cannot be

assumed that these relationships operate uniformly across different organisational contexts. Companies differ substantially in their sponsorship maturity, organisational culture, internal communication practices, employer branding strategies, and historical engagement with sport sponsorship. Such contextual variations may shape how employees interpret sponsorship activities and how strongly these perceptions translate into identification, brand evaluations, and intention to stay.

In particular, benchmark companies – characterised by more established sponsorship strategies, stronger employer brands, and more systematic integration of sponsorship into human resource and communication practices – are expected to generate stronger psychological and behavioural responses among employees than comparative firms with less developed sponsorship frameworks. Employees in benchmark organisations may thus exhibit more pronounced pathways from sponsorship-related perceptions to organisational identification, employer brand image, and ultimately intention to stay. To empirically assess whether the proposed structural relationships differ across organisational contexts, this study employs multi-group analysis (MGA). This approach provides deeper insight into the boundary conditions of the model (Byrne, 2013) and allows the study to move beyond universal assumptions by examining how organisational context moderates the effects of sponsorship on employee-related outcomes. In light of the foregoing discussion, this study posits that organisational context plays a critical role in shaping how employees interpret and respond to sponsorship-related initiatives. Accordingly, the multi-group comparison is formulated to test whether the strength of the structural relationships in the proposed SEM model differs significantly between the benchmark company and the comparison group, thereby providing empirical evidence on the moderating effect of organisational setting on sponsorship-driven employee outcomes.

Multi-group comparison (exploratory analysis, not a formal deductive hypothesis)***:*** *The strength of the structural relationships in the proposed SEM model differs significantly between the benchmark company and the comparison group.*

To probe this comparison, the strength of each structural path — SAK → OI, SAK → EBI, PSE → OI and PSE → EBI — is compared between the benchmark company and the comparison group. These path-level comparisons are reported within the multi-group analysis as a decomposition of this comparison rather than as separate formal hypotheses.

2.10.9 Summary of the Research Hypotheses and Proposed Structural Relationships

This section consolidates all hypotheses developed in the preceding subsections and presents them in an integrated framework comprising direct effects and mediation mechanisms (see Table 1), complemented by an exploratory multi-group comparison. The hypotheses collectively reflect the conceptual model of the study, which posits that Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE)

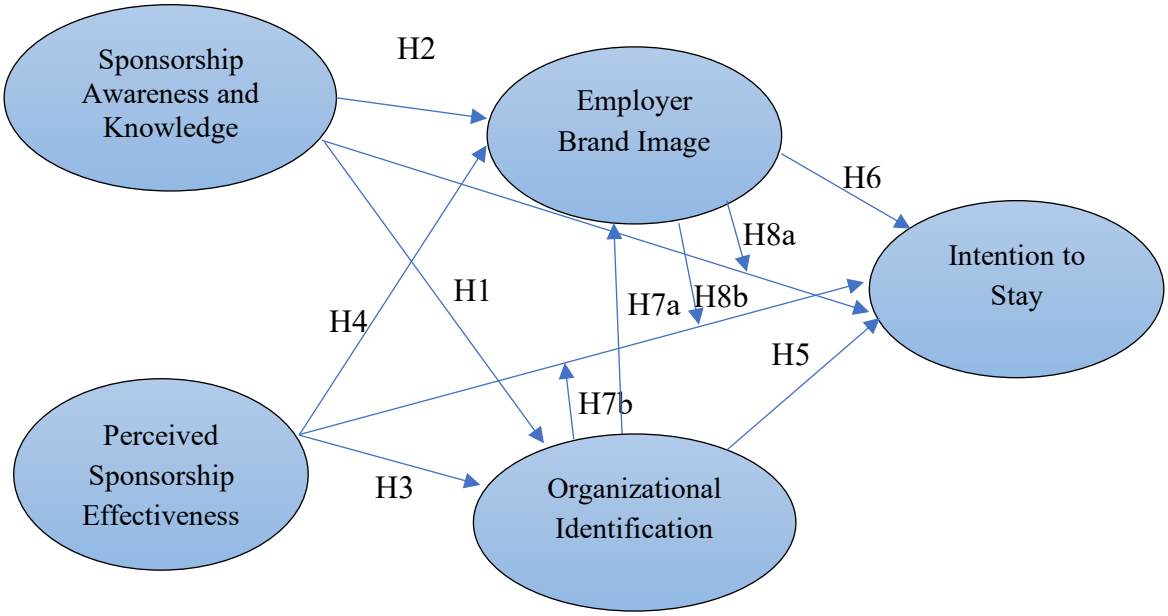
influence employees' Organisational Identification (OI) and Employer Brand Image (EBI), which in turn shape their Intention to Stay (ITS). In addition, the model assumes that OI and EBI function as key mediating mechanisms linking sponsorship perceptions with retention outcomes. Finally, the study proposes that these structural relationships are not uniform across organisational contexts, and therefore, a multigroup analysis is employed to test whether the magnitude of the hypothesised effects differs significantly between the benchmark company and the comparison group. The complete set of direct, mediating, and multigroup hypotheses is summarised in Table 1 to provide a clear overview of the proposed causal paths and to guide the subsequent empirical analyses.

Table 1: List of Research Hypotheses and Corresponding Relationships

Code	Description	Structural Relationship
Direct (Causal) Effect Hypotheses		
H1	Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) is positively related to the Organisational Identification (OI)	SAK→OI
H2	Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) is positively related to the Employer Brand Image (EBI)	SAK→EBI
H3	Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) is positively related to the Organisational Identification (OI).	PSE→OI
H4	Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) is positively related the Employer Brand Image (EBI)	PSE→EBI
H5	Organisational Identification (OI) is a positively related to the Intention to Stay (ITS)	OI→ITS
H6	Employer Brand Image (EBI) is positively related to the Intention to Stay (ITS)	EBI→ITS
Mediation Effect Hypotheses		
H7a	Organisational Identification (OI) mediates the relationship between Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Intention to Stay (ITS)	SAK→OI→ITS
H8a	Employer Brand Image (EBI) mediates the relationship between Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Intention to Stay (ITS)	SAK→EBI→ITS
H7b	Organisational Identification (OI) mediates the relationship between Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) and Intention to Stay (ITS)	PSE→OI→ITS
H8b	Employer Brand Image (EBI) mediates the relationship between Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) and Intention to Stay (ITS)	PSE→EBI→ITS

Source: Own work

Figure 2: Conceptual framework of the study variables and hypothesised relationships



Source: Own work

2.11 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has provided a comprehensive synthesis of the theoretical and empirical literature on corporate sport sponsorship, with a particular emphasis on its evolving role beyond traditional marketing functions toward influencing internal stakeholders, especially employees. The review clarified the conceptual foundations of sponsorship, its strategic processes of rights acquisition and activation, and its growing dominance within corporate marketing portfolios. It further highlighted how sport sponsorship has transformed into a multifaceted organisational tool serving branding, corporate social responsibility, business-to-business networking, and, increasingly, sponsorship-linked internal marketing (SLIM).

Grounded in social identity theory, signalling theory and Weick's sensemaking theory, the chapter established a robust theoretical framework explaining how sponsorship initiatives generate reciprocal value, shape organisational identity, enhance employer brand image, and influence employee attitudes, skills, and retention-related outcomes. While prior research has predominantly focused on consumer responses and brand equity, this review identified a substantial gap in understanding how sponsorship affects employees' perceptions, behaviours, and organisational attachment. Moreover, the lack of integrated conceptual models and standardised measurement instruments for capturing these internal effects further justifies the need for the present study.

Based on the identified gaps, the chapter developed a set of direct and mediating hypotheses, together with an exploratory multi-group comparison, linking Sponsorship Awareness and

Knowledge and Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness with Organisational Identification, Employer Brand Image, and Intention to Stay. Together, these hypotheses form the conceptual backbone of the study and guide the subsequent empirical investigation. The next chapter presents the research methodology adopted to empirically test the proposed model. It outlines the overall research design, sampling strategy, instrument development and pilot testing, ethical considerations, and the qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques employed to ensure methodological rigour and validity of the study findings.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative and quantitative study is to examine how corporate sport sponsorship influences employees' perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural outcomes, particularly in terms of organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay. To achieve this objective, the study adopts a rigorous mixed-methods research design that enables both the testing of hypothesised relationships and the in-depth exploration of managerial perspectives. Accordingly, this chapter outlines the methodological framework employed to collect and analyse the data. The quantitative phase is based on survey data analysed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses and structural equation modelling, while the qualitative phase relies on semi-structured interviews with senior executives analysed thematically using NVivo. The integration of these two approaches ensures triangulation and enhances the robustness and validity of the research findings.

3.1 Research Methods

Qualitative research comprises diverse methodologies and often includes interviews, focus group study, participant observation, ethnography, case studies, and document analysis (secondary source) (Dodgson, 2017; Muzari et al., 2022). These methods hold the capability to get detailed insights into participants' thoughts, motivations, interactions, and emotions (Järvenoja & Järvelä, 2005). Data is typically collected in the form of written documents such as interview transcripts, tables of variables or field notes, and is analysed with the help of various analytical techniques, for example, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, or grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The researcher plays a central role in data collection and interpretation, as his cognitive skills can influence the outcomes of research at any stage (Poth & Searle, 2021).

The qualitative research holds considerable utility when the objective of research includes rather complex or sensitive issues, a specific community, or a special territory with little prior research (Cowles, 1988; Liamputtong, 2006). It enables the exploration of phenomena in natural settings, facilitating respondents to participate in research on their own terms (Fine & Deegan, 1996; Yanchar, 2015). The data generated by this type of research is largely helpful in theory building, policy development and the deep understanding of the social context (Bendassolli, 2013; Dumas & Anderson, 2014). Qualitative research usually provides us with rich descriptions and offers theoretical insights that are grounded in the data (Sallee & Flood, 2012; Skovdal & Cornish, 2015).

Contrary to the qualitative research, quantitative research is a systematic investigation of, mainly, natural and social sciences disciplines (Bonn & Cantlon, 2012; Sukamolson, 2007). It focuses on quantification of data and revealing patterns, simple of causal associations established by certain statistical methods (Disman et al., 2017). Having produced generalisable results, quantitative research is often used to test hypotheses and validity of

theories (Martin & Bridgmon, 2012). By using structured tools in methodology on relatively large sample sizes, quantitative research aims to give objective-oriented, replicable, and statistically reliable findings for fellow researchers (Isaza-Restrepo et al., 2018; Krause, 2002; Zudaire et al., 2011). This type of research relies on numerical data which can be quantified and analysed using various mathematical formulas/equations and statistical techniques (Johnston, 2009).

In quantitative research, the common tools for data collection include surveys, experiments, structured observations, and the use of existing datasets (as a secondary source of data) (Mahboob, 2018; Smith et al., 2011; Tesch, 2013; Vartanian, 2010). Researchers typically devise methodology of research with precise tools, questionnaires with closed-ended questions or measuring tools/experimental setups to ensure consistency and reliability (Cheung, 2021; Kircher & Zipp, 2022). Dependent and independent variables are established. The collected data are analysed using statistical software to identify trends, test relationships between variables, or assess the effectiveness of interventions (Edler et al., 2002).

Quantitative research is considerably suitable for research involving comparison, territorial prevalence, chronological/temporal variations, or simple measurements (Cleland, 2015; Yilmaz, 2013). Having sampled a representative population, quantitative research has the ability to minimise bias, maintain objectivity, and set predictions about larger populations (Cohen, 2002; Wolberg, 2010). However, generalisation of findings over a large population requires opting for an appropriate type of sampling (Sarker & AL-Muaalemi, 2022). It allows results to be extrapolated beyond the immediate sample (Hossan et al., 2023). This approach also emphasises clear and compact depiction of its findings. In reporting results, quantitative research emphasises clarity, precision, and replicability (Pollock, 2018). Results are often presented in the form of charts, graphs, and statistical outputs (Euler & Gregorčič, 2023; Spriestersbach et al., 2009). Quantitative research is foundational to evidence-based decision-making in fields such as medicine, public health, economics, and education (Bruce et al., 2018; Matsuo et al., 2004).

This study investigates two principal research questions, each necessitating distinct methodological approaches. Decision-makers within organisations, particularly those in marketing or specialised sponsorship management roles, employ a sense-making approach in their sports sponsorship activities. When this sponsorship and the associated sense-making process are communicated to all other employees, it is likely to influence their attitudes. Consequently, the research required the application of separate methodologies: one to gather data on the narratives of decision-makers regarding their firms' sports sponsorship (employing a qualitative approach for data collection), and another to assess the impact on the attitudes and behaviours of the firm's employees (utilising a quantitative approach for data collection). The methodology for data collection is contingent upon the scope of the data to be gathered and the specific research objectives (Taherdoost, 2022). Numerous

studies have emphasised the implementation of two distinct data collection techniques (Bryman, 2003; Casper et al., 2007). Further, as noted by researchers (Flynn et al., 1990), the selection of a data collection method, whether singular or a combination of multiple methods, should be meticulously aligned with the research objectives and design.

3.2 Mixed-Method Research Design

The integration of qualitative and quantitative methodologies for data collection is highly advantageous and has been widely adopted by researchers. Unlike in the past, when selecting the most effective data collection techniques posed significant challenges, contemporary researchers frequently employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods (Lo et al., 2020; Mutua, 2022). This methodological combination facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions and contributes to the generation of more valid and applicable findings. The primary advantage of integrating qualitative and quantitative methods is the ability to leverage the strengths of each approach while minimising their respective limitations (Matović & Ovesni, 2021). The inherent flexibility of mixed methods holds significant practical utility in the fields of healthcare, business, and social sciences (Buzko et al., 2018; Kaur et al., 2019). The integration of qualitative and quantitative research within business studies constitutes a robust approach that facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the corporate sector, consumer attitudes, market trends, and organisational dynamics (Hohenthal, 2007). This methodological integration is referred to as a mixed-methods approach (Östlund et al., 2010). Qualitative research is particularly effective for understanding the complexities involved in decision-making processes, specifically in evaluating the role of decision-makers, such as marketing managers or directors, in determining their organisation's sponsorship of sports. In contrast, to investigate the effects of such sponsorships on internal employees, quantitative data collection methods are required.

Qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection facilitate the research on effects of sports sponsorship by a firm on its internal employees (Bjerke & Elvekrok, 2021). Both types of research are important for exploration of prevailing facts (Newman & Benz, 1998). However, there are certain differences in both of them (Paley, 2000). These differences draw distinction between the utility and relevance to the type of study (Cleland, 2015). The approach of qualitative research is based on exploration of social phenomena through collection and interpretation of non-numerical data (Bulmer, 2017). Comprising disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology, qualitative research is used to highlight patterns of meaning, lived experiences, and the contextualised perspectives of individuals or groups (Bradley et al., 2007). Rather than testing assumed hypotheses or establishing generalisable facts, qualitative research focuses on insight into contextualised facts, and nuance in understanding human behaviour vis-à-vis the social world (Fusch et al., 2018).

Decision-makers play a crucial role in the sponsorship process. To explore the intentions, perceptions, sensemaking, and priority-setting of these decision-makers in the context of sports sponsorship, a qualitative research methodology is indispensable. Sensemaking is a subjective and contextual process that takes into account individuals' aptitude, expertise, and interactions within their organisational environment. Against this distinctive backdrop, the present study seeks to elucidate the nuanced ways in which a firm's marketing managers and directors comprehend, internalise, and respond to the company's sports sponsorship initiatives.

3.3 Qualitative Data Collection

An interview guide is an internationally standardised tool to collect qualitative data. It ensures evenness and consistency in data and the procedure to obtain it (Cerel & Fristad, 2001). The interview guide not only helps the researcher administer the same set of questions to all respondents but also minimises the level of bias in the interview (Ahlin, 2019). It paves the way for a comparative analysis of responses. Interviews are specifically beneficial for research where consistency is paramount (Rogers, 2008). There are mainly two broad types of interviews: structured and semi-structured. There are many definitions of structured interview available. To keep them in consideration, a comprehensive definition is that structured interviews are characterised by a constantly ordered sequence of questions, ensuring that each respondent answers the same questions in the same order (Southerland et al., 2005; Sternberg et al., 2001). By minimising the variability of structured interviews, this comprehensive definition increases the reliability of the data collected from study participants (Angold et al., 2007). Usually, structured interviews are of two types: open-ended and close-ended (Ivis et al., 1997; Weller et al., 2018). The close-ended type facilitates researchers at coding/decoding and analysis step by making these steps easy for analysis of responses (Wethington & McDarby, 2015).

In qualitative research, the interview gives many benefits. The foremost advantage is its ability to produce reliable and valid data (Campion et al., 1994). By keeping the interview process constantly structured, researchers can analyse the reason behind differences because the element of how questions are posed is subsided here (Krajewski et al., 2006). This consistency is crucial when comparing responses amongst different demographic groups or in different sets of time (Conway & Peneno, 1999). The same questions in the same order are the main attribute of a structured interview (Campion et al., 1997). In addition, structured interviews are time-efficient, as the standardised format allows for quicker data collection and analysis (Phellas et al., 2011).

A fourth benefit of the structured interview is the training of a researcher (Joyner et al., 2007). A naïve researcher can easily be trained on a repeated set of questions written in the same sequence (Gokah, 2006; Hancock et al., 2001). Structured interviews facilitate training of interviewers before the formal conduct of a study or process of data collection. Since the

questions and their sequence are predetermined, interviewers are well prepared to administer the interview in a consistent manner (Lyon, 2002). It, again, reduces the potential for biasedness (Seidman, 2006; Srivastava, 2024). This is particularly beneficial in large studies involving multiple interviewers (Bergelson et al., 2022).

The structured interview has some demerits also (Srivastava, 2024). It is less flexible and may not facilitate deep exploration of complex topics (Segal & Coolidge, 2007). Since the interviewer is bound to follow the devised structure of interview, he may not be capable of getting new self-appearing dimensions of the hypothesis (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021). This disadvantage keeps the arena of novelty in study closed. Moreover, the rigid nature of structured interviews may not facilitate capture of the full range of participants' experiences and perspectives, potentially overlooking valuable insights (Cohen Miller et al., 2020). Another limitation of it is the requirement of training of interviewer. The prerequisites include interviewers' familiarity with the interview guide and international standardisation (Lievens & De Paepe, 2004; Powell & Brubacher, 2020). Also, frequent monitoring of data collection is the requirement of this process.

An experienced and professional method to develop a structured interview can help mitigate these disadvantages of the structural guide (Fowler & Mangione, 1990). This process involves key steps. The first and foremost step is formulation of objectives of research and collecting necessary information about it (Whetzel et al., 2003). At the second step, a list of questions is formulated, ensuring they are clear, concise, and relevant (Booth et al., 2000). Pilot testing the interview guide is important to reduce complexities and ambiguities. The utility of questions can also be weighed at pilot-level testing, and the guide refined on the basis of feedback from the pilot testing (Bhalla et al., 2023).

3.4 Quantitative Data Collection

In quantitative research, a simple questionnaire is also a valid tool (Jain et al., 2016). Comprising basic and simple questions, such questionnaires are used to get data from naïve people (Jenn, 2006). Low-class employees, often representing the majority of the workforce, may not have many formal channels to express their views (Behling & Law, 2000). A simple questionnaire provides a practical and efficient tool to gather insights from the general population (Ben Charif et al., 2022; Dorer, 2023; Rayhan et al., 2013). In an organisation, employees with low literacy rates and heavy work routines can respond easily to such simple questionnaires. Simple language, closed-ended questions (often marked with Likert scales), and translation into local languages are key characteristics of a simple questionnaire (Barua, 2013).

Since sponsorship of sports by a corporation is a common phenomenon and bound to influence employees' attitude, it is important to get insight into types of effect on them. The simple questionnaires can capture employees' attitudes towards the firm's sports

sponsorship initiatives (Baker, 2003; Ellis, 2008). Internal support for CSR and sponsorship activities can cause change in workers' morale and the culture of an organisation (Parajuli, 2004). To get data from the workforce of an organisation, such questionnaires are useful (Kóczy et al., 2020). Also, simple questionnaires can be distributed quickly across different sections and levels of an organisation (Jenn, 2006; Willimack et al., 1999). They require minimal training of the researcher to administer (Frary, 2003). They ensure anonymity of respondents on demand (Vogel, 2018). This enhances both the quantity and quality of data collected. As far as the research of organisational workforce is concerned, tailoring data collection tools is essential to get valid and rich responses according to the aptitude of respondents (Abawi, 2017; SenGupta, 1993). Many studies support the use of structured interview guides for senior or executive employees and simple questionnaires for operational employees, because of the differences in communication style, cognitive skills, literacy terms, and decision-making roles (Codó, 2008; Secor, 2010).

3.5 Rationale of using Mixed-method Data Collection Approach

The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods with the help of semi-structured interview and survey methods was used in this study. In a survey method, simple questionnaires can be used to collect data from different worker groups of an organisation (Hanson & Pratt, 2014; Kim et al., 2011; Sileyew, 2019). Adjusting methodology based on the characteristics of different subgroups is vital to get optimised response quality and reduce biasedness (Groves & Heeringa, 2006; Sileyew, 2019). Since top-ranked employees of an organisation hold a high literacy rate, they play a key role in decision making, marketing, CSR or miscellaneous objective settings. From such top-ranked employees, interviews (semi-structured with either close-ended or open-ended response options) enable greater depth and flexibility in responses and reduce complex viewpoints from such high-level officials (Campion et al., 1994; Lievens & De Paepe, 2004). Semi-structured interviews keep a balance between consistency and adaptability and make respondents express their opinion in a rational way (Azungah, 2018; Gill, 2014).

On the other hand, lower-class employees, for example, labour of manufacturing section, factory workers, janitorial staff, or field workers, usually have no formal education, limited availability during work shift, and lower organisational influence (Borg et al., 2008; Mellow & Sider, 1983). For this group, a simple questionnaire (closed-ended or Likert scale items) is suitable because it is easy to understand and facilitates more participation. Theoretically, equity in research practice implies that one-size-fits-all data collection methodologies might technically be less advantageous as compared to the separate one (Glasow, 2005; Punch, 2013). Since sports sponsorship is rampant in the corporate sector, its effects on attitude and behaviour of employees of upper or lower tier are required to be studied. Thus, the use of structured interviews for upper-class employees and simple questionnaires for lower-class employees can be of great help because, in literature, both research tools are found theoretically correct and ethically sound.

The extensive review of literature depicts that in the currently competitive and brand-driven business environment, the sports sponsorships have evolved from simple brand exposure platform into complex strategic instruments bound to deliver multidimensional value to companies. At the same time the focus of the sponsorship has shifted from external stakeholders to internal employees. A sponsorship deal is not pursuing solely the popularity of a sport or event; rather, it is paving the way for broader business goals such as market entry, employee engagement, or stakeholder alignment. One of the instrumental implications is the potential of sports sponsorships to boost internal branding and employee behaviour. Employees are associated with the firm as its ambassadors, but are overlooked most of the time as target audience. Companies must consider that the sponsored sport or event resonates with the expectations of its internal employees, which may involve exploratory study of impacts of sponsorship on attitude and behaviour of employees of the sponsoring firm. Dividing employees into upper tier and lower tier, the literature suggests using structured interviews and simple questionnaires for each category respectively.

3.6 Study Participants

In this study, 17 companies from nine industries in six Slovenian cities took part in the qualitative phase; 10 of them, from seven industries, took part in the quantitative phase. The selection of both cities and industries was contingent upon obtaining permission to access their employees for semi-structured interviews. These industries provided comprehensive access to their marketing managers for the purpose of conducting interviews. However, the leaders of these industries expressed concerns regarding the anonymity of their organisations and the employees involved in the interviews, which we assured would be maintained. Written agreements ensuring anonymity, permission to record interviews (audio only), and authorisation to examine records related to sports sponsorship have been secured and are available for review upon request.

Sports sponsorship predominantly resides within the marketing domain, rendering the role of marketing managers or directors pivotal in the decision-making process. Companies engage in sports sponsorship to augment brand awareness, foster customer loyalty, and enhance corporate image, with marketing managers playing a central role in this strategy (Hawabhay et al., 2009). The indispensable involvement of marketing managers in the decision-making process of sports sponsorship is critical, as their expertise significantly influences the success and return on investment (ROI) of such initiatives (King, 2018). Drawing on their experience and expertise, marketing managers possess insights into market trends and consumer preferences, enabling them to identify the sports, teams, or athletes that best align with the company's values and overarching marketing objectives.

This strategic alignment is essential. In addition, marketing managers must assess the potential benefits and risks associated with sponsorship agreements. This involves conducting financial analyses, evaluating media exposure, and calculating the anticipated

ROI (Nadeem, 2005). Sports sponsorship often requires substantial investment, and without a robust decision-making framework, brands may incur losses (Jönsson & Zahn, 2018). Marketing managers evaluate both tangible and intangible benefits, such as brand visibility, audience engagement, goodwill, and exclusive marketing rights. Negotiation is another critical area where marketing managers exert influence, as a well-negotiated agreement can achieve the sponsorship's objectives (Athanasopoulou & Sarli, 2015).

In addition, the evaluation of sports sponsorship and the measurement of performance fall within the responsibilities of marketing managers, as they continuously assess key performance indicators (KPIs), which are crucial for developing future strategies (Grønholdt & Martensen, 2006). In addition, marketing managers are pivotal in leveraging sponsorship for comprehensive marketing campaigns. They collaborate with advertising, print, digital, and social media teams to enhance sponsorship outcomes (Irwin et al., 2008). In summary, cognitive abilities, market awareness, negotiation skills, and a strategic approach are essential for aligning sports sponsorship with a company's objectives.

In this context, we interviewed 17 marketing/sponsorship managers from 17 companies. In certain cases, these individuals held the titles of marketing and sponsorship managers. All participants were Slovenian nationals who played an active role in decision-making processes related to sports sponsorships in their companies. Written consent for participation was obtained from all the interviewees involved in the study, and these consent forms were securely stored and are available upon request.

This section sets out the criteria and procedures governing the selection of both the qualitative and the quantitative samples, together with the company-level recruitment and response data underpinning the survey phase.

3.6.1 Qualitative Sample: Selection Rationale

The qualitative phase employed a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). The objective was to identify organisations in the Slovenian market that were active and identifiable sport sponsors, that retained senior decision-makers with direct responsibility for sponsorship, and that operated across a range of industries to permit cross-industry analytical comparison.

Sampling proceeded in three stages. First, the annual reports of the largest Slovenian companies, ranked by revenue and number of employees, were systematically reviewed to identify all organisations that disclosed active sport sponsorship. This screening yielded 30 eligible companies spanning the banking, insurance, telecommunications, manufacturing, oil distribution, automotive retail and food retail sectors. Second, all 30 companies were approached with a formal research invitation addressed to the Director of Marketing or Head of Sponsorship; of these, 17 agreed to participate and granted access for in-depth interviews. Third, of those 17, ten further agreed to extend participation to the employee questionnaire phase, providing access to their workforce for survey distribution.

3.6.2 Rationale for Industry Coverage

The industries represented in the sample were not selected a priori on industry criteria; rather, they emerged from the population of active major sport sponsors in Slovenia as revealed through the annual-report review. This ensures that the sample reflects actual sponsorship practice in the Slovenian corporate market rather than a theoretically constructed ideal. The decision not to restrict the sample to a single industry is grounded in the logic of purposive maximum-variation sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): including diverse industries strengthens the transferability of the findings by establishing whether the relationships between sponsorship and employee outcomes are robust across organisational contexts. Had a single industry been selected, the findings would have been contextually narrow and their generalisability substantially reduced. Industry context is itself analytically relevant, since sponsorship practices, internal communication cultures and the symbolic value of sport vary across sectors; banking and insurance firms, for example, may use sponsorship primarily for reputational signalling, whereas manufacturing firms may use it for community embeddedness. Industry diversity therefore enriches the sensemaking analysis and supports a more nuanced interpretation of how decision-makers across strategic contexts frame and justify sponsorship.

3.6.3 Quantitative Sample: Recruitment and Response Rates

The quantitative phase used a nested sampling strategy. The ten companies that agreed to participate served as the sampling frame. Within each organisation, questionnaires were distributed to all reachable employees through the company's internal human-resources or communication channel (a full-census distribution within each participating organisation), with individual participation remaining voluntary and anonymous. Distribution and response data by company are summarised in the table below, with companies anonymised by industry to preserve confidentiality.

Table 2: Questionnaire distribution and response rates by participating company (anonymised by industry)

Industry	**Distributed**	**Completed**	**Response rate**
Oil distribution and retail	126	35	27.8%
Insurance	2,000	53	2.7%
Banking 1	340	45	13.2%
Manufacturing 1	98	25	25.5%
Telecommunications	700	68	9.7%
Automotive retail	120	29	24.2%
Banking 2	2,516	181	7.2%
Manufacturing 2	170	26	15.3%

To be continued

Table 2: Questionnaire distribution and response rates by participating company (anonymised by industry) (cont.)

Industry	Distributed	Completed	Response rate
Manufacturing 3	1,500	20	1.3%
Food retail	100	17	17.0%
Total	7,670	499	6.5%

Source: Own work

Note. Response rate = completed / distributed × 100. Companies are anonymised by industry to protect confidentiality.

The overall response rate of 6.5% (499 completed questionnaires from 7,670 distributed) and the usable-submission rate are identical in this study: all 499 returned questionnaires were complete and usable, so no distinction between the two is required. Per-company rates nonetheless vary considerably, from 1.3% (Manufacturing 3) to 27.8% (Oil distribution and retail), reflecting genuine variation in internal engagement and communication practice across organisations.

It should be acknowledged that a 6.5% overall response rate, while not atypical for large-company internal surveys with voluntary participation (Baruch & Holtom, 2008), carries a risk of non-response bias. Employees who declined to participate may differ systematically from those who responded; less engaged or less sport-interested employees may be under-represented, which would tend to inflate the estimated effect of sponsorship on identification and intention to stay. The marked variation in response rates across companies further implies that the aggregate sample over-represents employees from higher-engagement organisations, a point that should be borne in mind when interpreting the generalisability of the findings. These limitations are discussed explicitly in the Limitations section. The influence of this variation on the structural results could be assessed in future robustness checks through company-level fixed effects or company dummy variables.

Missing data within usable questionnaires were not an issue: the survey platform required a response to every item before submission, making partial responses technically impossible. It should be noted, however, that mandatory-response formats carry a risk of satisficing, whereby some respondents may select arbitrary answers in order to progress; this represents a potential data-quality limitation that cannot be assessed post hoc. Accordingly, all 499 submitted questionnaires were complete and no imputation procedures were applied.

3.7 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

For industries, the sole inclusion criterion was investment in sports sponsorship with a minimum budget of 200.000 EUR invested in sport sponsorship either in national federation, club, individual athlete or event. The inclusion criterion for participants was the selection of

marketing or dedicated sponsorship managers with at least five years' experience in managing marketing departments/budgets of their respective companies. The experience-based inclusion of study participants allows researchers to gather data from individuals directly involved and knowledgeable in the field of business studies (Singer & Bruhns, 1991). Experienced professionals provide unique insights into the subject under investigation, facilitating specific data analysis (Sambrook et al., 2014). In addition, given the phenomenon-specific nature of the study, there were limited individuals relevant to the research question, precluding the formulation of exclusion criteria for screening irrelevant participants. However, in exploratory or qualitative studies, the absence of stringent inclusion criteria can be advantageous in several respects (Saunders & Townsend, 2016; Upadhyay & Lipkovich, 2020): it provides insights into the perspectives of marketing managers, offers a broader range of perspectives, and enables researchers to identify unexpected themes or issues. We obtained authorisation from all the companies approached for this study. In addition, they facilitated the acquisition of consent from their marketing officers, who were ultimately included in this study.

3.8 Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted in strict accordance with internationally accepted ethical standards for social science research. Ethical approval for the project entitled *"Sport Sponsorships and Effects on Employees in Sponsor Corporations"* was formally granted by the Ethics Committee for Research at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Economics (Decision K-XVI/2.1, Appendix C). Prior to data collection, all participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without any negative consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from each interviewee before conducting the qualitative interviews. Participants were also assured that the study was being conducted solely for academic purposes. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained throughout the research process. No personally identifiable information was disclosed in the reporting of results, and all interview transcripts and survey responses were anonymised using unique identification codes. The data were stored securely in password-protected electronic files, accessible only to the researcher and supervisory team.

In the qualitative phase, audio recordings of interviews were made only after obtaining explicit permission from the participants. These recordings were transcribed and translated where necessary, and the original audio files were securely stored and subsequently deleted after completion of the analysis phase. For the quantitative phase, the online questionnaire did not collect names or any information that could directly identify respondents. Finally, the study adhered to the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, and respect for participants' autonomy, ensuring that no physical, psychological, or professional harm was caused to any participant as a result of their involvement in the research.

3.9 Data Collection Techniques

3.9.1 Data Collection for Qualitative Study

The literature review revealed that the application of Weick's sensemaking theory to corporate decisions regarding sports sponsorship is notably underexplored. Numerous factors influence senior management's decision-making processes when considering sports sponsorship (Lee et al., 2013). According to Weick (1995), seven interrelated properties – identity construction, social context, retrospective justification, and the pursuit of plausible explanations that align with both internal and external expectations, as well as extracted cues – are critical to understanding how executives rationalise and justify sponsorship decisions (Daellenbach et al., 2014; Wagner & Nissen, 2015).

Conducting semi-structured interviews in a qualitative study is particularly well-suited for studies inspired by Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking, as both approaches emphasise the role of decision-makers in the process of sensemaking within the complex and socially embedded context of sports sponsorship. In this framework, sensemaking underscores the emergence of decisions from individuals' interpretations of experiences, negotiation of shared meanings, and justification of actions in uncertain situations (Helms Mills et al., 2010). Within the realm of sports sponsorship, these interpretative and sensemaking processes occur among corporate executives, marketing managers, and other stakeholders as they collaboratively determine sponsorship objectives, assess opportunities and evaluate outcomes (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). Through open-ended discussions during semi-structured interviews, participants were able to articulate their observations of sponsorship opportunities, the cues they prioritised, the influence of organisational identity on their decisions, and their retrospective evaluations of sponsorship effectiveness (Hammer & Wildavsky, 2018). These articulations, facilitated by in-depth interviews, align with Weick's proposition that sensemaking is retrospective, social and grounded. In this context, integrating Weick's theory of sensemaking with in-depth interviews offers insights into the rationale behind sponsorship decisions, extending beyond mere outcomes. This approach elucidates that sponsorship decisions are not solely economic in nature but also serve as symbolic acts through which organisations continuously construct meaning, negotiate identities, and manage relationships with diverse stakeholders. Figure 3 illustrates the key constructs (derived from a semi-structured interview) in relation to Weick's theory of sensemaking.

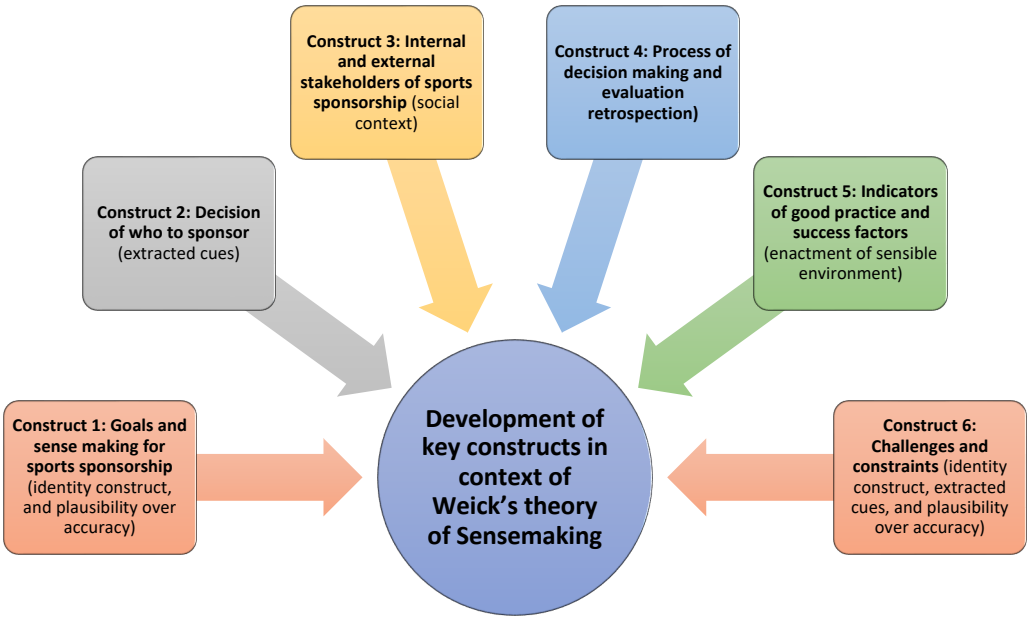
3.9.1.1 Development of the Constructs for Interviews

The six constructs selected for the in-depth interviews were interrelated. Integrating these key constructs with the seven principles of Weick's theory of sensemaking provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how managerial cognition and organisational factors influence sports sponsorship decisions. Construct 1, "Goals and sensemaking for

sports sponsorship", is directly linked to and dependent on the other four constructs. As goal setting is an evolutionary process, organisations continuously develop sensemaking to align goals with sponsorship. The evolution of goals is influenced by interactions with both internal and external stakeholders in sports sponsorships. Weick's (1995) identity perspective of sponsoring firms is pertinent to goal-setting. Consequently, the prioritisation of goals and selection of sponsorships are not solely rational but are driven by plausible narratives that "make sense" within the organisational context, reflecting Weick's principle of plausibility over accuracy.

The determination of sponsorship recipients (construct 2) is contingent on the rationale formulated through sensemaking and is intrinsically connected to the establishment of sponsorship objectives (construct 1). In this context, decision-makers, such as marketing directors and managers, interpret available sponsorship opportunities through the framework of organisational goals, stakeholder interests (including internal employees and external audiences/customers), and identity alignment, which are influenced by their personal orientation. They also evaluate sponsorship decisions based on the criteria of fit and authenticity, which is a sub-construct of construct 2 (sponsorship). Indicators of best practices and success factors (construct 5) provide feedback that informs future goal-setting and sensemaking (construct 1). Through comprehensive post-sponsorship evaluations, organisations assess outcomes such as brand visibility, social impact, and stakeholder approval, which serve as retrospective cues, in accordance with Weick's theory, for establishing future goals and decisions, thereby ensuring the creation of a coherent environment as per Weick's theory.

Figure 3: Schematic view of key constructs of decision-making vis-à-vis Sensemaking theory



Source: Own work

The evolution of goals (Construct 1) is inherently context-dependent and shaped by interactions with both internal and external stakeholders (Construct 3) involved in sports sponsorship. This process is directly influenced by the social context of Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking. Stakeholders, including sports organisations, employees of sponsoring firms, management, consumers, media partners, and the broader community, collectively influence the interpretation, negotiation, and refinement of sponsorship objectives within the organisation. This social interaction determines which interpretations are legitimised and which sponsorship goals are prioritised. Thus, the formulation and evolution of sponsorship goals are intricately linked to stakeholders' perspectives and the process of sensemaking.

The process of decision-making and evaluation (Construct 4) exerts a continuous influence on all previously mentioned constructs, as well as on challenges and constraints (Construct 6). Regular assessments and reviews of this process shape objectives, determine sponsorship decisions, and establish success indicators. The social context is assessed through its sub-construct, "stakeholder architecture". Ultimately, both evidence and intuition guide future trajectories. Construct 6, which encompasses challenges and constraints, includes three sub-constructs aimed at identifying the emotional connection with internal and external stakeholders, the impact of digital and societal factors, and the complexities of attribution and return on investment (ROI). This construct is interconnected with the other five constructs, addressing key challenges and constraints in goal setting, decision-making, evaluation processes, and stakeholder engagement. Consequently, these six elements are mutually interdependent: goals inform decisions, decisions produce outcomes, outcomes shape future goals, and stakeholders continuously influence and reinterpret each stage of the process. Collectively, they constitute a dynamic cyclical sensemaking system that drives the evolution of corporate sports sponsorship strategies.

3.9.1.2 Qualitative Data Collection Tools (Semi-structured interview)

We utilised a semi-structured interview guide for data collection, which presents several advantages for eliciting insights from marketing managers. Semi-structured interviews are recognised as an effective method for gathering qualitative data because of their unique combination of structure and flexibility, facilitating the acquisition of rich and meaningful insights (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Unlike structured interviews, which adhere to a rigid set of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews employ a framework that guides key topics and incorporates open-ended questions (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). This approach allows researchers to direct conversations while remaining open to exploring new dimensions of the topic. The defining feature of semi-structured interviews is their inherent flexibility, which enables researchers to elicit more natural and comprehensive insights from participants regarding complex phenomena or experiences (Adams, 2015). In addition, semi-structured interviews assist researchers in making comparisons across the responses of all sampled individuals (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). The uniformity of the questions posed during

the interviews facilitated the comparison of participants' answers and the analysis of response patterns. The flexible nature of these interviews mitigates ambiguities in statements by eliciting detailed responses from participants (Kallio et al., 2016). Statistically, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to identify recurring themes within a dataset while preserving the unique perspectives offered by each interviewee (Karatsareas, 2022).

In addition, semi-structured interviews are crucial for exploring subjective meanings and understanding how individuals interpret their decisions by integrating their expertise and experience (Ahlin, 2019). This methodology is particularly significant in research areas focusing on identity, culture, belief systems, and personal experiences. Through comprehensive dialogue, researchers can investigate the underlying motivations, values, and reasoning behind participants' actions and choices, which are otherwise difficult to capture through quantitative methods or structured interviews alone (Striepe, 2020).

In light of the recognised advantages of semi-structured interviews, we devised an interview guide. Each interview was conducted with a single respondent and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The literature suggests that the optimal duration for semi-structured interviews ranges from 30 to 60 minutes, contingent upon the subject matter, as well as the characteristics of the interviewer and interviewee (Mannan & Afni, 2020; Naz et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2021). With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded using iOS software. Following a brief introduction outlining the purpose of the interview, we formally requested consent to participate, to which all respondents agreed. The interviews commenced with inquiries regarding the socio-demographic backgrounds of the respondents and their respective firms. Participants were asked to provide their name, age, experience, type of organisation, revenue, and tenure with the organisation. Nine constructs were examined in relation to sports sponsorship and sensemaking. The initial category focused on “background information on sports sponsorship within the current organisation”. Questions addressed the historical budget (EUR) allocated to sports. The study examines the dynamics of sports sponsorship, focusing on the external and internal factors influencing it, the criteria for evaluating its success, and the development of guidelines for implementing sports sponsorship policies. A significant concept explored is “retrospective sensemaking”, which involves analysing how past experiences with sports sponsorships inform current decision-making processes. Three constructs related to sensemaking were identified. The first construct posits that “social sensemaking is a social process”, addressing the roles of internal and external stakeholders in decision-making, decision modification, and the influence of colleagues and audiences on sports sponsorship approaches. The second construct, “ongoing sensemaking never stops”, involves gathering opinions on re-evaluating the purpose of sports sponsorship, reassessing its goals, and considering the impact of evolving trends on its practice. The third construct, focusing on sensemaking, is “extracted cues – we make sense from small cues”, which examines indicators of sponsorship success, the role of feedback in interpreting successful sponsorships, and how specific cues can reshape perspectives on sponsorships. In nearly all interviews, additional questions were

posed under the final construct of the questionnaire, probing respondents' intrinsic motivations and justifications for their firms' sports sponsorship activities.

3.9.2 Interview Protocol

The qualitative phase employed a semi-structured interview protocol developed specifically for this study. Each interview was conducted individually with one senior participant (Marketing Director, Head of Sponsorship or equivalent) and lasted between 55 and 65 minutes (approximately one hour). Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The protocol was structured around six theoretically grounded constructs, each mapped onto Weick's (1995) seven properties of sensemaking: (1) goals and sensemaking of sponsorships; (2) determination of sponsorship recipients; (3) stakeholder involvement; (4) decision-making and evaluation processes; (5) internal and external communication; and (6) challenges and constraints. Each construct was addressed through three to five open-ended questions, with follow-up probes prepared to allow deeper exploration of unanticipated themes. The protocol was piloted with two participants before field deployment and refined for clarity. Where interviews were conducted in Slovenian, transcripts were translated into English before coding, with care taken to preserve contextual meaning.

3.9.3 Data Collection for Quantitative Study

Sports sponsorship by the corporate sector is now extending beyond targeting external audiences and has started shaping the internal attitudes and behaviours of employees. When a company engages in sponsoring sports teams or events, it often enhances employees' sense of organisational pride (Xia et al., 2024), hence identification. Employees feel proud to work for a company that is visible, socially responsible, and associated with values like teamwork, perseverance, and excellence. Sports sponsorship infuses feelings of motivation, identification, and job satisfaction amongst employees of the sponsoring firm (Hsiao et al., 2021). These effects on employees are best studied under Signalling Theory by Spence in 1973 (Campbell, 2000), and Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

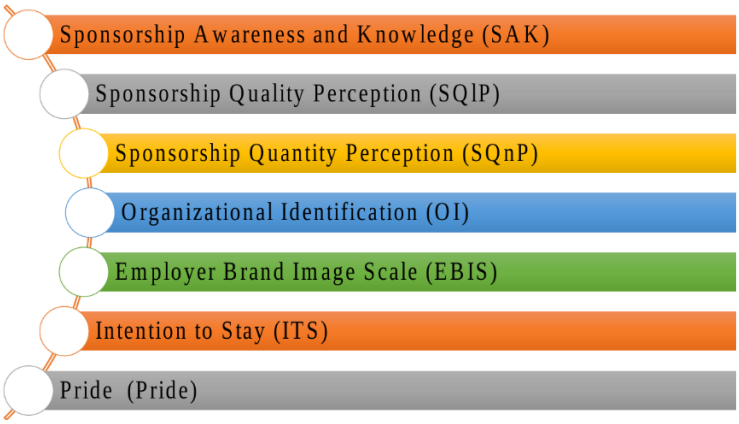
Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973) proposes that organisations communicate their preferences for their values, quality, and reliability through observable actions (Connelly et al., 2025). Sponsorship of sports is the best visible action to communicate with not only external but also internal audiences (employees) of the sponsoring firm. Internally, it gives signals to employees about the company's culture, priorities, and financial stability (Cravens & Oliver, 2006). When employees interpret these signals positively, they feel improved feelings about job satisfaction, trust, and organisational commitment (Hickman et al., 2005). This interpretation reinforces employees' belief that they are part of a prestigious and

responsible organisation. However, if this interpretation of the signal appears inconsistent with internal factors such as lack of facilities, inappropriate division of tasks, etc., it can prompt cognitive dissonance and lower morale (Donovan & Henley, 2010). Thus, the effect of corporate signalling and its perception by the internal employees requires authentic alignment for positive employee attitudes.

Likewise, Social Identity Theory narrates a framework for understanding how employees' sense of belonging and self-concept are influenced by their association with the companies' involvement in sponsorship of sports (Madrigal, 2001). This theory helps understand how sponsorship activities influence employees' behaviour towards general attitudes, organisational commitment, and pride. Employees naturally derive self-esteem and pride from the success, prestige, and positive image of the sports that their firms have sponsored. It enhances the organisation's social standing, and employees internalise this prestige through organisational identification, emotional attachment, loyalty, and motivation (Demirel et al., 2018), which is the pivotal point of the Social Identity Theory. However, at the same time, if the employees perceive the sponsored sport as unrelated to their company's values or interpret the initiative as insincere, the identification process weakens, and the expected positive attitudes may not emerge. Therefore, it is necessary to measure and evaluate employees' response/perception of the sports sponsorship by their employers.

Together, Social Identity Theory and Signalling Theory explain how employees internalise organisational prestige derived from sports sponsorship, and *how* sponsorship actions convey meaning that employees interpret, respectively. Since both theories emphasise the symbolic power of sports sponsorship in shaping employees' perceptions, strengthening organisational identification, and enhancing overall organisational commitment, it is necessary to study the effect of sports sponsorship on internal employees of the sponsoring firm, in light of these theories, together with Weick's sensemaking perspective. Based on this necessity, we developed seven key constructs.

Figure 4: Key constructs of the Study



Source: Own work

The subsequent sections explain details about each construct.

Construct 1. Sponsorship awareness and knowledge (SAK): Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge is a significant parameter to study because it reflects the extent to which employees are informed about and acknowledge their organisation's sponsorship activities. This construct depicts the depth of employees' cognitive understanding and informational exposure regarding their organisation's involvement in sports-oriented initiatives, such as sponsoring teams, events, or athletes. It refers to the employees' level of awareness of the sponsorship, and deeper understanding of the purpose, goals, and expected outcomes of these sponsorship activities. It includes recognition of the company's strategic objectives, such as brand visibility, community engagement, and improvement of brand image. The scale of this construct is adopted from Cause-Related Sport Sponsorship: An Assessment of Spectator Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behavioral Intentions Irwin et al. (2003), and from Zepf (2008), Internal Branding and Sponsorship Awareness: Development of a Sponsorship Awareness Scale.

This construct is directly related to Social Identity Theory and Signalling Theory. Social Identity Theory says that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their affiliation with social groups, for example, organisations (Hogg & Terry, 2014). And when employees of an organisation get awareness and knowledge of their company's sports sponsorship activities, the objectives and values behind them, they are more likely to internalise the organisation's positive image as part of their own identity. It helps build a cognitive bridge to connect employees' self-image with the organisation's external achievements (e.g., sponsoring sports events or teams). Similarly, the Signalling Theory propounds that corporate actions of sports sponsorship serve as signals to communicate the company's financial stability, and commitment to community development (Khanna & Jain, 2025; Lin & Bruning, 2024).

Since the construct of Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge captures employee's ability to connect himself with the organisation, and perceive, interpret, and evaluate the signals of sports sponsorship, employees are more likely to enhance trust, pride, and emotional attachment toward the organisation, leading to more favourable work attitudes. Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge, under the mechanism of signalling theory and social identity theory, serves as a foundational construct to connect corporate sports sponsorship to employee attitudes, by determining how well employees perceive, comprehend, and internalise their organisation's sponsorship actions. There are 17 items under the light of these two theories. Ten items were developed through the social identity theory and seven items were developed through signalling theory.

Construct 2. Sponsorship Quality Perception (SQlP): Sponsorship Quality Perception holds significance to study the extent of sponsorship effects on employees' attitudes. Its main focus is on employees' perception of how well and how meaningfully their organisation engages in sponsorship activities. Since it deals with employee's cognitive skills, this

construct is also strongly associated with the Social Identity Theory and Signalling Theory. Employees' perception about their firm's sponsorship of sports decides employees' image building and the consequent identification with the firm. Perceived sponsorship quality makes employees aware of the priorities, for example, upholding positive social values, such as teamwork, health promotion, and community engagement, of their firm. Also, the sponsorship signals the organisation's authenticity, credibility, and a general positive image amongst the internal audience (employees). Employees internalise these values and develop an enhanced organisational identification which ultimately strengthens positive attitudes, such as job satisfaction, loyalty, and emotional attachment – the crux points of Social Identity theory and signalling theory.

Construct 3. Sponsorship Quantity Perception (SQnP): Sponsorship Quantity Perception refers to employees' assessment of the extent, frequency, and visibility of their organisation's sponsorship activities. While Sponsorship Quality Perception captures how meaningful and authentic these activities are, SQnP reflects *how much* the organisation is involved in sponsorship in terms of number of events, scale of exposure, and continuity of engagement. This construct is grounded in Signalling Theory and Social Identity Theory, as frequent and visible sponsorship sends strong signals to employees about the organisation's commitment to its social and sporting partnerships. A higher perceived quantity of sponsorship enhances the salience of the organisation's presence in the social environment, reinforcing employees' awareness of the firm's market position, resource capability, and strategic priorities. When employees repeatedly observe their organisation sponsoring multiple sports initiatives, they are more likely to interpret this as a sign of organisational strength, stability, and proactive engagement, which in turn strengthens organisational identification, pride, and loyalty. However, if high quantity is not accompanied by perceived quality, employees may interpret sponsorship efforts as symbolic or superficial, highlighting the importance of balancing both dimensions for sustainable internal branding outcomes.

Construct 4. Organisational identification (OI): Organisational Identification (OI) is a construct vital to evaluate the effect of sports sponsorship on employees of the sponsoring firm. It has a direct link with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) which formulates the theoretical foundation for the concept of organisational identification, which refers to the degree to which employees recognise themselves by the same attributes they believe define their organisation. In essence, this construct and theory examine how deeply employees feel "one with the organisation". When a company engages in sports sponsorship, it builds a favourable image amongst its employees and becomes associated with admired social values such as teamwork, competition, community development, and health promotion. Employees who perceive and value these activities tend to internalise them as part of their own self-concept. Like Social Identity Theory, the OI construct has an association with Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973). Sponsorship activities by a firm work as signals of its priorities for cultural values, financial stability, and social responsibility. The clear decoding of these signals infuses positivity and credibility amongst employees of the

sponsoring body. Also, this conducive signalling strengthens organisational identification, as employees feel proud to be associated with an organisation that publicly demonstrates excellence and moral integrity. The idea of this construct was taken from Bhattacharya et al. (1995) and Mael and Ashforth (1992).

Construct 5. Employer Brand Image Scale (EBIS): To study the effect of sports sponsorship on internal employees of the sponsoring firm, a very important construct is Employer Brand Image Scale. The idea of this construct is taken from Employer Brand Image Scale (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003) adaptation. It is a measurement framework derived from the concept given by Ambler and Barrow in 1996. Taking into account overall image, reputation, and attractiveness of an organisation in the minds of its workforce, it assesses how internal employees perceive and evaluate their organisation as an employer. When employees perceive things positively, they build a strong image of their brand and experience enhanced self-esteem and pride in being part of it. Assessment of such feelings (high self-esteem and confidence to be part of such admired organisations) brings this construct in direct consonance with the Social Identity Theory. This construct (EBIS) also falls under the umbrella of Signalling Theory, by serving as a signal to employees about financial progress and social commitment. Employees interpret these signals as the organisation's rising prestige. Hence, as a response to the company's signalling, employee brand image scale gets improved.

Construct 6. Intention to Stay (ITS): The Intention to Stay Subscale was adapted from Kyndt et al. (2009). Technically, it is a measurement tool (usually part of an employee attitude or engagement survey) that assesses how strongly employees intend to continue working with their employer. Based on their satisfaction, loyalty, and organisational experiences, this construct helps measure the behavioural intention rather than the actual behaviour. Sponsorship of sports serves as a signal to internal employees of the sponsoring firm. And when these signals are perceived as credible and consistent, they foster trust, satisfaction, and psychological security, eventually giving rise to the employees' intention to stay. Such attributes of construct 5 make it relevant to Signalling Theory which says that intention to stay is a psychological response to how effectively employees perceive the signal of sports sponsorship. Similarly, this perception of the company's signals makes the base of organisational identification by employees – a crux of Social Identity Theory.

Construct 7. Pride (PRIDE): In the context of sports sponsorship by the corporate sector, pride amongst employees refers to their positive emotional response as a result of sponsorship by their employers. It arises when employees interpret the act of sponsorship as a positive signal, and identify this signal with their organisation's positive image. All these reasons of pride are branches of social identity theory and signalling theory. The idea of this construct was extracted from the work of Kuo and Shao (2008), and Hofer and Grohs (2018).

3.9.4 Measures: Scale Sources, Adaptation Rationale, and Validation

The measurement instrument was developed by assembling and adapting scales from established prior research, supplemented by original items where existing scales did not cover dimensions relevant to the internal employee context of sport sponsorship. The full initial instrument comprised 44 items across seven constructs. Following pilot testing (n = 183), twelve items were removed on psychometric grounds (low factor loadings, high cross-loadings, elevated modification indices and discriminant-validity failure), yielding a final instrument of 32 items across five constructs. All adapted scales were validated on the pilot sample, which was drawn from the same target population as the main study, prior to deployment.

3.9.4.1 Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK)

The SAK construct was developed from three sources. Seven items were adapted from Irwin et al. (2003), whose cause-related sport sponsorship scale measured spectators' attitudes and beliefs towards sponsoring organisations; these items were re-framed from an external spectator perspective to an internal employee perspective (for example, replacing "the sponsoring organisation" with "my employer"). Two further items were adopted from Zepf (2008), whose doctoral dissertation developed a sponsorship awareness scale specifically for employees of sponsoring firms, rendering these items directly applicable without re-framing. As the existing scales captured only general attitudes towards sponsorship and did not address whether employees were informed about its strategic rationale, understood its alignment with organisational values, or experienced its internal communication as inclusive, eight original items were developed to capture these additional dimensions. These items are theoretically grounded in signalling theory, namely the proposition that the clarity and reach of the sponsorship signal within the organisation moderate its effect on employee outcomes.

3.9.4.2 Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE)

Sponsorship quality-linked perception (three items) and sponsorship quality-non-linked perception (three items) were both adapted from Batt et al. (2021) and Hofer and Grohs (2018). These scales were originally developed and validated in employee contexts (a Swiss retail company and an Austrian manufacturing firm, respectively) and were therefore directly applicable with minimal adaptation. Conceptually, both subscales capture different facets of the same underlying employee judgement, and Batt et al. (2021) themselves treated combined sponsorship-quality perception as a higher-order construct. In the present pilot exploratory and confirmatory analyses the two subscales showed a high inter-factor correlation ($r > .80$) and their items loaded on a common factor, providing both empirical and conceptual grounds for merging them into a single Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness

construct reflecting employees' overall evaluation of their organisation's sponsorship activities.

3.9.4.3 Organisational Identification (OI)

The OI scale was drawn from Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Bhattacharya et al. (1995), two of the most extensively validated measures of organisational identification in the management literature. The items are phrased generically (for example, "the successes of my firm are my successes") and require no sector-specific adaptation, rendering them suitable for cross-industry application. Their use is justified directly by social identity theory, which underpins the OI construct in the theoretical framework.

3.9.4.4 Employer Brand Image (EBI)

The EBI scale was adapted from Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) and Lievens and Highhouse (2003), who developed and validated employer-brand perception measures in the human-resource and recruitment literature. Four items captured general employer-brand perceptions (reputation, attractiveness, pride and peer-perceived desirability). A fifth, original item — "our sport sponsorship activities strengthen our organisation's image as an employer" — was added to create a direct conceptual link between the sponsorship stimulus and employer-brand outcomes, a link central to the study's theoretical model but absent from the original scales.

3.9.4.5 Intention to Stay (ITS)

The Intention to Stay subscale was adapted from Kyndt et al. (2009), whose scale was developed and validated on a sample of 349 Belgian employees and measures the intention to remain with the current employer. Both positively worded indicators (for example, "I see a future for myself within this company") and reverse-worded indicators (for example, "if I received an attractive job offer, I would take it") were included to capture the construct bidirectionally and to reduce acquiescence bias; the three leave-oriented items were reverse-coded prior to analysis, so that higher scores consistently reflect a stronger intention to remain.

This relabelling aligns with established terminology in the employee-turnover literature (Tett & Meyer, 1993; Kyndt et al., 2009) and more accurately reflects the employee-side perspective from which all six items are formulated.

3.9.4.6 Pride (PRIDE) — dropped after pilot

Four pride items were adapted from Kuo and Shao (2008) and Hofer and Grohs (2018). Following the pilot confirmatory factor analysis the Pride construct exhibited very high

correlations with both Employer Brand Image (r = .86) and Intention to Stay (r = .97), indicating substantial conceptual overlap. To preserve the discriminant validity of the final model, the Pride construct was removed from the main analysis; its conceptual content is largely subsumed within the EBI and OI constructs.

3.9.4.7 Scale Validation Procedure

All scales underwent a multi-stage validation procedure before use in the main study. In Stage 1 (expert review), item wording was reviewed by two academic experts in organisational behaviour and adapted for linguistic and contextual clarity within the Slovenian corporate context. In Stage 2 (pilot exploratory factor analysis, n = 183), principal-axis factoring with orthogonal (Varimax) rotation was conducted; the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin statistic (.928) confirmed sampling adequacy, eight factors exceeded Kaiser's criterion of 1.0, and these collectively accounted for 65.57% of the total variance, with cross-loading items and items loading below .50 flagged for removal (Hair et al., 2018). In Stage 3 (pilot confirmatory factor analysis, n = 183), an initial model was estimated and, following item purification, a revised model returned acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.748$; CFI = .906; TLI = .897; RMSEA = .064), with composite reliability (CR > .70) and average variance extracted (AVE > .50) confirming convergent validity and the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) confirming discriminant validity. In Stage 4 (main-study confirmatory factor analysis, n = 499), the validated five-construct model was re-estimated on the full sample, confirming adequate fit and stable psychometric properties across a larger and more heterogeneous sample.

3.10 Data Analysis Techniques

This section outlines the analytical procedures employed to examine the research data and test the proposed theoretical framework. To ensure methodological rigour and triangulation of findings, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach, whereby qualitative and quantitative data were analysed using complementary and systematic techniques, described in the following sections.

3.10.1 Qualitative Data Analysis Techniques

The qualitative data in this study were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, supported by NVivo software, to develop a systematic and transparent interpretation of participants' accounts. Seventeen semi-structured interviews (approximately one hour each) were audio-recorded with informed consent, then translated (where required) and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. The analysis followed an iterative and reflexive process moving from raw interview text to conceptual themes, ensuring that the findings were grounded in participants' meanings while remaining aligned with the study objectives.

All interview recordings were transcribed and checked for accuracy against the audio files. Where interviews involved more than one language, translation was completed before coding and care was taken to preserve contextual meaning and culturally embedded expressions. Each transcript was anonymised to protect participants' identities, assigned an interview ID (e.g., P1–P17), and imported into NVivo as individual sources. Basic case attributes (e.g., role, years of experience) were also recorded to support interpretation across participants.

NVivo was used to enhance the auditability and organisation of the analysis. Specifically, NVivo supported: (i) systematic coding across all transcripts, (ii) retrieval of coded extracts for comparison, (iii) development of hierarchical node structures (themes and sub-themes), and (iv) generation of analytic summaries such as coding frequency, participant coverage, and thematic matrices. Visual outputs (e.g., charts/cluster views) were used as descriptive aids to understand salience and distribution of themes; however, interpretation was based on the depth, meaning, and contextual richness of accounts rather than frequency alone. The final output of the analysis is presented as a thematic framework consisting of major themes and associated sub-themes. Each theme is reported with (i) a concise conceptual definition, (ii) analytical interpretation linked to research questions and theoretical framing, and (iii) supporting evidence through representative quotations. The qualitative findings are then integrated with the quantitative results to provide a more complete explanation of sponsorship-related organisational outcomes.

3.10.2 Quantitative Data Analysis Techniques

The quantitative data in this study were analysed using a combination of SPSS (Version 28) and AMOS following a structured, multi-stage analytical procedure consistent with best practice in multivariate research. The overall analytical strategy was designed to ensure data quality, establish the psychometric soundness of the measurement instruments, and test the hypothesised relationships using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

Prior to hypothesis testing, the dataset was screened for accuracy, missing values, outliers, and distributional assumptions. Missing data were assessed using frequency and descriptive analyses; Univariate outliers were examined using standardised z-scores, histograms, and boxplots, while multivariate outliers were identified through Mahalanobis D^2 distances. Data normality was evaluated through skewness and kurtosis statistics at both univariate and multivariate levels to confirm the suitability of maximum likelihood estimation.

A pilot sample (n = 183) was used to conduct Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) in SPSS to assess the underlying factor structure of the initial 44 items and establish construct validity. The suitability of the data for factor analysis was confirmed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. Factors were extracted using principal axis factoring with Varimax rotation, and items with

low factor loadings, high cross-loadings, or weak communalities were removed. Internal consistency reliability for each subscale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The refined item set from the EFA stage was then subjected to Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using AMOS to validate the measurement model. Convergent validity was assessed through standardised factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR), while reliability was further supported through Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT ratio to ensure that each construct was empirically distinct from others. To assess potential common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was performed in SPSS. The variance explained by the first unrotated factor was examined to ensure that it did not exceed the recommended threshold, thereby reducing concerns related to common method variance.

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis) were computed for all constructs to describe the distributional properties of the data. Independent-sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA/Welch tests were conducted to examine differences in construct means across demographic groups such as gender, tenure, educational level, and managerial status. The hypothesised structural relationships were tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) in AMOS. Model fit was evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including χ^2/df, GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, IFI, and RMSEA. Direct, indirect, and total effects were estimated, and statistical significance was determined using standardised path coefficients, critical ratios (t-values), and p-values. Mediation effects were tested using the bootstrapping approach to examine indirect effects and determine the degree of mediation (partial or full). In addition, Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) was employed to assess whether structural relationships differed significantly between the benchmark company and the comparison group. Together, these quantitative techniques ensured the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments and provided robust empirical evidence for testing the proposed research model and hypotheses.

3.11 Pilot Study: Summary of Instrument Validation

Prior to the main data collection, the measurement instrument was validated on a separate pilot sample (n = 183) drawn from the same target population. The full validation — exploratory factor analysis, reliability analysis, the initial and revised confirmatory factor analyses, and the assessment of convergent validity, discriminant validity and common-method variance — is reported in Appendix L. In summary, sampling adequacy was confirmed (KMO = .928); the revised measurement model achieved acceptable fit (χ^2/df = 1.748; CFI = .906; TLI = .897; RMSEA = .064); composite reliability (CR > .70) and average variance extracted (AVE > .50) supported convergent validity; and the Fornell–Larcker criterion supported discriminant validity. Twelve items were removed on psychometric grounds, yielding the final 32-item, five-construct instrument used in the main study. The pilot questionnaire was distributed before the main survey by a market-research agency through its online respondent panel, targeting panel members employed in Slovenian

companies that sponsor sport; 183 usable responses were obtained. Pilot respondents therefore belonged to the same target population (employees of sport-sponsoring companies in Slovenia) but were recruited independently of the ten companies that took part in the main study; their responses were used only for instrument validation and were not included in the main-study sample (n = 499).

3.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter has detailed the overall research methodology adopted to investigate the effects of sport sponsorship on employees in sponsoring companies. It explained the mixed-methods research design, the data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and the analytical techniques employed for both qualitative and quantitative phases. In addition, the results of the pilot study were presented to establish the construct validity and internal reliability of the research instrument, ensuring that the final questionnaire was methodologically sound for the main study. Having established the methodological rigour and robustness of the measurement tools, the following chapters proceed with the analysis of the collected data. The next chapter presents the qualitative findings derived from executive interviews, followed by the quantitative data analysis chapter that reports the results of the survey-based statistical modelling.

4 QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative phase of the study, which aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of corporate sport sponsorship practices and their perceived implications for branding, organisational identity, employee engagement, and strategic decision-making. To complement the quantitative SEM findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior executives (C-suite level) who are directly involved in sponsorship-related decisions. This qualitative inquiry enabled the exploration of managerial sensemaking, strategic rationales, and experiential insights that cannot be fully captured through survey data alone. A total of 17 in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior informed consent, professionally transcribed, and translated where necessary. The anonymised transcripts were then imported into NVivo for systematic qualitative analysis.

4.1 Participants' Details

The qualitative phase of the study involved 17 senior-level participants drawn from marketing, branding, communication, and strategic leadership functions. The interviewees comprised 13 female and 4 male executives, reflecting strong representation of women in senior marketing and corporate communication roles. Participants' ages ranged from 39 to 53 years, with the majority in their mid-40s to late-40s, indicating a mature and experienced cohort. All interviewees held decision-making or advisory positions directly related to sponsorship, branding, corporate communication, legal affairs, product strategy, or sustainability (e.g., Marketing Directors, Heads of Corporate Communication, Executive Directors, Brand Development Heads, and a Director of Legal Affairs). Their professional experience ranged from 13 to 26 years, with an average of 19.6 years of work experience, ensuring deep institutional knowledge and strategic insight. Collectively, this profile provided rich, credible, and informed perspectives on corporate sport sponsorship practices, strategic intent, and organisational implications, thereby strengthening the rigour and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. Table 3 shows the demographic details of the 17 interview participants.

Table 3: Demographics of the Interview Participants

Code	Gender	Industry	Size	Position / Role	Age (Years)	Work Experience (Years)	Duration (Minutes)
P1	Female	Industrial Manufacturer	Large	Marketing Director – Europe	48	20	61
P2	Male	Banking	Large	Communication & Brand Manager	44	22	58
P3	Female	Fuel Retailer	Large	Head of Corporate Communications	43	15	62
P4	Female	Logistics	Large	Head of Public Relations	43	20	59
P5	Female	Fuel Retailer	Large	Executive Director – Marketing & Digital Sales	49	25	64
P6	Female	Insurance	Large	Marketing Director	47	20	60
P7	Female	Beverage Manufacturer	Large	Marketing Director	39	13	57
P8	Male	Industrial Manufacturer	Medium	Director of Legal Affairs	47	23	55
P9	Female	Insurance	Large	Marketing & PR Director	40	18	63
P10	Female	Banking	Medium	Marketing & PR Director	50	26	65
P11	Female	Telecommunications	Large	Executive Director – Product Strategy	47	20	59
P12	Male	Automotive	Medium	Marketing Manager	53	20	56
P13	Female	Food Retail	Large	Marketing Director	40	18	62
P14	Female	Food Retail	Large	Marketing Director	49	23	60
P15	Female	Food Manufacturer	Large	Head of Brand Development	45	20	61
P16	Female	Industrial Manufacturer	Large	Head of Corporate Communication	40	15	58
P17	Male	Real estate, logistics	Large	Executive Director – Marketing & Sustainability	42	16	64

Source: Own work

4.2 Data Analysis Procedure

The qualitative data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, supported by NVivo software. The analysis followed a rigorous, multi-stage coding process to ensure credibility, transparency, and analytical depth.

4.2.1 Initial Coding

The first stage involved open and descriptive coding, during which participants' statements were coded line-by-line to capture their explicit meanings. This process resulted in 190 initial codes, reflecting a wide range of ideas related to sponsorship goals, decision criteria, internal processes, employee engagement, and perceived challenges. Maintaining this initial code set served as an audit trail, enhancing the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Figure 5: Example of initial codes (screenshot from NVivo)

Name	Files	References
Decision making considerations and factors	15	26
Internal and External stakeholders involved in sponsorship decisions	16	24
Goals of sponsorship	12	22
Matching trends of digitalization, social change, sustainability, etc	17	20
Personal connection to sports	14	19
Percentage that sports sponsorships among other sponsorships	16	17
Evaluating new opportunity - relying on gut vs data	15	17
Regular review, evaluation, reporting of sponshorship success, KPIs etc	14	16
Influence of the sponsor on the sponsorship ecosystem	14	15
Influence of sponshorship on brand perceptions	9	15
Role , background etc	12	14
Role in deciding, process of deciding on sponsorships	11	14
Local events and sports	7	12
Decision or experience that shaped the view of sponsorship	11	11
unexpected outcomes	9	10
Research	8	10
Through media visibility	10	10
Social responsibility and other motivations - other than money	7	8
other comments	6	8
you need to understand the market and the people , what they like etc	6	8
Brand Tracker- measuring perceptions	6	8
Large competitions and events internationally	6	8
treating employees well	6	7
History of sponsoring in the company	7	7

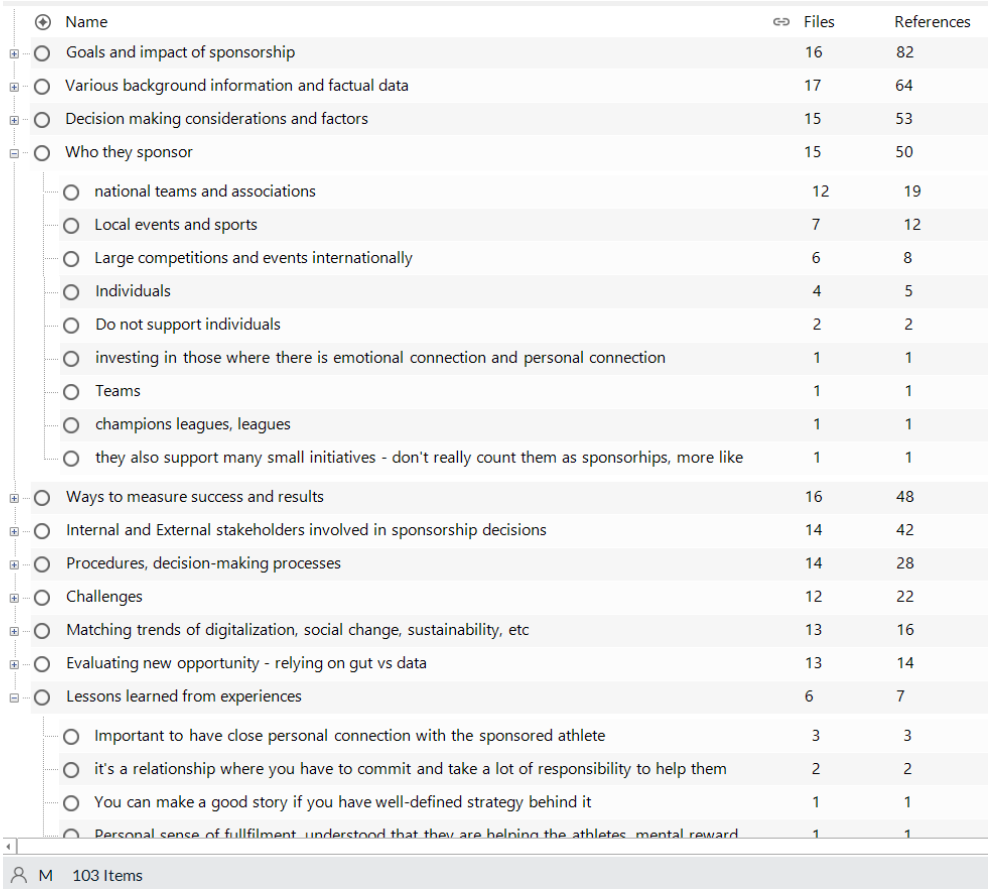
Source: Own work

Once the initial codes were created, they were moved to an initial codes folder where they would remain. A copy was, then, moved to a newly created "focused codes" folder, where the subsequent analysis would take place (keeping the original version of the codes constitutes a form of audit trail and helps ensure validity of the final findings, as well as helps trace back any coding decisions at any stage of the analysis).

4.2.2 Focused Coding and Code Refinement

In the second stage, the initial codes were reorganised into parent–child hierarchies within NVivo. Codes that were conceptually overlapping or redundant were merged, resulting in a refined set of 103 focused codes. The next step involved trying to make sense of the data through organising the codes, as well as reading the created codes and their content. To achieve this, the existing, descriptive codes were first organised into a 'parent-child' relationship, which is a term used in *NVivo* to refer to the hierarchical organisation of codes (see Figure 6) in a group, and these groups were based on the judgment as to what topics the various codes represent. At this stage, the organisation of codes did not mean trying to create themes, but rather trying to make sense of the data further by introducing any common-sense way to group the large number of codes to make them easier to understand and evaluate.

Figure 6: An example of organising the initial codes into a parent-child relationship (screenshot from NVivo)



Source: Own work

This phase aimed to improve conceptual clarity while preserving the richness of participants' accounts.

4.2.3 Development of the Thematic Framework

Through iterative reading, within-case and cross-case comparisons, and continuous reflection on the research objectives, the focused codes were further synthesised into a final thematic framework. The codes were, then, copied and pasted to the final "thematic framework" folder. All codes were being scrutinised and their content re-read multiple times, and questions were asked as to how this newly developed understanding of the data may contribute to answering the research questions. Based on this, as well as cross- and within-case comparisons (or detailed reading and analysing the data both between the different participants as well as within each participant's data), the codes were re-organised again to make sure that they now represent the themes running through the data. This framework consists of four overarching themes, each comprising multiple sub-themes. The final thematic structure, including the number of participants and total references per theme, is reported in the NVivo output and forms the basis for the findings presented in this chapter. This final thematic framework is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Interview Thematic Framework

Theme/Sub-theme name	**Total number of participants who discussed it**	**Total number of mentions**
Goals and sensemaking of sponsorships	**16**	**82**
Brand awareness and reputation	13	39
Social responsibility and community impact	11	21
Internal engagement	10	13
Commercial and market focus	6	9
Decision-Making and Evaluation Processes	**17**	**183**
Fit and authenticity criteria	16	71
- *Popularity and visibility of the sport and athletes*	10	15
- *Trust and authenticity, emotional connection, and relationship-building*	8	13
- *Match with the brand identity and values*	8	10
- *Fit with the vision, values, and strategy of the sponsor*	7	11
- *Reach and media coverage*	7	7
- *Characteristics of the target audience*	6	7

To be continued

Table 4: Interview Thematic Framework (cont.)

Theme/Sub-theme name	Total number of participants who discussed it	Total number of mentions
- *Exclusivity and avoiding competition*	5	5
- *Geographical location*	3	3
Who to sponsor	15	43
Stakeholder architecture	14	28
Internal processes and approvals	14	27
Using evidence and intuition	13	14
Good practices and success factors	**17**	**110**
Regular measurement and reviews	17	54
Capabilities and knowledge	13	21
Emotional connection and relationship building	11	16
Consistency and coherence	10	19
Challenges and constraints	**15**	**37**
Digital and social shifts	13	15
Reputation risk and dependency	6	12
Attribution and ROI difficulties	5	6
Internal adoption and getting employees on board	2	2
Understanding and making emotional connection with target group	2	2

Source: Own work

4.3 Overview of the Thematic Framework

The qualitative analysis yielded the following four main themes:

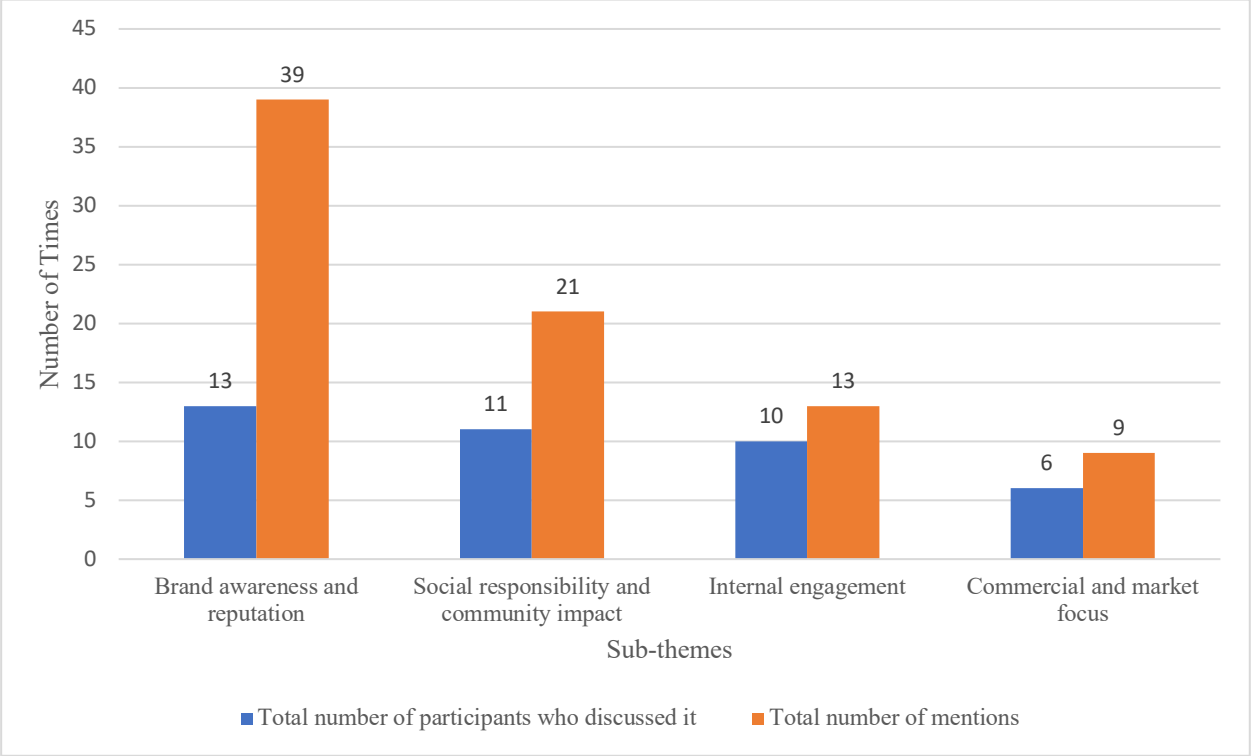
1. Goals and Sensemaking of Sponsorships
2. Decision-Making and Evaluation Processes
3. Good Practices and Success Factors
4. Challenges and Constraints

Each theme is discussed in detail below, supported by illustrative quotations from participants (identified anonymously).

4.3.1 Goals and Sensemaking of Sponsorships

The first overarching theme, Goals and Sensemaking of Sponsorships, captures how senior executives conceptualise, justify, and interpret corporate sponsorships – particularly sport sponsorships – within their organisations. This theme reflects the strategic meaning attached to sponsorships and the multiple organisational goals they are expected to serve. Rather than being viewed merely as promotional tools, sponsorships are framed as multi-purpose strategic instruments that simultaneously support brand positioning, social responsibility, employee engagement, and commercial objectives. The sensemaking process revealed that executives actively interpret sponsorships in relation to both external audiences (customers, communities, and markets) and internal stakeholders (employees and organisational culture), highlighting sponsorship as an integrative element of corporate strategy. The theme is further unpacked through four interrelated sub-themes: brand awareness and reputation, social responsibility and community impact, internal engagement, and commercial and market focus. These sub-themes provide a structured lens to examine how sponsorship goals are prioritised, balanced, and rationalised by decision-makers.

Figure 7: Frequency of Sub-themes of Theme: Goals and Sensemaking of Sponsorships



Source: Own work

Figure 7 provides an overview of this theme by illustrating both the number of participants who discussed each sub-theme and the total number of references coded in NVivo. As shown, brand awareness and reputation emerged as the most dominant sub-theme, discussed by nearly all participants and generating the highest number of mentions, underscoring its

centrality in executives' sensemaking of sponsorships. Social responsibility and community impact also received substantial attention, reflecting the growing importance of societal value creation. In contrast, internal engagement and commercial and market focus were discussed less frequently, yet they remain integral components of the broader sponsorship logic. Together, the figure visually demonstrates how sponsorship goals are layered, with reputational and societal considerations forming the core, supported by internal and market-oriented objectives.

4.3.1.1 Brand Awareness and Reputation

Enhancing brand awareness and corporate reputation emerged as the most prominent motivation for engaging in sport sponsorship. Participants consistently described sport as a powerful emotional platform that enables brands to associate themselves with positive values such as teamwork, national pride, perseverance, and success. Sponsorship was perceived as more impactful than traditional advertising due to its ability to create emotional resonance and high visibility, both locally and internationally. Several executives emphasised that sport sponsorship facilitates brand recognition beyond geographical boundaries and strengthens top-of-mind awareness. Importantly, sponsorship was not viewed merely as logo exposure but as a mechanism for storytelling and value transfer, whereby brand identity becomes intertwined with the symbolic meaning of sport.

Among the most discussed goals of sport sponsorship was the enhancement of brand awareness and reputation. Participants commonly described sponsorship as an effective tool for shaping how their company is perceived both locally and nationally, as well as associating their brand with the positive emotions that sport evokes. As Participant 1 noted, "Sports are one of the few activities where I think there is a lot of positive emotion… we see that as a nation we unite in good results. Sport is one of the few things that has very few negative connotations… and here, I think it makes a lot of sense for a company to associate itself with this". This link between emotional appeal and visibility was further reflected in her comment that "Take team sports, for example, which we often sponsor. It's about team spirit, and I think this value systems are very good and very compatible with each other" (Participant 1).

Several participants highlighted that sport offers a platform for creating recognition that extends beyond traditional advertising channels. As Participant 1 explained, "when someone says Velenje to me, I immediately say Gorenje… it means that brand recognition is also created outside these borders through sporting successes". Similarly, Participant 17 observed that "if you sponsor a big national team, you have huge visibility… and at the same time the perception of the brand itself rises… you go for big national teams so that more people see you, because at the same time it influences the brand much more".

Some participants described sponsorships as an avenue for reinforcing their image as responsible and community-oriented organisations. Participant 12 explained that their goal was to "use sports sponsorship to strengthen the image of the brand and the company", and emphasised that even when the commercial gain was limited, "we really just want to… reinforce the fact that we are a sponsor of winter sports… to see us as one of the main players in Slovenia… not only commercially oriented… but also socially responsible". The same belief was echoed by Participant 6, who stated that sponsorship "absolutely enhances it. It enhances it, it affects our reputation… we actually have the highest reputation among retailers, and I think that has had a very, very, very big impact on that".

For several companies, visibility was not limited to mass exposure but also extended to community recognition and loyalty. Participant 14 explained that "we want to be among people, to be present, to be perceived as local, to support the local environment, to give back", adding that their partnership with a regional football club was "definitely very positively received… we are there, we are present, we are very visible at all matches… and I think this has a big impact on opinion, on top of mind, on everything". Participant 5 provided a similar reflection, explaining that "we are a long-standing sponsor and we are also recognised in the area as long-standing supporters of sport in general… and we as supporters and people in this are still quite visible today".

Brand awareness was also linked to consistency and coherence in communication. Participant 17 explained that effective sponsorship required a clear, unified message, noting that "you take a red thread and from that you pull out the message you want to send to everyone who watches it… it was always good to connect, not to just have a logo… but to try to extract something from that sport and their values to implement in your values". The same participant added that research consistently confirmed sponsorship's measurable impact: "visibility at the moment when there are championships… very, very positively affects the brand's perception… if you want to have a very short, very great awareness… sport is absolutely number one".

Finally, participants saw the reputational value of sponsorship as extending beyond customers to employees and partners. Participant 5 described how their company's sports involvement "helps build a different story and commercial interest… one of the successful ways to strengthen loyalty and our reputation as a supporter of sports in the community". Participant 6 made a similar point, stating that such activities "are part of our company's brand essence that we care about society… and we actually receive a lot of these various requests". Overall, participants consistently viewed sport sponsorship as a powerful tool for visibility, image building, and emotional resonance.

4.3.1.2 Social Responsibility and Community Impact

Beyond commercial objectives, participants strongly framed sport sponsorship as an expression of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Many organisations perceived sponsorship as a moral obligation to give back to society, promote healthy lifestyles, support youth development, and strengthen local communities. Executives highlighted that sponsoring sport – particularly at grassroots and national levels – allows companies to demonstrate authenticity, solidarity, and long-term commitment to societal wellbeing. In several cases, sponsorship decisions were justified even in the absence of direct commercial returns, reinforcing the notion that sport sponsorship operates simultaneously as a social and strategic investment.

Another goal identified by participants was the fulfilment of social responsibility and contribution to the wider community. Many emphasised that sponsorship is not only a marketing activity but also an expression of values and commitment to giving back. As Participant 17 explained, "As one of the largest companies in Slovenia, social responsibility is in our backbone. And the first thing is that we are socially responsible and that we help expand the local community". Similarly, Participant 15 described their company's philosophy as "to give back to society… we want and believe in this triangle, meaning that it is good for the company, good for the sponsor, and also good for society at large… a win-win situation for all stakeholders".

Several participants pointed out that their involvement in sport sponsorship goes beyond commercial logic and reflects a moral duty to contribute to the public good. Participant 2 admitted that "certain associations and certain sponsorships are much more a part of our social responsibility than the pursuit of serious market effects", adding that this is not about brand strength or sales but "because it is right to say frankly… our support for Slovenian handball… is not because the handball association works very well with us, contributes to our sales activities, or even contributes greatly to the strength of our brand". He further noted that "the most effective way to do this is to support sport because it has the highest awareness, the most public attention", making it an ideal channel to demonstrate social responsibility.

The idea of community benefit was also central in several accounts. Participant 3 explained that their company's strategic decision to support a local handball club ensures that "children are in the gym instead of on their phones and in bars… I think if you're a boy in Trebnje, you're in the handball club, and if you're a girl, you're in the majorettes". This sense of civic contribution was also reflected in Participant 5's reflections, who described sponsorships as a means to "support a certain activity… One is social responsibility, as I said, in the broader local and national environment… because we believe that we have the greatest impact on this environment". He further explained that sponsorship helps balance the company's industrial footprint, stating that "even though we are good and the area is developing because

of us… we are simply an industry that is disruptive to the environment, and this sponsorship is also support for a certain activity, as a kind of… mitigating factor".

Participant 6 similarly emphasised that sport sponsorship serves a broader social purpose. "We want to support Slovenian sports, we want to give back to our society, we want to stand by our athletes in good times and bad", he explained, adding that "we believe that if we support something, we don't do it passively, we don't just put up three banners and that's it, but we try to somehow connect with them and record and live". For him, this long-term engagement also represented a statement of reliability: "Just as you can rely on us as a retailer, you can also rely on us to remain long-term supporters of basketball" (Participant 6).

Many saw social responsibility as a core element of their organisational identity. As Participant 6 put it, "it is one of the values in our company's DNA, that we give back to society… this emotional bond that you create both at the local and national levels is extremely strong, and it is all about social responsibility". In some cases, this included environmental and educational initiatives, as he explained through the company's "guide to sustainable shopping", developed with the support of Ecologists Without Borders, to promote more sustainable consumer behaviour.

Other participants discussed social responsibility as a form of empathy and shared satisfaction. Participant 7 described that "the primary goal is to have empathy, to give back to society as such… we feel obliged to do so", while also recognising that "we're doing this more for personal satisfaction in the end than for striving for results as such". Participant 4 expressed a similar sentiment, stating, "We just want to give our employees and our users some emotional added value… and we're not doing it just for the money, but also to give something back to the community".

For some, sponsorship was also a tool for promoting inclusivity and equality in sport. Participant 17 recounted, "we later turned around and said let's divide it so that both women and men are equally successful and have an equally great responsibility when it comes to sports… we turned to women… because in our company more than half of our employees are women, so let's sponsor women too". Participant 12 added that his company's involvement in local skiing events, despite not being commercially necessary, reflected the same principle: "to help in some way or to fulfil our social responsibility, we support both organisers of Slovenian World Cup races, even though we practically don't have to, but we do it anyway". Overall, participants framed sport sponsorship as a socially responsible act that brings value to communities, promotes health and inclusion, and strengthens emotional bonds between brands and society. Rather than viewing sponsorship solely as a promotional mechanism, they positioned it as part of their ethical and cultural responsibility to support people, causes, and environments that reflect their corporate values.

4.3.1.3 Internal Engagement

Sport sponsorship was also widely recognised as a powerful internal engagement tool. Participants reported that sponsorship activities enhance employee pride, identification with the organisation, and emotional attachment to the brand. Employees were frequently involved through access to tickets, participation in sponsored events, team-building activities, and interactions with athletes. Such practices were described as strengthening organisational identification, fostering a sense of belonging, and reinforcing the company's employer brand. In several organisations, sponsorship-related benefits were deliberately integrated into HRM and employer branding strategies to support recruitment, motivation, and retention efforts.

Participant 1 illustrated this and described how sponsorships often became opportunities for collective participation and enjoyment: "For example, last year we took, in Qatar, when we were sponsors of the soccer championship, we took 50 employees… we had a call for proposals, they could apply with their ideas, we basically organised a whole human resources project, and it was again a very good engagement… we took five buses full of employees, gave them T-shirts, and it was great". He added that employees were regularly provided with free tickets and that such activities "organise various meetings… people can go and watch, and we organise various meetings… these things are wonderful".

Employee involvement in sponsorships was also described as a way of recognising staff contributions and linking company values to social responsibility. Participant 10 explained that "our employees play a key role here… we definitely give priority to those organisations whose members are also our employees". He clarified that supporting local volunteer fire departments or community associations was not about influence but "a way of recognising the employee… for their leisure-time involvement in activities that are socially beneficial". Several participants provided examples of creative and inclusive ways of engaging staff through sports. Participant 12 described a month-long initiative in which "all of us employees committed to cycling, running, hiking in the mountains or going for walks for a month, and for every kilometre walked, cycled or run, we would donate… to charity". The project became highly interactive, as "there was actually competition between individuals… who wanted to dominate in certain groups", resulting in "the whole organisation really got on its feet".

Others integrated sports sponsorships directly into reward systems and professional development. Participant 17 noted that "we didn't just give all the tickets we got to customers, but we also gave them to employees… we had sales promotion, where we gave certain KPIs. Whoever sells the most of those and those products in that period, we take him and his team to football". The initiative led to a measurable impact, producing "an incremental turnover of somewhere from 5% to 7% in that period … just because of football".

Sponsorships were also viewed as a way to enhance employee wellbeing, satisfaction, and loyalty through shared experiences. Participant 4 explained that “whenever there are big events… we give tickets or organise a box or whatever for the employees… they are given as a reward”. He added that the company tries to “see that those who have, if someone really likes basketball, for example, you give them a basketball, a ticket to a basketball game as a reward”. Similarly, Participant 5 described that “we can also look for something extra… perhaps some tickets… that we, as sponsors, get a certain quota of tickets and then distribute them to our employees… this is always a welcome condition, perhaps, for us to then decide to support it”.

Participant 6 highlighted the importance of making employees feel included in sponsorship activities: “We always make sure that we have enough tickets for our employees as part of our sponsorship offers… our employees have the opportunity to attend all basketball games… sometimes individual stores organise team building events, go to the game, socialise, and so on”. These efforts were supported by proactive communication: “Emails are always sent out in advance to let people know that there are free seats available, so they can go and enjoy themselves”. Some participants also described integrating sponsorship benefits into their employer branding strategies. Participant 2 observed that “we try to combine the fact that we are a supporter of sport, that we have tickets, that you can go to events, that we have our own internal sports club at the bank… with convincing job seekers how good an employer we are”. He explained that such “soft benefits… are a great, great hook for employing young people”.

In several organisations, employee sponsorship extended even further – to supporting staff members who were active athletes themselves. Participant 15 explained, “We also sponsor a couple of our employees. For example, we have one ultramarathon runner… another employee who competes professionally in stand-up paddleboarding… so we sponsor quite a few employees who are involved in sports”. He added that, beyond personal sponsorships, “we arrange tickets for employees… we include employees in everything we are involved in”.

Finally, some companies deliberately embedded employee-focused activities into sponsorship contracts. As Participant 16 described, “we also include certain activities in the sponsorship itself… which are for employees… whether it's the presence of athletes at our internal events for employees, for employees' children… so that the children of employees have the opportunity… to talk to Domen Prevc about ski jumping and help them there at Mini Planica”. Overall, participants viewed internal engagement as a crucial dimension of sport sponsorship. Beyond its external visibility, sponsorship was seen as a means of strengthening employee pride, team spirit, and identification with corporate values.

4.3.1.4 Commercial and Market Focus

While emotional and social dimensions were central, participants also acknowledged the commercial logic underpinning sponsorship decisions. Sponsorships were strategically selected to reach specific target segments, enter new markets, or reinforce brand positioning in competitive environments. Finally, several participants discussed sport sponsorships from a more explicitly commercial and market-oriented perspective. While many emphasised social and emotional outcomes, they also recognised sponsorship as a targeted marketing tool designed to reach key customer segments, support sales strategies, and enhance market positioning. Participant 12 explained that for premium brands in particular, sponsorships can provide direct access to consumers: "we also believed in this strategy, that through sponsorships we would directly reach our potential customers, which is perhaps a little more typical for a premium brand than for other brands". Similarly, Participant 14 described a sponsorship decision made "to get closer to the residents, to make an impression on them and encourage them to choose their very competitive insurance company. Purely from that perspective".

Some participants framed sponsorships as an integral part of marketing and market development strategies. Participant 16 explained that sponsorships are "a marketing tool to achieve the goals we set ourselves… either in the context of our sustainability commitments, or simply in the context of the purely marketing goals we pursue in individual markets". These goals varied depending on context: "in developed markets, it's more about building reputation and image and increasing brand power… in newer markets, it's more about building awareness, establishing an emotional connection with consumers… to attract attention and so on".

A similar focus on market alignment was described by Participant 5, who explained that their company sponsors sports strategically across regions where commercial value is strongest: "we support the Nordic sector, ski jumping and Nordic combined… this is really a sport that is popular in these hinterland markets, which are the most important for us, Austria, Poland, also the Czech Republic and basically some of southern Bavaria… and with this we are also looking for this commercial interest". He added that their approach now includes "measure[ing] the success of this process… perform[ing] an analysis of visibility and then measure some commercial interest" (Participant 5).

For others, sponsorships were seen as a flexible way to adapt marketing strategies to specific demographics. Participant 6 noted, "we also sponsor the band Joker Out. Why? Because it's a bit of a new thing, and we want to use this sponsorship to reach young people… our research has shown that we actually have… a smaller share of young customers and that we basically need to strengthen this part of our communication with young people". He added that "we came up with a new strategy for attracting young people… one of which is sponsoring sporting events or student events… so, young people and music, or rather a band

that has a huge following and communicates a lot with young people". These sponsorships, he explained, are "completely business-related and, I would say, perhaps even short-term… the strategy for young people will probably be adapted to the Zeitgeist" (Participant 6).

Overall, while many participants viewed sport sponsorships through the lenses of social impact and emotional connection, they also recognised their tangible business value. Sponsorships provided a means to strengthen presence in key markets, target new customer segments, and align with profitable audiences.

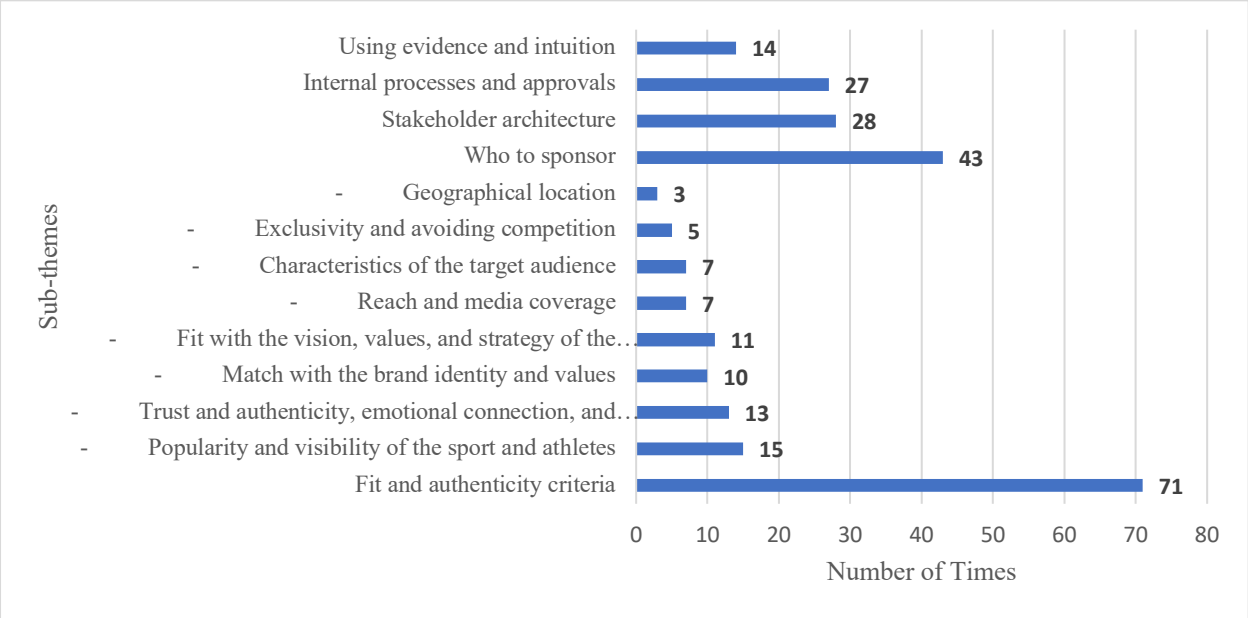
4.3.2 Decision-Making and Evaluation Processes

The second main theme, Decision-Making and Evaluation Processes, explains how organisations systematically decide which sponsorships to pursue, approve, and sustain, and how these decisions are evaluated over time. This theme highlights that sponsorship decisions are neither ad hoc nor purely intuitive, but instead emerge from a structured process that combines strategic alignment, stakeholder involvement, evidence-based reasoning, and managerial judgment. Executives described sponsorship decision-making as a negotiated process shaped by internal governance mechanisms, brand strategy, and broader organisational values, while evaluation practices focus on ensuring continued relevance, legitimacy, and return on investment.

Within this theme, several interrelated sub-themes capture the complexity of sponsorship decision-making. The most prominent sub-theme is fit and authenticity criteria, reflecting executives' strong emphasis on alignment between the sponsored entity, corporate values, and brand identity. Closely related are considerations around who to sponsor and stakeholder architecture, which illustrate the importance of internal and external actors – such as top management, marketing, HR, legal teams, and external partners – in shaping final decisions. Sub-themes such as internal processes and approvals and using evidence and intuition further demonstrate how formal evaluation metrics are often complemented by experiential knowledge and managerial intuition. Additional criteria, including popularity and visibility, trust and emotional connection, brand and strategic fit, and reach and media coverage, indicate that decision-making extends beyond financial metrics to include symbolic, relational, and reputational dimensions.

Figure 8 visually summarises this theme by showing the frequency with which each sub-theme was mentioned across interviews. The figure clearly indicates that fit and authenticity criteria dominate executive discourse, suggesting that perceived alignment and credibility are central to sponsorship evaluation. This is followed by who to sponsor and stakeholder architecture, underscoring the strategic and relational nature of decision-making. In contrast, factors such as geographical location, exclusivity, and target audience characteristics received fewer mentions, implying that while these aspects matter, they are secondary to broader considerations of strategic fit and organisational legitimacy.

Figure 8: Frequency of Sub-themes of Theme: Decision-making and Evaluation Processes



Source: Own work

4.3.2.1 Fit and Authenticity Criteria

A dominant theme across interviews was the importance of fit and authenticity. Sponsorship decisions were guided by alignment between the sport, the sponsored entity, and the company's values, identity, and strategic vision. Participants stressed that sponsorships lacking authenticity risk reputational damage and reduced credibility. Key criteria included popularity and visibility of the sport, media reach, audience characteristics, emotional connection, trustworthiness of partners, and congruence with brand values. Long-term relationships were preferred over short-term opportunistic deals, reflecting a commitment to strategic consistency and authenticity.

Several respondents noted that visibility is central because it determines how widely sponsorship messages are seen and remembered. Participant 14 explained that decisions often depend on "measurable data… how many people attend the games in general, how much brand awareness they have… how much media coverage there is". However, while sponsors valued visibility, they also recognised that data must "go hand in hand with our strategy, with what we want to achieve, who we want to address" (Participant 14). Similarly, Participant 6 stressed the importance of quantifying exposure, stating that "we also have other agencies we can turn to… even if the club doesn't have it, I can ask the media agency how this match is watched on television… I calculate the average viewership and we estimate it".

When discussing popularity, some participants also emphasised the need for alignment with market reach and demographic appeal. Participant 15 provided a clear example of data-driven decision-making, explaining that their company entered the climbing sector "because, when we analysed it, we found that it was the fastest growing sport at the time and that it covered all the target segments that were important to us, i.e., young people, families, and even older people… it had a really wide reach, and we entered this segment very strategically". In a similar way, Participant 16 described how decisions were guided by "a combination of all the research and all the data you get from the market, about the popularity of the sport, the target group that the sport addresses, the viewership, the opportunities that the sport offers".

For some companies, the choice of sport was also influenced by regional and cultural popularity, ensuring that sponsorship resonated with local audiences. Participant 8 explained that "which sports are most popular in each region" mattered greatly – "soccer is number one, but if we look at the regions… skiing is not popular throughout Croatia… handball, for example, something we've been considering… basketball, of course, is the number two sport, but it's not equally strong throughout the region". Similarly, Participant 4 explained that their organisation sponsors national associations rather than local clubs, because "the associations cover the whole of Slovenia… we don't want to be part of just one city, we want to be part of the whole of Slovenia".

Closely linked to popularity, reach and media coverage were key considerations in sponsorship decisions. Companies sought partnerships that could guarantee broad visibility and sustained audience engagement.

As Participant 1 explained, "we have to look at sponsorships that have a broader reach… we can't sponsor Slavia Prague, for example, if it doesn't have global reach". Others emphasised using data to estimate audience size and coverage. Participant 14 noted that sponsors "have some estimates of how much visibility there will be… how many people come to the games… how much media coverage there is".

Several participants highlighted that sponsoring national associations rather than individual clubs helped maximise exposure. "The associations cover the whole of Slovenia", said Participant 4, while Participant 5 added that "sports associations are more useful… because they have a certain reach… top athletes at the level of the Olympic Games".

Participants also spoke of sport's unique emotional power to bring people together in authentic ways that no other platform can. As Participant 15 put it, "in sports we see emotions that we don't see in people anywhere else… sports connect us, bring us closer together, it's the only platform where we're not divided into left and right… so we think it's important that through this you bring your brand closer to people". This emotional dimension was described as both deeply human and strategically powerful, allowing brands to soften their image and

appear more relatable. Participant 8 reflected that “there is always an emotional aspect to sports… it gives us an opportunity, because… our brand identity is that we want to be a guardian… sports sponsorships certainly help with that… your identity softens a little”.

For many organisations, trust was built over time through genuine community involvement and transparent communication. Participant 3 described how consistent dialogue with local supporters helped rebuild a struggling club’s reputation: “in recent years we have developed a different culture… of cheering, where you are with your club through thick and thin… we are solving this issue with very transparent operations, and above all with regular communication… because then it spreads, then it goes around”. Likewise, Participant 4 highlighted the importance of personal relationships in sustaining partnerships, explaining that “many of these players, as well as members of the committee, are connected to our firm they are oriented towards how I feel and what I want… I think connections are the most important thing”.

Emotional connection and mutual trust also underpinned how sponsors and organisations collaborated. Participant 9 reflected that “if there's a belief and a genuine trust and relationship, a lot of it is possible… it’s much more relationship… creating the amazing things because people see the benefit in the mutual”. The same participant emphasised that sponsorship should feel “relevant and authentic… not just a brand somewhere”, and that the goal is to “bring the emotion and the experience and not so much just the product placement”. Another discussed criterion was the match with the brand identity and values, closely related to fit with the vision, values, and strategy of the sponsor. For most participants, sponsorships were not only about visibility or reach but about alignment with the company’s ethos, culture, and message. The choice of sport, athlete, or event was seen as an opportunity to reflect who they are as a brand and what they stand for.

Several participants emphasised that the values embodied by the sponsored party must resonate with the company’s own. Participant 15 explained that “it’s important that a particular club or sport is connected to our values… we are perhaps the complete opposite of Red Bull, which seeks out high-risk sports, but we avoid certain risky sports precisely because we emphasise safety and prevention”. He added that ski jumpers were a perfect fit because “they are always modest, hard-working, and they have a place in the hearts of Slovenians”. Similarly, Participant 1 observed that “team sports… are about team spirit, and I think these value systems are very good and very compatible with each other”.

For many, sponsorships were a way to express and reinforce company identity. Participant 10 described how their organisation “links sponsorships to the values we have… we promote a healthy way of life, a healthy lifestyle, through cycling and sports in general”. The same participant noted that these initiatives also help “communicate values, desirable practices… to employees”, making sponsorships an internal as well as external expression of culture.

Several participants described structured processes for ensuring that sponsorships remain consistent with corporate strategy. Participant 12 mentioned that "all importers must coordinate each sponsorship with the Audi Sponsorship Forum… to ensure that this consistency is the same from the factory down to all importers". Similarly, Participant 16 emphasised adherence to formal guidelines: "we have very specific guidelines here… we are very much following a certain vision… why we are doing this".

In some cases, decisions were guided as much by instinct as by analysis. Participant 5 acknowledged that "there is always a certain reciprocity… and only one criterion is financial… all other criteria are subjective… either you feel close to the person, their story, their background, or you don't". Participant 13 similarly reflected that the decision often stems from "shared corporate values, or the characteristics and qualities of the sponsored club".

Another important factor guiding sponsorship choices was alignment with the characteristics of the target audience. Companies sought partnerships that reflected their customer base and reached the demographics most relevant to their products or services.

For some, this meant choosing sports that naturally appealed to their clientele. As Participant 10 explained, "our director has actually been thinking about cycling for quite some time, mainly because we see cycling as a form of sustainable mobility… cyclists also need to refuel somewhere, not necessarily with fuel, but with coffee, snacks, and gas stations are great for them on the road". Similarly, Participant 14 noted that their company focused on domestic audiences: "as an insurance company, our products are not interesting to foreigners… we do not decide to participate in major international events, because our customers are not actually there".

Others emphasised using data and market research to understand audience fit. "It's a combination of all the research and all the data you get from the market, about the popularity of the sport, the target group that the sport addresses, the viewership, the opportunities that the sport offers", explained Participant 16.

Selecting sports that resonated with key demographic groups was also a recurring strategy. Participant 15 described entering climbing "very strategically… because it was the fastest growing sport at the time and it covered all the target segments that were important to us, i.e., young people, families, and even older people". Similarly, Participant 6 noted a growing focus on youth-oriented sponsorships, saying their organisation "had to focus on young target groups… and redirected our resources to support young people".

Participant 12 also highlighted the need to consider audience compatibility and brand competition, stating, "we always try to sponsor a team or an event so that we are not so focused on one individual who might not be suitable for a certain part of the target group…

if Mercedes, BMW, Volvo, Lexus, or whatever is present somewhere, we will not push into that segment".

When asked if they care about competition, many participants made it clear that exclusivity and avoiding competition play a central role in their sponsorship strategies. Companies consistently sought to avoid overlapping with competitors, either by securing exclusive partnerships or by deliberately steering clear of sports already associated with rival brands. As Participant 16 explained, "we won't go into soccer, for example, if our competition is in soccer… we also don't want our competitors to get into winter sports. We want to have our own little garden here". Similarly, Participant 17 noted that "when one of the competitors takes a certain sport as their own, we then don't decide on that sport, because it makes no sense… people recognise that that sport is sponsored by that competitor".

For some, exclusivity was also about reinforcing brand distinctiveness and maintaining consistent visibility. Participant 15 said, "we always try to be exclusive in a particular partnership or sport", highlighting a deliberate focus on selecting areas with strong audience fit and limited brand saturation.

In some cases, compromises were necessary. As Participant 8 explained, "we always keep track of where everyone is… sometimes we have to make a compromise, for example, and let the competition in. The Football Association is such a compromise… we had to make a gentleman's agreement because we had industry exclusivity".

Other organisations addressed competition by focusing on national rather than local sponsorships. Participant 10 said, "we choose national teams… because we have a national presence and we believe there is already enough local rivalry". Finally, geographical location also influenced sponsorship choices, as organisations sought to balance national visibility with local relevance.

4.3.2.2 Who to Sponsor

When asked who they typically choose to sponsor, participants described a layered approach combining national visibility, community connection, and strategic selectivity. Most organisations favoured sponsoring national associations, teams, or events rather than individual athletes, primarily to reduce risk and ensure broader exposure. However, selective athlete sponsorships were pursued when strong personal alignment and reputational trust existed.

Many preferred sponsoring *national associations or umbrella organisations* to ensure broad coverage and stability. Participant 12 explained that "we have usually always sponsored the organising committees of these competitions… it has always been our strategy to spread the risk, to always sponsor organisations, not individuals". Similarly, Participant 10 emphasised

that “we choose nationally, that is, we choose national teams… because we have a national presence and believe there is already enough of this in Slovenia, in a way, local patriotism and local rivalry”.

Local sponsorships also played a vital role, helping brands maintain community visibility and strengthen relationships with regional audiences. As Participant 10 added, “for smaller sponsorships, we mainly give to local projects… we make sure that the projects are evenly distributed across the geographical area”. Participant 13 described a similar model: “we identified these clubs at both locations… volleyball, swimming, a soccer club, a little skiing, and a little table tennis club”.

A few companies extended support to *individual athletes*, though this was viewed as less common and more selective. Participant 16 explained that “we always divide sponsorships into three pillars… one pillar includes national associations and individual athletes”. However, Participant 8 noted that “historically, their company has covered many more individual athletes, but at the moment we only have [one]… because once you are connected to an individual athlete, it can be a very risky decision whether the season will go well for them or not”. These risks are explored further in *Section 4: Challenges.*

Others adopted a mix of all levels – national, local, and individual. Participant 9 summarised: “we sponsor national associations, handball, football… but also local clubs like Cedevita Olimpija, and even individual cycling. It’s from national level to local community level to individual level”.

4.3.2.3 Stakeholder Architecture

Sponsorship decisions typically involved a complex stakeholder architecture, with marketing departments initiating proposals, senior management approving budgets, and finance and legal teams assessing risks. Larger organisations employed formal committees and structured approval systems, while smaller firms relied on more agile and centralised decision-making. Despite procedural differences, participants consistently highlighted the need for cross-functional alignment to ensure coherence between sponsorship activities and corporate strategy.

Across companies, marketing departments consistently emerged as the main initiators. Participant 1 explained that “marketing usually makes a proposal… the first decision to even start thinking seriously about it is usually related to marketing”, while Participant 16 similarly noted that “marketing also plays a very important role in the decision-making process”. Once proposals are developed, they are typically presented to management boards for approval. As Participant 1 clarified, “in the end, it is always our management that has to approve it”, describing a board composed of both global and European members. Participant

3 echoed this structure: “the key internal stakeholders are definitely the management, which is classic, as it is everywhere… if we have a good idea, we go back to management”.

Some organisations established formal committees to ensure objectivity and multi-level review. Participant 2 described their process in detail: “we have a sponsorship committee… the sector where we weigh things very carefully. We do not bring things to the sponsorship committee that we are not sure about… there are also instances of very clear rejection, even contrary to my proposal”. The committee was described as an “independent body composed of five senior directors”, showing that sponsorship decisions were treated as serious governance matters.

In smaller companies, decision-making was more streamlined. Participant 6 summarised it simply: “It’s me and the director. Mostly. We are the decision-makers”. Participant 5 reported a similar setup, noting that “there are six of us in total… we filter everything that comes in. We also have a committee, which is basically an internal body that takes care of this”.

Several participants highlighted the role of cross-departmental collaboration. Marketing teams often worked closely with sales, PR, and corporate communications to align sponsorships with broader company goals. Participant 15 explained that “sales, marketing, PR, and management, i.e., the board of directors, are involved in the decision-making process”, while Participant 14 added that “we work closely together, that is, the sales and marketing departments, and then basically the company’s management”. Participant 17 described a recent internal restructuring where sponsorships were moved from corporate communications to marketing, explaining that “this was the best decision… no one says that corporate communication will not be at those meetings, but marketing is now the core”.

External stakeholders also influenced decisions. Participant 13 mentioned that “external factors include local politics, regional umbrella sports organisations with some hints or suggestions, and also the clubs themselves”. Others referred to agencies that provided strategic or creative input. As Participant 13 explained, “we also work with agencies for activations… we have an agency and we also worked on a strategy with them”.

Finally, legal and financial experts occasionally contributed to risk assessment and budgeting. Participant 16 noted that “the legal department also has to assess the risks of each contract”, while Participant 1 mentioned that “management and mostly financiers and businesspeople are always convinced by numbers”.

4.3.2.4 Internal Processes and Approvals

Closely linked to stakeholder involvement are the internal approval procedures that govern how sponsorships are proposed, evaluated, and authorised. Across organisations, these

processes were described as structured yet adaptable, ensuring that sponsorships align with wider business and communication strategies while still leaving space for professional judgment and creativity.

Several participants described multi-stage approval systems requiring formal documentation and justification. For example, Participant 10 explained, “We actually have a form that needs to be filled out for each sponsorship and submitted to the group for approval. And on this form, you also have to write down certain KPIs that you want to achieve with the sponsorship”. Although these KPIs were acknowledged as “not very precisely measurable”, the process ensures that decisions are deliberate and supported by clear objectives. Similarly, Participant 12 highlighted that their company uses a prescribed form requiring numerical targets such as expected media value and audience reach, along with a compliance review to prevent “any moral complications, corruption, [or] conflicts of interest”.

In some cases, approvals are tightly connected to coordination with parent companies or group structures. Participant 10 noted that “corporate communication is part of the job: convince the group, sign the contract, transfer the money”, after which marketing manages activation activities linked to specific products. Participant 12 echoed this, describing how sponsorship proposals must be approved by the factory-level forum before implementation, ensuring alignment with brand-level goals and consistency across markets.

Participants also emphasised a blend of formal and informal practices. While official approval paths exist, smaller firms often rely on consensus and flexibility. As Participant 10 explained, informal consultation and discussion “over a cup of coffee or a cigarette” are used to gauge internal attitudes and maintain shared ownership of decisions. Similarly, Participant 16 described their role as preparing an evidence-based proposal for management: “I see my contribution here mainly in trying to objectify the reasons why we should go into this sponsorship and what it will bring us”.

Strategic alignment was repeatedly mentioned as a guiding principle. Participant 15 outlined a hierarchy of priorities in which “the first thing we focus on is business strategy”, with brand, employer, and sustainability strategies following underneath as “key guidelines”. Others confirmed that each proposal is reviewed for consistency with company strategy before submission to management (Participants 3, 4, 6, 17).

Decision-making was generally collaborative, though levels of autonomy varied by company size and sponsorship scale. In larger organisations, marketing typically initiates proposals, while the management board makes final approvals (Participants 4, 10, 14). In smaller or more agile teams, decisions can be more immediate. Participant 6 summarised their process succinctly: “It’s me and the director. Mostly. We are the decision-makers”.

4.3.2.5 Evidence versus Intuition

An important insight from the interviews was the interplay between data and intuition. While measurable indicators such as audience reach, media value, and ROI were considered essential – particularly for board-level justification – many executives acknowledged that intuition, experience, and "gut feeling" play a decisive role in final decisions.

Many emphasised that sponsorship decisions cannot rely solely on numbers. As Participant 10 put it, "If I had to estimate in percentages, I would say that 70% is definitely decided by some intuition, some internal feedback, when you check the mood a little. And 30% is some hard data". Similarly, Participant 14 reflected, "I would say it's about 40% data and 60% gut feeling... you can expect that. I think that convinces me more, definitely yes, they have to present some data, but it has to be broad, it has to go hand in hand with our strategy".

Others expressed a more intuitive orientation, describing sponsorship as something that has to "feel right". Participant 3 stated simply, "You just have to feel the project, and then you say to yourself, yes, this is it". Likewise, Participant 4 said, "My gut feeling… probably because I'm from the world of sports, I have a feeling for it. Of course, everyone who sells sponsorships knows how to talk the talk, but if you don't feel the sport you want to sponsor, it's pointless anyway". Participant 17 echoed this emotional dimension: "The first is always a feeling… when you are at all intrigued by a new sponsorship, it is certain that something has happened or that someone is very, very successful at that moment and that you want to be part of that story".

Still, several respondents stressed that feelings alone were insufficient. Participant 2 explained that while personal impressions matter, proposals must also be supported by "numbers we always want… rankings, viewership", as well as the expertise of their professional team. Participant 5 similarly described their approach as "a mixture of both", noting that they assess "how well-organised and capable a particular club, association, or federation is" before relying on relational trust or intuition.

Some participants leaned decisively toward evidence-based reasoning, particularly in larger organisations subject to formal oversight. Participant 8 emphasised, "In the end, I want to take what I bring to the board, I want professional support… I want hard facts. Then I can sleep peacefully". Participant 6 also described a rational, strategic process: "There's no feeling here. It's about whether it fits our strategy, whether we see that connection… we always look at the number of contacts and the price per contact".

A few participants described how the balance shifts depending on sponsorship scale. Participant 9 explained, "When we look at local clubs, that's much more on a feeling… If we look at larger scale, like OKS, then you really look at what is the impact that we can create on the brand".

Overall, participants saw data and intuition not as opposites but as complementary tools. Data provided accountability and justification for management and auditors, while intuition guided early judgments about fit, potential, and authenticity. Sponsorship decisions, as they portrayed them, were therefore as much about numbers and strategy as they were about trust, instinct, and understanding the emotional pulse of sport and community.

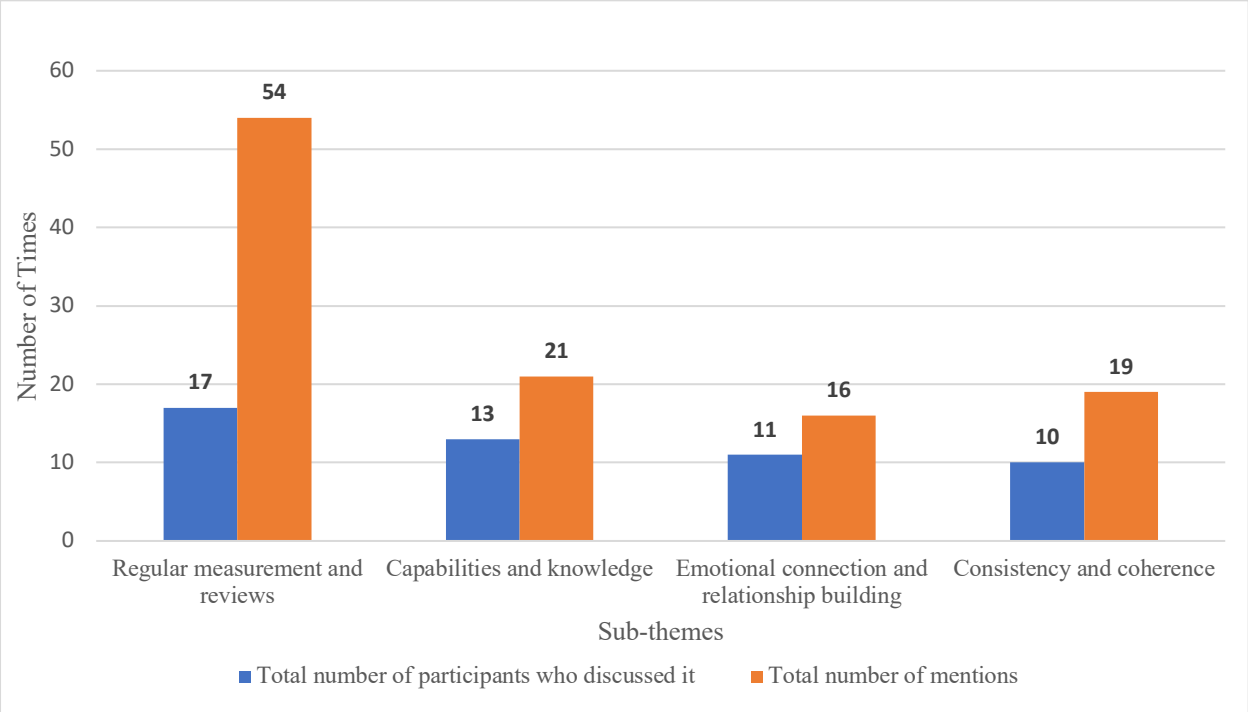
4.3.3 Good Practices and Success Factors

The third main theme, Good Practices and Success Factors, captures executives' reflections on what makes sport sponsorships effective and sustainable over time. This theme goes beyond decision-making to focus on how sponsorships are managed, nurtured, and optimised in practice. Interviewees consistently emphasised that successful sponsorships are not the result of one-off agreements, but of ongoing managerial commitment, organisational capability, and relationship-building efforts. The theme highlights sponsorship as a dynamic process that requires learning, coordination, and consistency rather than short-term promotional thinking.

Across the interviews, four key sub-themes emerged. Regular measurement and reviews appeared as the most salient success factor, indicating that systematic monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment are central to sustaining sponsorship value. Executives described the use of both formal indicators (e.g., visibility, engagement, alignment with objectives) and informal reflections to assess performance. Capabilities and knowledge reflect the importance of internal expertise, professionalisation, and accumulated experience in managing sponsorship portfolios effectively. In addition, emotional connection and relationship building underline the relational nature of sponsorships, where trust, long-term partnerships, and shared values enhance effectiveness. Finally, consistency and coherence point to the need for alignment across communication, branding, and organisational practices to reinforce credibility and authenticity over time.

Figure 9 illustrates the distribution of participant engagement and total mentions across these sub-themes. The figure shows that regular measurement and reviews dominate both in terms of the number of participants discussing the issue and the frequency of mentions, underscoring its central role in perceived sponsorship success. While capabilities and knowledge, emotional connection, and consistency and coherence received fewer mentions, they remain critical complementary factors that collectively shape effective sponsorship outcomes. Overall, the figure reinforces the view that sponsorship success is driven by structured evaluation, organisational learning, and sustained relational engagement, rather than isolated tactical actions.

Figure 9: Frequency of Sub-themes of Theme: Good Practices and Success Factors



Source: Own work

4.3.3.1 Regular Measurement and Review

Effective sponsorship management was associated with continuous measurement and evaluation. Organisations employed a mix of quantitative indicators (media exposure, brand recall, social media engagement) and qualitative assessments (sentiment, employee feedback). Regular reviews enabled learning, adaptation, and justification of continued investment.

Participants consistently highlighted that effective sponsorship management relies on continuous measurement and review. Sponsorships were not seen as static commitments but as dynamic relationships that require consistent tracking, evaluation, and evidence of impact. Many organisations have established structured systems for ongoing assessment. Participant 1 explained that their company uses a formal metric known as ROSI – "Return on Sponsorship Investment" – which quantifies exposure value: "If we invest half a million euros and the media footprint is worth ten million euros, our return on sponsorship investment is such and such". They also conduct regular board reports and audits, requiring clubs to meet specific KPIs, such as attendance or media visibility, to secure variable payments. "If you achieve 100%, you get the entire variable part, if you achieve 50:50, you get half, and if you don't, you get nothing", they noted.

A similarly structured approach was described by Participant 15, whose company operates a digital sponsorship portal: "They have to prepare these reports all the time, and they are

also included in the portal... it contains the entire history... all the reports are in there, everything". This systematic documentation ensures that sponsorship outcomes remain transparent and easily reviewable.

While some organisations measure outcomes continuously, others adopt fixed review cycles. Participant 13 explained, "We usually review it once a year… whether this portfolio is still appropriate as it is, or whether we need to shake it up a bit", while Participant 12 added that annual ISO assessments require teams to "put these documents together, evaluate them, and see what we have actually done in the past year and how to move forward". Participant 16 described a tiered approach, combining project-specific assessments ("at the end of the season we have certain measurements that show us the effectiveness") with long-term brand tracking surveys "once a year… to track some long-term effects".

Measurement techniques vary across organisations but typically combine quantitative and qualitative indicators. Commonly tracked metrics include social media engagement, audience reach, brand recognition, and ROI. Participant 11 noted that their company measures "spontaneous recall, recall with assistance… and how much the image had improved", while Participant 9 mentioned "social listening in the sense of the sentiment of the country", illustrating growing interest in consumer perception.

Several participants also described routine monitoring embedded within operational workflows. Participant 10 reported reviewing sponsorship contracts "about once every two months" and checking "what else we can do, and above all, how we can include our sponsors in communication and marketing activities". Others, such as Participant 5, maintain live spreadsheets and public opinion tracking systems, updating them "on an ongoing basis" to assess both visibility and community reputation.

For many, the purpose of evaluation extends beyond financial justification. As Participant 17 noted, "We evaluate once a year where we are, what we are and how it has turned out for us… but one metric does not exist. If it existed, we would all be too smart and it would be so easy". This recognition – that sponsorship success is multidimensional and context-dependent – underscored a shared commitment to learning, adaptation, and long-term brand development through regular reflection and evidence-based review.

4.3.3.2 Capabilities, Knowledge, and Consistency

Participants emphasised that successful sponsorship requires not only marketing expertise but also deep contextual knowledge of sport, culture, and audiences. Consistency – both in long-term commitment and coherent communication – was identified as a critical success factor for building strong brand–sport associations.

Across interviews, participants highlighted how effective sponsorship depends not only on marketing and management skills, but also on deep contextual understanding – of people, culture, markets, and the dynamics of sport itself. Many explained that successful sponsorships require knowing both *what* works commercially and *why* it resonates socially and emotionally with audiences.

Several respondents pointed to the value of market awareness and strategic fit between the sport and the company's brand. Participant 1 explained that "we chose handball in the past because of our roots, but also because it made good business sense", noting that their strongest international markets – "the Adriatic region, Eastern Europe, Poland, Hungary, Denmark, Scandinavia, Germany" – are also strong handball regions, which made the partnership "compatible because handball is also strong, and this somehow also creates brand recognition". This sense of alignment between sport, market, and audience was a recurring theme.

At the same time, participants emphasised that personal knowledge of sport – its rules, culture, and community – was equally important. Participant 1 described how this experience allowed her to manage sponsorship rights more effectively, admitting that some colleagues "didn't really know the difference between a handball, a soccer ball, and a volleyball". For her, being "a woman, a mother, and a former athlete" was an advantage, as it helped her "know sports, understand that this actually means that you can manage sponsorship rights much better".

Others echoed this, describing how a sense and intuition for the sports world improved decision-making. As Participant 4 explained, "sponsorships are my hobby… I have a feel for it, and I have a feel especially for what is happening in sports and how things work". This sports literacy was not just about fandom, but about recognising subtleties in timing, values, and opportunities – "the more you know", Participant 1 noted, "the more you know where the opportunities lie, where the good values lie… and then you can utilise them in a better way".

Cultural and contextual understanding also played a crucial role. Participant 9 explained how decisions varied by country: "It really depends in each country what is the relevant sports there… in the UK, we always sponsored Rugby in the Six Nations… That's the moment where you want to be. That's where people connect through sports again". Others referred to Slovenia's strong sporting identity, observing that "Slovenians have an affinity for sports, we are athletes, and if anything unites us, it is sports" (Participant 11). This awareness of national character shaped how companies positioned themselves to "influence the improvement of the mood of the inhabitants of Slovenia", recognising that "all of Slovenia would watch football" (Participant 17).

Finally, participants linked knowledge to creativity and storytelling – to "making a really good story when you have a strategy behind it and when you actually know what you want" (Participant 10). For some, enthusiasm for sport itself even shaped their motivation, as Participant 1 admitted, "I personally like sports… and because I think it's a good thing to do, I may push some things through more often than not".

4.3.3.3 Emotional Connection and Relationship Building

Finally, emotional connection and relationship building were repeatedly described as the core essence of sponsorship effectiveness. Trust-based relationships with athletes, teams, employees, and communities were seen as the foundation for sustained impact and brand loyalty. Participants repeatedly emphasised that successful sponsorship is an ongoing relationship. Emotional connection appeared in multiple forms – between sponsors and athletes, between employees and the brand, and between brands and consumers. It also reinforced earlier themes of authenticity and consistency, suggesting that long-term trust and emotional engagement form the backbone of effective sponsorship practice.

Many respondents described emotional connection as what truly differentiates sponsorship from traditional marketing. Participant 16 explained that "sponsorships are a very powerful factor" because sport "is so full of emotion", adding that consumers perceive that "this company or brand is also investing back… it is not strict capitalism, but something developing". This emotional layer, she said, strengthens brand preference and reputation – "the biggest brand is the one that we feel something unconscious towards". Similarly, Participant 9 reflected, "for me, sport is emotion. It's the emotion. And if, as a brand, you're able to capture that emotion in a relevant setting… then you have the magic". However, as she warned, this connection must be cultivated over time: "there's no one-year effect… you need to build. People need to feel that you are there for good and bad times".

Several interviewees emphasised the *relational nature* of sponsorships – that they are, at their core, partnerships built on trust and mutual benefit. Participant 5 captured this succinctly: "sponsorship is really a relationship; it's not just a matter of giving and that's it". Long-term collaboration was seen as critical to creating genuine loyalty and ensuring that both parties could "carry out their programmes at the desired level". This was echoed by Participant 1, who warned that "in the end, you see that he's only doing it for the money, then it's pointless, then it makes no sense". Authentic relationships required integrity, shared purpose, and a willingness to walk away from partnerships that compromised trust.

Others provided vivid examples of building personal and emotional bonds with athletes. Participant 11 recalled her experience working with Jakov Fak: "I experienced for the first time that it is possible to get to know an athlete not only from a professional perspective, but also on a purely personal level… when you see how worthwhile it is to understand the athlete better". She described how empathy and effort – even trying the sport herself – deepened

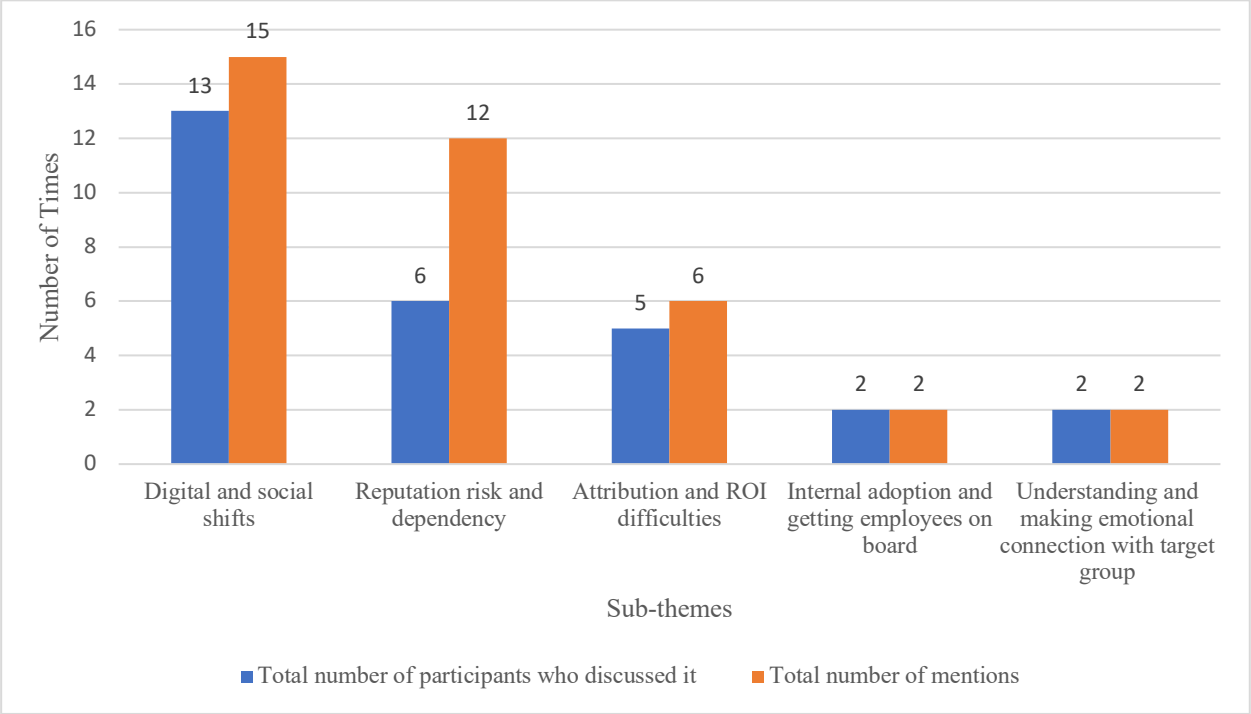
her appreciation and allowed her to "write very good stories". Similarly, Participant 6 reflected on meaningful relationships that transcended performance outcomes, explaining that "you can also create a wonderful story if the values of the company coincide with the values of the athlete". Describing work with both professional and disabled athletes, she noted, "what I have seen in all of them is the immense gratitude of the athletes… they didn't even realise that we had made them heroes". Such experiences, she added, were transformative: "that really changed me, when I experienced the personal stories of these athletes".

Emotional connection was also used to strengthen *internal and external relationships*. Participant 14 described how sponsorship events were used to "connect with business partners… relax and develop other agreements", but also to "reward our employees" and allow them to interact with athletes. Participant 4 recounted how they celebrated their partnership with the national basketball team: "we invited the whole team… we gave them all that, and then we also invited them to our company and organised events around them… our employees were very happy because we could be part of their story". In some organisations, this emotional involvement extended to consumers, as companies sought to ensure that "our customers identify with this story, that they are also living a similar story, that they are fans" (Participant 12).

4.3.4 Challenges and Constraints

Despite the perceived benefits, participants acknowledged several challenges, including difficulties in attribution and ROI measurement, internal adoption among employees, reputational risks, and the increasing complexity of engaging fragmented audiences in a digitalised environment. These constraints highlight the inherent tension between emotional value creation and managerial demands for measurable outcomes.

Figure 10: Frequency of Sub-themes of Theme: Challenges and Constraints



Source: Own work

Relationship building and emotional connection were also among the challenges that the participants discussed. *Internal adoption and getting employees on board,* for example, is "the hardest thing" according to Participant 4, and Participant 8 also raised concerns that some employees "still don't feel connected to this enough", which demonstrates that this is believed to be a challenge.

Also, understanding and making an emotional connection with the target group is important and difficult. In the following extract, Participant 16 explained how reaching the intended audience, or "how to remain relevant" to them is "the hardest part":

> I mean, from the perspective of how consumers are now divided into target groups. I mean, in old-school marketing, the target groups were 25 to 35, 35 to 45, and so on. Now, I think it's more about lifestyle, for example, a 45- or 50-year-old may have the same values as a 30-year-old. No, and then how to bridge that gap with communication channels, how to reach both, how to influence. I think that's the hardest part. That is, how to remain relevant to individual target groups and generations that are now emerging.

Attribution and ROI difficulties were also reported, and participants highlighted the persistent difficulty of demonstrating and quantifying the actual outcomes of sponsorship activities. While emotional resonance and internal enthusiasm are essential for sustaining

commitment, the ability to link those outcomes to measurable business value remains one of the most complex aspects of sponsorship management.

Respondents repeatedly described the attribution problem – the challenge of isolating what sponsorship itself contributes, as opposed to the effects of other marketing or communication activities happening in parallel. As one participant explained, "these KPIs… are not very precisely measurable when we talk about sponsorships, because… you can't say, oh, it's because of this sponsorship that we got this… because there are always parallel marketing activities going on at other levels, the company is working, it's present in the market, it's present in the media" (Participant 10). This lack of clear causal connection made it difficult for managers to prove the direct impact of sponsorships, especially when outcomes such as brand perception or goodwill develop gradually and are intertwined with other campaigns.

At the same time, many emphasised ROI difficulties – the inability to translate awareness, emotional engagement, or reputation into clear financial value. Participant 1 reflected on this challenge in practical terms: "the biggest challenge is actually linking sponsorship with products… how this likability is then transferred to the level of sales decisions". Although they had conducted research showing that "20% more people who recognised the brand decided to buy the brand's product", the broader problem of proving a consistent return on sponsorship investment persisted.

Several participants linked these measurement issues directly to the problem of reaching and influencing customers. As Participant 10 noted, "it's much more difficult [to communicate values] with customers… they are faced with numerous brands", making it challenging to ensure that sponsorship-generated awareness translates into loyalty or sales. Similarly, Participant 5 commented that "the most difficult [thing] is to achieve brand awareness, because it's not something you can measure". For smaller markets like Slovenia, limited reach and audience saturation made this even more challenging: "our pool is small… we're all talking to the same people".

Participants also acknowledged the intangibility of many sponsorship outcomes, particularly those tied to image, emotion, and social responsibility. Participant 8 explained that while exposure metrics such as "how many minutes you will be on screen" are easily tracked, "you cannot determine how much individual sponsorship has brought in in terms of revenue", because outcomes such as "preference" or being seen as "a socially responsible company" resist straightforward quantification. Participant 9 summarised this duality: "ROI on sports investment is really hard to measure. It has always been… there is this authentic connection that is not always measurable in financials".

The participants were also asked during the interview about the impact of digitalisation and social media on sponsorship practice and commented on how these digital and social shifts can also pose a challenge on their own. Many participants linked these transformations to

the broader challenge of reaching and meaningfully engaging target audiences – particularly younger generations – which had also emerged in earlier discussions about the difficulty of creating emotional connection and maintaining audience attention.

Respondents described how changing media consumption habits have altered what it means to communicate through sport. As one participant noted, "young people still follow sports, as all research shows, but they follow them in a different way. They no longer watch two-hour matches on television, but perhaps watch highlights… on channels such as TikTok, Instagram and so on" (Participant 16). For sponsors, this shift requires producing constant, short-form, platform-specific content to stay visible and relevant. Another participant confirmed this growing demand for agility, saying that "companies now have much higher expectations of their sponsors, who have to be very active and produce a lot of video content… it's not like, I'll get you for a day of filming and we'll do it for the whole year" (Participant 11).

Several interviewees admitted that this constant flow of digital content can be overwhelming. Participant 10 described it as "a living nightmare for sponsors", because audiences now control what they watch, forcing brands to "look for content that appeals to these young people" while remaining mindful of "the brand's reputation". This tension between creativity, control, and appropriateness was a recurring theme, with respondents highlighting the reputational risks of trying to appear trendy or "viral".

Others viewed digitalisation as an opportunity to expand the reach of live events and local sponsorships. Participant 9 explained that their company now sends "influencers and local talent… to capture content… and bring it to our own digital channels", allowing fans to engage even if they cannot attend in person. Similarly, Participant 8 noted the rise of new digital activation models, such as "localised advertising" during international broadcasts, which allow sponsors to tailor exposure by country or region.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that digital platforms have not replaced the value of physical experiences. "We try to organise activations at the event itself, to socialise there with employees or business partners or even our policyholders", explained Participant 14, because live presence still creates stronger emotional engagement. Some respondents also expressed ambivalence toward fully digital approaches, as illustrated by a banking representative who remarked that "the whole point of sports is to get people away from their screens, not toward them" (Participant 2).

Building on earlier discussions about emotional connection and brand authenticity, participants also reflected on the challenge of *reputational risk and dependency* that come with sponsorship. They described a twofold dependency: on the one hand, sponsors rely on athletes, teams, and organisations to represent their values positively; on the other, public opinion and media scrutiny can rapidly amplify any failure, scandal, or poor performance.

Many participants stressed that the success of sponsorships often depends on athletes' results and that ethical or personal controversies can easily damage both the sponsored and sponsoring parties. Several interviewees recalled experiences with doping scandals or athlete misconduct that posed direct reputational threats. "People love sport precisely because it is clean", one respondent explained, "and this always spoils the image of the purity of sport… we have a clause in case there is a danger in sport, such as inappropriate substances" (Participant 1). Another described a doping case that "was actually very difficult for the company at the time" (Participant 6). These experiences reinforced the importance of including compliance clauses and reputational safeguards in contracts.

Dependency on athletic performance was another recurring concern. As one respondent noted, "once you are connected to an individual athlete, it can be a very risky decision whether the season will go well for them or not" (Participant 8). Sponsors not only risk losing visibility when results decline but also face moral dilemmas when deciding whether to withdraw support after an injury or poor performance. Participant 1 recalled that "when [the Nordic skiers] had a couple of seasons with very poor results, the public turned against them… and at that time, most sponsors abandoned their sponsored athletes". Others saw this dependency as a reason to avoid relying too heavily on individuals: "With individuals, there is always the possibility that half of the public will be very supportive… while the other half will not. We have such cases in Slovenia as well, and we have always sponsored organisations" (Participant 12).

Beyond performance, several participants mentioned the risk of negative public perceptions or scrutiny surrounding sponsorship practices. Participant 1 pointed out that, historically, "whenever you entered into a major sponsorship deal, everyone immediately started thinking, 'Oh, now these two have agreed on something under the table.'" This lingering association of sponsorship with questionable deals or "money laundering" reflected the challenge of maintaining transparency and legitimacy in the public eye. Similarly, others highlighted the pressure from local communities and politics, where "appetites… you can't satisfy" can lead to frustration or accusations of favouritism (Participant 13).

Several interviewees also spoke about managing the tension between loyalty and protection. While long-term partnerships foster trust, they can also expose companies to reputational spillover if the partner fails. One participant described a case in which a sponsored football club "got into such financial trouble that we said we weren't going to do it anymore… there was already a big risk to our reputation" (Participant 13). Others highlighted examples where companies took a stand by staying with athletes through difficult times, yet even then, reputational exposure remained high.

Competitive positioning through sport sponsorship is a strategically relevant dimension of decision-making that the quantitative model does not formally capture; the qualitative evidence is therefore used to address it. The interviews with senior executives revealed that competitive positioning is present in decision-making implicitly, though not always systematically. Several participants described sponsorship choices motivated partly by a desire to occupy visibility spaces that competitors had not yet claimed, or to maintain parity with competitors already active in particular sports. A recurring theme was the logic of category exclusivity – the principle that the sponsor of a given property should be the only representative of its industry, thereby preventing competitor association with the same property – which is a competitive-differentiation mechanism. The same interviews, however, revealed that formal competitive analysis is rarely conducted prior to sponsorship decisions; most organisations relied on intuition, historical precedent or industry observation rather than systematic benchmarking, a finding consistent with the "evidence versus intuition" sub-theme identified in the thematic analysis.

Competitive positioning was not modelled quantitatively because doing so would require comparative data across competing firms within the same market, which are not available at the employee level: employees are unlikely to be aware of competitors' sponsorship activities, and the attribution chain from a competitor comparison to personal identification is theoretically indirect. The quantitative model therefore focuses on the internal effects of an organisation's own sponsorship, which is both more tractable empirically and more directly relevant to the human-resource outcomes of interest. Future research could operationalise competitive positioning through a manager-level instrument measuring perceived sponsorship exclusivity, awareness of competitor activity and market differentiation – constructs that require decision-maker rather than employee informants.

4.4 Summary of Qualitative Findings

In summary, the qualitative analysis provides a rich and nuanced understanding of sport sponsorship as a strategic, sensemaking-driven, and relational organisational practice. Senior executives consistently described sponsorship not merely as a promotional tool, but as a long-term strategic investment aligned with corporate values, brand identity, and broader marketing and human resource objectives. The findings demonstrate that sponsorship decisions are guided by a combination of strategic fit, authenticity, emotional connection, and stakeholder alignment, rather than purely commercial considerations.

Across the four main themes, executives emphasised that clear goals and shared interpretations of sponsorship purpose, structured yet flexible decision-making and evaluation processes, and good managerial practices are central to sponsorship success. Effective sponsorships were associated with continuous evaluation, internal capabilities and expertise, strong relationships with sponsored entities, and consistent communication across organisational functions. Importantly, the findings highlight the role of sponsorship in

fostering organisational identification, employer brand strength, and employee engagement, thereby extending its impact beyond external audiences to internal stakeholders.

Overall, the qualitative findings complement and substantively enrich the quantitative SEM results by explaining how and why sponsorship awareness and perceived effectiveness translate into favourable organisational outcomes. Together, the mixed-method evidence highlights that sponsorship-driven value creation emerges from strategic coherence, authenticity, and sustained relational commitment, positioning sport sponsorship as a meaningful contributor to both organisational performance and employee-related outcomes.

5 QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

This chapter presents the empirical findings derived from the analysis of survey data collected to examine the relationships among sports sponsorship perceptions, organisational identification, employer brand image, and employee intention to stay. The primary objective of this chapter is to evaluate the psychometric soundness of the measurement instrument and subsequently determine whether the hypothesised structural relationships are supported by the data. To achieve this, a sequence of statistical procedures was conducted, beginning with descriptive statistics and reliability analyses. These analyses were used to assess whether the observed variables exhibited acceptable internal consistency and aggregated into latent constructs in a conceptually coherent manner. After ensuring the adequacy of the measurement model, structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed to assess direct and indirect pathways among the constructs and to test the theoretical model proposed in this study. SEM was selected due to its capacity to simultaneously estimate multiple dependent relationships and capture mediating effects among psychological and organisational variables that cannot be evaluated using traditional regression approaches. The model therefore provides insight into how sports sponsorship awareness and perceptions translate into organisational identification and employer brand outcomes, and how these in turn shape employees' intentions to remain within the organisation.

5.1 Data Screening

Prior to conducting the main analyses, a comprehensive data screening procedure was undertaken to ensure the accuracy, completeness, and suitability of the dataset for multivariate analysis. The screening process involved assessing the presence of missing values, detecting univariate and multivariate outliers, and evaluating the normality of the data. These preliminary checks are essential for enhancing data quality, preventing estimation bias, and meeting the statistical assumptions required for subsequent factor analyses and structural equation modelling. The cleaned and validated dataset was then used for all further analyses.

5.1.1 Assessment of Missing Values

Missing data occur when respondents fail to answer one or more items in the survey. The screening of the data indicates that there is a minimal amount of missing data (less than 5%). The current dataset has no missing values and is complete in all respects. Thus, the sample size with 499 cases showed zero missing values and was used throughout the analysis.

5.1.2 Removing Outliers

The identification and treatment of outliers constitute a critical step in the data screening process prior to multivariate analysis. Outliers are observations that exhibit unusually extreme values or unique combinations of characteristics that distinguish them from the majority of the dataset (Hair et al., 2018). If left unaddressed, such observations may violate statistical assumptions, adversely influence parameter estimates, and distort overall research findings (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). In this study, both univariate and multivariate approaches were employed to detect outliers. Univariate outliers were examined using graphical techniques, including histograms and boxplots, in conjunction with standardised z-scores. Consistent with established guidelines, cases with z-scores exceeding ±3.29 were considered potential outliers and were inspected further (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). For multivariate outlier detection, Mahalanobis distance (D^2) was calculated for all cases based on the set of observed variables. Observations exceeding the critical chi-square value at $p < .001$ were identified as multivariate outliers (Hair et al., 2019). This method is particularly suitable for multivariate techniques such as confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling, where the joint distribution of variables is of primary concern.

5.1.2.1 Univariate Outliers

Univariate outliers were examined using standardised values (*z*-scores) for all observed items. Following conventional guidelines, standardised values exceeding ±3.29 were considered indicative of potential univariate outliers (Hair et al., 2019; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). As presented in the results, the majority of items exhibited standardised values within the acceptable range of ±3.29, indicating no severe univariate outliers. Most lower-bound *z*-scores ranged between −3.12 and −1.44, while upper-bound values remained well below the critical threshold, generally not exceeding +2.00. These results suggest that item-level responses were broadly consistent and did not display excessive extremity. Overall, the univariate outlier assessment confirms that the dataset exhibits an acceptable distribution at the item level, with only minimal deviations. Consequently, the data were deemed suitable for subsequent multivariate analyses, including exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses.

The full listing of standardised values (z-scores) for all observed items is provided in Appendix L.

5.1.2.2 Multivariate Outliers

To identify potential multivariate outliers, the data were further examined using Mahalanobis distance (D^2). This method is effective in detecting cases with unusual combinations of values across multiple variables (Flury et al., 1988). Mahalanobis D^2 values were generated for each observation using regression-based procedures in SPSS, with the case identifier specified as the dependent variable and all non-demographic measurement items included as independent variables. Following established guidelines, cases with a D^2/df ratio exceeding 3.5 were considered indicative of potential multivariate outliers (Flury et al., 1988). The results revealed that the majority of observations fell within acceptable ranges, with D^2 values clustering around average levels. No substantial deviations or extreme multivariate outliers were detected. Consequently, all cases were retained for subsequent analyses, as the dataset demonstrated adequate multivariate integrity and suitability for factor analysis and structural equation modelling.

5.1.3 Assessment of the Data Normality

Assessment of data normality was conducted as a key prerequisite for applying maximum likelihood estimation in subsequent multivariate analyses. Normality was evaluated at both the univariate and multivariate levels. Univariate normality refers to the distributional properties of each individual variable, whereas multivariate normality concerns the joint distribution of multiple variables simultaneously. Examining both forms of normality is essential, as violations may bias parameter estimates, standard errors, and overall model fit in structural equation modelling. The results of these assessments are presented in the following sections.

5.1.3.1 Univariate Normality

Univariate normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values for each item. As shown in the descriptive statistics, skewness values ranged from –1.30 to 0.18, while kurtosis values ranged from –0.82 to 1.94. These values fall within widely accepted thresholds for demonstrating approximate normality. According to Kline (2011), skewness values between –3 and +3 and kurtosis values between –10 and +10 are generally acceptable for SEM using maximum likelihood estimation. More stringent guidelines offered by George and Mallery (2018) suggest that skewness values within ±2 and kurtosis within ±7 indicate no serious deviation from normality.

Based on these criteria (Table 5), all items exhibit skewness and kurtosis within acceptable limits, suggesting that the data do not significantly violate univariate normality assumptions. The slight negative skew observed in several items indicates a mild tendency toward agreement among respondents, which is common in organisational behaviour and perception-based surveys. Overall, the results support the suitability of the data for further multivariate analysis using maximum likelihood estimation.

Table 5: Assessment of Normality of the Items

Construct Variable	Item	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK)	SAK1	4.25	0.86	-1.30	1.94
	SAK2	4.12	0.88	-1.01	1.12
	SAK3	3.92	1.08	-0.92	0.30
	SAK6	3.47	1.13	-0.49	-0.45
	SAK7	3.73	1.14	-0.74	-0.20
	SAK8	3.66	1.11	-0.65	-0.29
	SAK9	3.59	1.12	-0.65	-0.25
	SAK11	3.74	0.99	-0.66	0.09
	SAK12	3.30	1.14	-0.40	-0.57
	SAK13	3.18	1.18	-0.29	-0.73
	SAK14	3.35	1.09	-0.36	-0.54
	SAK15	4.11	1.00	-1.07	0.66
	SAK16	3.95	1.02	-0.88	0.37
	SAK17	3.90	1.05	-0.86	0.18
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE)	SPQL1	3.99	1.02	-0.95	0.40
	SPQL2	3.94	1.01	-0.86	0.35
	SPQN3	3.78	1.01	-0.67	-0.01
Organisational Identification (OI)	OI1	2.98	1.13	-0.07	-0.82
	OI2	3.43	1.08	-0.48	-0.33
	OI4	3.91	0.97	-0.82	0.41
	OI5	3.68	1.06	-0.75	0.05
	OI6	3.68	1.04	-0.59	-0.23
Employer Brand image (EBI)	EBI1	3.85	0.96	-0.60	-0.07
	EBI2	3.59	0.87	-0.30	-0.05
	EBI3	3.88	0.92	-0.78	0.59
	EBI4	3.62	0.93	-0.44	-0.05
Intention to Stay (ITS)	ITS1	3.83	0.97	-0.80	0.46
	ITS2	3.94	1.06	-1.02	0.63
	R_ITS3	2.68	1.16	0.18	-0.79
	R_ITS4	3.90	1.08	-0.76	-0.09
	R_ITS5	3.68	1.09	-0.69	-0.08
	ITS6	4.15	0.81	-0.77	0.28

Source: Own work

5.1.3.2 Multivariate Normality

Multivariate normality was evaluated using Mardia's multivariate kurtosis statistic, as reported in the AMOS normality output. Although individual items demonstrated some degree of skewness and kurtosis – particularly a tendency toward negative skewness, which is common in perceptual Likert-scale data – their values largely remained within acceptable univariate ranges, as previously discussed.

At the multivariate level, the estimated Mardia's multivariate kurtosis value was 207.79 with a critical ratio (CR) of 49.75, which exceeds the recommended threshold (Yuan et al., 2005), indicating a departure from strict multivariate normality (Byrne, 2013; Tabri & Elliott, 2012). Such findings are common in survey-based research involving attitudinal measures and large numbers of observed variables. Despite this deviation, prior methodological literature suggests that maximum likelihood estimation remains robust to moderate violations of multivariate normality, particularly when (a) sample size exceeds 150, (b) indicators show acceptable univariate normality, and (c) skewness and kurtosis are not extreme at the item level (Byrne, 2013; Tabri & Elliott, 2012). Given that the current study satisfies these conditions and the sample size (n = 499) is adequate, the use of maximum likelihood estimation was considered appropriate. As an additional safeguard against the departure from multivariate normality, the indirect effects were evaluated with bootstrapped confidence intervals (section 5.6.2), which do not rely on the normality assumption.

5.2 Sample Profile

The demographic profile of the respondents indicates a well-distributed and diverse sample. With respect to personal interest in sports, the majority of participants reported a positive orientation toward sports, with 52.1% indicating active involvement and 42.3% reporting passive following, while only 5.6% stated that they were not interested in sports. In terms of gender distribution, the sample comprised 56.5% female and 43.5% male respondents, reflecting a relatively balanced representation. Regarding age, the respondents were predominantly middle-aged, with the largest proportions falling within the 36–45 years (33.1%) and 46–55 years (33.9%) categories. Smaller proportions were observed among younger employees aged 26–35 years (17.4%), while respondents aged 56 years or above accounted for 13.6% of the sample; individuals aged up to 25 years were minimally represented (2.0%).

Table 6: Demographic Details of Participants (n=499)

Demographic Characteristics		n	Percentage
Interest in sport:	Yes, I actively participate in sports	260	52.1%
	Yes, I follow sports passively	211	42.3%
	No, I am not interested in sports	28	5.6%
Gender:	Male	217	43.5%
	Female	282	56.5%
Age:	Under 25 years	10	2.0%
	26–35 years	87	17.4%
	36–45 years	165	33.1%
	46–55 years	169	33.9%
	56 years and above	68	13.6%
Highest level of education completed:	Primary school or lower	1	0.2%
	Secondary school	90	18.0%
	Post-secondary / higher vocational	94	18.8%
	Higher education / university	240	48.1%
	Master's degree or higher	74	14.8%
How long have you been employed in this company?	Up to 1 year	29	5.8%
	More than 1 up to 3 years	63	12.6%
	More than 3 up to 5 years	60	12.0%
	More than 5 up to 7 years	39	7.8%
	More than 7 up to 10 years	48	9.6%
	More than 10 up to 15 years	54	10.8%
	More than 15 up to 20 years	75	15.0%
	More than 20 years	131	26.3%
Position in the company:	Other employees	98	19.6%
	Operational / professional staff	306	61.3%
	Middle management / department head	80	16.0%
	Senior management / company leadership	15	3.0%

Source: Own work

In terms of educational attainment, nearly half of the respondents (48.1%) held a higher education or university degree, followed by those with post-secondary or higher vocational qualifications (18.8%) and secondary education (18.0%). A smaller proportion reported holding a master's degree or higher (14.8%), while only a negligible percentage (0.2%) had primary-level education or below. Concerning organisational tenure, the sample demonstrated substantial work experience, with 26.3% of respondents having worked in the company for more than 20 years, followed by 15.0% with 15–20 years of tenure and 10.8%

with 10–15 years. Shorter tenure groups were also represented, including those with 1–3 years (12.6%), 3–5 years (12.0%), and up to one year (5.8%) of employment.

Finally, with respect to organisational position, the majority of participants were operational or professional staff (61.3%), followed by other employees (19.6%) and middle management or department heads (16.0%). A smaller proportion of respondents occupied senior management or leadership roles (3.0%). Overall, the demographic characteristics suggest a heterogeneous sample with adequate representation across age, education, tenure, and organisational roles, supporting the robustness and generalisability of the study's findings.

5.3 Common Method Bias (Harman's Single-factor Test)

To assess the potential impact of common method bias (CMB), Harman's single-factor test was conducted using an unrotated principal component analysis (PCA), as commonly recommended in survey-based behavioural research (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This procedure examines whether a single latent factor emerges or whether one general factor accounts for the majority of the covariance among the measurement items. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.950, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60, indicating that the data were highly suitable for factor analysis (Hair et al., 2018). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was also significant (χ^2 = 10,765.21, df = 496, $p < .001$), confirming that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix and that factor analysis was appropriate. The unrotated factor solution revealed multiple factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. Importantly, the first unrotated factor accounted for 39.48% of the total variance, which is below the commonly accepted threshold of 50% used to indicate serious common method variance (Fuller et al., 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2003). This suggests that no single factor dominates the variance in the data. Accordingly, the results indicate that common method bias is unlikely to be a serious concern in this study. For transparency and replication purposes, the one-factor solution resulting from Harman's test is provided in Appendix J.

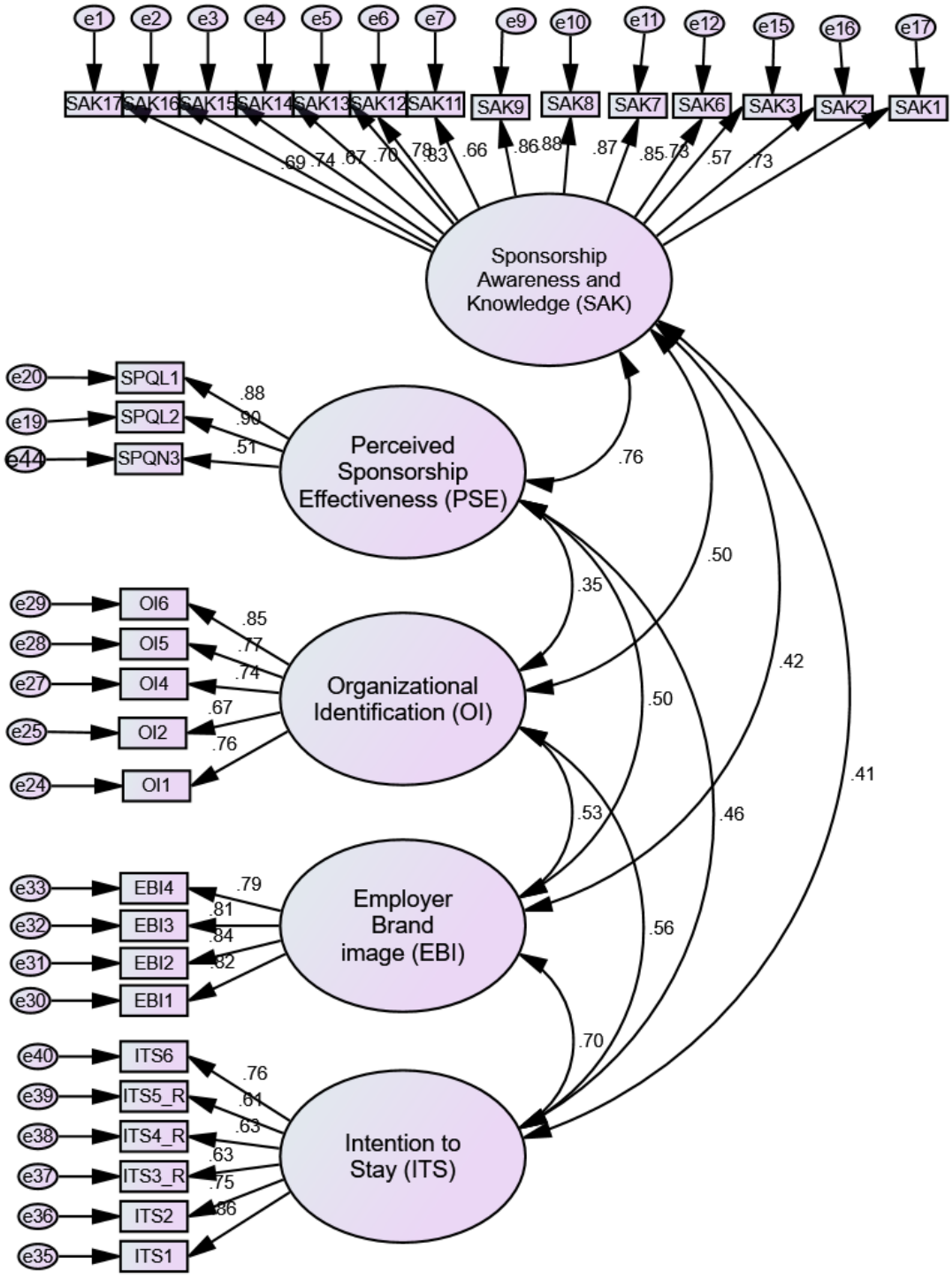
5.4 Measurement Model (CFA) – Stage 1 of the SEM

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS (Maximum Likelihood estimation) to validate the measurement model consisting of five latent constructs: Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK), Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) (including the SPQN item), Organisational Identification (OI), Employer Brand Image (EBI), and Intention to Stay (ITS). The analysis was performed on a final sample of 499 respondents, which exceeds recommended thresholds for SEM analysis and ensures stable parameter estimates.

The overall measurement model demonstrated an acceptable to good fit to the data. Although the chi-square statistic was significant (χ^2 = 1256.83, df = 454, $p < .001$), this result is expected in large samples and therefore not interpreted in isolation. Instead, multiple fit

indices were examined. The relative chi-square (CMIN/df = 2.77) falls below the recommended upper limit of 3.0, indicating an adequate model fit. Incremental fit indices further support this conclusion, with CFI = 0.924, TLI = 0.917, and IFI = 0.924, all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.90. The GFI (0.853) and AGFI (0.829) also indicate a satisfactory fit for a complex measurement model. The RMSEA value of 0.060, with a 90% confidence interval of [0.056, 0.064], indicates a good approximation fit, consistent with the commonly accepted cutoff of ≤ 0.08. Collectively, these indices confirm that the proposed measurement model adequately represents the observed data (Byrne, 2013; Hair et al., 2018; Tabri & Elliott, 2012).

Figure 11: Measurement Model (CFA)



Source: Own work

All measurement items loaded significantly and positively on their intended latent constructs ($p < .001$). Standardised factor loadings ranged from 0.510 to 0.901, indicating strong relationships between the indicators and their respective constructs.

- **Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK)** showed strong loadings ranging from 0.573 to 0.878, with most items exceeding 0.70, demonstrating robust convergent validity.
- **Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE)** exhibited high loadings for SPQL1 (0.877) and SPQL2 (0.901), while SPQN3 loaded moderately (0.510), remaining within acceptable limits for construct retention.
- **Organisational Identification (OI)** item loadings ranged from 0.667 to 0.851, indicating good internal coherence.
- **Employer Brand Image (EBI)** demonstrated strong factor loadings between 0.793 and 0.840, reflecting a well-defined latent construct.
- **Intention to Stay (ITS)** items loaded between 0.614 and 0.860, confirming satisfactory measurement quality.

All standardised factor loadings exceeded the minimum recommended threshold of 0.50 and the majority surpassed 0.70, supporting convergent validity of the constructs (Hair et al., 2018).

5.4.1 Convergent Validity & Reliability (within construct relationships)

After establishing the unidimensionality of the latent constructs through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the measurement model was further evaluated for convergent validity and reliability. Construct reliability was assessed using three complementary indicators: Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Convergent validity was examined through standardised factor loadings and AVE values, following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2019) and Fornell and Larcker (1981).

Table 7: Convergent Validity and Reliability of the Measurement Model

Construct / Variable	Factor Loading (Range)	Items	AVE[a]	CR[b]	Cronbach's Alpha
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK)	0.57 – 0.88	14	0.56	0.95	0.94
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE)	0.51 – 0.90	3	0.55	0.78	0.75
Organisational Identification (OI)	0.67 – 0.85	5	0.55	0.86	0.85
Employer Brand Image (EBI)	0.79 – 0.84	4	0.66	0.89	0.85
Intention to Stay (ITS)	0.61 – 0.86	6	0.52	0.87	0.93

Note: **AVE[a] (Average Variance Extracted)** was computed as the mean of squared standardised loadings and exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.50 for all constructs, indicating adequate convergent validity.
CR[b] (Composite Reliability) values are above the 0.70 benchmark, confirming strong construct reliability.
All **standardised factor loadings exceed 0.50** and are statistically significant ($p < .001$), satisfying measurement quality criteria.

Source: Own work

Table 7 presents the reliability and convergent validity results for the final CFA measurement model comprising 32 retained items. The findings indicate that all standardised factor loadings are statistically significant and exceed the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.50. Further, the CR values for all constructs are above 0.70, while the AVE values exceed the recommended cutoff value of 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha coefficients also surpass the acceptable level of 0.70, demonstrating strong internal consistency across all constructs. Collectively, these results provide robust evidence of convergent validity and reliability for the measurement model, supporting its adequacy for subsequent structural model analysis.

5.4.2 Discriminant Validity (between construct relationships)

Discriminant validity was assessed to examine the extent to which each latent construct is empirically distinct from the other constructs included in the measurement model. Establishing discriminant validity is essential to confirm that the observed relationships among constructs are not artefacts of measurement overlap (Kline, 2005).

In this study, discriminant validity was first evaluated by examining the correlations among latent constructs. As recommended by Kline (2005), inter-construct correlations below 0.85 indicate acceptable discriminant validity. The CFA results show that all correlations fall below this threshold, suggesting that multicollinearity among constructs is not a serious concern. In addition, discriminant validity was further assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, which compares the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct with its correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity is established when the square root of AVE for a construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs in the model.

Table 8 presents the Fornell–Larcker discriminant validity matrix. Overall, the square roots of AVE (shown on the diagonal) are greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations for all construct pairs except SAK–PSE, where the square root of AVE for PSE (.74) is marginally below the SAK–PSE correlation (.76). The two constructs are nevertheless retained as distinct: they are conceptually different (awareness of the sponsorship versus evaluation of its effectiveness), they loaded on separate factors in the pilot EFA and CFA (Appendix L), and they show different structural effects in the main analysis (SAK predicts OI only; PSE predicts EBI only). Overall, discriminant validity is considered satisfactory. Although the correlation between Employer Brand Image (EBI) and Intention to Stay (ITS) is relatively high, it remains theoretically justifiable, given that favourable employer brand perceptions are expected to be closely associated with employees' intentions to remain with the organisation. This overlap is acknowledged and interpreted cautiously in subsequent structural analyses. Overall, the results provide sufficient evidence of discriminant validity, supporting the distinctiveness of the constructs employed in the measurement model.

Table 8: Fornell–Larcker Discriminant Validity Matrix

Construct	SAK	PSE	OI	EBI	ITS
SAK	**0.75**				
PSE	0.76	**0.74**			
OI	0.5	0.35	**0.74**		
EBI	0.43	0.5	0.53	**0.81**	
ITS	0.41	0.46	0.56	0.7	**0.72**

Note: Diagonal elements (in bold) represent the square root of AVE; off-diagonal elements represent inter-construct correlations.

Source: Own work

Upon a comprehensive examination of the measurement model, including overall model fit, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, the findings provide strong evidence that the measurement model is both statistically sound and theoretically robust. The goodness-of-fit indices indicate that the proposed measurement model adequately represents the observed data, meeting commonly accepted thresholds for model fit. In addition, the assessment of convergent validity, based on standardised factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR), confirms that the indicators of each construct share a substantial proportion of variance and effectively capture their intended latent concepts.

In addition, the evaluation of discriminant validity demonstrates that the constructs are empirically distinguishable from one another, with inter-construct correlations remaining within acceptable limits and the Fornell–Larcker criterion generally satisfied. Collectively, these results suggest that the measurement scales used to assess the study constructs and their associated items exhibit satisfactory reliability and validity. Therefore, the measurement model provides a credible foundation for proceeding to the structural model analysis and hypothesis testing with confidence in the quality of the underlying measures.

5.5 Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive statistics for the five latent constructs are presented in Table 9 and reflect generally positive perceptions among respondents. Overall, the mean values range from 3.54 to 3.90, indicating that participants tended to agree with the statements related to sponsorship perceptions, organisational attitudes, and retention-related outcomes. The mean was applied as a measure of central tendency, which indicated that the mean values of all constructs are above the mid-point level of 3. The phenomenon indicated that the consensus of respondents' perceptions toward these constructs was above average.

Among the constructs, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (M = 3.90, SD = 0.86) recorded the highest mean score, suggesting that employees generally view the organisation's

sponsorship activities as impactful and beneficial. Similarly, Employer Brand Image (M = 3.74, SD = 0.80) and Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (M = 3.73, SD = 0.82) also recorded high mean scores. Organisational Identification (M = 3.54, SD = 0.86) yielded the lowest mean among the constructs, although it still reflects moderate-to-high identification with the organisation. Intention to Stay (M = 3.70, SD = 0.78) suggests that employees generally express a favourable inclination to remain with their employer.

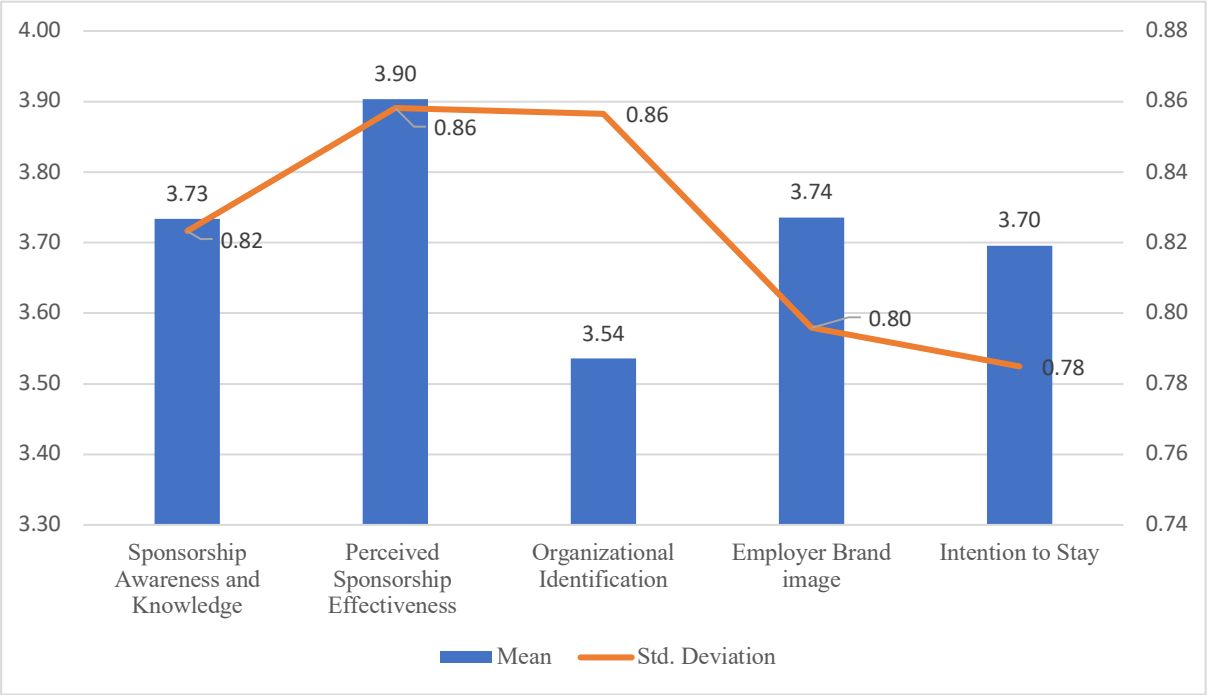
Normality assessment through skewness and kurtosis values shows that all constructs fall within acceptable thresholds (e.g., |skewness| < 2.0 and |kurtosis| < 7.0), indicating no substantial deviation from normal distribution (Tabri & Elliott, 2012). Overall, the descriptive results indicate that respondents hold favourable evaluations of the organisation's sponsorship efforts, brand image, and their own retention attitudes, providing a solid foundation for subsequent structural analysis.

Table 9: Results of Descriptive Statistics for Variables

Constructs	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge	3.73	0.82	-0.86	0.34
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness	3.90	0.86	-0.94	0.51
Organisational Identification	3.54	0.86	-0.61	0.00
Employer Brand image	3.74	0.80	-0.64	0.17
Intention to Stay	3.70	0.78	-0.50	-0.20

Source: Own work

Figure 12: Means and Standard Deviations of All Construct Variables



Source: Own work

Figure 12 visually presents the mean scores and standard deviations for all study constructs, illustrating that respondents generally reported moderately high perceptions across the variables. The relatively small standard deviations further indicate a consistent pattern of responses, supporting the stability and reliability of the measured constructs.

5.6 Structural Models (Path Analysis) – Stage 2 of SEM

The full structural equation model examined the interrelationships among Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK), Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE), Organisational Identification (OI), Employer Brand Image (EBI) and Intention to Stay (ITS) using a sample of 499 employees. All latent variables were measured by multiple indicators with strong standardised factor loadings: SAK items ranged from .57 to .88, PSE from .51 to .90, OI from .67 to .86, EBI from .79 to .85 and ITS from .60 to .86, indicating that the observed items were good reflections of their respective constructs. In this study the structural model was estimated to examine the research hypotheses, using AMOS and the maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) technique.

The structural model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data. The chi-square statistic was significant, $\chi^2(457) = 1334.25$, $p < .001$, which is expected in large samples, while the relative chi-square (χ^2/df) was 2.92, below the commonly accepted cut-off of 3.0. The GFI (.848) and AGFI (.824) were slightly below the ideal .90 but still within the range typically

interpreted as reasonable for complex models. Incremental fit indices were all above the recommended .90 threshold, with CFI = .917, TLI = .910 and IFI = .917, supporting good comparative fit. The RMSEA was .062 (90% CI: .058–.066), which falls within the "acceptable" range (< .08) and close to the more stringent .06 criterion, further indicating that the specified model reproduces the population covariance structure satisfactorily. The results of the goodness-of-fit indices of the measurement model are represented in Table 10.

Table 10: Model fit indices for the structural (full) SEM model

Fit index	Observed value	Recommended threshold	Remark
χ^2/df	2.92	≤ 3.00–5.00 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988)	Acceptable
GFI	0.848	≥ .90 (Hoyle, 1995)	Slightly below; moderate fit
AGFI	0.824	≥ .80 (Chau & Hu, 2001)	Acceptable
CFI	0.917	≥ .90 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Byrne, 2013)	Good fit
TLI	0.91	≥ .90 (Hair et al., 2006; Ho, 2006)	Good fit
IFI	0.917	≥ .90 (Hair et al., 2006; Ho, 2006)	Good fit
RMSEA	0.062	≤ .08 (good), ≤ .10 (acceptable) (Schumacker & Lomax, 2010)	Good/acceptable fit

Source: Own work

5.6.1 Direct Effects of the Variables

Turning to the structural paths, the direct effects of SAK had a strong, positive and statistically significant effect on OI (unstandardised b = .619, S.E. = .095, CR = 6.51, p < .001; β = .516). This indicates that employees who are more aware of and knowledgeable about the sponsorship activities of the company tend to report stronger identification with their organisation. In contrast, the direct path from PSE to OI was negative and non-significant (b = –.021, p = .772; β = –.022), suggesting that perceptions of sponsorship effectiveness alone do not meaningfully predict employees' organisational identification once SAK is accounted for.

For Employer Brand Image, the pattern is reversed. The path from PSE to EBI is positive and highly significant (b = .353, S.E. = .066, CR = 5.32, p < .001; β = .408), indicating that employees who perceive the company's sponsorship activities as high quality are more likely to see the employer as attractive and reputable. The direct effect of SAK on EBI is smaller and not statistically significant at the 5% level (b = .136, p = .089; β = .124), implying only a weak tendency for sponsorship awareness per se to enhance employer brand perceptions once perceived quality is controlled. Together with the strong covariance between SAK and PSE (r = .756, p < .001), these results suggest that awareness and perceived effectiveness

play differentiated roles: awareness primarily strengthens identification with the organisation, whereas perceived quality shapes evaluations of the employer brand.

At the final stage of the model, both OI and EBI exert significant positive effects on ITS. The path from OI to ITS is moderate but significant (b = .291, S.E. = .040, CR = 7.23, p < .001; β = .311), showing that employees who feel a stronger sense of identification with their organisation report higher intentions to stay. The path from EBI to ITS is even stronger (b = .592, S.E. = .047, CR = 12.47, p < .001; β = .579), indicating that favourable perceptions of the employer brand are a particularly powerful driver of intention to stay. In combination, these paths suggest that retention is influenced by both relational attachment (identification) and evaluative judgements of employer attractiveness, with the latter playing the more dominant role.

Although the direct paths from SAK and PSE to ITS were not statistically significant in the final model, the significant links described above imply meaningful indirect effects. SAK contributes to ITS indirectly via OI (SAK → OI → ITS) and, to a lesser extent, via EBI; PSE influences ITS indirectly through its effect on EBI (PSE → EBI → ITS). Conceptually, this means that sponsorship initiatives translate into stronger intention to stay only when they successfully foster employees' identification with the organisation and/or enhance the perceived attractiveness of the employer brand. The non-significant direct paths from SAK and PSE to EBI and OI, respectively, reinforce the idea that awareness and quality represent complementary but distinct sponsorship mechanisms rather than interchangeable predictors.

In sum, the full SEM provides a coherent and theoretically meaningful picture. The model exhibits acceptable global fit and robust measurement properties, while the structural paths support a nuanced process: sponsorship awareness primarily feeds into organisational identification, perceived sponsorship effectiveness strengthens employer brand image, and both identification and brand image in turn promote employees' intention to remain with the organisation, with employer brand effects being particularly strong.

Table 11: Examining Results of Hypothesised Direct Effects of the Variables

Path	**H**	**Unstandard. Estimate**	**S.E.**	**Standard. Estimate β**	**Critical ratio (C.R.)**	**p-value**	**H result**
SAK → OI	H1 (+)	0.619	0.095	0.516	6.512	<.001	**Supp.**
SAK → EBI	H2 (+)	0.136	0.08	0.124	1.701	0.089	**Not Supp.**
PSE → OI	H3 (+)	–0.021	0.071	–0.022	–0.289	0.772	**Not Supp.**
PSE→ EBI	H4 (+)	0.353	0.066	0.408	5.317	<.001	**Supp.**

To be continued

Table 11: Examining Results of Hypothesised Direct Effects of the Variables (cont.)

Path	H	Unstandard. Estimate	S.E.	Standard. Estimate β	Critical ratio (C.R.)	p-value	H result
OI → ITS	H5 (+)	0.291	0.04	0.311	7.231	<.001	**Supp.**
EBI → ITS	H6 (+)	0.592	0.047	0.579	12.468	<.001	**Supp.**

Note: (Latent variables: SAK = Sponsorship Awareness & Knowledge; PSE = Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness; OI = Organisational Identification; EBI = Employer Brand Image; ITS = Intention to Stay)

Source: Own work

The following section discusses the results of path analysis in relation to the above hypotheses in the direct effect structural model:

H1: ***Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge → Organisational Identification (Supported)***

The results show that Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) has a significant positive effect on Organisational Identification ($\beta = 0.516$, $p < .001$). This indicates that employees who are more aware of and informed about their company's sponsorship activities tend to feel more connected, aligned, and emotionally attached to the organisation. The strong standardised coefficient highlights that sponsorship knowledge meaningfully enhances employees' sense of belonging. In other words, when employees understand what their company supports in sports and why, they feel prouder and more connected to their company. The numbers show a strong, meaningful relationship.

H2: ***Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge → Employer Brand Image (Not Supported)***

Although the direction is positive, the effect of SAK on Employer Brand Image (EBI) is **not statistically significant** ($\beta = 0.124$, $p = .089$). This indicates that merely being aware of sponsorship activities does not strongly enhance the way employees perceive their employer's image. While awareness contributes slightly, it is not strong enough to support the hypothesis. This indicates that knowing about sponsorships does not necessarily change how employees see the company's reputation. The effect exists but is too weak to matter statistically.

H3: ***Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness → Organisational Identification (Not Supported)***

The effect of Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) on Organisational Identification (OI) is **not significant** ($\beta = –0.022$, $p = .772$). This means that employees' perceptions about the *quality* or quantity of sponsorship activities do not meaningfully influence how strongly they identify with the organisation. The negative and very small coefficient suggests no

practical or theoretical contribution. That means that even if employees think the sponsorship is good quality, this alone does not make them feel more connected to the company.

H4: ***Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness → Employer Brand Image (Supported)***

The results show a **significant positive effect of Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness on Employer Brand Image** ($\beta = 0.408$, $p < .001$). This means employees who believe their company sponsors meaningful, high-quality events tend to hold a more favourable view of the organisation as an employer. High-quality sponsorship signals professionalism, responsibility, and community engagement, improving employer reputation. In other words, when the company's sponsorships look professional and well-organised, employees think better of the company overall. The numbers show a strong and important effect.

H5: ***Organisational Identification → Intention to Stay (Supported)***

Organisational Identification has a significant positive effect on Intention to Stay ($\beta = 0.311$, $p < .001$). This finding shows that employees who feel a sense of belonging and alignment with the company are more likely to want to stay long term. A strong psychological bond acts as a powerful driver of retention behaviour. This indicates that when employees feel proud to be part of their company, they are more likely to stay. The numbers show a clear and meaningful relationship.

H6: ***Employer Brand Image → Intention to Stay (Supported)***

Employer Brand Image demonstrates a **strong positive effect** on Intention to Stay ($\beta = 0.579$, $p < .001$), making it the most influential predictor in the model. This means employees who view their company as a reputable and desirable employer are significantly more likely to remain. A positive employer reputation helps reinforce loyalty, satisfaction, and long-term commitment. In other words, if employees believe the company is a great place to work, they do not want to leave. The effect is very strong – the biggest among all relationships in the model.

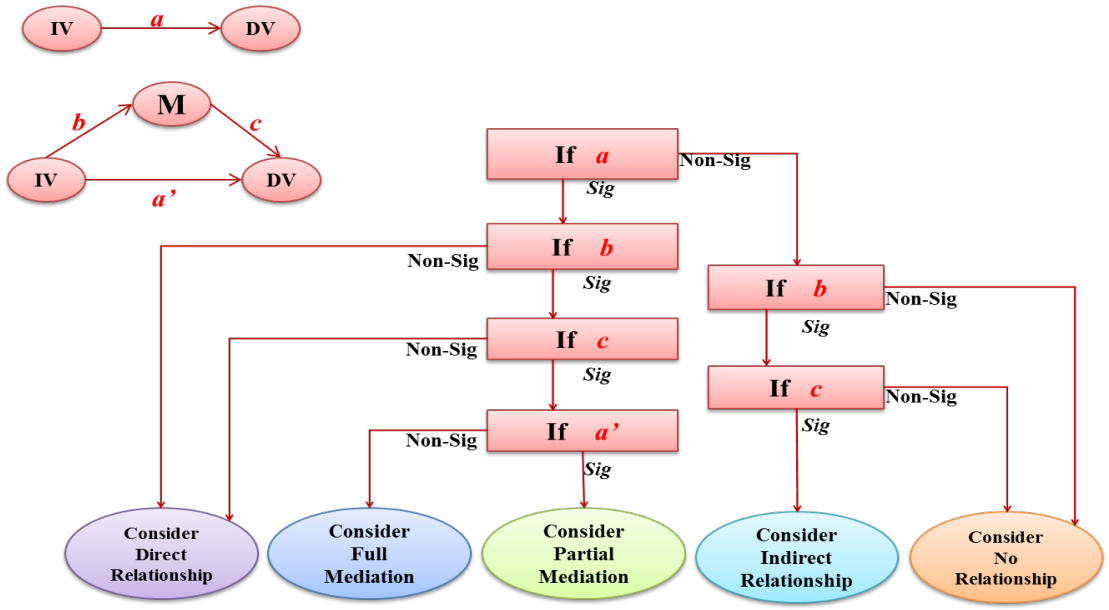
5.6.2 Mediation Effects of Organisational Identification and Employer Brand Image

The mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether Organisational Identification (OI) and Employer Brand Image (EBI) operate as mediating mechanisms through which the sponsorship-related predictors – Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) – influence Intention to Stay (ITS). Consistent with mediation logic, the analysis assessed the extent to which the indirect pathways SAK → OI → ITS, SAK → EBI → ITS, PSE → OI → ITS, and PSE → EBI → ITS contribute to explaining employees' intentions to remain with their organisation.

The analytical logic is grounded in the covariance-based mediation framework suggested by Mathieu and Taylor (2006), which provides a systematic decision-tree for evaluating the relationships among an independent variable (IV), a mediator (M), and a dependent variable (DV).

According to Baron and Kenny (1986) and Mathieu and Taylor (2006), the necessary precondition for mediation is that all three paths (a, b, and c) demonstrate statistically significant relationships. If any of these paths is non-significant, the possibility of finding a meaningful mediation effect becomes mathematically implausible. In the present study this rule is applied with one explicit qualification: where the first path is marginal ($p < .10$) but the indirect effect is non-trivial, the mediation is reported as partial and interpreted with caution; this applies to H8a only (SAK → EBI, $p = .089$).

Figure 13: Decision tree for evidence supporting different intervening effects



Source: Mathieu and Taylor (2006)

Based on this framework, the most important precondition that must be met to find significant mediation is that all three correlations among the three variables (paths a, b & c) must be statistically significant. Once these relationships are confirmed, the nature of mediation is determined by the strength of the **direct effect (a′)** of the IV on the DV when the mediator is included in the model.

- **Full mediation** occurs when paths a, b, and c are significant but the direct effect a′ becomes non-significant.
- **Partial mediation** is present when both the direct and indirect effects remain significant, indicating that the mediator explains part, but not all, of the relationship between IV and DV.

- **No mediation** occurs when the indirect pathway is not statistically significant despite a significant total effect.

In this research, mediation effects were tested using SEM, which is superior to traditional regression-based mediation analysis because it simultaneously models measurement and structural relationships and provides global fit indices for evaluating model adequacy (Browne et al., 1993; Garver & Mentzer, 1999). To ensure robust estimation, the bootstrapping method recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988) was applied, allowing significance assessment of indirect effects using confidence intervals rather than relying solely on normal-theory assumptions.

The mediation model (Figure 14) examines how Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) influence Intention to Stay (ITS) indirectly through Organisational Identification (OI) and Employer Brand Image (EBI). The model includes two exogenous constructs (SAK, PSE), two parallel mediators (OI, EBI) and one outcome (ITS). All paths were estimated simultaneously using SEM with maximum likelihood (N = 499). SAK and PSE are strongly correlated (r = .756), indicating that employees who are more aware of sponsorship activities also tend to evaluate sponsorship effectiveness more positively, but the two constructs are empirically distinct.

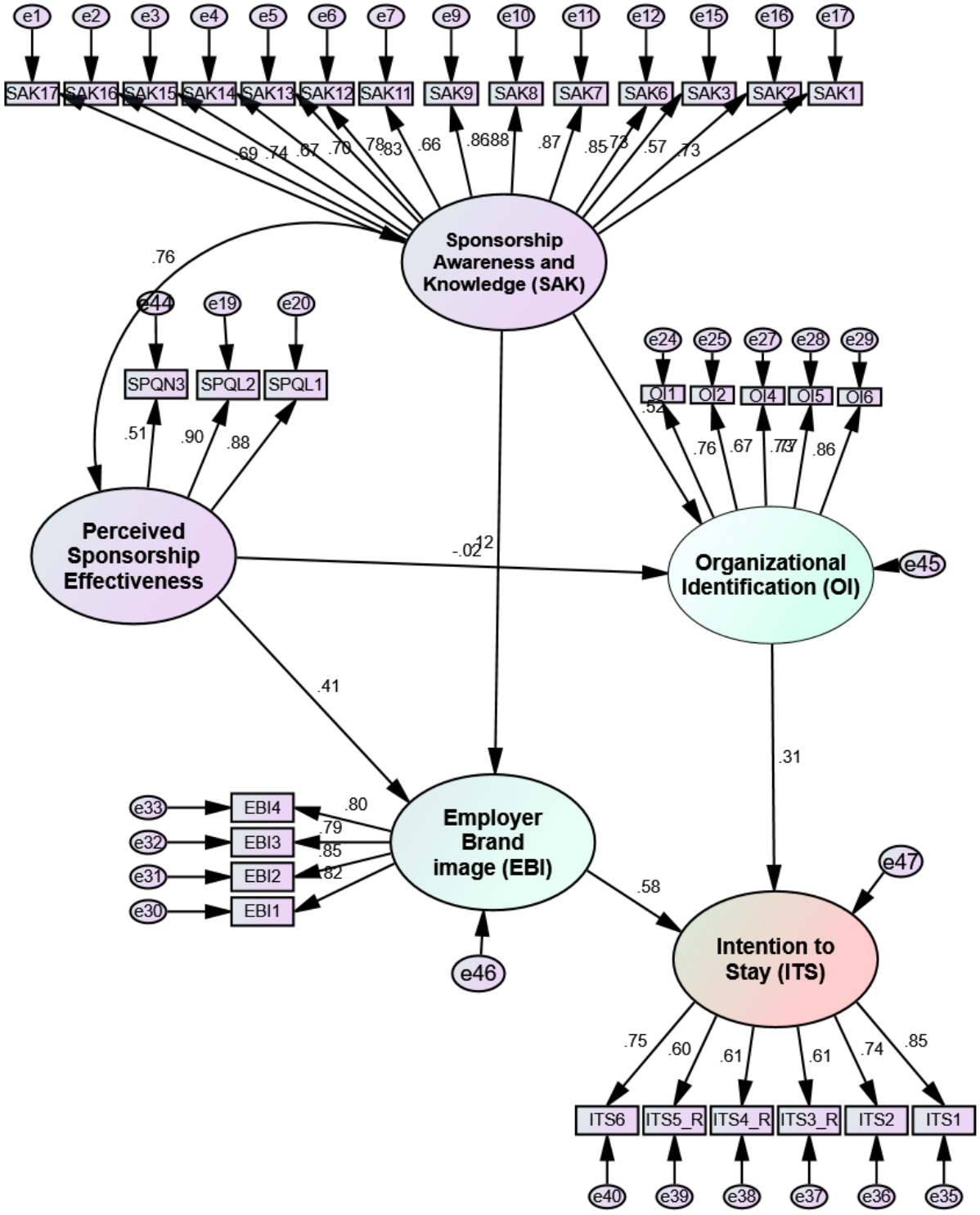
The overall structural equation model demonstrated an acceptable to good fit to the data. The chi-square statistic was significant (χ^2 = 1334.25, df = 457), which is expected given the large sample size; therefore, relative and incremental fit indices were emphasised. The normed chi-square value (χ^2/df = 2.92) falls well below the recommended threshold of 3.00, indicating an adequate model fit. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI = .917) and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI = .910) both exceed the conventional cutoff value of .90, suggesting satisfactory incremental fit. In addition, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = .062) is within the recommended upper limit of .08, indicating a close fit of the model to the population covariance matrix.

Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) demonstrates a strong and statistically significant positive effect on Organisational Identification (OI) (β = .516, $p < .001$), indicating that greater awareness and understanding of sponsorship activities substantially enhances employees' psychological attachment to the organisation. However, the effect of SAK on Employer Brand Image (EBI) is positive but only marginally significant (β = .124, p = .089), suggesting that awareness and knowledge alone play a limited role in shaping employer brand perceptions. In turn, both mediators significantly predict Intention to Stay (ITS), with OI exerting a moderate positive effect (β = .311, $p < .001$) and EBI showing a strong positive effect (β = .579, $p < .001$). Consistent with these findings, the direct path from SAK to ITS is not specified as significant in the full mediation model, indicating that SAK does not exert an independent direct influence on intention to stay once the mediating mechanisms are accounted for.

When the indirect pathways are considered, SAK exhibits a meaningful total indirect effect on ITS (standardised indirect effect = .232). This indirect influence operates primarily through OI (SAK → OI → ITS: .516 × .311 ≈ .160), with a smaller contribution through EBI (SAK → EBI → ITS: .124 × .579 ≈ .072). Taken together, these results support a pattern consistent with full mediation, whereby the influence of sponsorship awareness and knowledge on intention to stay is transmitted through employees' organisational identification and, to a lesser extent, their perceptions of the employer brand. Substantively, employees who are more knowledgeable about sponsorship activities are more likely to identify with the organisation, and this strengthened identification – rather than awareness alone – explains their intention to remain with the organisation.

For Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE), a different pattern emerges. PSE does not significantly predict OI ($\beta = -.022$, $p = .772$), indicating that perceptions of sponsorship effectiveness do not directly foster organisational identification. However, PSE has a strong and statistically significant positive effect on EBI ($\beta = .408$, $p < .001$). Given the robust relationship between EBI and ITS ($\beta = .579$, $p < .001$), PSE exerts a substantial indirect effect on intention to stay through employer brand image (standardised indirect effect ≈ .236). The indirect pathway via OI is negligible (PSE → OI → ITS: −.022 × .311 ≈ −.007), confirming that EBI is the dominant mediating mechanism. Overall, these findings indicate that perceived sponsorship effectiveness influences intention to stay almost entirely through enhanced employer brand image, highlighting that favourable evaluations of sponsorship effectiveness translate into stronger intention to stay primarily by improving how employees perceive the organisation as an employer.

Figure 14: Results of the Examined Direct and Mediation Effects of the Variables



Source: Own work

H7a: *OI mediates SAK → ITS*

Hypothesis H7a proposed that Organisational Identification (OI) mediates the relationship between Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Intention to Stay (ITS). The results provide strong support for this hypothesis (see Table 12). Specifically, SAK has a strong and statistically significant positive effect on OI ($\beta = .516$, $p < .001$), indicating that greater awareness and understanding of sponsorship activities enhance employees' identification with the organisation. In turn, OI significantly predicts ITS ($\beta = .311$, $p < .001$), suggesting that employees who identify more strongly with the organisation are more likely to intend to remain with it.

When OI and Employer Brand Image (EBI) are included in the model, the direct path from SAK to ITS is not statistically significant, whereas the indirect effect of SAK on ITS remains substantial (standardised total indirect effect = .232). Importantly, this indirect influence operates primarily through OI (SAK → OI → ITS), with a secondary and weaker contribution via EBI. This pattern indicates that sponsorship awareness and knowledge do not directly translate into intention to stay; rather, their effect is transmitted through employees' psychological identification with the organisation. Overall, these findings are consistent with **full mediation**, supporting the proposition that organisational identification is a key mechanism through which sponsorship awareness and knowledge influence employees' intention to stay. Thus, **H7a is supported**.

Table 12: Mediation Role of Organisational Identification (OI) between SAK → ITS

IV = Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) **DV** = Intention to Stay (ITS) **Mediator** = *Organisational Identification (OI)*	
Path	**Standardised Estimate β (SE)**
Total Effect of IV on DV without M (path a) SAK → ITS	**.254 (direct .022 + indirect .232)**
Direct Effect of IV on DV with M (path a') SAK → ITS	**.022** (.048), *ns*
Indirect Effect of IV on DV through M (path bc) SAK → →OI → ITS	**.160** (.516× .311)
Effect of IV on M (path b) SAK → OI	**.516**(<.001), ***
Effect of M on DV (path c) OI → ITS	**.311**(.035), ***
Mediation Path	SAK → OI → ITS
Degree of Mediation	**Full Mediation**
Hypothesis Result	**H7a Supported**

Source: Own work

H8a: ***EBI mediates SAK → ITS***

Hypothesis H8a proposed that Employer Brand Image (EBI) mediates the relationship between Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) and Intention to Stay (ITS). The results provide **partial support** for this hypothesis. Specifically, the effect of SAK on EBI is positive but only marginally significant (β = .124, p = .089), suggesting that awareness and knowledge of sponsorship activities play a limited role in shaping employees' employer brand perceptions. In contrast, EBI exhibits a strong and statistically significant positive effect on ITS (β = .579, p < .001), indicating that favourable employer brand perceptions substantially enhance employees' intentions to remain with the organisation.

When OI and EBI are included simultaneously in the model, the direct path from SAK to ITS is not statistically significant, while the total indirect effect of SAK on ITS remains meaningful (standardised total indirect effect = .232). However, the indirect pathway through EBI alone is relatively weak (SAK → EBI → ITS: .124 × .579 ≈ .072) compared to the stronger mediation route via OI. These findings suggest that although employer brand image contributes to the transmission of sponsorship awareness and knowledge into intention to stay, it does so to a lesser extent than organisational identification. Consequently, EBI acts as a **secondary mediator** in the SAK–ITS relationship. Thus, **H8a is partially supported**, indicating that employer brand image plays a limited but non-negligible mediating role alongside organisational identification.

Table 13: Mediation Role of Employer Brand Image (EBI) between SAK → ITS

IV = Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) **DV =** Intention to Stay (ITS) **Mediator = Employer Brand Image (EBI)**	
Path	**Standardised Estimate β (SE)**
Total Effect of IV on DV without M (path a) SAK → ITS	**.254 (direct .022 + indirect .232)**
Direct Effect of IV on DV with M (path a') SAK → ITS	**.022** (.048), *ns*
Indirect Effect of IV on DV through M (path bc) SAK → EBI → ITS	**.072** (.124× .579)
Effect of IV on M (path b) SAK → EBI	**.124**(.051), ns (p = .089)
Effect of M on DV (path c) EBI → ITS	**.579**(.038), ***
Mediation Path	SAK → EBI → ITS
Degree of Mediation	**Partial Mediation**
Hypothesis Result	**H8a Partially Supported**

Source: Own work

H7b: *OI mediates PSE → ITS*

Hypothesis H7b proposed that Organisational Identification (OI) mediates the relationship between Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) and Intention to Stay (ITS). The results do not support this hypothesis. Specifically, PSE does not significantly predict OI ($\beta = -.022$, $p = .772$), although OI itself significantly predicts ITS ($\beta = .311$, $p < .001$). Because the first segment of the indirect pathway (PSE → OI) is not statistically significant, the resulting indirect effect of PSE on ITS through OI is negligible (PSE → OI → ITS: $-.022 \times .311 \approx -.007$). This indicates that employees' perceptions of sponsorship effectiveness are not meaningfully associated with their level of organisational identification.

Given the absence of a significant PSE → OI relationship, any effect of PSE on intention to stay cannot be attributed to changes in organisational identification. Instead, organisational identification operates independently as a predictor of intention to stay rather than as a mediating mechanism in the PSE–ITS relationship. Accordingly, OI does not mediate the relationship between perceived sponsorship effectiveness and intention to stay. Thus, **H7b is not supported**.

Table 14: Mediation Role of Organisational Identification (OI) between PSE → ITS

IV = Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE)
DV = Intention to Stay (ITS)
Mediator = *Organisational Identification (OI)*

Path	Standardised Estimate β (SE)
Total Effect of IV on DV without M (path a) PSE → ITS	**.324 (direct .095 + indirect .229)**
Direct Effect of IV on DV with M (path a') PSE → ITS	**.095** (.043), *p = .050*
Indirect Effect of IV on DV through M (path bc) PSE → OI → ITS	**–.007 (–.022 × .311)**
Effect of IV on M (path b) PSE → OI	**–.022** (.053), *ns*
Effect of M on DV (path c) OI → ITS	**.311**(.035), ***
Mediation Path	PSE → OI → ITS
Degree of Mediation	**No Mediation**
Hypothesis Result	**H7b Not Supported**

Source: Own work

H8b: *EBI mediates PSE → ITS*

Hypothesis H8b proposed that Employer Brand Image (EBI) mediates the relationship between Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) and Intention to Stay (ITS). The results strongly support this hypothesis. Specifically, PSE has a significant and positive effect on EBI ($\beta = .408$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher perceived effectiveness of sponsorship

initiatives substantially enhances employees' perceptions of the organisation's employer brand. In turn, EBI is a strong predictor of ITS (β = .579, p < .001), suggesting that favourable employer brand perceptions significantly increase employees' intentions to remain with the organisation.

When EBI (along with OI) is included in the model, the direct path from PSE to ITS falls to the conventional threshold (β = .095, p = .050) and is treated as non-significant, whereas the indirect effect of PSE on ITS through EBI remains substantial (standardised indirect effect ≈ .236). This pattern is consistent with **full mediation**, indicating that perceived sponsorship effectiveness influences intention to stay primarily by improving employer brand image rather than exerting a direct effect. Substantively, these findings suggest that employees' evaluations of sponsorship effectiveness translate into stronger intention to stay because such evaluations enhance how positively they perceive the organisation as an employer. Therefore, **H8b is supported**, with employer brand image operating as the central mediating mechanism in the PSE–ITS relationship.

Table 15: Mediation Role of Employer Brand Image (EBI) between PSE → ITS

IV = Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) **DV =** Intention to Stay (ITS) **Mediator =** Employer Brand Image (EBI)	
Path	**Standardised Estimate β (SE)**
Total Effect of IV on DV without M (path a) PSE → ITS	**.324 (direct .095 + indirect .229)**
Direct Effect of IV on DV with M (path a') PSE → ITS	**.095** (.043), *p = .050*
Indirect Effect of IV on DV through M (path bc) PSE → →EBI → ITS	**.236** (.408× .579)
Effect of IV on M (path b) PSE → EBI	**.408**(.049), ***
Effect of M on DV (path c) EBI → ITS	**.579**(.038), ***
Mediation Path	PSE → EBI → ITS
Degree of Mediation	**Full mediation (direct path borderline, p = .050)**
Hypothesis Result	**H8b Supported**

Source: Own work

5.6.3 Multi-Group Analysis

To examine whether the structural relationships in the proposed path analysis model vary across organisational contexts, a Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) was conducted. Participants were divided into two groups based on organisational affiliation: employees from the benchmark company X, and employees from all other companies, which served as the

comparison group. This grouping strategy enables an assessment of whether the strength and significance of the hypothesised paths differ between a benchmark organisation and a broader cross-organisational sample. MGA within the structural equation modelling framework allows for a systematic comparison of path coefficients across groups and provides insights into the extent to which the proposed relationships are invariant or context-specific. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for identifying whether best-practice benchmark organisations demonstrate distinct mechanisms in translating sponsorship-related perceptions into employee retention outcomes compared with other organisations.

The Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) was conducted to examine whether the structural relationships among Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK), Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE), Organisational Identification (OI), Employer Brand Image (EBI), and Intention to Stay (ITS) differ between employees of the benchmark organisation (X) and employees from other companies (comparison group). The unconstrained multi-group model was estimated for both groups, allowing all structural paths to vary freely. The main hypothesis was: Measurement invariance across the two groups (configural and metric) was not formally tested and no path-difference test was computed; the comparison is therefore exploratory and the differences reported below are interpreted descriptively. Standardised coefficients above 1 and the sign reversals of the PSE paths in the benchmark company reflect the very high SAK–PSE correlation in that sub-sample (a suppressor effect) and should not be read as point estimates.

Multi-group comparison: *The strength of the structural relationships in the proposed SEM model differs significantly between the benchmark company and the comparison group*

5.6.3.1 Structural Path Comparisons

The MGA results reveal clear and theoretically meaningful differences in the strength and direction of structural relationships across the two organisational contexts. For the benchmark organisation (X), Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) exerted a strong positive effect on Organisational Identification (β = 1.195), indicating that employees' awareness and understanding of sponsorship initiatives strongly enhance their sense of identification with the organisation. In contrast, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) showed a negative effect on OI (β = −.615), suggesting that within the benchmark context, organisational identification is driven more by cognitive awareness of sponsorships than by evaluative judgements of sponsorship effectiveness.

With respect to Employer Brand Image (EBI), both SAK (β = .944) and PSE (β = −.401) significantly predicted EBI in the benchmark group, although the negative coefficient for PSE suggests a more complex evaluative mechanism among benchmark employees. Importantly, both mediators – OI (β = .291) and EBI (β = .540) – significantly and positively predicted Intention to Stay, with EBI emerging as the stronger predictor. This indicates that

in the benchmark organisation, employer brand perceptions play a particularly critical role in explaining employees' intentions to remain with the organisation.

In contrast, a markedly different pattern emerged for the comparison group. While SAK continued to significantly predict OI (β = .393), the magnitude of this relationship was substantially weaker than that observed in the benchmark group. PSE did not significantly predict OI (β = .062), indicating that perceptions of sponsorship effectiveness are not meaningfully associated with organisational identification among employees in non-benchmark organisations. Instead, PSE demonstrated a strong positive effect on EBI (β = .476), whereas the effect of SAK on EBI was negligible (β = .030). These findings suggest that, in the comparison group, employer brand perceptions are shaped primarily by evaluative judgements of sponsorship effectiveness rather than by sponsorship awareness.

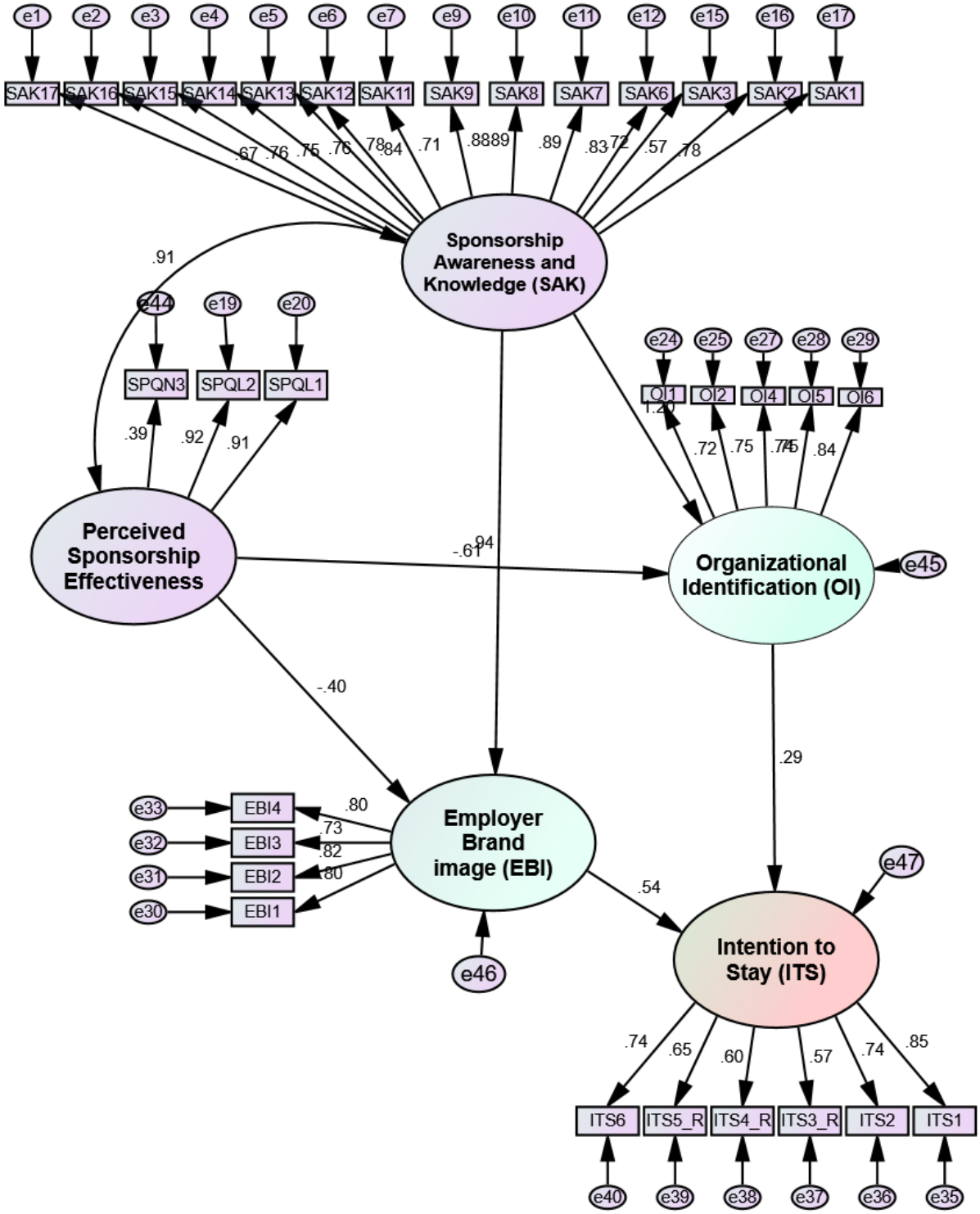
Consistent across both groups, OI and EBI significantly predicted Intention to Stay. However, the relative importance of these mediators differed by organisational context. In the benchmark group, the EBI → ITS path (β = .540) was dominant, whereas in the comparison group, the EBI → ITS relationship was even stronger (β = .583), indicating that employer brand image is a central mechanism for explaining intention to stay across organisations. Overall, these results provide strong evidence of structural non-invariance, demonstrating that organisational context moderates the pathways through which sponsorship-related perceptions translate into employee intention to stay.

Table 16: Multi-Group Comparison of Standardised Structural Path Coefficients

Structural Path	Benchmark (X) β	Comparative Group β	Difference (Δβ)	Interpretation
SAK → OI	1.195	0.393	Large	Stronger in benchmark group
PSE → OI	−0.615	0.062 (ns)	Moderate	Only relevant in benchmark group
SAK → EBI	0.944	0.030 (ns)	Large	Dominant in benchmark group
PSE → EBI	−0.401	0.476	Large	Direction reverses across groups
OI → ITS	0.291	0.323	Small	Stable across groups
EBI → ITS	0.540	0.583	Small	Strong in both groups

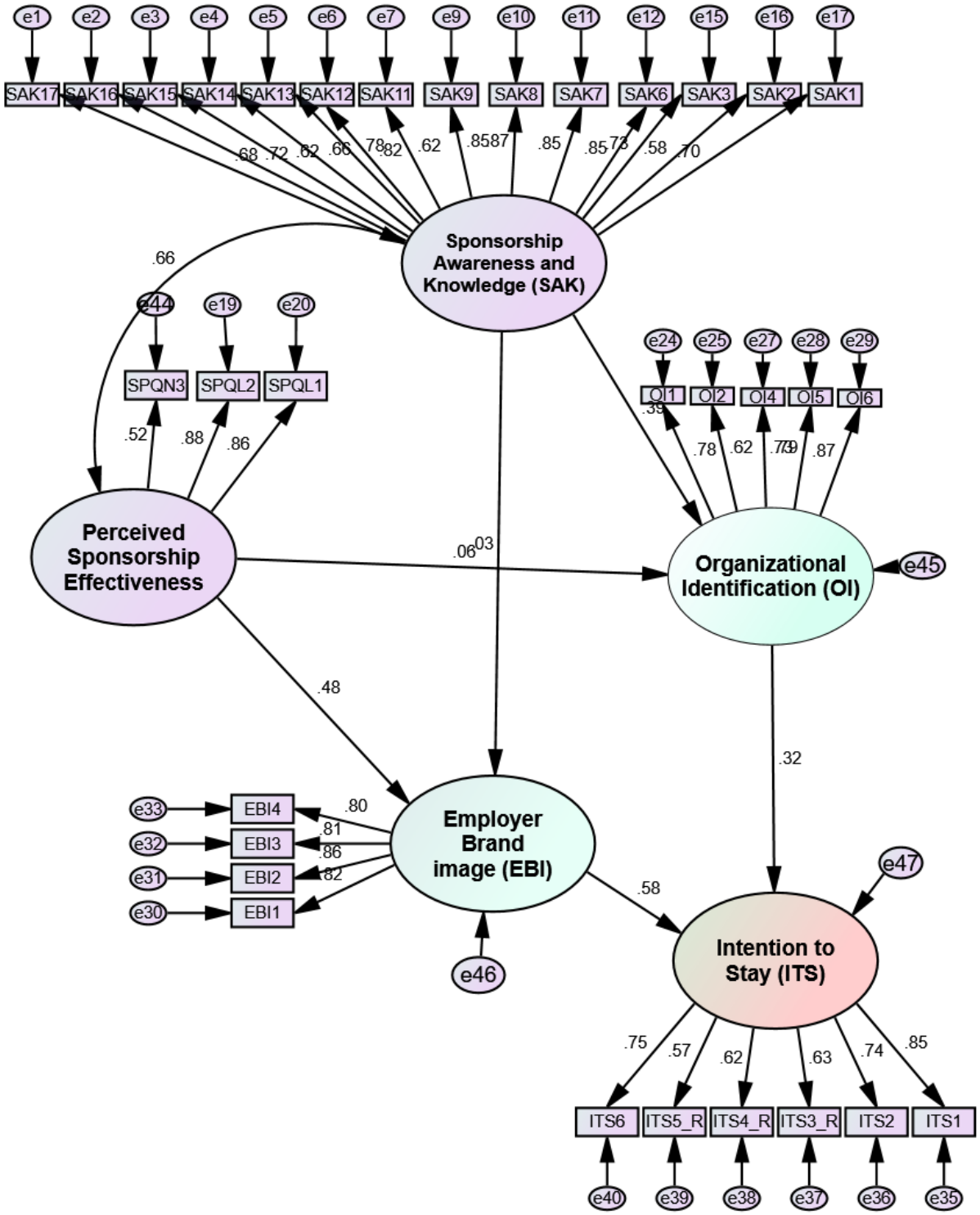
Source: Own work

Figure 15: Results of the Examined Direct and Mediation Effects of the Variables for Benchmark Company (X)



Source: Own work

Figure 16: Results of the Examined Direct and Mediation Effects of the Variables for Comparison Groups (all other companies)



Source: Own work

5.6.3.2 Groupwise Comparisons (Probing the multi-group comparison)

The four path-specific comparisons reported below (labelled Comparison (a) to Comparison (d)) decompose the overall multi-group comparison by structural path. They are probing analyses rather than separate formal hypotheses; the comparison itself is evaluated through the joint pattern of these path-level group differences.

Group comparison: SAK → OI

Comparison (a)**:** *The effect of Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) on Organisational Identification (OI) differs significantly between the benchmark company and the comparison group.*

For the **benchmark organisation (X)**, Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) exhibited a strong positive effect on Organisational Identification (OI) (β = 1.195), and OI, in turn, significantly predicted Intention to Stay (ITS) (β = .291). This pattern indicates that among benchmark employees, sponsorship awareness strongly translates into intention to stay through enhanced organisational identification. In the **comparison group**, although SAK also significantly predicted OI, the magnitude of this effect was substantially weaker (β = .393). Nevertheless, OI remained a significant predictor of ITS (β = .323). These findings suggest that while the mediating role of OI exists in both groups, it is considerably stronger in the benchmark organisation. Thus, the hypothesis is supported in both groups, with a stronger mediation effect in the benchmark organisation (X).

Group comparison: SAK → EBI

Comparison (b)**:** *The effect of Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) on Employer Brand Image (EBI) differs significantly between the benchmark company and the comparison group.*

In the **benchmark group**, SAK had a strong positive effect on Employer Brand Image (EBI) (β = .944), and EBI significantly predicted ITS (β = .540). This indicates that sponsorship awareness substantially enhances employer brand perceptions, which in turn increase intention to stay within the benchmark organisation. In contrast, in the **comparison group**, the effect of SAK on EBI was negligible (β = .030), despite EBI remaining a strong predictor of ITS (β = .583). This suggests that, for non-benchmark organisations, employer brand perceptions are not meaningfully shaped by sponsorship awareness. Thus, Comparison (b) is supported for the benchmark organisation only and not supported in the comparison group, indicating context-specific mediation.

Group comparison: PSE → OI

Comparison (c)**:** *The effect of Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) on Organisational Identification (OI) differs significantly between the benchmark company and the comparison group.*

For the **benchmark group**, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) showed a significant negative relationship with OI (β = −.615), while OI positively predicted ITS (β = .291). Despite statistical significance, the negative direction indicates that PSE does not function as a positive antecedent of OI in the benchmark context, thus failing to support a theoretically meaningful mediation mechanism. In the **comparison group**, PSE did not significantly predict OI (β = .062), although OI significantly predicted ITS (β = .323). As the first leg of the mediation path was non-significant, mediation was not established. Hence, Comparison (c) is not supported in either group.

Group comparison: PSE → EBI

Comparison (d)**:** *The effect of Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) on Employer Brand Image (EBI) differs significantly between the benchmark company and the comparison group.*

For the **benchmark organisation**, PSE significantly predicted EBI (β = −.401), and EBI strongly predicted ITS (β = .540). Although the direction of the PSE → EBI relationship was negative, the strength and significance of the indirect pathway indicate that EBI serves as a mediating mechanism in the benchmark context, albeit in a more complex evaluative manner. In the **comparison group**, PSE had a strong positive effect on EBI (β = .476), and EBI significantly predicted ITS (β = .583). This establishes a clear and theoretically consistent mediation pathway whereby perceptions of sponsorship effectiveness enhance employer brand image, which in turn increases intention to stay. Therefore, Comparison (d) is supported in both groups, with a stronger and theoretically clearer mediation effect in the comparison group.

Table 17: Summary of Multi-Group Analysis Results

Comparison	Mediation Path	Benchmark (X)	Comparison Group
Comparison (a)	SAK → OI → ITS	Supported (Strong)	Supported (Weaker)
Comparison (b)	SAK → EBI → ITS	Supported	Not Supported
Comparison (c)	PSE → OI → ITS	Not Supported	Not Supported
Comparison (d)	PSE → EBI → ITS	Supported	Supported (Stronger)

Source: Own work

5.7 Summary of Structural, Mediation, and Multi-Group Results

Overall, the results provide a coherent picture of how sponsorship-related perceptions influence employees' intention to stay through distinct psychological mechanisms. With respect to the **direct effects**, Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) emerged as a strong and significant predictor of Organisational Identification (OI), indicating that employees who are more aware of and knowledgeable about sponsorship activities are more likely to develop a sense of identification with the organisation. In contrast, SAK did not significantly predict Employer Brand Image (EBI), suggesting that awareness alone plays a limited role in shaping employer brand perceptions. Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) showed a different pattern: while it was not significantly associated with OI, it exerted a strong and positive effect on EBI. Both OI and EBI were found to be significant predictors of Intention to Stay (ITS), with employer brand image demonstrating a particularly strong association with employees' intentions to remain with the organisation.

The **mediation analyses** further clarified these relationships by revealing distinct indirect pathways. Organisational Identification fully mediated the relationship between SAK and ITS, indicating that sponsorship awareness and knowledge influence intention to stay primarily by strengthening employees' psychological attachment to the organisation. Employer Brand Image also mediated the SAK–ITS relationship; however, this mediation effect was comparatively weaker, suggesting that EBI functions as a secondary mechanism alongside OI. In contrast, OI did not mediate the relationship between PSE and ITS, as PSE did not significantly predict organisational identification. Instead, Employer Brand Image fully mediated the PSE–ITS relationship, demonstrating that perceptions of sponsorship effectiveness translate into stronger intention to stay mainly through enhanced employer brand perceptions.

The **multi-group analysis (MGA)** revealed that these mechanisms are contingent upon organisational context. For employees in the benchmark organisation (X), the mediating role of organisational identification in the SAK–ITS relationship was stronger than that observed in the comparison group, highlighting the importance of identity-based processes in benchmark organisations. Similarly, the mediating role of employer brand image in the SAK–ITS relationship was supported only in the benchmark organisation, indicating that sponsorship awareness is more effectively converted into positive brand perceptions in this context. In contrast, the mediation of PSE through employer brand image was supported in both groups and was stronger in the comparison group, suggesting that employees in non-benchmark organisations rely more heavily on perceived sponsorship effectiveness as a signal when forming employer brand evaluations. Taken together, the MGA results indicate that while employer brand image represents a robust and consistent pathway to retention across organisations, the role of organisational identification is more pronounced in benchmark organisational contexts.

Table 18: Summary of Structural and Mediation Hypotheses Results (SEM)

Hypothesis	Path / Relationship	Standardised Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation	Result
Direct Effect Hypothesis					
H1	SAK → OI	0.516	< .001	Sponsorship awareness and knowledge significantly enhance organisational identification	**Supported**
H2	SAK → EBI	0.124	0.089	Sponsorship awareness has a weak, marginal effect on employer brand image	**Not Supported**
H3	PSE → OI	−.022	0.772	Perceived sponsorship effectiveness is not associated with organisational identification	**Not Supported**
H4	PSE → EBI	0.408	< .001	Perceived sponsorship effectiveness significantly enhances employer brand image	**Supported**
H5	OI → ITS	0.311	< .001	Organisational identification positively influences intention to stay	**Supported**
H6	EBI → ITS	0.579	< .001	Employer brand image strongly predicts intention to stay	**Supported**
Mediation Analysis					
H7a	SAK → OI → ITS	Indirect = .160 (total indirect via OI and EBI = .232)	< .001	Organisational identification fully mediates the SAK–ITS relationship	**Supported (Full Mediation)**
H8a	SAK → EBI → ITS	Indirect = .072	0.089	Employer brand image plays a secondary mediating role (SAK → EBI p = .089; EBI → ITS p < .001)	**Partially Supported**
H7b	PSE → OI → ITS	Indirect = −.007	0.772 (ns)	Organisational identification does not mediate the PSE–ITS relationship	**Not Supported**
H8b	PSE → EBI → ITS	Indirect ≈ .236	< .001	Employer brand image fully mediates the PSE–ITS relationship (direct path borderline, p = .050)	**Supported (Full Mediation)**

To be continued

Table 18: Summary of Structural and Mediation Hypotheses Results (SEM) (cont.)

Hypothesis	Path / Relationship	Standardised Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation	Result
Multi-Group Analysis					
SAK → OI	SAK → OI → ITS	**Benchmark Company (X):** Supported (Strong)	**Comparison Group:** Supported (Weaker)	OI mediates SAK–ITS in both groups, stronger in benchmark	**Supported (Strong)**
SAK → EBI	SAK → EBI → ITS	**Benchmark Company (X):** Supported	**Comparison Group:** Not Supported	EBI mediation exists only in benchmark organisation	**Supported**
PSE → OI	PSE → OI → ITS	**Benchmark Company (X):** Not Supported	**Comparison Group:** Not Supported	OI does not mediate PSE–ITS in either group	**Not Supported**
PSE → EBI	PSE → EBI → ITS	**Benchmark Company (X):** Supported	**Comparison Group:** Supported (Stronger)	EBI mediates PSE–ITS in both groups, stronger in comparison group	**Supported**

Source: Own work

5.8 Significant Mean Differences based on Demographics

A series of independent t-tests and ANOVA were performed to determine significant differences in the study variables based on the participants' demographics.

5.8.1 Gender-Based Mean Comparisons

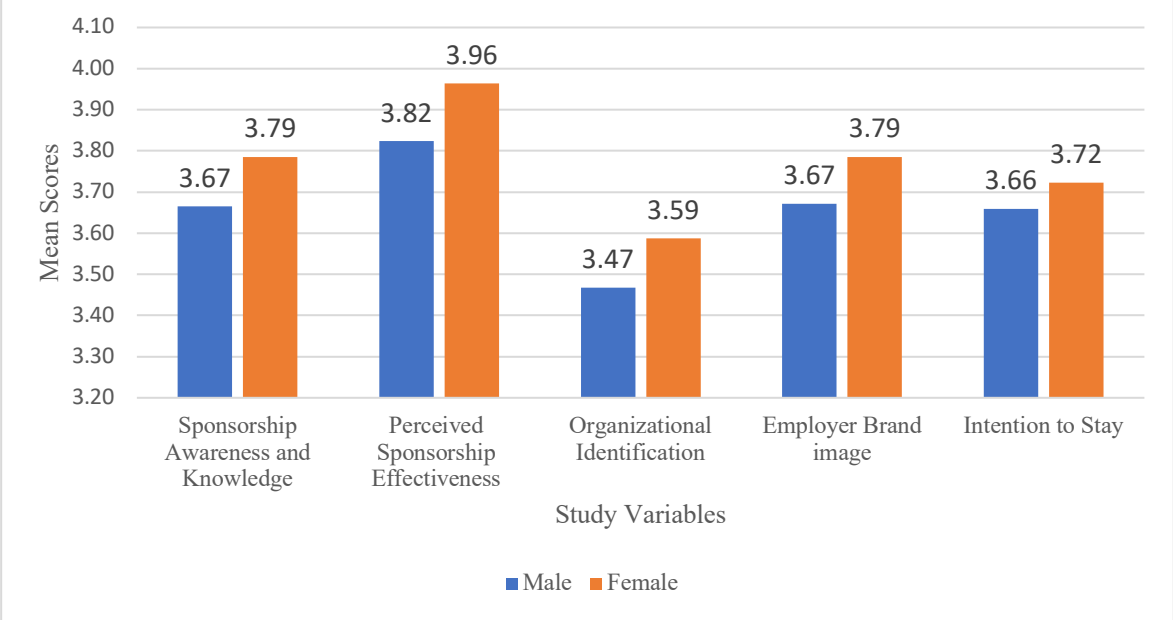
Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences across all study variables, including Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness, Organisational Identification, Employer Brand Image, and Intention to Stay. The results indicate that none of the gender-based mean differences reached conventional levels of statistical significance. For Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge, males ($M = 3.67$) and females ($M = 3.79$) did not differ significantly, $t(497) = -1.62$, $p = .105$. Similarly, the difference in Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness between males ($M = 3.82$) and females ($M = 3.96$) was marginal but not statistically significant, $t(497) = -1.83$, $p = .068$. No significant gender differences were observed for Organisational Identification, $t(497) = -1.55$, $p = .122$, Employer Brand Image, $t(497) = -1.59$, $p = .113$, or Intention to Stay, $t(497) = -0.90$, $p = .370$. Overall, these findings suggest that male and female participants hold broadly similar perceptions regarding sponsorship awareness, perceived sponsorship effectiveness, organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay.

Table 19: Mean Comparisons between Male (n=217) and Female (n=282) Participants

Study Variables	Gender	Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge	Male	3.67	-1.62	497	0.105	-0.12	-0.27	0.03
	Female	3.79						
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness	Male	3.82	-1.83	497	0.068	-0.14	-0.29	0.01
	Female	3.96						
Organisational Identification	Male	3.47	-1.55	497	0.122	-0.12	-0.27	0.03
	Female	3.59						
Employer Brand image	Male	3.67	-1.59	497	0.113	-0.11	-0.25	0.03
	Female	3.79						
Intention to Stay	Male	3.66	-0.90	497	0.370	-0.06	-0.20	0.08
	Female	3.72						

Source: Own work

Figure 17: Mean Scores of Study Variables for Male and Female Participants



Source: Own work

5.8.2 Group-Based Mean Comparisons: Benchmark Company vs. Comparison Group

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences in mean scores between employees from the benchmark company (X) and those from all other companies across the study variables. The results indicate several statistically meaningful differences between the two groups.

Employees from X reported significantly higher levels of Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (M = 3.91) compared to employees from other companies (M = 3.63), t(497) = 3.96, p < .001. The mean difference was 0.27, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.12 to 0.42, indicating a clear and reliable difference between the groups. Similarly, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness was significantly higher among X employees (M = 4.22) than among those from other companies (M = 3.72), t(497) = 5.98, p < .001, with a substantial mean difference of 0.50 (95% CI [0.35, 0.66]). In contrast, no significant difference was observed for Organisational Identification between X (M = 3.54) and the comparison group (M = 3.53), t(497) = 0.17, p = .862, suggesting that employees' sense of identification with their organisation is comparable across the two groups. For Employer Brand Image, however, X employees reported significantly more favourable perceptions (M = 3.87) than employees from other companies (M = 3.66), t(497) = 2.80, p = .005, with a mean difference of 0.21 (95% CI [0.06, 0.35]).

Table 20: Mean Comparisons between Benchmark Company (n=181) and Comparison Group (n=318)

Study Variables	Groups	Mean	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge	X	3.91	497	0.000	0.27	0.120	0.42
	All other companies	3.63					
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness	X	4.22	497	0.000	0.50	0.350	0.66
	All other companies	3.72					
Organisational Identification	X	3.54	497	0.862	0.01	-0.140	0.17
	All other companies	3.53					

To be continued

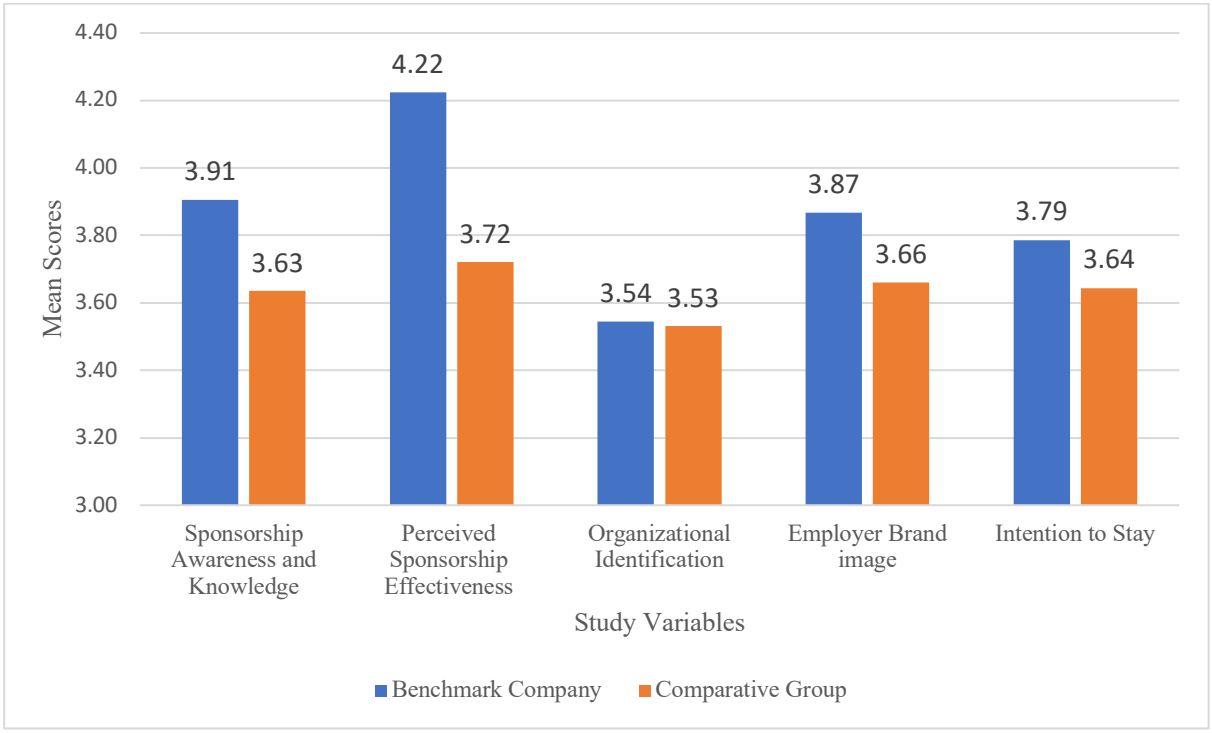
Table 20: Mean Comparisons between Benchmark Company (n=181) and Comparison Group (n=318) (cont.)

Study Variables	Groups	Mean	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper
Employer Brand image	X	3.87	497	0.005	0.21	0.060	0.35
	All other companies	3.66					
Intention to Stay	X	3.79	497	0.050	0.14	-0.001	0.28
	All other companies	3.64					

Source: Own work

Finally, the difference in Intention to Stay between X (M = 3.79) and the comparison group (M = 3.64) approached but did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, t(497) = 1.95, p = .050. Although the mean difference (0.14) suggests a tendency toward higher intention to stay among X employees, the confidence interval included zero, indicating that this difference should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 18: Mean Scores of Study Variables for Benchmark Company and Comparison Group



Source: Own work

5.8.3 Mean Comparisons Based on Interest in Sponsorship

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether participants' level of sports engagement – specifically, active participation in sports versus passive followers of sports – is associated with differences in mean scores across the study variables. This comparison allows for assessing whether behavioural engagement with sports relates to sponsorship-related perceptions, organisational attitudes, and intention to stay.

The results indicate that no statistically significant differences were observed between actively participating and passively following participants for Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge. Participants who actively participate in sports (M = 3.79) and those who follow sports passively (M = 3.76) reported comparable levels of awareness and knowledge. Similarly, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness did not differ significantly between active participants (M = 3.94) and passive followers (M = 3.92), suggesting that evaluations of sponsorship effectiveness are not contingent on the intensity of sports engagement.

Table 21: Mean Comparisons between Participants who Actively Participate in Sports (n=260) and those who Follow Sports Passively (n=211)

Study Variables	Interest in Sports	Mean	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge	Active participation in sports	3.79	469	0.676	0.03	-0.12	0.18
	Follow sports passively	3.76					
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness	Active participation in sports	3.94	469	0.745	0.03	-0.13	0.18
	Follow sports passively	3.92					
Organisational Identification	Active participation in sports	3.46	469	0.012	-0.20	-0.35	-0.04
	Follow sports passively	3.66					

To be continued

Table 21: Mean Comparisons between Participants who Actively Participate in Sports (n=260) and those who Follow Sports Passively (n=211) (cont.)

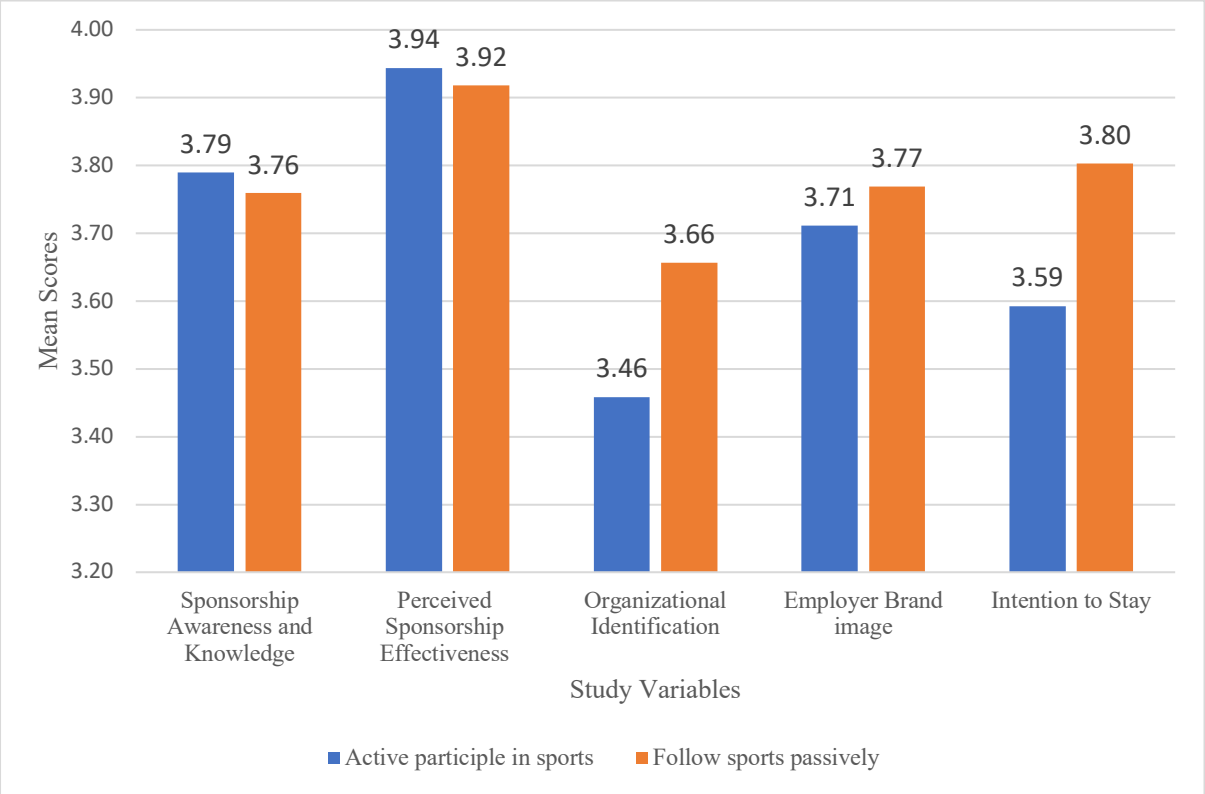
Study Variables	Interest in Sports	Mean	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Employer Brand image	Active participation in sports	3.71	469	0.439	-0.06	-0.20	0.09
	Follow sports passively	3.77					
Intention to Stay	Active participation in sports	3.59	469	0.004	-0.21	-0.35	-0.07
	Follow sports passively	3.80					

Source: Own work

In contrast, statistically significant differences emerged for Organisational Identification and Intention to Stay. Participants who actively participate in sports reported significantly lower levels of Organisational Identification (M = 3.46) compared to those who follow sports passively (M = 3.66). A similar pattern was observed for Intention to Stay, with actively participating individuals reporting lower intentions to remain with the organisation (M = 3.59) than passive followers (M = 3.80). These findings indicate that passive sports followers exhibit stronger psychological attachment to the organisation and greater intention to stay.

No significant difference was found for Employer Brand Image between active participants (M = 3.71) and passive followers (M = 3.77), indicating that employer brand perceptions remain stable regardless of the level of sports engagement.

Figure 19: Mean Scores of Study Variables between Those Who Actively Participate and Those Who Passively Follow Sports



Source: Own work

The table below summarises the one-way ANOVA results across the four demographic factors; the full ANOVA tables are provided in Appendix L.

Table 22: Summary of one-way ANOVA results by demographic factor

Demographic factor	**Significant differences**	**No significant differences**
Educational qualification	None	SAK, PSE, OI, EBI, ITS
Age group	SAK, OI	PSE, EBI, ITS
Employment experience	SAK, PSE, OI, EBI, ITS	—
Job position	OI, ITS	SAK, PSE, EBI

Source: Own work

5.8.4 ANOVA Results Based on Qualification

One-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether participants' educational qualification is associated with differences in the study variables. The results indicate that none of the variables differed significantly across qualification levels. Specifically, no significant differences were observed for Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (F(4, 494)

= 1.17, p = .323), Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (F(4, 494) = 0.21, p = .933), Organisational Identification (F(4, 494) = 1.85, p = .118), Employer Brand Image (F(4, 494) = 1.13, p = .340), or Intention to Stay (F(4, 494) = 1.02, p = .397). Overall, these findings suggest that participants' perceptions of sponsorship, organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay are consistent across different educational qualification levels, indicating that qualification does not play a differentiating role in the studied relationships.

The full ANOVA table is provided in Appendix L.

5.8.5 ANOVA Results Based on Age Groups

One-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether participants' age groups are associated with differences in the study variables. The results reveal statistically significant differences across age groups for Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge and Organisational Identification. Specifically, age groups differed significantly in Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (F(4, 494) = 4.58, p = .001), indicating that participants' awareness and understanding of sponsorship activities vary by age.

The full ANOVA table is provided in Appendix L.

Similarly, significant age-based differences were observed for Organisational Identification (F(4, 494) = 8.12, p < .001), suggesting that employees' psychological attachment to their organisation differs across age cohorts. In contrast, no significant differences across age groups were found for Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (F(4, 494) = 0.86, p = .487), Employer Brand Image (F(4, 494) = 1.15, p = .331), or Intention to Stay (F(4, 494) = 1.34, p = .253). These findings indicate that perceptions of sponsorship effectiveness, employer brand image, and intentions to remain with the organisation are relatively stable across different age categories. Overall, the results suggest that age plays a differentiating role in shaping sponsorship awareness and organisational identification, but is not significantly associated with employer brand perceptions or intention to stay.

5.8.6 ANOVA Results Based on Employment Experience

One-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether employees' length of employment experience is associated with differences in the study variables. The results indicate that employment experience significantly differentiates all five study variables.

Specifically, statistically significant differences across experience groups were found for Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (F(7, 491) = 2.32, p = .024) and Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (F(7, 491) = 2.57, p = .013), suggesting that employees' awareness and evaluations of sponsorship initiatives vary according to their tenure.

Significant differences were also observed for Organisational Identification ($F(7, 491) = 3.38$, $p = .002$) and Employer Brand Image ($F(7, 491) = 3.43$, $p = .001$), indicating that longer employment experience is associated with differing levels of psychological attachment and employer brand perceptions. In addition, Intention to Stay differed significantly across experience groups ($F(7, 491) = 2.55$, $p = .014$). Inspection of the descriptive statistics suggests a general trend whereby employees with longer tenure (particularly those with more than 15 years of experience) tend to report higher levels of sponsorship awareness, perceived sponsorship effectiveness, organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay compared to employees with shorter tenure.

The full ANOVA table is provided in Appendix L.

5.8.7 ANOVA Results Based on Job Position

One-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether employees' job position is associated with differences in the study variables. The results indicate that job position significantly differentiates Organisational Identification and Intention to Stay, while no significant differences were observed for the remaining variables. Specifically, significant differences across job positions were found for Organisational Identification ($F(3, 495) = 9.04$, $p < .001$). Descriptive results show a clear upward trend, with organisational identification increasing from other employees and operational staff to middle management and senior management, indicating stronger psychological attachment at higher organisational levels. Similarly, Intention to Stay differed significantly across job positions ($F(3, 495) = 3.68$, $p = .012$), with middle and senior management reporting higher intentions to remain with the organisation compared to lower-level positions. In contrast, no statistically significant differences were found across job positions for Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge ($F(3, 495) = 1.13$, $p = .337$), Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness ($F(3, 495) = 0.31$, $p = .821$), or Employer Brand Image ($F(3, 495) = 1.30$, $p = .273$). Overall, the results indicate that job position plays an important role in shaping employees' organisational attachment and intention to stay, but is not substantially associated with their perceptions of sponsorship awareness, sponsorship effectiveness, or employer brand image.

The full ANOVA table is provided in Appendix L.

5.9 Summary of Quantitative Findings

This chapter presented a comprehensive empirical examination of the relationships among Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness, Organisational Identification, Employer Brand Image, and Intention to Stay using a combination of structural equation modelling, mediation analysis, multi-group analysis, and group-based mean comparisons.

The structural equation modelling results demonstrated that the proposed model is well specified and theoretically coherent. Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge emerged as a strong predictor of Organisational Identification, whereas its effect on Employer Brand Image was weak and not statistically significant. In contrast, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness significantly enhanced Employer Brand Image but did not influence Organisational Identification. Both Organisational Identification and Employer Brand Image were found to be significant predictors of Intention to Stay, with Employer Brand Image exhibiting the strongest direct effect. These findings confirm the distinct and complementary roles of identity-based and brand-based mechanisms in explaining employee intention to stay.

Mediation analyses further clarified these relationships by identifying the underlying psychological pathways. Organisational Identification fully mediated the relationship between Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge and Intention to Stay, indicating that sponsorship awareness influences employees' intention to stay primarily through strengthening their identification with the organisation. Employer Brand Image played a secondary mediating role in this relationship. In contrast, Organisational Identification did not mediate the relationship between Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness and Intention to Stay. Instead, Employer Brand Image fully mediated this relationship, highlighting its central role in translating perceptions of sponsorship effectiveness into intention to stay.

The multi-group analysis revealed that these mechanisms vary across organisational contexts. For the benchmark company, the mediating role of Organisational Identification in the Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge–Intention to Stay relationship was stronger, and Employer Brand Image also mediated this relationship. In the comparison group, however, Employer Brand Image emerged as the dominant mediating mechanism, particularly in the Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness–Intention to Stay relationship. These findings underscore the contextual nature of sponsorship-related effects and suggest that benchmark organisations are better positioned to convert sponsorship awareness into organisational identification, whereas non-benchmark organisations rely more heavily on sponsorship effectiveness as a signalling mechanism to enhance employer brand perceptions.

In addition to the structural analyses, a series of mean comparison tests were conducted to examine demographic and contextual differences. Gender and educational qualification did not produce significant differences across the study variables, indicating that the observed relationships are robust across these demographic characteristics. Age differences were observed for Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge and Organisational Identification, while employment experience significantly differentiated all study variables, with longer-tenured employees generally reporting higher scores. Job position also played a significant role, particularly for Organisational Identification and Intention to Stay, with higher-level employees exhibiting stronger attachment and intention to stay. Group comparisons further revealed that employees from the benchmark organisation reported higher sponsorship

awareness, perceived sponsorship effectiveness, and employer brand image than those from other companies.

In addition, participants who followed sports passively reported higher organisational identification and intention to stay than those who actively participated in sports. Overall, the findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework and highlight the importance of organisational identification and employer brand image as key mechanisms linking sponsorship-related perceptions to employee retention. The results also demonstrate that these relationships are shaped by organisational context and individual characteristics, offering a nuanced understanding of how sponsorship functions as an internal branding and retention tool. The implications of these findings are discussed in the following chapter.

6 DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings of the study by integrating results from the quantitative structural equation modelling (SEM) with the qualitative NVivo-based thematic analysis. The purpose is to interpret how corporate sport sponsorship practices shape employees' organisational identification, employer brand image and, ultimately, their intention to stay. The discussion is structured around the tested hypotheses, the mediation mechanisms, and the multi-group differences between the benchmark company and the comparison group, and is anchored in social identity and signalling theory, along with Weick's theory on sensemaking. The sections below present discussions of the qualitative and quantitative findings.

6.1 Discussion Based on the Qualitative Findings

This study sought to unpack how corporate sport sponsorship is understood, enacted and leveraged by relevant senior decision-makers, and how these practices shape internal employee-related outcomes. The qualitative findings reveal that sponsorship is not interpreted merely as a marketing expense but as a sensemaking-driven strategic practice deeply embedded in the construction of the organisation's identity, stakeholder relationships, and internal engagement processes.

6.1.1 Goals and Sensemaking of Sponsorships

Executives overwhelmingly framed sponsorship as a multi-purpose strategic instrument, serving brand awareness, reputation building, social responsibility, internal engagement, and commercial goals. Rather than prioritising short-term visibility alone, managers emphasised the importance of authenticity, value congruence, and alignment with corporate identity. This reflects Weick's notion of *plausibility over accuracy* whereby managers construct meaningful narratives around sponsorship that 'make sense' within the firm's identity and strategic trajectory. Notably, the sub-theme of internal engagement highlights that sponsorship is increasingly used to reinforce employees' sense of belonging and pride. Although mentioned less frequently than brand awareness, it emerged as a critical psychological bridge between sponsorship activities and organisational identification. This qualitative evidence explains why, in the quantitative model, Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) strongly predicts Organisational Identification (OI): employees internalise sponsorship narratives when they are embedded into the everyday organisational communication and culture.

6.1.2 Decision-Making and Evaluation Processes

The theme of Decision-Making and Evaluation Processes had the highest number of references, underscoring its centrality in sponsorship strategy. Executives relied on complex evaluative logics incorporating fit and authenticity, stakeholder architecture, internal approvals, and a blend of evidence and intuition. This sensemaking-driven process illustrates how sponsorship decisions are rarely linear or purely rational. Instead, managers interpret cues retrospectively, reassessing sponsorship success based on reputational signals, employee reactions, and stakeholder feedback. Such retrospective interpretations shape future goals, reinforcing the cyclical relationship between sensemaking, evaluation, and organisational learning. This explains the differentiated quantitative effects of SAK and PSE: while awareness enhances identification, perceived quality shapes employer brand evaluations. The qualitative narratives show that employees respond differently to mere exposure than to the perceived credibility and emotional resonance of sponsorship, thus clarifying why PSE had a stronger effect on Employer Brand Image (EBI) than on OI in the SEM results.

6.1.3 Good Practices and Success Factors

The Good Practices and Success Factors theme emphasises that sponsorship effectiveness is contingent on regular measurement, organisational capabilities, emotional connection, and strategic coherence. Managers highlighted the need for ongoing review mechanisms, internal expertise, and cross-departmental coordination. These practices enable sponsorship to move beyond symbolic gestures into sustained organisational routines. Importantly, executives stressed that sponsorship creates internal value only when it is institutionally embedded – supported by HR, communications, leadership, and measurement systems – rather than executed as episodic campaigns. This aligns with the SLIM logic and explains the SEM mediation effects: only when sponsorship is systematically activated does it translate into stronger organisational identification, enhanced employer branding and, ultimately, employee intention to stay.

6.1.4 Challenges and Constraints

The final theme exposes structural vulnerabilities in sponsorship strategy, including reputation risk, dependency on sponsored entities, digital disruption, attribution difficulties, and internal adoption challenges. Participants recounted instances when athletes' failures or scandals brought reputational damage to sponsors, and when ambiguous ROI metrics undermined managerial confidence. These challenges illuminate boundary conditions of the sponsorship–employee relationship. When sponsorship is perceived as misaligned, opaque, or politically motivated, it weakens internal trust and undermines employee buy-in. This qualitative evidence contextualises the SEM findings by showing *why* awareness of the

sponsorship alone is insufficient – perceived authenticity and internal coherence are also decisive.

6.1.5 Integrative Interpretation

Overall, the qualitative findings substantively enrich the quantitative model by uncovering the organisational processes through which sponsorship signals are constructed, interpreted, and internalised. They demonstrate that sponsorship effectiveness is not a property of the sponsorship object itself, but of the sensemaking architecture surrounding it – comprising leadership narratives, evaluation routines, stakeholder alignment, and internal communication infrastructures. Therefore, sport sponsorship contributes to employee retention only when it is experienced as a coherent, authentic, and strategically embedded practice, reinforcing organisational identity and employer brand meaning. This integrated qualitative-quantitative evidence positions sponsorship as a relational, sensemaking-driven capability rather than a transactional marketing tool.

6.2 Discussion Based on Quantitative Findings

The quantitative phase of this study employed Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to examine the hypothesised relationships among sponsorship awareness and knowledge, perceived sponsorship effectiveness, organisational identification, employer brand image, and employee intention to stay. The results demonstrate that sponsorship awareness and knowledge are positively and significantly associated with the extent to which employees identify with the organisation, while perceived sponsorship effectiveness is a strong positive predictor of employer brand image. In addition, both organisational identification and employer brand image were found to be significant predictors of intention to stay, with employer brand image emerging as the strongest predictor. Mediation analysis further revealed that organisational identification and employer brand image transmit the effects of sponsorship-related perceptions to employee intention to stay, consistent with a central role of these psychological mechanisms in linking sponsorship activities to tangible human resource outcomes.

6.2.1 Direct Effects of Sponsorship Awareness and Perceived Effectiveness

The SEM results demonstrate that Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) has a strong correlation with Organisational Identification (OI), thus supporting H1. This finding is consistent with social identity theory, which posits that when employees clearly understand their organisation's sponsorship initiatives, they are more likely to perceive these actions as signals of organisational values, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and emotional attachment (Ko & Hur, 2014). The qualitative findings corroborate this, since senior executives repeatedly emphasised that employees who are aware of the sponsorship

activities develop pride and psychological ownership with respect to the brand. In contrast, SAK did not significantly predict Employer Brand Image (EBI), leading to the rejection of H2. This suggests that mere awareness of the sponsorship activities may not be enough to enhance employees' perceptions of the employer brand unless these activities are experienced as meaningful or strategically aligned. The finding is similar to what Hickman et al. (2005) established, namely, that internal branding outcomes require deeper emotional and experiential engagement rather than surface-level awareness. Further, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) had no significant relationship with Organisational Identification, and accordingly H3 is rejected. This counterintuitive result indicates that employees' identification with the organisation is less influenced by how 'effective' the sponsorship is perceived to be in market terms, and more by how well they understand and relate to the sponsorship initiative itself. The notion that identification is rooted in shared meaning rather than performance metrics is therefore reinforced. Read through a sensemaking lens, this divergence is theoretically informative: identification appears to depend on whether employees can construct a plausible, self-relevant account of the sponsorship rather than on whether they judge it to be objectively effective (Weick, 1995). Effectiveness perceptions feed the evaluative, brand-directed register, whereas identification follows from the meaning employees attach to the activity — a refinement that signalling theory alone, which treats the signal as uniformly informative, does not anticipate. Two further explanations merit consideration. Methodologically, PSE and SAK were modelled simultaneously, so their shared variance may have been absorbed by SAK, attenuating the unique contribution of PSE to identification. Substantively, effectiveness judgements are evaluative appraisals that operate primarily on brand-related attitudes rather than on the self-definitional bond captured by identification (Hofer & Grohs, 2018); comparable asymmetries, whereby evaluative sponsorship perceptions shape brand and attitude outcomes more strongly than identity outcomes, have been reported in internal sponsorship research (Edwards, 2015; Grohs et al., 2015). For social identity theory, the null PSE–OI path is best read as a boundary condition rather than a disconfirmation: the signal activates identification only once it has been interpreted as identity-congruent, so the sensemaking step is a necessary precondition for the social-identity mechanism to operate. However, PSE significantly predicted Employer Brand Image, in turn supporting H4. This implies that when employees believe that sponsorships are strategically successful, well executed, and authentic, their perceptions of the employer as a strong and reputable brand are enhanced. Such a finding is in line with employer branding literature that highlights perceived organisational success as a key driver of brand attractiveness (Karjaluoto & Paakkonen, 2019).

6.2.2 Effects on Intention to Stay

The findings also reveal that both Organisational Identification and Employer Brand Image significantly predict employees' intention to stay, supporting H5 and H6 respectively. Notably, the effect of EBI on retention was substantially stronger than that of OI, indicating

that employer brand perceptions play a more dominant role in shaping employees' intention to stay. The described pattern is consistent with organisational behavioural theory, which argues that employees are more likely to remain in organisations they perceive to be prestigious, reputable, and socially responsible (Batt et al., 2021; Edwards, 2017). The qualitative evidence supports this interpretation, with executives referring to how strong employer reputation derived from sport sponsorship adds to employees' pride, loyalty, and long-term commitment. Viewed through a signalling lens, a credible and consistently communicated sponsorship portfolio functions as a costly signal of organisational quality and stability; employees who internalise this signal revise their employment expectations accordingly, which is reflected in stronger intentions to remain (Spence, 1973). The dominance of EBI over OI also echoes Schlager et al. (2011), who identified employer-brand perceptions as proximal determinants of employee attitudes.

6.2.3 Mediation Effects of Organisational Identification and Employer Brand Image

The mediation analysis showed that OI and EBI mediate the relationships between sponsorship-related variables and intention to stay, although not uniformly across pathways. The mediation analysis revealed that Organisational Identification (OI) and Employer Brand Image (EBI) play a critical intervening role in translating employees' sponsorship perceptions into intention to stay. Specifically, the indirect effects indicate that Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) has a significant influence on Intention to Stay (ITS) primarily via both OI and EBI, even though the direct effect of SAK on ITS was not statistically significant. This pattern is consistent with full mediation, suggesting that employees do not remain with the organisation simply because they are aware of its sponsorship activities; instead, they stay because such awareness enhances their sense of identification with the organisation and improves their perceptions of the employer brand. In contrast, Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) influenced intention to stay indirectly through EBI, which fully mediated the PSE–ITS relationship (H8b supported), whereas OI did not mediate this relationship (H7b not supported), because PSE had no significant effect on OI. This pattern indicates brand-based rather than identity-based mediation of the effect of PSE. This implies that when employees perceive sponsorship activities as meaningful, well-aligned, and impactful, they are more likely to intend to stay with the organisation because such perceptions strengthen their employer brand perceptions, rather than their organisational identification. These findings support the theoretical premises of Social Identity Theory and Signalling Theory, stressing that sponsorship must be perceived as authentic and effective in order to foster deeper psychological attachment and long-term retention among employees. The mediation pattern can therefore be expressed as a three-stage chain in which the sponsorship signal (signalling theory) is interpreted through organisational sensemaking (Weick, 1995) before it is internalised as identification or appraised as employer-brand image (social identity theory); the indirect-only effect of SAK on intention to stay is consistent with the claim that the signal must be rendered meaningful before it shapes behaviour, rather than acting directly.

6.2.4 Multi-Group Analysis: Benchmark vs the Comparison Group

The exploratory multi-group analysis revealed descriptive differences in structural relationships between the benchmark company and the comparison group, supporting the multi-group comparison and its path-level decomposition. In the benchmark company, the effects of SAK on OI and EBI were descriptively stronger, whereas the PSE paths reversed sign (PSE → OI = −.615; PSE → EBI = −.401), consistent with a suppressor effect given the high SAK–PSE correlation in this sub-sample, suggesting that well-established sponsorship strategies yield deeper psychological and branding impacts on employees. This finding is supported by the qualitative data, where executives from mature sponsoring firms described more structured internal communication, stronger employee engagement, and clearer alignment between sponsorship objectives and HR strategies. The finding strengthens the view that sponsorship-linked internal marketing (SLIM) is most effective when sponsorship activities are systematically embedded within organisational routines and policies, rather than implemented as isolated or short-term initiatives. The qualitative interviews further support this interpretation, with senior executives consistently highlighting that long-standing sponsorship programmes – supported by structured internal communication, continuous evaluation, and integration with HR practices – were far more successful in shaping employees' perceptions and engagement than sporadic or one-off sponsorship efforts. At the same time, the path-level probing showed that OI did not mediate the PSE–ITS relationship in either group, whereas EBI mediated it in both. This asymmetry points to a boundary condition of the identification mechanism: evaluative sponsorship judgements appear to operate on retention through employer-brand appraisal rather than through self-definitional attachment, irrespective of the maturity of the sponsorship programme. The benchmark advantage is consistent with a sensemaking interpretation: mature programmes supply the internal narratives, evaluation routines and communication infrastructure that allow employees to make coherent sense of the sponsorship signal, so the signal–identification mechanism is conditional on the organisational sensemaking architecture rather than on the existence of sponsorship as such (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

6.2.5 Negative Employee Attitudes towards Sponsorship

Negative employee attitudes towards sport sponsorship are theoretically important because they delimit the conditions under which the positive effects identified in the structural model hold. The demographic analysis is informative here. Only 28 of the 499 respondents (5.6%) reported no interest in sport at all, a group too small for a separate comparison; however, 211 respondents (42.3%) described themselves as passive followers rather than active participants, so almost half of the sample has no active personal involvement in sport. Employees who are not personally interested in sport may regard sponsorship as irrelevant or even as a misallocation of resources that might otherwise benefit employees directly. The comparison between active participants and passive followers (Table 21) shows no

differences in sponsorship awareness, perceived effectiveness or employer brand image, but passive followers reported significantly higher organisational identification and intention to stay, indicating that the internal benefits of sponsorship do not depend on active sporting engagement, while leaving open the question of how the small minority with no interest in sport responds.

Three mechanisms account for such negative attitudes. First, through a resource-allocation lens, employees uninterested in sport may interpret sponsorship expenditure as inequitable (Adams, 1963), believing the funds would be better spent on wages, benefits or working conditions, which can depress satisfaction and commitment. Second, value incongruence: where the sponsored sport or team is perceived as misaligned with the employee's own values, the signal fails to activate the social-identity mechanism and may instead provoke psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966). Third, weak internal communication: where employees are unaware of sponsorship, or are aware but receive no explanation of its strategic rationale, the signal is received as noise rather than meaningful communication — which underscores the role of internal communication quality as a moderator of effectiveness. Collectively, these mechanisms indicate that the positive effects of sponsorship on employee outcomes are conditional rather than universal: active internal communication, value alignment between sponsorship choices and the employee population, and transparent justification of expenditure are necessary conditions for translating sponsorship investment into human-resource outcomes. These conditions can be understood as failures of sensemaking rather than of signalling: where the signal is emitted but no shared, value-congruent account is constructed, employees interpret it as noise or as resource misallocation, and the social-identity mechanism does not engage. Negative attitudes thus mark the lower boundary of the signal–sensemaking–identification chain (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014).

6.3 Integration of the Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

The integration of the qualitative and quantitative findings offers a comprehensive understanding of how sport sponsorship influences the employees of sponsoring organisations. While the quantitative SEM results establish statistical relationships among sponsorship awareness and knowledge, perceived sponsorship effectiveness, organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay, the qualitative interviews provide rich contextual explanations that shed light on the mechanisms underlying these relationships.

The quantitative findings showed that Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) significantly strengthens Organisational Identification (OI), and that Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) exerts a strong positive effect on Employer Brand Image (EBI). These effects were echoed in the qualitative narratives, with senior executives consistently emphasising that employees develop a stronger emotional bond with the organisation when

they clearly understand why the company is sponsoring specific sports and how these activities align with the corporate values. Interviewees frequently described sponsorship as a "storytelling platform" that allows employees to make sense of the corporate identity and purpose, supporting sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) and the argument that meaningful internal communication plays a valuable role in them identifying with the organisation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

In addition, the quantitative model identified EBI as the strongest predictor of Intention to Stay (ITS), surpassing even Organisational Identification. This finding is strongly reinforced by the qualitative data, in which executives repeatedly noted that sponsorship adds to the prestige and attractiveness of the employer brand, making employees feel proud to be associated with the company. Participants described how employees often refer to sponsorships while speaking about their employer to their peers and external stakeholders, illustrating the symbolic value of sponsorship for internal branding. Support is thereby provided for prior research indicating that employer brand perceptions are critical determinants of employee loyalty and retention (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Schlager et al., 2011).

The mediation results further demonstrated that OI and EBI transmit the effects of SAK and PSE on intention to stay, albeit through distinct pathways: the effect of SAK is transmitted primarily through OI (and, to a lesser extent, EBI), whereas the effect of PSE is transmitted through EBI alone, as OI does not mediate the PSE–ITS relationship. Qualitative insights help explain this mechanism: interviewees noted how sponsorship initiatives first influence employees' perceptions and emotions – such as pride, a sense of belonging and alignment with corporate values – which subsequently translate into stronger attachment and intentions to remain with the organisation. The described pattern reflects the logic of social identity theory (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Turner et al., 1979). The theory posits that individuals construct part of their identity based on their membership in social groups, among which organisations play a substantial role. Employees identify with an organisation when they believe that its values, reputation and activities reflect their own values, or provide them with psychological benefits. Moreover, qualitative themes relating to decision-making and evaluation processes showed that organisations that systematically integrate sponsorship into their HRM and communication strategies achieve more consistent internal outcomes. Support is hence given for the quantitative finding that sponsorship effectiveness, rather than mere awareness, is pivotal for shaping employer brand image. It also reinforces the concept of Sponsorship-Linked Internal Marketing (SLIM), suggesting that sponsorship is most impactful when it is institutionally embedded rather than implemented as isolated or episodic campaigns (Madill & O'Reilly, 2010; Mlakar et al., 2024). Overall, the mixed-methods integration validates that sport sponsorship functions not only as an external marketing instrument but also as a powerful internal branding and engagement mechanism. The quantitative model provides robust empirical evidence of the structural relationships, while the qualitative findings offer explanatory depth, demonstrating how strategic sensemaking,

authentic communication, and institutional alignment transform sponsorship investments into enhanced organisational identification, stronger employer brand image and, ultimately, higher employee retention.

6.4 Theoretical Contributions and Research Implications

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature on sport sponsorship, internal branding, and employee behaviour. It advances the conceptualisation of sport sponsorship by empirically showing that sponsorship is not simply an external marketing activity but is additionally a strategic internal mechanism that influences employees' organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay. While previous research has mostly focused on consumer- or market-oriented outcomes (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020; Grohs et al., 2015), this study positions employees as central stakeholders in the sponsorship process, thereby responding directly to calls for the greater integration of internal stakeholder perspectives into sponsorship research (Mlakar et al., 2024). The study's central theoretical move, however, is to integrate three perspectives that have largely been applied in isolation. Signalling theory specifies the stimulus (a credible, costly sponsorship signal), Weick's sensemaking theory specifies how that signal is interpreted within the organisation, and social identity theory specifies the resulting internalisation into employees' self-concept. Positioning sensemaking as the interpretive bridge between signal and identification — rather than treating the signal as directly internalised — is the principal conceptual contribution and is what the mixed-methods design was constructed to evidence.

At the same time, the study advances Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) by demonstrating that employees reciprocate perceived organisational investments in sport sponsorship by more strongly identifying themselves with the organisation and developing firmer intentions to remain with it. The significant mediating roles of Organisational Identification (OI) and Employer Brand Image (EBI) – OI in the SAK–ITS pathway and EBI in both the SAK–ITS and PSE–ITS pathways – reveal that employees do not merely respond to sponsorship activities cognitively, but interpret them as symbolic signals of the organisation's values, prestige, and care for stakeholders. Such a sensemaking process transforms sponsorship from a marketing expense into a relational exchange mechanism that strengthens identification and intention to stay. Accordingly, the study enriches applications of social identity theory (and the reciprocity logic it shares with social exchange theory) in HRM by positioning sport sponsorship as a powerful internal exchange currency that fosters psychological attachment and loyalty.

Finally, the study extends Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973) and Weick's Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995) by explaining how employees interpret sport sponsorship activities as meaningful organisational signals that shape their understanding of the employer brand and their relationship with the organisation. The findings show that employees' Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) significantly strengthens Employer Brand Image (EBI) and

indirectly relates to Intention to Stay through Employer Brand Image (EBI). This demonstrates that sponsorship is not a passive communication artefact but an active sensemaking cue via which employees infer organisational values, strategic priorities, and authenticity. Through these cognitive and symbolic interpretations, sponsorship becomes an internal signalling mechanism that informs how employees construct their organisational reality. Crucially, the present findings refine this signal–identification account in two ways. First, they show that the link is not automatic but sensemaking-dependent: the non-significant paths from perceived effectiveness to identification, alongside the qualitative evidence of retrospective, plausibility-driven interpretation, indicate that a signal shapes identity only once employees have constructed a coherent, value-congruent account of it (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Second, the multi-group results establish that this signal–sensemaking–identification chain is conditional on benchmark status: it operates more strongly where mature sponsorship programmes supply the narratives, routines and communication infrastructure that make organisational sense-giving possible. Sensemaking is therefore not a peripheral addition but a co-equal third pillar of the model, carrying the explanatory weight that links the qualitative and quantitative strands. Consequently, the study broadens the application of the signalling and sensemaking theories by positioning sport sponsorship as a powerful internal meaning-making process that cultivates the pride of employees and their long-term attachment to the organisation.

To sum up, the study contributes methodologically to sponsorship research. The integration of SEM with in-depth qualitative interviews provides a richer explanation of how sponsorship operates as a sensemaking and identity-building process within organisations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Weick, 1995), offering a multi-layered model that future theory development can build upon.

The findings of this study hold several important implications for academic researchers. First, scholars are encouraged to move beyond consumer-centric sponsorship models and incorporate employee-level constructs, such as organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay, into future sponsorship frameworks. Such an internal orientation opens new theoretical pathways for understanding sponsorship as a multidimensional organisational practice. Second, the significant mediation effects identified in this study suggest that future models should explicitly include psychological mechanisms rather than assuming direct effects between sponsorship inputs and behavioural outcomes. Constructs such as pride, perceived organisational support, and value congruence may further enrich theoretical models. Third, the results indicate that sponsorship awareness alone is insufficient to generate strong internal outcomes; instead, perceived sponsorship effectiveness plays a more pivotal role. Hence, a refinement of sponsorship measurement scales is needed so that they distinguish between awareness, quality and effectiveness, in particular from the employee perspective. Finally, the mixed-methods approach demonstrates the value of combining SEM with qualitative sensemaking analysis in

sponsorship research. The described methodological integration can help scholars unpack not just whether sponsorship works, but how and why it works inside organisations.

6.5 Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several actionable insights for managers, HR professionals, and sponsorship strategists. First, organisations should not treat sport sponsorship solely as an external branding tool but must deliberately integrate it into internal communication and HR systems. Employees' intention to stay was predicted primarily through Organisational Identification and Employer Brand Image, indicating that sponsorship must be framed as part of the company's internal narrative, values, and identity-building processes. Second, managers should move beyond creating mere awareness of sponsorship activities. The results show that Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge alone does not sufficiently enhance employer brand perceptions. Instead, organisations must focus on improving employees' perceived effectiveness of sponsorship by clearly communicating the objectives, showcasing tangible outcomes, and linking sponsorship activities to organisational values and employee well-being. Third, leadership involvement is critical. Senior management should actively endorse sponsorship initiatives, participate in sponsored events, and visibly support sponsorship-related internal campaigns. This visible leadership commitment bolsters employees' sensemaking processes and enhances their sense of identification with the organisation. Finally, firms should establish formal evaluation and feedback mechanisms to assess how employees perceive sponsorship initiatives. Regular internal surveys, focus groups, and town hall discussions can help organisations monitor the internal impact of a sponsorship and make timely adjustments.

6.6 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that offer directions for future research. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the drawing of causal inferences. Although SEM is consistent with the theorised directional relationships, longitudinal studies are recommended to examine how sponsorship effects evolve over time and whether changes in sponsorship strategies lead to sustained changes in employees' intention to stay. Reverse causality also cannot be excluded: employees who already intend to stay may evaluate their employer's sponsorship more favourably, so the directionality assumed in the structural model rests on theoretical grounds rather than on temporal evidence.

Second, the study relied on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to common method bias and social desirability effects. Despite the application of procedural remedies (including anonymity assurances and reverse-coded items) and statistical checks (Podsakoff et al., 2003), future research should consider incorporating objective HR indicators such as turnover records, performance metrics, or absenteeism data. Third, the sample was drawn from a limited organisational and cultural context, which may constrain the generalisability

of the findings. Comparative cross-national studies are recommended to explore whether cultural values moderate the relationship between sponsorship and employee outcomes. In addition, because the multi-group comparison contrasts a single benchmark organisation with a pooled comparison group, group-level differences may partly reflect unmeasured organisational characteristics — industry, size, or human resource practices — rather than sponsorship maturity alone; replication across multiple matched pairs of organisations would strengthen this inference. Fourth, only two mediating mechanisms – organisational identification and employer brand image – were examined. Future studies could extend the model by including additional mediators like perceived organisational support, work engagement, psychological contract fulfilment, or employer reputation.

Finally, future research should extend the investigation of sponsorship-linked internal marketing beyond the sport context to determine whether the internal branding and sensemaking mechanisms identified in this study are transferable to other sponsorship domains such as education, arts, environmental sustainability, and social innovation initiatives. Different sponsorship categories may activate distinct employee interpretations, emotional responses, and identification processes, depending on the symbolic meaning attached to a given sponsored activity. For instance, educational or community-development sponsorships may trigger stronger moral identification, while arts sponsorships may stimulate creativity and cultural pride among employees. Future studies could adopt comparative multi-sector designs to systematically test the boundary conditions of the proposed model. Longitudinal designs are also recommended to capture how employees' sensemaking and identification evolve over time as sponsorship initiatives mature. Moreover, future research should incorporate additional mediators such as perceived organisational support, value congruence, pride, and employer attractiveness to build a more comprehensive psychological process model. Lastly, qualitative comparative analysis encompassing different national cultures and organisational forms (e.g., SMEs vs multinational corporations) would further add to the generalisability and contextual sensitivity of sponsorship-linked internal marketing theory.

Precise data on the proportion of organisations engaging in sport sponsorship in Slovenia or the wider Central and Eastern European market are not available in published form, as no national census of corporate sponsorship has been conducted in the region. At the global level, industry estimates suggest that sport accounts for roughly 70 per cent of total sponsorship expenditure (Nielsen Sports, 2022). Within Slovenia, the present study's own sampling identified 30 active sport sponsors among the country's largest organisations, suggesting that sport sponsorship is concentrated among larger, more visible firms rather than being a universal organisational behaviour. This is a limitation: the sample is drawn exclusively from sponsoring companies, so the study describes effects within a context where sponsorship already exists, and a matched comparison with non-sponsoring companies would be required to generalise the findings to the broader organisational population.

The theoretical mechanisms identified here — organisational identification and employer-brand image as mediators between organisational signals and the intention to stay — are not unique to sport sponsorship. They apply to any visible, values-aligned organisational action that generates employee awareness, communicates the organisation's identity and shapes employer-brand perceptions, including corporate social responsibility initiatives, community investment, sustainability certification and prominent partnerships. The conceptual contribution therefore extends beyond sport sponsorship to the broader category of sponsorship-linked internal marketing. For organisations that do not sponsor sport, the practical implication is that the same psychological mechanisms can be activated through alternative channels, provided that the organisation engages in a visible, prestige-associated activity, that employees are aware of and informed about it, and that the activity is perceived as congruent with organisational values and as strategically intentional.

Several further directions for future research follow from the present limitations. The alignment between organisational identification and strategically consistent behaviour, which the cross-sectional design can evidence only indirectly, could be tested through a longitudinal or experimental design incorporating supervisor ratings or behavioural data. Competitive positioning through sponsorship, which is not captured at the employee level, could be modelled through a manager-level instrument measuring perceived exclusivity and awareness of competitor activity. Finally, negative employee attitudes towards sponsorship — particularly among employees with no interest in sport, a group too small in the present sample (5.6%) to be analysed separately — warrant dedicated investigation, including the conditions under which value incongruence or perceived resource misallocation offsets the identity and evaluative benefits documented here.

6.7 Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine how corporate sport sponsorship influences employees' attitudes and behavioural intentions, with particular emphasis on organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay. The study is grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT), Signalling Theory, and Weick's Sensemaking Theory, which together provide the conceptual foundation for explaining how employees interpret sport sponsorship activities and reciprocate them by way of enhanced organisational identification, employer brand perceptions, and intention to stay. By adopting a mixed-methods design that combined structural equation modelling with in-depth qualitative interviews of senior executives, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of sponsorship not merely as a marketing investment, but as a strategic internal mechanism that shapes how employees perceive, interpret, and feel about their organisation.

In direct answer to the research questions: RQ1 – marketing and sponsorship decision-makers make sense of sport sponsorship as a multi-purpose strategic practice rather than a marketing expense, constructing plausible, value-congruent narratives around fit and

authenticity (Chapter 4, Themes 1 and 2). RQ1a – the mechanisms for enacting a sponsorship are the selection of recipients on fit and authenticity, a stakeholder architecture with internal approvals, a blend of evidence and intuition in evaluation, and deliberate internal activation through leadership presence, employee involvement and internal communication (Themes 2 and 3). RQ2 – corporate sport sponsorship affects employee outcomes indirectly, through two distinct psychological pathways: awareness and knowledge build organisational identification (H1), and perceived effectiveness builds employer brand image (H4); both in turn predict intention to stay (H5, H6). RQ2a – sponsorship affects organisational identification through awareness and knowledge ($\beta = .516$), not through perceived effectiveness (H3 not supported). RQ2b – the relationship between sponsorship and employee outcomes is fully mediated: SAK reaches intention to stay through OI (H7a) and, marginally, through EBI (H8a), while PSE reaches it through EBI only (H8b); no direct effects remain once the mediators are included.

The quantitative findings demonstrate that Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) significantly strengthens Organisational Identification (OI), while Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE) plays a central role in enhancing Employer Brand Image (EBI). Both OI and EBI, in turn, have strong positive effects on employees' Intention to Stay (ITS), confirming that sponsorship contributes meaningfully to internal outcomes. Further, the mediation analyses reveal that OI and EBI function as key psychological mechanisms via which sponsorship perceptions are translated into behavioural intentions. These results support the proposition that sponsorship operates through relational and identity-based pathways rather than through simple direct effects.

The qualitative findings further enrich this interpretation by showing how senior executives conceptualise sport sponsorship as a multidimensional practice involving branding, social responsibility, employee engagement, and long-term strategic positioning. Interviewees consistently stressed that sponsorship becomes truly impactful only when it is embedded in organisational routines, internally communicated, and aligned with human resource management processes. These insights illustrate the sensemaking processes according to which employees attach meaning to sponsorship initiatives and transform them into identification with, and intention to stay in, their organisation. Taken together, the integrated findings indicate that sport sponsorship functions as a form of Sponsorship-Linked Internal Marketing (SLIM), whereby externally oriented sponsorship investments generate substantial internal value when supported by effective communication, leadership commitment, and institutional integration. The study therefore bridges a critical gap in the literature by shifting the focus of sponsorship research from external market outcomes to internal organisational consequences. In conclusion, the presented research provides robust evidence that corporate sport sponsorship is far more than a branding exercise: it is a strategic resource that shapes employee identity, reinforces employer reputation, and is associated with stronger intention to stay. By empirically demonstrating how sponsorship-driven perceptions cascade through organisational identification and employer brand image to

influence intention to stay, the study offers a robust framework for understanding sponsorship as a core component of contemporary human resource and corporate strategy. Future research and managerial practice alike can build on these insights to design sponsorship initiatives that not only reach customers, but also inspire and retain the people within the organisation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Summary in the Slovenian Language

ŠPORTNA SPONZORSTVA IN UČINKI NA ZAPOSLENE V SPONZORSKIH PODJETJIH

UVOD

Opis ožjega znanstvenega področja

Korporativno sponzoriranje športa se je razvilo v strateški poslovni instrument, ki daleč presega tradicionalno marketinško komuniciranje, usmerjeno v zunanje ciljne skupine. Medtem ko se je velik del obstoječe literature osredotočal na učinke, kot so prepoznavnost blagovne znamke, podoba blagovne znamke in stališča potrošnikov (Zdravkovic in Till, 2012), to poglavje umešča športno sponzorstvo kot večdimenzionalno organizacijsko prakso z izrazitimi notranjimi implikacijami. Zlasti poudarja, kako lahko korporativno sponzoriranje športa vpliva na zaznave, stališča in vedenja zaposlenih, vključno z organizacijsko identifikacijo, zaznano podobo znamke delodajalca in namero ostati v organizaciji (Javalgi in drugi, 1994).

Športno sponzorstvo je razumljeno kot strateški menjalni odnos, v katerem podjetja zagotavljajo finančno ali stvarno podporo športnim ekipam, športnikom, dogodkom ali zvezam v zameno za asociativne koristi in promocijske priložnosti (Bello, 2016; Ratković, 2023). V okviru te splošne opredelitve so obravnavane različne oblike sponzorstva, ki odražajo raznolikost sodobnih sponzorskih praks. Te vključujejo sponzorstvo ekip (Berrett in Slack, 1999; Bloxsome in drugi, 2011; Wildfeuer, 2018), nazivno sponzorstvo (O'Reilly in drugi, 2019; Sağlam, 2016), predstavitveno sponzorstvo (Jensen in Cornwell, 2017), ekskluzivno sponzorstvo (Coburn in McCafferty, 2017), uradna partnerstva (Fuchs in Bodet, 2020) ter stvarno sponzorstvo (Carrillat in d'Astous, 2012; Kiraguri, 2007). Vsaka od teh oblik ima različne strateške implikacije glede vidnosti, nadzora, vključenosti deležnikov in simbolne vrednosti.

Sponzorstvo posameznih športnikov je poudarjeno kot posebej močna oblika sponzorstva zaradi simbolnega in čustvenega kapitala, ki ga športniki nosijo. Športniki ne delujejo zgolj kot nosilci športnih dosežkov, temveč tudi kot nosilci blagovnih znamk, katerih kredibilnost, dosežki in osebne zgodbe se lahko prenesejo na sponzorska podjetja (Sukma in Ariyani, 2024; Wagner, 2016). Odmevni primeri, kot sta Nikeovo dolgoročno partnerstvo z LeBronom Jamesom (Morones, 2003) in Wilsonovo sponzorstvo Serene Williams (Ifekwunigwe, 2008), ponazarjajo, kako lahko sponzorstvo športnikov krepi korporativno identiteto ter ustvarja ponos ne le med potrošniki, temveč tudi med zaposlenimi.

Sponzorstvo dogodkov je predstavljeno kot še ena prevladujoča oblika sponzorstva, ki ponuja obsežno izpostavljenost in čustveno vključenost (Ko in drugi, 2016; Nuseir, 2020; Slåtten in drugi, 2017). Primeri, kot sta Pepsijevo sponzorstvo polčasne predstave Super

Bowla (Levy, 2016; Russell in drugi, 2003) in nazivno sponzorstvo maratona v New Yorku s strani Tata Consultancy Services (Footprint, 2018; Rajeev, 2023), kažejo, kako lahko sponzorstvo dogodkov komunicira korporativne vrednote, kot so odličnost, vzdržljivost in inovativnost. Te simbolne asociacije niso zgolj zunanje vidne, temveč imajo tudi notranji pomen, saj prispevajo k občutku ponosa zaposlenih in organizacijske pripadnosti.

Jasna razlika je vzpostavljena med športnim sponzorstvom in tradicionalnim oglaševanjem. Za razliko od oglaševanja, ki temelji na eksplicitnih sporočilih in kratkoročnem prepričevanju, je športno sponzorstvo posredno, odnosne narave in praviloma dolgoročno usmerjeno (Hoek in drugi, 1997; Smolianov in Shilbury, 2005). Učinki sponzorstva se pogosto vrednotijo z uporabo širših kazalnikov, kot so vrednost blagovne znamke, lojalnost, čustvena navezanost in ugled, ne pa zgolj s takojšnjimi prodajnimi rezultati (Bala in Verma, 2018; Masterman, 2007). Ta razlika je še posebej pomembna za notranje ciljne skupine, saj zaposleni sponzorske aktivnosti interpretirajo skozi organizacijske narative, skupne vrednote in menedžersko komuniciranje, ne pa skozi formalna promocijska sporočila (Varey, 1995).

Vloga odločevalcev – zlasti menedžerjev marketinga in sponzorstev – je osrednja za razumevanje, kako sponzorstvo vpliva tako na zunanje kot notranje deležnike. Menedžerji so odgovorni za izbor sponzorskih lastnosti, razporejanje proračunov, pogajanja o pogodbah, obvladovanje tveganj in vrednotenje donosnosti naložb (Anagnostopoulos in drugi, 2014; Farrelly in drugi, 2006; Henseler in drugi, 2011). Njihove presoje glede strateškega ujemanja, vrednostne skladnosti in relevantnosti za deležnike določajo, ali so sponzorske pobude zaznane kot avtentične in smiselne ali zgolj simbolične. Pomembno je tudi, da menedžerske odločitve oblikujejo način notranjega komuniciranja sponzorstva ter spodbujanje vključenosti zaposlenih.

Za konceptualizacijo menedžerskega vpliva pri sponzorskih odločitvah sta uporabljeni dve komplementarni teoretski perspektivi. Weickova teorija ustvarjanja pomenov pojasnjuje, kako menedžerji oblikujejo in komunicirajo narative, ki zaposlenim pomagajo interpretirati sponzorske aktivnosti, zlasti v razmerah negotovosti (Djaballah in drugi, 2016). S pripovedovanjem zgodb in notranjo komunikacijo menedžerji zaposlenim omogočajo, da sponzorske aktivnosti povežejo z organizacijsko identiteto in vrednotami. Nasprotno Wagner in Nissen (2015) poudarjata strukturiran pristop, formalno integracijo, strateško usklajenost in merjenje uspešnosti. Skupaj ti perspektivi poudarjata, da učinkovito upravljanje sponzorstva zahteva tako interpretativno osmišljanje kot tudi sistematično vrednotenje.

Cilji korporativnega športnega sponzorstva so povzeti iz literature in vključujejo prepoznavnost ter vidnost blagovne znamke (Miloch in Lambrecht, 2006; Tsordia in drugi, 2017), korporativno družbeno odgovornost in vključenost v skupnost (Buck in drugi, 2015; Miragaia in drugi, 2017), lojalnost kupcev in čustveno navezanost (Biscaia in drugi, 2013; Madrigal, 2000; Walker in Kent, 2009), vstop na trge in diferenciacijo (Alexander, 2009; Dolphin, 2003; Speed in Thompson, 2000), rast prodaje (Almaiman in drugi, 2023; Dees in

drugi, 2022) ter poslovno-poslovno mreženje (Morgan in drugi, 2014; O'Reilly in drugi, 2011; Waśkowski, 2016). Uvodno poglavje te cilje preoblikuje skozi notranjo perspektivo in poudarja, da imajo zaposleni ključno posredniško vlogo pri pretvarjanju sponzorskih pobud v trajnostno organizacijsko vrednost (Batt in drugi, 2021).

Ilustrativni primeri podjetij dodatno utrjujejo ta notranji poudarek. Olimpijsko sponzorstvo podjetja Coca-Cola je povezano s povečanim ponosom in identifikacijo zaposlenih (Bruhn in Rohlmann, 2024; Gavrilović in drugi, 2023), Adidasovo sponzorstvo svetovnega prvenstva FIFA je okrepilo notranjo usklajenost blagovne znamke (Wilton in Biscoe, 2023; Wu in drugi, 2020), Deloitteovo sponzorstvo paralimpijskih iger je utrdilo vrednote vključenosti in družbene odgovornosti (Bretherton in drugi, 2014; Gillooly in drugi, 2017), Heinekenovo partnerstvo z Ligo prvakov UEFA pa je prispevalo k zavzetosti in lojalnosti zaposlenih (Grimaldi, 2014; Walraven, 2013). Ti primeri ponazarjajo, da učinki sponzorstva niso omejeni zgolj na potrošnike, temveč segajo globoko v organizacijsko življenje.

Raziskovalna tema in raziskovalna vprašanja

Na podlagi zgoraj predstavljenega uvodnega pregleda literature ta doktorska disertacija obravnava odnos med korporativnim športnim sponzorstvom ter organizacijsko vgrajenimi stališči in vedenji zaposlenih v sponzorskih podjetjih z iskanjem odgovorov na naslednja raziskovalna vprašanja in podvprašanja:

1. Kako direktorji in vodje marketinga, ki so odgovorni za sponzorstva, osmislijo sponzoriranje športa?
   a) Kakšni so mehanizmi udejanjanja (izvajanja) športnega sponzorstva?
2. Kako mehanizem korporativnega športnega sponzorstva učinkuje na zaposlene v organizaciji?
   a) Kako korporativno športno sponzorstvo vpliva na organizacijsko identifikacijo?
   b) Kakšen je odnos med korporativnimi športnimi sponzorstvi in učinki na zaposlene v organizaciji?

Skupno gledano to poglavje vzpostavlja intelektualne temelje za preučevanje športnega sponzorstva kot strateškega mehanizma, ki oblikuje stališča in vedenja zaposlenih. Z integracijo literature o sponzorstvu, organizacijskem vedenju, notranjem znamčenju in ustvarjanju pomenov utemeljuje potrebo po empirični raziskavi, ki preuči, kako zaposleni zaznavajo, interpretirajo in se odzivajo na športne sponzorske aktivnosti svojega delodajalca. Ta konceptualni okvir predstavlja izhodišče za nadaljnja poglavja, ki razvijajo teoretični model in empirični pristop za preučevanje teh odnosov.

Pregled literature

Korporativno športno sponzorstvo je v tem poglavju konceptualizirano kot strateški menjalni odnos in ne kot filantropska dejavnost, pri kateri podjetja zagotavljajo finančno ali stvarno podporo v zameno za komercialne, simbolne in odnosne koristi (Amis in drugi, 1999; Cobbs

in Groza, 2020; Meenaghan, 1983; Olkkonen, 2001). Za razliko od donacij je sponzorstvo namerno, recipročnega značaja in ovrednoteno z merljivimi izidi, kot so izpostavljenost blagovne znamke, ugled in vključenost deležnikov (Bello, 2016; Wang in drugi, 2008). Športno sponzorstvo je postalo prevladujoča oblika sponzorstva zaradi svoje čustvene privlačnosti, nevsiljivega komunikacijskega sloga ter sposobnosti umeščanja blagovnih znamk v kulturno pomembne kontekste (Eagleman in Krohn, 2012; Shank in Lyberger, 2014).

Medtem ko so se raziskave sponzorstva v veliki meri osredotočale na zunanje deležnike, to poglavje umešča zaposlene kot ključno, vendar premalo raziskano notranjo ciljno skupino. Zaposleni niso pasivni prejemniki sponzorskih signalov, temveč jih aktivno interpretirajo, vrednotijo in posredujejo organizacijski pomen (Ewing in drugi, 2002; Korschun, 2015). Teorija deležnikov podpira ta notranji fokus, saj poudarja vlogo zaposlenih pri oblikovanju organizacijske legitimnosti in dolgoročne uspešnosti (Krstić, 2014; Stieb, 2008). Zaposleni z zanimanjem za šport so še posebej nagnjeni k razvoju močnejših organizacijskih vezi, kadar njihov delodajalec sponzorira šport (Hickman in drugi, 2005), te zaznave pa se pogosto socialno širijo znotraj organizacij (Mlakar in drugi, 2024).

Raziskovalni model vodijo tri osrednje teoretske perspektive. Teorija socialne identitete pojasnjuje, kako zaposleni internalizirajo organizacijski prestiž, ki izhaja iz sponzorstva, in s tem krepijo organizacijsko identifikacijo (Ashforth in Mael, 1989; Tajfel in Turner, 1986). Teorija signaliziranja pojasnjuje, kako sponzorstvo zaposlenim sporoča neopazne organizacijske lastnosti, kot so kredibilnost, vrednote in stabilnost (Connelly in drugi, 2011; Jensen in drugi, 2020; Spence, 1973). Weickova teorija ustvarjanja pomenov pojasnjuje, kako zaposleni iz sponzorskih namigov konstruirajo skupni pomen, ki oblikuje čustveno navezanost in kolektivno interpretacijo (Wagner in Nissen, 2015; Weick, 1995).

Stališča zaposlenih so analizirana z uporabo ABC-modela stališč, ki prikazuje, da sponzorstvo vpliva na afektivne (ponos, morala), vedenjske (zavzetost, lojalnost) in kognitivne (prepričanja o kakovosti delodajalca) komponente (Haddock in Maio, 2004; Nader, 2020). Pozitivne zaznave sponzorstva povečujejo zadovoljstvo pri delu, organizacijsko zavezanost, komunikacijo, uspešnost in namero ostati v organizaciji (Batt in drugi, 2021; Papadimitriou in drugi, 2008), medtem ko slabo usklajena sponzorstva lahko povzročijo nezadovoljstvo in skepticizem (Abratt in drugi, 1987; Cortsen, 2014).

Poglavje nadalje uvaja koncept sponzorstvu povezanega notranjega marketinga (SLIM) kot mehanizma, preko katerega je sponzorstvo namensko uporabljeno za vplivanje na zaposlene (Madill in O'Reilly, 2010; Mlakar in drugi, 2024). Učinkovita integracija zahteva tako narativno osmišljanje kot tudi strukturirano vrednotenje, pri čemer združuje Weickov interpretativni pristop in strateški okvir Wagnerja in Nissna (2015).

Na koncu poglavje identificira ključne raziskovalne vrzeli: omejen empirični fokus na zaposlene, razdrobljeno uporabo teorij ter pomanjkanje celovitih merskih modelov

(Cornwell in Kwon, 2020; Grohs in drugi, 2004; Walraven, 2013). Kot odgovor razvije konceptualni okvir, ki povezuje zavedanje in znanje o sponzorstvu ter zaznano učinkovitost sponzorstva z organizacijsko identifikacijo, znamko delodajalca in namero ostati v organizaciji, vključno z mediacijskimi mehanizmi in kontekstualnimi razlikami. Ta okvir predstavlja teoretsko podlago za hipoteze in empirično testiranje, ki sledita.

Opredelitev znanstvenoraziskovalnih metod

V tej doktorski raziskavi sem uporabil mešani raziskovalni pristop (mixed-methods), da bi rigorozno preučil, kako korporativno športno sponzorstvo oblikuje zaznave, stališča in vedenjske namere zaposlenih, zlasti organizacijsko identifikacijo, znamko delodajalca in namero ostati v organizaciji. Metodološke odločitve so izhajale iz dvojne narave raziskovalnega problema: športno sponzorstvo je hkrati menedžerski proces odločanja in simbolni organizacijski signal, ki vpliva na notranje zaposlene. Zajeti to kompleksnost je zahtevalo metodološki pluralizem in ne zanašanje na en sam epistemološki pristop.

Raziskava združuje kvalitativne in kvantitativne metode, skladno z naraščajočim konsenzom, da mešani pristopi povečujejo pojasnjevalno moč, veljavnost in triangulacijo raziskovalnih ugotovitev (Bryman, 2003; Lo in drugi, 2020; Östlund in drugi, 2010). Kvalitativne metode so bile uporabljene za raziskovanje, kako odločevalci osmislijo sponzorstvo, medtem ko so kvantitativne metode omogočile testiranje, kako zaposleni interpretirajo sponzorske signale ter jih pretvarjajo v stališča in vedenjske namere.

S kvalitativnega vidika sem izhajal iz interpretativnih tradicij, ki poudarjajo kontekst, pomen in osmišljanje (Braun in Clarke, 2014; Dodgson, 2017). Polstrukturirani intervjuji so bili izbrani kot primarno kvalitativno orodje, saj omogočajo primerljivost med respondenti, hkrati pa ohranjajo fleksibilnost in globino (Adeoye-Olatunde in Olenik, 2021; Harrell in Bradley, 2009). Ta pristop je bil posebej primeren glede na teoretsko zasnovo raziskave, ki temelji na Weickovi (1995) teoriji ustvarjanja pomenov, ki menedžersko odločanje razume kot družbeno umeščen, retrospektiven in identitetno pogojen proces.

Intervjuval sem sedemnajst marketinških in sponzorskih menedžerjev iz slovenskih podjetij iz različnih industrij. Ti posamezniki so bili izbrani, ker imajo marketinški menedžerji osrednjo vlogo pri oblikovanju, vrednotenju in izvajanju sponzorskih strategij (Hawabhay in drugi, 2009; King, 2018). Intervjuji so se osredotočali na to, kako menedžerji interpretirajo cilje sponzorstva, presojajo ujemanje in avtentičnost, vključujejo deležnike, vrednotijo rezultate ter se soočajo z izzivi, kot so atribucija donosnosti naložb (ROI) in digitalna transformacija. Intervjujski vodič je bil strukturiran okoli šestih medsebojno povezanih konstruktov, izpeljanih iz Weickovih načel ustvarjanja pomenov, kar je zagotavljalo teoretsko koherenco in hkrati omogočalo respondentom, da izrazijo svoje izkušnje iz menedžerske prakse.

Kvalitativni podatki so bili analizirani z uporabo tematske analize, podprte s programom NVivo, po sistematičnem postopku transkripcije, kodiranja, razvoja tem in interpretacije

(Braun in Clarke, 2014). Poudarek je bil na pomenu, kontekstu in pojasnjevalni globini, ne pa na frekvenčnem štetju. Kvalitativne ugotovitve tako ponujajo vpogled v sponzorstvo kot simbolno in strateško prakso, ne zgolj kot ekonomsko transakcijo.

Kvantitativni del raziskave je bil zasnovan za preučevanje, kako zaposleni zaznavajo sponzorstvo in kako te zaznave vplivajo na organizacijsko identifikacijo, podobo znamke delodajalca in namero ostati v organizaciji. Kvantitativne metode so bile izbrane, ker omogočajo testiranje hipotez, posploševanje rezultatov in statistično validacijo (Isaza-Restrepo in drugi, 2018; Sukamolson, 2007). Podatki so bili zbrani s strukturiranim vprašalnikom, ki je bil razdeljen zaposlenim na različnih organizacijskih ravneh.

Kvantitativni teoretski okvir temelji na teoriji signaliziranja (Spence, 1973) in teoriji socialne identitete (Tajfel in Turner, 1979). Teorija signaliziranja pojasnjuje, kako sponzorstvo deluje kot viden organizacijski signal, ki komunicira vrednote, stabilnost in prestiž (Connelly in drugi, 2025), medtem ko teorija socialne identitete pojasnjuje, kako zaposleni te signale internalizirajo v samopodobo, ponos in organizacijsko pripadnost (Ashforth in Mael, 1989). Na podlagi teh teorij je bilo operacionaliziranih šest osrednjih konstruktov: zavedanje in znanje o sponzorstvu, zaznana kakovost sponzorstva, zaznana količina sponzorstva, organizacijska identifikacija, podoba delodajalca in namera ostati v organizaciji.

Analiza kvantitativnih podatkov je potekala po večstopenjskem postopku z uporabo programov SPSS in AMOS, vključno s pregledom podatkov, eksploratorno faktorsko analizo (EFA), konfirmatorno faktorsko analizo (CFA), testiranjem zanesljivosti in modeliranjem strukturnih enačb (SEM). Pilotna študija (n = 183) je bila izvedena za validacijo merskega instrumenta, preverjanje konstruktne veljavnosti in izboljšavo lestvice. Rezultati EFA in CFA so potrdili, da so konstrukti psihometrično ustrezni, notranje konsistentni in teoretsko smiselni. SEM je bil nato uporabljen za testiranje neposrednih in posrednih odnosov med konstrukti, vključno z mediacijskimi učinki, medtem ko je analiza več skupin omogočila primerjavo med organizacijskimi konteksti.

Etični vidiki so bili skozi celoten raziskovalni proces dosledno upoštevani. Raziskava je prejela etično soglasje Univerze v Ljubljani, od vseh udeležencev je bilo pridobljeno informirano soglasje, zagotovljeni so bili anonimnost in zaupnost, podatki pa so bili varno shranjeni skladno z mednarodnimi etičnimi standardi raziskovanja.

Celostno gledano ta metodološka zasnova omogoča raziskavi, da poveže menedžersko osmišljanje in zaznave zaposlenih ter ponudi robustno in teoretsko utemeljeno razlago, kako korporativno športno sponzorstvo deluje hkrati kot strateška odločitev in mehanizem notranjega znamčenja.

Kvalitativna analiza podatkov in ugotovitve

V tem poglavju interpretiram, kako višji vodstveni delavci osmislijo korporativno športno sponzorstvo kot strateško, simbolno in odnosno prakso. Na podlagi 17 poglobljenih

polstrukturiranih intervjujev z višjimi odločevalci s področij marketinga, blagovne znamke, komuniciranja, pravnih zadev in strateškega vodenja kvalitativne ugotovitve osvetljujejo pomene, utemeljitve in vsakdanje prakse, ki stojijo za sponzorskimi odločitvami. Ta analiza dopolnjuje kvantitativne rezultate z razlago, kako in zakaj športno sponzorstvo ustvarja organizacijske, blagovno-znamčne in z zaposlenimi povezane učinke.

Vzorec intervjuvancev predstavlja izjemno izkušeno in strateško vplivno skupino, saj imajo udeleženci v povprečju več kot 20 let delovnih izkušenj in zasedajo ključne odločevalske položaje. To je zagotovilo, da sponzorstvo ni bilo obravnavano kot operativna dejavnost, temveč kot dolgoročni strateški instrument, vpet v korporativno identiteto, upravljavske strukture in odnose z deležniki.

Z uporabo rigorozne tematske analize, podprte s programom NVivo, sem se premaknil od 190 začetnih odprtih kod k izčiščenemu okviru 103 fokusiranih kod, ki so se na koncu združile v štiri krovne teme: (1) cilji in ustvarjanje pomena sponzorstev, (2) procesi odločanja in vrednotenja, (3) dobre prakse in dejavniki uspeha ter (4) izzivi in omejitve. Te teme skupaj tvorijo dinamičen sistem ustvarjanja pomenov, skozi katerega se sponzorstvo nenehno interpretira, utemeljuje, udejanja in ponovno presoja.

Prva tema razkriva, da vodstveni delavci športno sponzorstvo konceptualizirajo kot večnamenski strateški instrument in ne zgolj kot promocijsko orodje. Od sponzorstev se hkrati pričakuje, da povečujejo prepoznavnost in ugled blagovne znamke, izražajo korporativno družbeno odgovornost, spodbujajo notranjo vključenost ter podpirajo komercialne cilje. Prepoznavnost in ugled blagovne znamke se izkažeta kot prevladujoča cilja, pri čemer je šport zaznan kot edinstveno močna čustvena platforma, sposobna prenosa vrednot, kot so timsko delo, vztrajnost, nacionalni ponos in uspeh, na blagovno znamko. Pomembno je, da vidnost ni razumljena zgolj kot izpostavljenost logotipa, temveč kot pripovedovanje zgodb in vrednotna usklajenost. Poleg reputacijskih ciljev vodstveni delavci sponzorstvo močno uokvirjajo tudi kot moralno in družbeno zavezo – podporo razvoju mladih, zdravemu načinu življenja, vključevanju in lokalnim skupnostim – pogosto celo brez neposrednih komercialnih donosov. Notranja vključenost je sicer obravnavana redkeje, vendar ima strateški pomen: sponzorstva se uporabljajo za krepitev ponosa zaposlenih, organizacijske identifikacije in privlačnosti znamke delodajalca preko izkustvene vključenosti. Komercialna logika ostaja prisotna, vendar je praviloma vpeta v širše reputacijske in odnosne cilje, namesto da bi nad njimi prevladovala.

Druga tema pojasnjuje, kako se sponzorske odločitve sprejemajo in vrednotijo. V nasprotju s poenostavljenimi pogledi na sponzorstvo kot oportunistično dejavnost vodstveni delavci opisujejo strukturirane, a hkrati pogajalske procese odločanja, ki jih oblikujejo strateško ujemanje, avtentičnost in usklajenost z deležniki. Ujemanje z identiteto blagovne znamke, korporativnimi vrednotami in dolgoročno strategijo je najpomembnejše merilo. Priljubljenost, vidnost, medijski doseg in značilnosti občinstev so pomembni, vendar le, če krepijo avtentičnost in kredibilnost. Sponzorske odločitve običajno sproži marketing, potrdi

jih najvišje vodstvo, oblikujejo pa jih prispevki različnih funkcij, vključno s financami, pravnimi službami, odnosi z javnostmi in zunanjimi agencijami. Čeprav so podatki o dosegu, izpostavljenosti in ROI bistveni – zlasti za utemeljevanje na ravni upravnih odborov – vodstveni delavci dosledno priznavajo odločilno vlogo intuicije, izkušenj in »občutka v trebuhu«. Dokazi in intuicija ne delujejo kot nasprotujoči si logiki, temveč kot komplementarni orodji v procesu osmišljanja sponzorstva.

Tretja tema opredeljuje dejavnike, ki jih vodstveni delavci zaznavajo kot ključne gonilnike uspeha sponzorstva. Uspešna sponzorstva so opisana kot dolgoročni odnosi in ne kot transakcijski posli. Nenehno merjenje in pregledovanje sta osrednjega pomena ter združujeta kvantitativne kazalnike (medijska vrednost, priklic, vključenost) s kvalitativnimi ocenami (sentiment, povratne informacije zaposlenih, reputacijski učinki). Hkrati vodstveni delavci poudarjajo, da noben posamezen kazalnik ne more v celoti zajeti vrednosti sponzorstva. Zmožnosti in znanje – zlasti kontekstualno razumevanje športa, kulture in občinstev – so ključni omogočevalci učinkovitega upravljanja sponzorstev. Doslednost in koherentnost v komunikaciji, pozicioniranju blagovne znamke in organizacijskem vedenju dodatno krepijo kredibilnost. Čustvena povezanost in gradnja odnosov se izkažeta kot bistvo učinkovitosti sponzorstva, saj podpirata zaupanje, lojalnost in trajnostni vpliv med zaposlenimi, potrošniki, športniki in skupnostmi.

Zadnja tema obravnava omejitve in napetosti, ki so neločljivo povezane s sponzorsko prakso. Vodstveni delavci izpostavljajo trajne težave pri atribuciji in merjenju ROI, zlasti kadar se učinki sponzorstva prekrivajo z drugimi marketinškimi aktivnostmi ali se razkrivajo v daljših časovnih obdobjih. Notranja sprejetost predstavlja dodatni izziv, saj se vsi zaposleni samodejno ne identificirajo s sponzorskimi pobudami. Digitalizacija in fragmentirana medijska potrošnja otežujeta vključenost, zahtevata stalno ustvarjanje vsebin in hkrati povečujeta reputacijska tveganja. Nazadnje odvisnost od športnih rezultatov, etičnega ravnanja in javnega mnenja izpostavlja sponzorje reputacijski ranljivosti, kar dodatno poudarja potrebo po avtentičnosti, transparentnosti in pogodbenih varovalkah.

Celostno gledano to poglavje kaže, da korporativno športno sponzorstvo deluje kot organizacijska praksa, utemeljena na osmišljanju, pri kateri se vrednost ustvarja skozi strateško koherenco, čustveno resonanco in trajne odnose, ne pa zgolj skozi kratkoročne finančne donose. Kvalitativne ugotovitve pojasnjujejo, kako se zavedanje sponzorstva, zaznana kakovost in kredibilnost – identificirani v kvantitativnem modelu – oblikujejo skozi menedžersko interpretacijo in prakso. S tem poglavje pokaže, da športno sponzorstvo pomembno oblikuje podobo delodajalca, organizacijsko identifikacijo in zavzetost zaposlenih ter ga umešča kot strateški most med zunanjo reputacijo in notranjimi organizacijskimi izidi.

Kvantitativna analiza podatkov in ugotovitve

V tem poglavju empirično preverjam teoretični model, razvit v zgodnejših fazah moje doktorske raziskave, s preučevanjem, kako se zaznave zaposlenih o korporativnem športnem sponzorstvu prevajajo v organizacijsko identifikacijo, podobo znamke delodajalca in končno v namero ostati v organizaciji. Poglavje predstavlja osrednjo kvantitativno validacijo raziskave in prikazuje, da sponzorstvo ne deluje zgolj kot orodje zunanjega znamčenja, temveč kot notranji organizacijski signal, ki oblikuje stališča zaposlenih in njihove vedenjske namere.

Analiza temelji na anketnih podatkih, zbranih pri 499 zaposlenih v 10 organizacijah. Pred preverjanjem hipotez sem izvedel obsežno pregledovanje podatkov, da bi zagotovil robustnost in ustreznost podatkovnega nabora za multivariatne analize. Podatkovni niz ni vseboval manjkajočih vrednosti, analize enovariatnih in multivariatnih odstopanj (Hair in drugi, 1998, 2019; Tabachnick in Fidell, 2001, 2007) pa so potrdile, da ni bilo treba izločiti nobenega primera. Čeprav multivariatna normalnost ni bila v celoti izpolnjena, je bilo to skladno s pričakovanji za obsežne zaznavne anketne podatke, uporaba metode največjega verjetja pa je ostala primerna glede na velikost vzorca in sprejemljive enovariatne porazdelitve (Byrne, 2013; Kline, 2011; Tabri in Elliott, 2012).

Po pregledovanju podatkov sem validiral merski model z uporabo potrditvene faktorske analize (CFA). Rezultati CFA so pokazali dobro prileganje modela in močne psihometrične lastnosti pri vseh ohranjenih konstruktih. Zanesljivost in konvergentna veljavnost sta bili potrjeni z uporabo Cronbachovega alfa koeficienta, sestavljene zanesljivosti (CR) in povprečne ekstrahirane variance (AVE), v skladu s kriteriji, ki sta jih predlagala Fornell in Larcker (1981) ter Hair in drugi (2018, 2019). Vsi konstrukti so presegli priporočene mejne vrednosti, kar potrjuje, da so merski instrumenti statistično zanesljivi in teoretično koherentni.

Diskriminantna veljavnost je bila ocenjena z uporabo medkonstruktnih korelacij in Fornell–Larckerjevega kriterija (Fornell in Larcker, 1981; Kline, 2005). Čeprav so bili nekateri konstrukti – zlasti podoba znamke delodajalca in namera ostati v organizaciji – močno korelirani, so bili ti odnosi teoretično utemeljeni in niso kazali na problematično prekrivanje. Na splošno je merski model zagotovil trdno osnovo za modeliranje strukturnih enačb (SEM).

Strukturni model je razkril niansiran in teoretično smiseln vzorec odnosov. Zavedanje in poznavanje sponzorstva (SAK) se je izkazalo kot močan in statistično značilen napovednik organizacijske identifikacije (OI), kar kaže, da zaposleni, ki so dobro seznanjeni s športnimi sponzorskimi aktivnostmi svojega podjetja, občutijo močnejši občutek pripadnosti in usklajenosti z organizacijo. Ta ugotovitev podpira identitetno utemeljene razlage, ki izhajajo iz teorije socialne identitete, in poudarja pomen kognitivnega zavedanja pri krepitvi psihološke navezanosti.

Nasprotno pa zaznana učinkovitost sponzorstva (PSE) ni imela statistično značilnega vpliva na organizacijsko identifikacijo, kar kaže, da vrednotenja zaposlenih o kakovosti sponzorstva ne krepijo neposredno identifikacije, ko je zavedanje že upoštevano. Namesto tega je PSE imela močan in statistično značilen vpliv na podobo znamke delodajalca (EBI), kar kaže, da zaposleni visoko kakovostno sponzorstvo razumejo kot signal organizacijske profesionalnosti, kredibilnosti in privlačnosti delodajalca. Ta ugotovitev je tesno skladna s teorijo signaliziranja, po kateri zaznana kakovost – in ne zgolj vidnost – oblikuje vrednotenja.

Tako organizacijska identifikacija kot podoba znamke delodajalca sta pomembno napovedovali namero ostati v organizaciji, pri čemer se je podoba znamke delodajalca izkazala kot najmočnejši napovednik v modelu. To poudarja, da čeprav je čustvena navezanost pomembna, imajo širša vrednotenja organizacije kot zaželenega delodajalca ključno vlogo pri oblikovanju namer zaposlenih, da ostanejo v organizaciji.

Analize mediacije so dodatno razjasnile te mehanizme. Organizacijska identifikacija je v celoti posredovala odnos med zavedanjem in poznavanjem sponzorstva ter namero ostati v organizaciji, kar kaže, da zavedanje vpliva na zadržanje zgolj prek okrepljene identifikacije. Podoba znamke delodajalca je prav tako posredovala ta odnos, vendar šibkeje, kar jo umešča kot sekundarno pot. Nasprotno pa je podoba znamke delodajalca v celoti posredovala odnos med zaznano učinkovitostjo sponzorstva in namero ostati v organizaciji, medtem ko organizacijska identifikacija v tej poti ni imela posredovalne vloge. Te ugotovitve jasno razlikujejo notranje mehanizme, prek katerih delujeta zavedanje in zaznana učinkovitost.

Za poglobitev analize sem izvedel večskupinsko analizo, v kateri sem primerjal referenčno organizacijo z vsemi ostalimi podjetji. Rezultati so pokazali, da se moč in smer več odnosov med konteksti statistično značilno razlikujeta. V referenčni organizaciji je imelo zavedanje sponzorstva posebej močno vlogo pri oblikovanju tako organizacijske identifikacije kot tudi podobe znamke delodajalca, medtem ko je bila v primerjalni skupini zaznana učinkovitost sponzorstva prevladujoč dejavnik oblikovanja zaznav o znamki delodajalca. V obeh skupinah se je podoba znamke delodajalca dosledno izkazala kot najmočnejši napovednik namere ostati v organizaciji, kar poudarja njeno osrednjo vlogo pri notranjih znamčnih izidih.

Nazadnje demografske analize niso pokazale statistično značilnih razlik med spoloma pri ključnih konstruktih, kar nakazuje, da zaznave, povezane s sponzorstvom, delujejo podobno pri moških in ženskih zaposlenih. Vendar pa so se pojavile pomembne razlike med referenčnimi in nereferenčnimi organizacijami, kar dodatno potrjuje pomen organizacijskega konteksta pri oblikovanju notranje interpretacije sponzorskih signalov.

Skupno gledano to poglavje zagotavlja trdne empirične dokaze, da korporativno športno sponzorstvo vpliva na zadržanje zaposlenih v organizaciji posredno, prek različnih psiholoških mehanizmov. Zavedanje sponzorstva primarno krepi organizacijsko

identifikacijo, medtem ko zaznana učinkovitost sponzorstva izboljšuje podobo znamke delodajalca. Te ugotovitve potrjujejo, da sponzorstvo ni enoten notranji signal, temveč večdimenzionalen mehanizem, katerega učinek je odvisen od tega, kako zaposleni interpretirajo tako njegovo prisotnost kot tudi njegovo kakovost. To poglavje tako potrjuje teoretični okvir disertacije in vzpostavlja močno empirično podlago za končno razpravo in implikacije.

Razprava in prispevek na področju znanja

V svojem doktoratu povezujem in interpretiram ugotovitve svoje raziskave z združevanjem kvantitativnih rezultatov, pridobljenih z modeliranjem strukturnih enačb (SEM), in kvalitativnih vpogledov, pridobljenih s tematsko analizo, podprto z NVivo. Cilj ni zgolj ponoviti rezultatov, temveč pojasniti, kako in zakaj korporativno športno sponzorstvo oblikuje organizacijsko identifikacijo zaposlenih, zaznano podobo znamke delodajalca in namero ostati v organizaciji. Razprava, zasidrana v teoriji socialne identitete, teoriji signaliziranja in Weickovi teoriji ustvarjanja pomenov, kaže, da sponzorstvo deluje kot odnosna in interpretativna organizacijska praksa in ne zgolj kot instrumentalna marketinška dejavnost.

S kvalitativnega vidika se sponzorstvo kaže kot strateški proces, voden z ustvarjanjem pomenov. Višji vodstveni delavci so sponzorstvo dosledno opisovali kot večnamenski instrument, ki služi prepoznavnosti blagovne znamke, ugledu, družbeni odgovornosti, notranji vključenosti in dolgoročnemu pozicioniranju. Namesto poudarjanja kratkoročne izpostavljenosti so odločevalci izpostavljali avtentičnost, vrednotno skladnost in identitetno usklajenost. To odraža Weickovo (1995) načelo verjetnosti pred natančnostjo: sponzorske odločitve se utemeljujejo skozi pripovedi, ki »imajo smisel« znotraj identitete organizacije in njene strateške poti. Pomembno je, da se notranja vključenost pojavi kot ključen, čeprav pogosto implicitno izražen cilj. Čeprav je bila manj pogosto artikulirana kot prepoznavnost blagovne znamke, je delovala kot psihološki most, ki povezuje sponzorske aktivnosti z občutkom pripadnosti in ponosa zaposlenih. Ta kvalitativni vpogled pojasnjuje, zakaj v kvantitativnem modelu zavedanje in poznavanje sponzorstva (SAK) močno napovedujeta organizacijsko identifikacijo (OI).

Procesi odločanja in vrednotenja so predstavljali najdominantnejšo kvalitativno temo. Vodstveni delavci so se zanašali na kompleksne evalvacijske logike, ki združujejo strateško ujemanje, avtentičnost, arhitekturo deležnikov, notranja odobravanja ter kombinacijo dokazov in intuicije. Izidi sponzorstva so bili retrospektivno interpretirani skozi znake, kot so odzivi zaposlenih, medijske pripovedi in reputacijski signali. Te retrospektivne presoje so oblikovale prihodnje sponzorske odločitve in krepile ciklični proces osmišljanja. To pojasnjuje diferencirane kvantitativne učinke, opažene v SEM: medtem ko je zavedanje primarno krepilo identifikacijo, je zaznana učinkovitost oblikovala vrednotenja podobe znamke delodajalca.

Kvalitativne ugotovitve o dobrih praksah in dejavnikih uspeha so dodatno razkrile, da sponzorstvo ustvarja notranjo vrednost le, kadar je institucionalno vgrajeno. Menedžerji so poudarjali redno merjenje, notranje kompetence, čustveno resonanco in medfunkcijsko koordinacijo. Kadar sponzorstvo podpirajo kadrovske službe, interno komuniciranje, podpora vodstva in evalvacijski sistemi, se razvije iz simbolne geste v trajno organizacijsko rutino. Ta vpogled pojasnjuje mediacijske učinke, ugotovljene kvantitativno: sponzorstvo vpliva na zadržanje zaposlenih v organizaciji zgolj prek psiholoških mehanizmov – organizacijske identifikacije in podobe znamke delodajalca – in ne neposredno.

Hkrati so vodstveni delavci prepoznali več izzivov in omejitev, vključno z reputacijskim tveganjem, odvisnostjo od sponzoriranih subjektov, digitalnimi motnjami, težavami pri atribuciji in notranjim odporom. Primeri neprimernega vedenja športnikov ali nejasnega ROI so spodkopali zaupanje in podporo zaposlenih. Ti zapisi poudarjajo pomembne mejne pogoje učinkovitosti sponzorstva in kontekstualizirajo ugotovitve SEM, saj kažejo, zakaj samo zavedanje ni zadostno. Zaposleni se ne odzivajo na sponzorstvo samo po sebi, temveč na njegovo zaznano avtentičnost, koherentnost in notranjo usklajenost.

Ob prehodu na kvantitativne ugotovitve rezultati SEM kažejo, da zavedanje in poznavanje sponzorstva (SAK) statistično značilno krepi organizacijsko identifikacijo, kar podpira hipotezo H1 in je skladno z logiko socialne identitete (Ko in Hur, 2014). Vendar pa SAK ni imelo statistično značilnega vpliva na podobo znamke delodajalca, kar je vodilo k zavrnitvi H2. To kaže, da zavedanje brez pomena ne dvigne samodejno zaznav blagovne znamke delodajalca, kar odmeva ugotovitve Hickmana in drugih (2005). Zaznana učinkovitost sponzorstva (PSE) ni pokazala statistično značilnega odnosa z organizacijsko identifikacijo, kar vodi k zavrnitvi H3, je pa imela močan pozitiven učinek na podobo znamke delodajalca, kar podpira H4. Ta razlika krepi idejo, da identifikacija temelji na deljenem pomenu, medtem ko vrednotenja blagovne znamke delodajalca izhajajo iz zaznane kredibilnosti, uspešnosti in avtentičnosti (Karjaluoto in Paakkonen, 2019).

Tako organizacijska identifikacija kot podoba znamke delodajalca sta statistično značilno napovedovali namero ostati v organizaciji, kar podpira hipotezi H5 in H6, pri čemer se je podoba znamke delodajalca izkazala kot najmočnejši napovednik. To kaže, da na odločitve zaposlenih o ostanku vpliva predvsem to, kako organizacijo vrednotijo kot delodajalca, in ne zgolj čustvena navezanost (Batt in drugi, 2021; Edwards, 2017). Analiza mediacije je dodatno razkrila, da OI v celoti posreduje odnos med SAK in namero ostati v organizaciji (EBI le obrobno), medtem ko odnos med PSE in namero ostati v celoti posreduje EBI (OI ne posreduje). Te ugotovitve potrjujejo, da se zaznave sponzorstva v namero ostati v organizaciji prevajajo le prek psiholoških in evalvacijskih mehanizmov, skladno s teorijo socialne identitete in teorijo signaliziranja.

Eksplorativna večskupinska analiza je razkrila opisne razlike med referenčno organizacijo in primerjalno skupino, kar potrjuje večskupinsko primerjavo in njene primerjave po poteh. V referenčnem podjetju so bili učinki zavedanja sponzorstva na identifikacijo in podobo

znamke delodajalca opisno močnejši, medtem ko so poti zaznane učinkovitosti spremenile predznak. Kvalitativni dokazi podpirajo ta rezultat, saj so vodstveni delavci iz organizacij z zrelim sponzorstvom opisovali bolj strukturirano komuniciranje, močnejšo notranjo usklajenost in globljo integracijo sponzorstva v kadrovske prakse. To krepi logiko sponzorstvu povezanega notranjega marketinga (SLIM) (Madill in O'Reilly, 2010; Mlakar in drugi, 2024) in kaže, da je sponzorstvo najučinkovitejše, kadar je vpeto v organizacijske rutine in ne izvajano občasno.

Integrirana kvalitativno-kvantitativna interpretacija kaže, da športno sponzorstvo deluje kot arhitektura ustvarjanja pomenov. Kvantitativni rezultati vzpostavljajo strukturne odnose, kvalitativni vpogledi pa pojasnjujejo, kako vodstvene pripovedi, evalvacijske rutine, usklajenost deležnikov in interno komuniciranje zaposlenim omogočajo, da sponzorstvo ponotranjijo kot del organizacijske identitete. Podoba znamke delodajalca se izkaže kot najmočnejši mehanizem zadržanja zaposlenih v organizaciji, medtem ko organizacijska identifikacija zagotavlja čustveno osnovo, prek katere se ponotranji pomen sponzorstva.

Teoretično ta študija nadgrajuje literaturo o sponzorstvu z umestitvijo zaposlenih kot osrednjih deležnikov (Cornwell in Kwon, 2020). Razširja teorijo socialne identitete s prikazom, da sponzorstvo deluje kot notranja izmenjava, ki spodbuja ponos in lojalnost, ter bogati teorijo signaliziranja s prikazom, da sponzorstvo deluje kot notranji signal, ki oblikuje pomen blagovne znamke delodajalca. Integracija Weickove teorije ustvarjanja pomenov dodatno pojasnjuje, da so izidi sponzorstva odvisni od tega, kako se pomen konstruira, in ne zgolj od velikosti investicije.

Praktično ugotovitve kažejo, da morajo organizacije športno sponzorstvo obravnavati kot notranjo in zunanjo strategijo. Samo zavedanje ni dovolj; zaznana učinkovitost, vključenost vodstva, interno komuniciranje in evalvacijski mehanizmi so ključni. Z vidika upravljanja človeških virov bi moralo biti sponzorstvo vpeto v strategije znamke delodajalca in zavzetosti zaposlenih.

Kljub svojim prispevkom je študija omejena s presečno zasnovo, samoocenjevalnimi podatki in omejenim kontekstualnim obsegom. Prihodnje raziskave bi morale uporabiti longitudinalne, medkulturne in večsektorske pristope ter vključiti dodatne mediatorje, kot so zaznana organizacijska podpora, ponos in skladnost z vrednotami podjetja.

Skupno gledano to raziskovanje utrjuje osrednji argument disertacije: korporativno športno sponzorstvo ni zgolj strošek znamčenja, temveč strateški notranji mehanizem, ki prek procesov ustvarjanja pomenov, signaliziranja in identifikacije oblikuje identiteto zaposlenih, pomen znamke delodajalca in namero ostati v organizaciji.

Appendix B: Definitions of Key Terms

Brand differentiation: This process involves differentiating a brand from its competitors in a manner that enhances its appeal to the target audience (Kotler et al., 2016).

Brand equity: This concept pertains to the value that a company imparts to its product or service, which is derived from customer perceptions, attitudes, and associations with the brand (Keller et al., 2010).

Cognition: The term refers to the cognitive processes involved in acquiring knowledge and comprehension through perception, thought, and sensory experience. Its primary components include reasoning, memory, attention, and decision-making (Anderson & Edu, 2015)**.**

Corporate culture: This concept pertains to the shared values, norms, customs, and behaviours that influence both inter- and intra-organisational interactions among employees (Schein, 2010).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): This concept pertains to the notion that organisations bear a responsibility to act in the best interests of their environment and society. The ultimate aim is to enhance the reputation of organisations that adhere to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Corporate sports sponsorship: The process involves an organisation providing support to a sports team, individual, or event in exchange for advertising and promotional opportunities (Shank & Lyberger, 2014).

Customer retention: This concept pertains to an organisation's capacity to maintain customer loyalty over an extended period, rather than focusing exclusively on acquiring new customers (Kumar & Reinartz, 2018).

Decision making: This entails the process by which decision makers select the most appropriate course of action to achieve specified objectives (Simon, 1997).

Marketing: This is characterised as an activity, a set of institutions, and a process for the creation, communication, delivery, and exchange of offerings that hold value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large (Andrews et al., 2021).

Organisation-embedded attitude: This pertains to the conduct of employees, which is profoundly influenced by the established norms and values of an organisation, themselves shaped by the organisational culture (Solinger et.al., 2008).

Organisation-embedded behaviour: This concept pertains to the attitudes or beliefs that employees develop within an organisation, influenced by their exposure to the organisation's values, culture, and structure (Chatman et al., 1998).

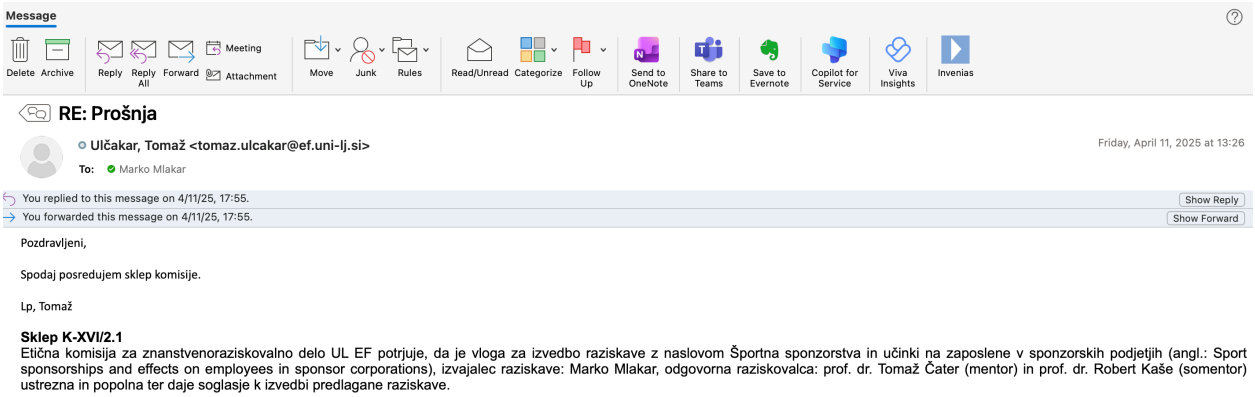
Performance metrics: These are quantitative metrics employed to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of an organisation in attaining its objectives (Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

Sensemaking: In organisational contexts, sensemaking denotes the process through which officials interpret and comprehend complex scenarios to establish a shared understanding that guides decision-makers (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Stakeholders: Stakeholders are defined as individuals, groups, or organisations that may be impacted by the actions of a firm (Freeman & Phillips, 2002).

Structured integration: This approach utilises a planned and strategic methodology to align branding initiatives with the interests of both the sponsoring and sponsored entities (Caves, 1980).

Appendix C: Approval of Ethical Committee



Pozdravljeni,

Spodaj posredujem sklep komisije.

Lp, Tomaž

Sklep K-XVI/2.1
Etična komisija za znanstvenoraziskovalno delo UL EF potrjuje, da je vloga za izvedbo raziskave z naslovom Športna sponzorstva in učinki na zaposlene v sponzorskih podjetjih (angl.: Sport sponsorships and effects on employees in sponsor corporations), izvajalec raziskave: Marko Mlakar, odgovorna raziskovalca: prof. dr. Tomaž Čater (mentor) in prof. dr. Robert Kaše (somentor) ustrezna in popolna ter daje soglasje k izvedbi predlagane raziskave.

Appendix D: Interview Guide Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

PhD Research topic: Sport sponsorships and effects on employees in sponsor corporations

Preparation checklist

Audio recorder: IOS: voice recorder. Verify you have 3h of conversation storage space and battery. Include power supply.

Paper notebook and a pen, working pen, notebook, full charge.

Qualitative interview introduction

Length: 45-60 minutes

Introduction: The purpose of the study is to better understand the connection between corporate sport sponsorship and its effects on employee outcomes in sponsor organisations. The underlying idea of this research project is to step beyond the marketing logics of sports sponsorships towards a psychosociological perspective on corporate sport sponsorships and its effects on employees in sponsor organisations. We want to understand why sport sponsorships makes sense from decision makers point of view. This can be better understood by knowing: How do marketing directors and managers responsible for sponsoring make sense of sponsoring sports and What are the mechanisms of sport sponsorship enactment?

Primary goal: To see things the way you see them… more like a conversation with a focus on your experience, your opinions and what you think or feel about the topics covered.

Written consent

Written consent was obtained from the study participant:

- YES - NO

Socio-demographic characteristics

Company / organisation:

Revenue:

Region:

Sector:

Size:

Company age:

Position in company/organisation:

Expert / education/ skills / experience:

Years of experience:

M / F:

Age:

Overview:

Invite interviewee to briefly tell me about him/herself: General background information mostly about experiences and perspectives on issues surrounding sport sponsorship decision making, sponsorship activation, desired impact of sport sponsorships and outcomes on employees. Personal affinity towards sport in general.

Questions: Background information on sport sponsorships in current organisation

Can you tell me about the history of sponsoring sport in your organisation? Why did your organisation decide to sponsor sport? When this happened-timing?

What were the main reasons behind the decision to sponsor sport?

What factors influenced this decision? Internal? External? What about management support?

What kind of sponsorship have you chosen-Olympic Committee, national federation, venue, club, individual athlete?

What budget (EUR) have you invested in sport sponsorship?

What percentage of the overall sponsorship budget represented sport sponsorship?

Were goals about sponsoring sport clearly defined?

How closely aligned are your decisions regarding sport sponsorships with the overall strategic objectives of your firm?

How do you define and measure success in sponsoring sport?

What common external factors (customer demands/competitors) influence your decision-making process?

Have you developed guidelines, procedures, activities related to active management of sport sponsorships?

Are there any other strategies or initiatives influencing sport sponsorships?

Other strategies or initiatives like CSR, employer branding or similar?

How much are sport sponsorships and marketing strategy intertwined?

How? Why?

What are the most important aspects of sport sponsorships for your organisation?

Most difficult to achieve? Why these? How did you tackle them?

What could you in your opinion do better? How and why?

Can you share positive experience with sport sponsorship project in your organisation?

How did you select that project? Who was the initiator of the project? Who made the final decision for the project? Were employees involved in project selection process?

Identity construction - Who am I in this context?

How do you see your role in the sponsorship decision-making process? How does your personal view on sports align with the company's sponsorship strategy?

How do you think sport sponsorship reflects or shapes your organisation's identity or brand personality?

In what way does sponsorship contribute to how your company wants to be perceived by the public or industry?

Retrospective - Sense is made looking backward.

Can you describe a past sponsorship decision that shaped the most how you approach sponsorships today?

Thinking back to past sponsorship experiences or activations, what influenced your current thinking about sponsorship value the most?

Enactment- People create environments they then react to.

How do your sponsorship actions (e.g., activations, campaigns) influence how others perceive your brand?

How do you think your organisation's behaviour influences the sponsorship ecosystem (sports clubs, fans, other sponsors)?

Have there been instances where your sponsorship actions led to unexpected outcomes, and, if so, how did you respond?

Social - Sensemaking is a social process.

Who are the key internal and external stakeholders involved in shaping your sponsorship decisions?

How do collaboration and dialogue within your team or organisation affect how sponsorship opportunities are evaluated?

To what extent do opinions of colleagues, agencies, or partners influence your understanding of what sponsorship means?

Can you recall a situation where disagreement with (a) stakeholder(s) changed your sponsorship decision or perspective?

Ongoing - Sensemaking never stops.

How often do you revisit or re-evaluate the meaning and value of your sponsorship engagements?

How do evolving trends (e.g., digitalisation, social change, sustainability) affect your thinking about sport sponsorship?

What triggers you to re-assess the goals or direction of a sponsorship programme?

Extracted Cues - We make sense from small cues.

What signs or indicators do you use to judge whether a sponsorship is working?

What data points, feedback, or signals influence your interpretation of sponsorship success or failure?

Can you describe a small cue or incident (a comment, reaction, or feedback) that (significantly) reshaped your view on a sponsorship?

Plausibility over Accuracy - What feels reasonable, not necessarily provable.

When evaluating a new sponsorship opportunity, do you rely more on hard data or gut feeling?

How do you deal with uncertainty or imperfect information when making sponsorship decisions?

What makes a sponsorship feel like a “good fit”, even before you see measurable results?

Bonus questions if time permits

How do you personally make sense of your company’s involvement in sports sponsorship?

What stories or narratives do you use internally to justify sponsorship investments?

What moments have reshaped how you define sponsorship success?

Conclusion

Do you think I should also speak to other experts in your organisation or outside?

- To whom?

Do you know of any other companies or interesting cases of sport sponsorships in your sector that you would highlight?

- Locally?

- Abroad?

Thank you for all that valuable information, is there anything else you’d like to add before we end?

Appendix E: Participant Consent to Participate in Research

Ethics Committee for Scientific Research

PARTICIPANT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Sport Sponsorships and Effects on Employees in Sponsor Corporations

1. You are invited to participate in the research study entitled *"Sport Sponsorships and Effects on Employees in Sponsor Corporations"*, conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation by **Marko Mlakar**. The research is being carried out at the **Department of Management and Organisation**, School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana, under the supervision of **Professor Dr Tomaž Čater** (mentor) and **Professor Dr Robert Kaše** (co-mentor). The purpose of the study is to explore why companies engage in sports sponsorship and how these sponsorships affect employees in sponsoring organisations.
2. If you agree to participate, you will take part in an interview.
3. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. No financial compensation will be provided for participation.
4. Participation in the study does not entail any particular risks.
5. Participation does not offer direct benefits, aside from the knowledge and experience you may gain through the process.
6. I consent to having my interview audio recorded.
7. Participation is entirely voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without any consequences.
8. Every effort will be made to protect your privacy. Your responses and demographic data (age and gender) will be stored under a research code. Only aggregate results will be published and publicly accessible. Your identity will not be disclosed under any circumstances.
9. For any additional questions, you may contact **Marko MLAKAR** at marko.mlakar@amrop.si, or the **Ethics Committee of the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana** at eticna.komisija@ef.uni-lj.si.

By signing this form, I confirm that I have read the statement and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding the research. I consent to participate in the described research study *"Sport Sponsorships and Effects on Employees in Sponsor Corporations "* and agree that the results may be used for educational and scientific research purposes.

_____

Participant's full name and signature **Date**

_____

Researcher's full name and signature **Date**

This research has been approved by the **Ethics Committee for Scientific Research of the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana**, by **Decision K-XVI/2.1 dated April 11, 2025**.

Appendix F: Information Letter for the Study Participants (English)

Thank you for taking the time to review this information sheet.

My name is Marko Mlakar, and I am a doctoral student at the Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana. I invite you to participate in my research study. Before deciding whether to take part, I would like to briefly explain the research topic and the nature of your participation. Should you have any questions or require additional information, please feel free to contact me (contact details are provided below). You are also welcome to discuss the research openly with others.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to explore how and in what ways sports sponsorships influence employees within sponsoring companies. The core idea of this research project is to move beyond the traditional market-driven logic of sports sponsorship and instead focus on the psychosocial aspects of sports sponsorships and their effects on employees within these organisations. In particular, I am interested in understanding why decision-makers choose to invest in sports sponsorships among many available alternatives, and how these decisions subsequently affect employees within their organisations. Sponsorships are typically used as tools for communicating with potential customers and retaining existing ones. However, relatively little is known about how employees experience these sponsorships and how they influence employees' perceptions of their employer (e.g., reputation, sense of belonging, motivation, and willingness to work for such an organisation). To gain a broader and deeper understanding of this topic, the current phase of the research includes multiple interviews conducted in Slovenia.

Who Is Conducting the Research?

This research is being conducted as part of my doctoral studies in Management and Organisation at the Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana. The research is funded by the University of Ljubljana and by myself. The study is conducted independently under the supervision of Professor Dr Tomaž Čater (supervisor) and Professor Dr Robert Kaše (co-supervisor). More information about my professional background can be found here: https://www.linkedin.com/in/marko-mlakar-b533421/

Why Are You Being Asked to Participate?

You are being invited to participate because the organisation in which you work is one of the key sponsors of sports activities at the national or local level. You have been identified as a professional who has in-depth knowledge of the motivations behind sports sponsorship decisions in your organisation, is recognised within the local business environment, and is

familiar with the decision-making processes related to sports sponsorships. For these reasons, you are considered a valuable and relevant participant in this research. The study will include interviews with professionals who have experience in marketing and in managing sports sponsorships.

Should I Take Part?

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Any decision regarding participation will be treated confidentially. You may also withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.

What Does Participation Involve?

Your participation will take the form of an interview. The main topics of discussion will include your experiences and perspectives related to the planning, implementation, integration, and management of sports sponsorships within your organisation. The interview will take place at a time convenient for you, either at your workplace or another agreed location. It will last approximately one hour. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate and reliable interpretation of the discussion. The collected data will be analysed independently.

What If I Decide to Withdraw After the Interview?

If you choose to withdraw after the interview has taken place, all notes, recordings, and transcripts related to your interview will be destroyed.

What Are the Benefits of Participating in the Research?

I hope that you will find the interview experience both interesting and valuable. Participation also offers an opportunity to receive feedback in the form of a summary report presenting the key findings of the overall research.

Will My Participation Be Kept Confidential?

Yes. All aspects of this research will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Economics, and applicable legal regulations. All collected data will be treated as confidential. Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in any publications or dissemination of the results. All data will be securely stored in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

What Will Happen to the Results of the Study?

The results of the study will provide insights into how sports sponsorships can be effectively measured and managed in relation to employees. The findings may help make sponsorships

more predictable, effective, and meaningful for employees. The results may be published in academic journals, presented at conferences, or used as part of a doctoral dissertation.

Additional Information

For additional information about the research or your participation, please contact me at:

📞 **+386 41 747 051**, 📧 **marko.mlakar@amrop.si** or reach out to me on https://www.linkedin.com/in/marko-mlakar-b533421/

In Case of Concerns?

Given the nature and scope of this research, it is highly unlikely that participation will cause any discomfort. However, if you have concerns regarding the research process or the conduct of the interview, you may contact:

- Professor Dr Tomaž Čater, Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana, https://www.ef.uni-lj.si/o-fakulteti/vodstvo-in-zaposleni/kontakti/tomaz-cater
- Professor Dr Robert Kaše, Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana, https://www.ef.uni-lj.si/o-fakulteti/vodstvo-in-zaposleni/kontakti/robert-kase

Thank you for considering this invitation and for your participation.

Marko Mlakar, MSc

Contact details:



Marko Mlakar
GSM: + 386 41 747 051
Email:marko.mlakar@amrop.si
https://www.linkedin.com/in/marko-mlakar-b533421/

Appendix G: Information Letter for the Study Participants (Slovene)

Hvala, ker ste si vzeli čas za ogled tega informativnega lista.

Sem Marko Mlakar, doktorski študent na Ekonomski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Vabim vas, da sodelujete v moji raziskavi. Preden se odločite o sodelovanju, vam na kratko predstavim raziskovalno temo in obliko vaše udeležbe. V primeru nejasnosti ali dodatnih informacij, me prosim kontaktirajte (kontakti spodaj). *O raziskavi lahko odprto razpravljate z drugimi.*

Namen raziskave

Namen raziskave je ugotoviti, kako in na kakšen način športna sponzorstva vplivajo na interne zaposlene v sponzorskih podjetjih. Osnovna ideja tega raziskovalnega projekta je preseči tržno logiko športnih sponzorstev in jo usmeriti k psihosociološkemu vidiku športnih sponzorstev in njegovih učinkov na zaposlene v teh podjetjih. Zlasti me zanima zakaj se odločevalci, ki sprejemajo odločitve o teh sponzorstvih, med množico možnosti, odločajo za sponzoriranje športa in kako to kasneje vpliva na zaposlene v teh organizacijah. Sponzorstva se namreč ponavadi uporabljajo kot orodje komuniciranja s potencialnimi novimi kupci in ohranjanjem obstoječih. Zelo malo pa je znanega o tem kako to doživljajo zaposleni in kakšen je vpliv teh sponzorstev na njihovo dojemanje svojega delodajalca (ugled, pripadnost, motivacija, želja po zaposlitvi v takem podjetju…). *Za širše in poglobljeno razumevanje problematike trenutna faza raziskave vključuje več intervjujev v Sloveniji*.

Kdo izvaja raziskavo?

To raziskavo izvajam kot del doktorskega študija managementa in organizacije na Ekonomski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Delo financirata Univerza v Ljubljani in sam. Raziskava je neodvisna in se izvaja pod nadzorom profesorja dr. Tomaža Čaterja kot mentorja in profesorja dr. Roberta Kašeta kot somentorja mojega doktorskega študija. *Več o mojem delu in izkušnjah si lahko preberete tukaj* https://www.linkedin.com/in/marko-mlakar-b533421/

Zakaj prošnja za sodelovanje?

K sodelovanju vas zaprošam, ker je organizacija, v kateri delate, eden najpomembnejših sponzorjev slovenskega športa na nacionalnem ali lokalnem nivoju. Identificiral sem vas kot nekoga, ki je strokovnjak, ki odlično pozna motive zakaj v vaši organizaciji sponzorirate šport, prepoznani ste v lokalnem poslovnem okolju in poznate proces odločanja za športna sponzorstva v vaši organizaciji. Skladno s tem ste zanimiv kandidat za sodelovanje. V okviru raziskave bom izvedel več intervjujev s strokovnjaki iz področja marketinga in izkušnjami pri upravljanju športnih sponzorstev.

Ali naj sodelujem?

Odločitev za sodelovanje v tej raziskavi je povsem prostovoljna. Vsaka odločitev v zvezi z udeležbo bo zaupna. Prav tako se lahko kadarkoli iz študije umaknete.

Kaj vključuje sodelovanje?

Vaše sodelovanje je v obliki intervjuja. Glavna tema pogovora bo obsegala vaše izkušnje in poglede glede načrtovanja, implementacije, integracije in upravljanja športnih sponzorstev v vaši organizaciji. Intervju bo potekal ob vam prilagojenem času, bodisi na vašem delovnem mestu ali drugje. Intervju bo trajal približno eno uro. Intervju bo zvočno posnet, kar zagotavlja ustrezno in natančno interpretacijo pogovora. Podatki zbrani v intervjuju bodo analizirani neodvisno.

Kaj, če se po intervjuju odločim za umik?

Če se odločite za umik po opravljenem intervjuju, bodo vsi zapiski, posnetki in prepisi vašega intervjuja uničeni.

Kakšne koristi bom imel od sodelovanja v raziskavi?

Upam, da vam bo izkušnja sodelovanja v intervjuju zanimiva in koristna. Sodelovanje je priložnost, da dobite povratne informacije v obliki poročila s ključnimi ugotovitvami celotne raziskave.

Ali bo moje sodelovanje v raziskavi obravnavano zaupno?

Da. Pri delu sledim etičnemu kodeksu Univerze v Ljubljani, Ekonomske fakultete in ustaljeni pravni praksi. Vsi zbrani podatki bodo obravnavani zaupno. Pri diseminaciji ali izkoriščanju rezultatov vi ali vaša organizacija ne boste imensko navedeni. Zbrani podatki bodo varno shranjeni na način, ki je skladen s »Splošno uredbo o varstvu podatkov« (angl. *General Data Protection Regulation- GDPR*).

Kaj se bo zgodilo z rezultati študije?

Rezultati raziskave bodo zagotovili informacije, kako učinkovito meriti in upravljati športna sponzorstva v podjetju v odnosu do zaposlenih. Kako jih narediti bolj predvidljive, uspešne in zanimive za njih. Rezultati in ugotovitve so lahko objavljene v znanstvenih revijah, predstavljene na konferencah ali uporabljene v doktorski disertaciji.

Dodatne informacije?

Za dodatne informacije o raziskavi ali sodelovanju, me kontaktirajte na telefonski številki +386 41 747 051, e-poštnem naslovu marko.mlakar@amrop.si, ali poiščite na https://www.linkedin.com/in/marko-mlakar-b533421/

V primeru težav?

Glede na naravo in vsebino raziskave je zelo malo verjetno, da boste s sodelovanjem nezadovoljni. V slučaju pripomb glede načina pristopa ali obravnave pri izvedbi intervjuja, se lahko obrnete na profesorja dr. Tomaža Čaterja, na Ekonomski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani: https://www.ef.uni-lj.si/o-fakulteti/vodstvo-in-zaposleni/kontakti/tomaz-cater ali profesorja dr. Roberta Kašeta, prav tako na Ekonomski fakulteti Univerza v Ljubljani: https://www.ef.uni-lj.si/o-fakulteti/vodstvo-in-zaposleni/kontakti/robert-kase

Hvala za obravnavo povabila in sodelovanje.

mag. Marko Mlakar

Kontaktni podatki



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https://www.linkedin.com/in/marko-mlakar-b533421/

Appendix H: Survey Questionnaire

Note on item coding: The construct labels used in this questionnaire reflect the original variable names retained from data collection; they map to the final construct labels used in the dissertation as follows. The Intention to Stay items are coded RI1–RI6 in this instrument (RI denotes the construct's original label, "Retention Intention"). The same items appear as RET1–RET6 in the dataset and SPSS output (Appendices I and K), and as ITS1–ITS6 in the structural-model diagrams. Items RI3–RI5 are reverse-worded and were reverse-coded prior to analysis (R_RET3–R_RET5 in the dataset; R_ITS3–R_ITS5 in the diagrams), so that higher scores consistently indicate a stronger intention to stay.

The Sponsorship Quality Perception (SQPL) and Sponsorship Quantity Perception (SQPN) subscales were combined during analysis into the single construct Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE), on the empirical and conceptual grounds set out in the Measures section. The original variable names are retained in this instrument to preserve a transparent, reproducible link between the administered questionnaire and the analysed dataset.

Quantitative Survey Questionnaire

Purpose of the Study

This survey aims to examine how employees perceive corporate sport sponsorship and how these perceptions influence organisational identification, employer brand image, and intention to stay. Your participation is voluntary and anonymous. There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer honestly based on your experience.

Instructions for Sections A–F

Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the scale below:

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neutral
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly Agree

Section A – Sponsorship Awareness & Knowledge (SAK)

ID	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
SAK1	Sports sponsorship creates a positive image for the sponsoring organisation.					
SAK2	Sports sponsorship is a positive thing in organisations today.					
SAK3	Sports sponsorship should be a regular part of a company's activities.					
SAK4	I am positively impressed with an organisation that sponsors anything or anyone.					
SAK5	I like to see companies supporting worthy causes or events.					

SAK6	My employer's sports sponsorship improves my impression of my company.					
SAK7	My employer's sports sponsorship effort makes me feel more favourable toward my employer.					
SAK8	My employer's sports sponsorship activity improves my perception of my employer.					
SAK9	My employer's sports sponsorship activity makes me like my employer more.					
SAK10	I am informed about the outcomes and benefits of my organisation's sports sponsorship activities.					
SAK11	I understand how our sports sponsorship activities align with the organisation's values or mission.					
SAK12	Knowing about our sports sponsorship activities increases my emotional connection to the organisation.					
SAK13	I feel more motivated at work when I see the organisation involved in meaningful sports sponsorships.					
SAK14	The way sports sponsorships are communicated internally makes me feel included and valued.					
SAK15	I talk positively about our sponsorships when speaking with others about my workplace.					
SAK16	Our sports sponsorships show that my company cares about the local community.					
SAK17	I believe our company's reputation in the local community is stronger because of our sponsorships.					

Section B – Sponsorship Quality Perception (SQPL)

ID	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
SQPL1	I like the sports sponsorship engagements of my firm					
SQPL2	I feel good about the sports sponsorship engagements of my firm					
SQPL3	The sports sponsorship engagements of my firm appeal to people like me					

Section C – Sponsorship Quantity Perception (SQPN)

ID	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
SQPN1	There seem to be a lot of sports sponsorship engagements of my firm airing in the market					
SQPN2	My firm frequently promotes sports events					
SQPN3	There is a heavy media schedule supporting the sports sponsorship engagements of my firm					

Section D – Organisation Identification (OI)

ID	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
OI1	When someone criticises my firm, it feels like a personal insult.					
OI2	I am very interested in what others think about my firm.					
OI3	When I talk about my firm, I usually say WE rather than THEY.					
OI4	The successes of my firm are my successes.					
OI5	If a story in the media criticised my firm, I would feel embarrassed/angered.					
OI6	When someone praises my firm, it feels like a personal compliment.					

Section E – Employer Brand Image Scale (EBI)

ID	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
EBI1	My organisation has a strong reputation as an employer					
EBI2	My organisation is known as a great place to work					
EBI3	I am proud of my organisation's image as an employer.					
EBI4	People in my field consider my organisation a desirable place of work.					
EBI5	Our sport sponsorship activities strengthen our organisation's image as an employer.					

Section F – Intention to Stay Subscale (ITS)

ID	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
RI1	I see a future for myself within this company.					
RI2	If it were up to me, I will definitely be working for this company for the next five years.					
RI3	If I received an attractive job offer from another company, I would take the job.					
RI4	I'm planning on working for another company within a period of three years.					
RI5	If I could start over again, I would choose to work for another company.					
RI6	I love working for this company.					

Section G – Pride

ID	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Pride1	I am proud to work for my organisation.					
Pride2	I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organisation.					

Pride3	Working here gives me a sense of pride.					
Pride4	My organisation has an image I am proud to be associated with.					

Section H – Demographic Information

1. Do you personally have an interest in sports?
   - Yes, I actively participate in sports; Yes, I follow sports passively
   - No, I am not interested in sports

2. Gender:
   - Male
   - Female

3. Age:
   - Under 25 years
   - 26–35 years
   - 36–45 years
   - 46–55 years
   - 56 years and above

4. Highest level of education achieved:
   - Primary education or lower
   - Secondary education
   - Post-secondary / higher vocational education
   - Undergraduate / university degree
   - Master's degree or higher

5. How long have you been employed at this company?
   - Up to and including 1 year
   - More than 1 up to and including 3 years
   - More than 3 up to and including 5 years
   - More than 5 up to and including 7 years
   - More than 7 up to and including 10 years
   - More than 10 up to and including 15 years
   - More than 15 up to and including 20 years
   - More than 20 years

6. Position within the company:
   - Other employees
   - Operational / professional staff
   - Middle management / department managers
   - Senior management / company leadership

The survey is now complete. If you want you can share any personal comment. Thank you very much for your participation. Have a great day!

Appendix I: Rotated Factor Matrix With Regression Weights

Note: variables prefixed RET correspond to the Intention to Stay (ITS) construct, formerly labelled "Retention Intention"; the original dataset variable names are retained for consistency with the SPSS output. R_RET3–R_RET5 are reverse-coded items (R_ITS3–R_ITS5 in the structural-model diagrams).

Rotated Factor Matrix[a]

		Factor						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
SAK1	Sports sponsorship creates a positive image for the sponsoring organisation.	0.547					0.391	
SAK2	Sports sponsorship is a positive thing in organisations today.	0.605					0.37	
SAK3	Sports sponsorship should be a regular part of a company's activities.	0.68						
SAK4	I am positively impressed with an organisation that sponsors anything or anyone.	0.575					0.553	
SAK5	I like to see companies supporting worthy causes or events.	0.315					0.441	
SAK6	My employer's sports sponsorship improves my impression of my company.	0.836						
SAK7	My employer's sports sponsorship effort makes me feel more favourable toward my employer.	0.762						
SAK8	My employer's sports sponsorship activity improves my perception of my employer.	0.65						
SAK9	My employer's sports sponsorship activity makes me like my employer more.	0.743						
SAK10	I am informed about the outcomes and benefits of my organisation's sports sponsorship activities.	0.636						
SAK11	I understand how our sports sponsorship activities align with the organisation's values or mission.	0.636						
SAK12	Knowing about our sports sponsorship activities increases my emotional connection to the organisation.	0.777						
SAK13	I feel more motivated at work when I see the organisation involved in meaningful sports sponsorships.	0.736						
SAK14	The way sports sponsorships are communicated internally makes me feel included and valued.	0.654						
SAK15	I talk positively about our sponsorships when speaking with others about my workplace.	0.619	0.363					
SAK16	Our sports sponsorships show that my company cares about the local community.	0.618						
SAK17	I believe our company's reputation in the local community is stronger because of our sponsorships.	0.697						
SPQL1	I like the sports sponsorship engagements of my firm				0.377			
SPQL2	I feel good about the sports sponsorship engagements of my firm				0.467			
SPQL3	The sports sponsorship engagements of my firm appeal to people like me				0.32			
SPQN1	There seem to be a lot of sports sponsorship engagements of my firm airing in the market				0.659			
SPQN2	My firm frequently promotes sports events				0.633			
SPQN3	There is a heavy media schedule supporting the sports sponsorship engagements of my firm				0.693			

OI1	When someone criticises my firm, it feels like a personal insult.			0.821		
OI2	I am very interested in what others think about my firm.			0.567		
OI3	When I talk about my firm, I usually say WE rather than THEY.		0.415	0.351		
OI4	The successes of my firm are my successes.		0.489	0.509		
OI5	If a story in the media criticised my firm, I would feel embarrassed/angered.		0.317	0.697		
OI6	When someone praises my firm, it feels like a personal compliment.		0.454	0.666		
EBI1	My organisation has a strong reputation as an employer		0.433		0.679	
EBI2	My organisation is known as a great place to work		0.481		0.59	
EBI3	I am proud of my organisation's image as an employer.		0.639			
EBI4	People in my field consider my organisation a desirable place of work.		0.525		0.514	
EBI5	Our sport sponsorship activities strengthen our organisation's image as an employer.	0.559				
RET1	I see a future for myself within this company.		0.79			
RET2	If it were up to me, I will definitely be working for this company for the next five years.		0.704			
R_RET3	If I received an attractive job offer from another company, I would take the job.		0.443			0.62
R_RET4	I'm planning on working for another company within a period of three years.		0.524			0.369
R_RET5	If I could start over again, I would choose to work for another company.		0.573			
RET6	I love working for this company.		0.818			
EP1	I am proud to work for my organisation.		0.812			
EP2	I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organisation.		0.8			
EP3	Working here gives me a sense of pride.		0.774			
EP4	My organisation has an image I am proud to be associated with.		0.699			

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

Appendix J: Harman's Single-Factor Test

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.950
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	10765.209
	df	496
	Sig.	.000

Total Variance Explained

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	12.634	39.483	39.483	12.634	39.483	39.483
2	3.891	12.161	51.643			
3	2.043	6.385	58.028			
4	1.417	4.428	62.456			
5	1.047	3.273	65.729			
6	.866	2.708	68.437			
7	.742	2.317	70.754			
8	.699	2.184	72.939			
9	.637	1.991	74.930			
10	.622	1.943	76.872			
11	.561	1.754	78.626			
12	.524	1.639	80.265			
13	.516	1.611	81.876			
14	.494	1.545	83.421			
15	.455	1.421	84.843			
16	.428	1.339	86.182			
17	.396	1.237	87.419			
18	.391	1.222	88.641			
19	.353	1.104	89.745			
20	.344	1.074	90.819			
21	.336	1.050	91.869			
22	.319	.995	92.865			
23	.296	.926	93.791			
24	.284	.888	94.679			
25	.260	.813	95.492			
26	.251	.785	96.277			
27	.241	.752	97.029			
28	.232	.724	97.753			

29	.201	.627	98.380			
30	.183	.572	98.952			
31	.182	.568	99.521			
32	.153	.479	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Appendix K: SPSS Syntax

Note: variables prefixed RET correspond to the Intention to Stay (ITS) construct, which was relabelled from "Retention Intention" during revision. The original dataset variable names are retained here to preserve reproducibility of the analysis. R_RET3–R_RET5 are reverse-coded items (shown as R_ITS3–R_ITS5 in the structural-model diagrams).

```
DATASET ACTIVATE DataSet1.
COMPUTE R_RET3=6-RET3.
COMPUTE R_RET4=6-RET4.
COMPUTE R_RET5=6-RET5.

EXECUTE.

 FACTOR
 /VARIABLES SAK1 SAK2 SAK3 SAK4 SAK5 SAK6 SAK7 SAK8 SAK9 SAK10
SAK11 SAK12 SAK13 SAK14 SAK15 SAK16
   SAK17 SPQL1 SPQL2 SPQL3 SPQN1 SPQN2 SPQN3 OI1 OI2 OI3 OI4 OI5 OI6 EBI1
EBI2 EBI3 EBI4 EBI5 RET1
   RET2 R_RET3 R_RET4 R_RET5 RET6 EP1 EP2 EP3 EP4
 /MISSING LISTWISE
 /ANALYSIS SAK1 SAK2 SAK3 SAK4 SAK5 SAK6 SAK7 SAK8 SAK9 SAK10 SAK11
SAK12 SAK13 SAK14 SAK15 SAK16
   SAK17 SPQL1 SPQL2 SPQL3 SPQN1 SPQN2 SPQN3 OI1 OI2 OI3 OI4 OI5 OI6 EBI1
EBI2 EBI3 EBI4 EBI5 RET1
   RET2 R_RET3 R_RET4 R_RET5 RET6 EP1 EP2 EP3 EP4
 /PRINT INITIAL KMO EXTRACTION ROTATION
 /FORMAT BLANK(0.3)
 /PLOT EIGEN
 /CRITERIA MINEIGEN(1) ITERATE(25)
 /EXTRACTION PAF
 /CRITERIA ITERATE(25)
 /ROTATION VARIMAX
 /METHOD=CORRELATION.

RELIABILITY
 /VARIABLES=SAK1 SAK2 SAK3 SAK4 SAK5 SAK6 SAK7 SAK8 SAK9 SAK10
SAK11 SAK12 SAK13 SAK14 SAK15 SAK16
   SAK17
 /SCALE('ALL VARIABLES') ALL
 /MODEL=ALPHA
/SUMMARY=TOTAL.
```

```
RELIABILITY
  /VARIABLES=SQLP1 SQLP2 SQLP3
  /SCALE('ALL VARIABLES') ALL
  /MODEL=ALPHA
 /SUMMARY=TOTAL.

RELIABILITY
  /VARIABLES=SQNP1 SQNP2 SQNP3
  /SCALE('ALL VARIABLES') ALL
  /MODEL=ALPHA
 /SUMMARY=TOTAL.

RELIABILITY
  /VARIABLES=OI1 OI2 OI3 OI4 OI5 OI6
  /SCALE('ALL VARIABLES') ALL
  /MODEL=ALPHA
 /SUMMARY=TOTAL.

RELIABILITY
  /VARIABLES=EMPB1 EMPB2 EMPB3 EMPB4 EMPB5
  /SCALE('ALL VARIABLES') ALL
  /MODEL=ALPHA
 /SUMMARY=TOTAL.

RELIABILITY
  /VARIABLES=RET1 RET2 R_RET3 R_RET4 R_RET5 RET6
  /SCALE('ALL VARIABLES') ALL
  /MODEL=ALPHA
 /SUMMARY=TOTAL.

RELIABILITY
  /VARIABLES=PRID1 PRID2 PRID3 PRID4
  /SCALE('ALL VARIABLES') ALL
  /MODEL=ALPHA
 /SUMMARY=TOTAL.

  REGRESSION
  /MISSING LISTWISE
  /STATISTICS COEFF OUTS R ANOVA
  /CRITERIA=PIN(.05) POUT(.10)
  /NOORIGIN
```

```
 /DEPENDENT PRID1
 /METHOD=ENTER SAK1 SAK2 SAK3 SAK6 SAK7 SAK8 SAK9 SAK11 SAK12
SAK13 SAK14 SAK15 SAK16 SAK17 SPQL1
   SPQL2 SPQN3 OI1 OI2 OI4 OI5 OI6 EBI1 EBI2 EBI3 EBI4 RET1 RET2 R_RET3
R_RET4 R_RET5 RET6
 /SAVE MAHAL.

* Common Method Bias

FACTOR
 /VARIABLES SAK1 SAK2 SAK3 SAK6 SAK7 SAK8 SAK9 SAK11 SAK12 SAK13
SAK14 SAK15 SAK16 SAK17 SPQL1
   SPQL2 SPQN3 OI1 OI2 OI4 OI5 OI6 EBI1 EBI2 EBI3 EBI4 RET1 RET2 R_RET3
R_RET4 R_RET5 RET6
 /MISSING LISTWISE
 /ANALYSIS SAK1 SAK2 SAK3 SAK6 SAK7 SAK8 SAK9 SAK11 SAK12 SAK13
SAK14 SAK15 SAK16 SAK17 SPQL1
   SPQL2 SPQN3 OI1 OI2 OI4 OI5 OI6 EBI1 EBI2 EBI3 EBI4 RET1 RET2 R_RET3
R_RET4 R_RET5 RET6
 /PRINT INITIAL KMO EXTRACTION
 /CRITERIA FACTORS(1) ITERATE(25)
 /EXTRACTION PC
 /ROTATION NOROTATE
 /METHOD=CORRELATION.

Compute SAK_Avg = (SAK1 + SAK2 + SAK3 + SAK6 + SAK7 + SAK8 + SAK9 + SAK11
+ SAK12 + SAK13 + SAK14 + SAK15 + SAK16 + SAK17 )/14.
Compute SPQL_Avg = (SPQL1 +   SPQL2 + SPQN3 )/3.
Compute OI_Avg = (OI1 + OI2 + OI4 + OI5 + OI6 )/5.
Compute EBI_Avg = (EBI1 +EBI2 + EBI3 + EBI4 )/4.

Compute RI_Avg = (RET1 + RET2 + R_RET3 + R_RET4 + R_RET5 + RET6)/6.
```

Appendix L: Pilot-Study Validation of the Measurement Instrument

Pilot-Study to Validate the Data Collection Tool

Prior to conducting the main analysis, a pilot study was carried out using a separate pilot sample of 183 respondents drawn from the same target population to evaluate the psychometric properties of the measurement instrument. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted on the pilot data to examine the underlying dimensionality of the items and to establish the construct validity of the proposed scales. In addition, the internal consistency of each subscale was assessed through Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients, allowing confirmation of whether the item sets within each construct demonstrated adequate coherence and measurement stability. The pilot testing therefore served as a critical preliminary step to refine the measurement model and ensure that only conceptually and empirically sound constructs would be retained for subsequent confirmatory and structural analyses.

Exploratory Factor Analysis – Pilot Sample (N = 183)

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the pilot sample of 183 respondents to assess the dimensionality and psychometric adequacy of the measurement instrument prior to conducting confirmatory analyses. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) statistic for sampling adequacy was 0.928, which exceeds the recommended threshold of .80 and indicates excellent inter-item correlations. Similarly, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2(946) = 5459.95$, $p < .001$), confirming that the correlation matrix was suitable for factor extraction and that the observed patterns did not approximate an identity matrix. Together, these indices provide strong empirical justification for conducting factor analytic procedures on the pilot dataset.

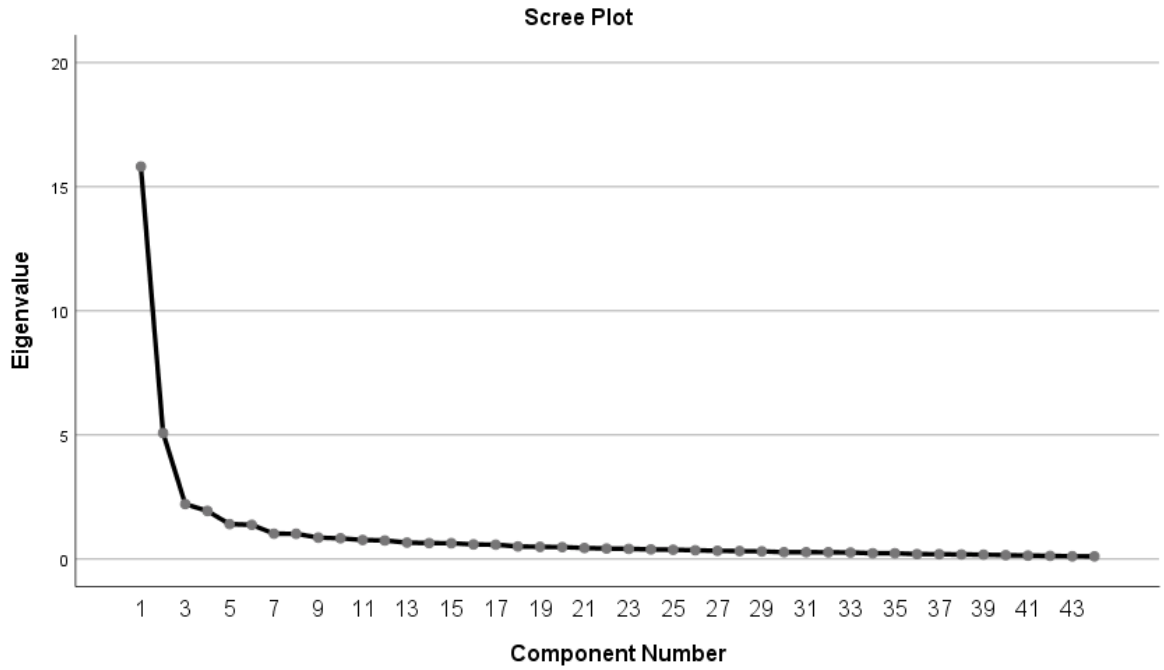
Initial eigenvalues revealed that eight factors exceeded Kaiser's criterion of 1.0, collectively accounting for 65.57% of the total variance. The first component accounted for 35.94%, while the next seven components contributed between 2.3% and 11.5% each. After rotation, the variance became more evenly distributed across factors, with the first two factors explaining 21.42% and 17.55% of the variance, respectively, while the remaining factors captured between 3.07% and 7.62%. The rotated cumulative variance indicates a stable factor solution, suggesting that the items represent multiple underlying constructs rather than one dominant factor.

The rotated factor matrix demonstrates a clear conceptual clustering that aligns with the theoretical model. Items related to sponsorship awareness, attitudinal appreciation, internal communication, and perceived social impact consistently loaded on the first factor, with loadings typically above 0.60, indicating a coherent latent dimension representing Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge.

A second set of items – primarily those capturing psychological attachment, identity-based pride, and emotional responses to organisational reputation – loaded strongly on the second factor. These items represent Organisational Identification, reflecting employees' personal alignment with the organisation. A third group of items loaded predominantly on the third factor and corresponded to the Employer Brand Image domain. These include perceptions of employer attractiveness, perceived reputation as a workplace, and external social standing. Loadings in this domain were consistent and moderate to high (typically >0.60), supporting the construct's internal coherence. The rotated factor matrix with regression weight for all items are provided as Appendix I:

Items related to sponsorship density and external communication, such as perceived frequency of sponsorship activities, media exposure, and event promotion, loaded on the fourth factor. These reflect perceptions of Sponsorship Quantity/Intensity, indicating that respondents interpret sponsorship visibility as a distinct evaluative dimension.

Figure A1: Scree plot of EFA Result with Pilot Sample Data



Source: Own work

Items related to intention to stay formed a separate fifth construct. Positive retention indicators (e.g., "I see my future in this company") loaded strongly in the expected direction, while turnover intention items (e.g., intention to accept outside offers) produced negative loadings, reflecting the inverse conceptual relationship. This polarity demonstrates structural validity and confirms that the items collectively represent a unified retention construct.

Some cross-loadings were observed, particularly among items measuring sponsorship affect and employer pride. Specifically, items related to professional pride, emotional attachment,

or brand appreciation showed partial loadings on employer brand and organisational identification factors. This pattern is theoretically unsurprising, as identity-based pride and perceptions of employer image are closely intertwined in organisational psychology. The partial overlap reflects employees' tendency to interpret sponsorship outcomes not only as brand signals but also as personal affirmation of workplace affiliation.

Overall, the EFA results from the pilot sample provide strong evidence of construct validity, showing that the instrument captures multiple theoretically consistent latent dimensions without substantial factor ambiguity. The emerging structure supports refinement of the measurement model, confirming that the core constructs – sponsorship perceptions, employer brand, organisational identification, and intention to stay – are empirically distinguishable and suitable for confirmatory testing on the full study sample.

Reliability Analysis

To assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for all latent constructs included in the questionnaire. The results demonstrate strong reliability across subscales, with coefficients exceeding commonly accepted thresholds in the organisational and social sciences literature (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

The Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK) construct, composed of 17 items capturing familiarity with and attitudinal responses toward sponsorship activities, exhibited excellent reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$) (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). This indicates a high degree of internal homogeneity and suggests that the items consistently measure employees' cognitive, affective, and informational engagement with sponsorship activities. Both sponsorship perception dimensions demonstrated satisfactory reliability. Perceived Sponsorship Quality, reflecting employees' evaluative judgments about the meaningfulness, attractiveness, and relevance of sponsorship initiatives, produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75 across its three items. Similarly, Perceived Sponsorship Quantity, which assessed perceptions of sponsorship frequency, volume, and external visibility, yielded an alpha of 0.72. While slightly lower, these coefficients are still above the 0.70 benchmark, indicating acceptable internal consistency for exploratory research.

The Organisational Identification (OI) scale demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.85$), confirming that the items capture a coherent psychological attachment to the organisation. Likewise, the Employer Brand Image (EBI) subscale produced an alpha of 0.85, indicating that employees' perceptions of employer reputation, desirability, and employer attractiveness are measured reliably within this construct. The Intention to Stay (ITS) scale showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.93$). This suggests that both positive retention sentiments (e.g., desire to remain) and reverse-coded turnover intentions (e.g., willingness to leave) collectively represent a unified and internally stable attitudinal domain. Finally,

although later excluded from the structural model due to cross-loading, the Employee Pride (EP) scale demonstrated a very high reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.92$). This result indicates that items measuring emotional pride, symbolic attachment, and affective affiliation with the company form a psychometrically robust construct, even if empirically overlapping with employer brand perception in dimensional analysis. Overall, the reliability analysis provides strong evidence that all constructs exhibit satisfactory to excellent internal consistency. The high Cronbach's alpha values support the use of these subscales in subsequent confirmatory and structural modelling procedures.

Table A1: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis with Pilot Sample Data (n=183)

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Reliability	Interpretation
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK)	17	0.94	Excellent
Perceived Sponsorship Quality (SPQL)	3	0.75	Good
Perceived Sponsorship Quantity (SPQN)	3	0.72	Good
Organisational Identification (OI)	6	0.85	Very Good
Employer Brand image (EBI)	5	0.85	Very Good
Intention to Stay (ITS)	6	0.93	Excellent
Employee Pride (EP)	4	0.92	Excellent

Source: Own work

Confirmatory Factor Analysis with Pilot-Sample (Initial Analysis)

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation to evaluate the measurement model consisting of seven latent constructs: Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (F1), Perceived Sponsorship Quality (F2), Perceived Sponsorship Quantity (F3), Organisational Identification (F4), Employer Brand Image (F5), Intention to Stay (F6), and Employee Pride (F7). The model specified 44 observed indicators loading on their respective first-order factors, with all latent variables allowed to correlate.

The CFA results indicate an acceptable fit of the hypothesised seven-factor model to the pilot data. The chi-square statistic was significant, $\chi^2(879) = 1432.93$, $p < .001$, which is expected given the sample size and model complexity. More informative incremental and absolute fit indices show that the model reproduces the observed covariance structure reasonably well: the χ^2/df ratio is 1.63, falling below the commonly recommended upper limit of 3.0; the RMSEA is .059, with a 90% confidence interval of .053–.064 and PCLOSE = .005, indicating close approximate fit. Incremental indices are slightly below the stringent .90 benchmark but approach acceptable levels for complex multi-factor models (CFI = .890, IFI = .891, TLI = .881, NFI = .760). Although the GFI (.739) and AGFI (.706) are modest, parsimony-adjusted indices (PCFI = .827, PNFI = .706) suggest that, relative to its complexity, the model achieves a satisfactory balance between goodness of fit and parsimony. Taken together, these indices support the adequacy of the proposed measurement structure for subsequent refinement and use in the main study.

Factor loadings and convergent validity

Standardised factor loadings were generally strong and statistically significant (all $p < .001$). For Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (F1), loadings ranged from .42 (Q1.122) to .84 (Q1.131), with the majority above .65, indicating that items consistently tap a common underlying construct. Perceived Sponsorship Quality (F2) exhibited loadings between .56 and .81, while Perceived Sponsorship Quantity (F3) showed loadings between .59 and .76, demonstrating satisfactory convergence on their respective factors. For Organisational Identification (F4), loadings ranged from .52 to .88, and for Employer Brand Image (F5) from .54 to .82, again indicating that items capture coherent latent dimensions. Intention to Stay (F6) presented strong loadings (.53–.88), even with the inclusion of reverse-coded items, confirming that the scale effectively represents a unified attitudinal construct. Finally, Employee Pride (F7) displayed very high loadings (.81–.90), evidencing a particularly strong and homogeneous factor. Overall, the magnitude and significance of the standardised loadings provide good evidence of convergent validity for all seven constructs.

Table A2: Standardised and Unstandardised Estimation of CFA Analysis

			Standardised Estimate	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
SAK1	<---	F1	0.783	1			
SAK2	<---	F1	0.694	0.803	0.080	10.060	<.001
SAK3	<---	F1	0.713	0.724	0.070	10.387	<.001
SAK4	<---	F1	0.673	0.809	0.084	9.685	<.001
SAK5	<---	F1	0.754	0.97	0.087	11.135	<.001
SAK6	<---	F1	0.758	0.928	0.083	11.216	<.001
SAK7	<---	F1	0.713	0.813	0.078	10.394	<.001
SAK8	<---	F1	0.638	0.886	0.097	9.092	<.001
SAK9	<---	F1	0.780	0.986	0.085	11.62	<.001
SAK10	<---	F1	0.748	0.967	0.088	11.02	<.001
SAK11	<---	F1	0.814	0.964	0.079	12.283	<.001
SAK12	<---	F1	0.842	1.160	0.090	12.834	<.001
SAK13	<---	F1	0.418	0.398	0.070	5.686	<.001
SAK14	<---	F1	0.617	0.726	0.083	8.748	<.001
SAK15	<---	F1	0.697	0.801	0.079	10.108	<.001
SAK16	<---	F1	0.670	0.692	0.072	9.635	<.001
SAK17	<---	F1	0.646	0.677	0.073	9.224	<.001
SPQL1	<---	F2	0.809	1			
SPQL2	<---	F2	0.803	0.931	0.084	11.055	<.001
SPQL3	<---	F2	0.562	0.677	0.091	7.440	<.001
SPQN1	<---	F3	0.656	1			
SPQN2	<---	F3	0.593	0.951	0.153	6.217	<.001
SPQN3	<---	F3	0.763	1.243	0.177	7.011	<.001
OI1	<---	F4	0.667	1			

To be continued

Table A2: Standardised and Unstandardised Estimation of CFA Analysis (cont.)

			Standardised Estimate	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
OI2	<---	F4	0.613	0.854	0.117	7.328	<.001
OI3	<---	F4	0.519	0.661	0.105	6.306	<.001
OI4	<---	F4	0.744	1.088	0.126	8.650	<.001
OI5	<---	F4	0.683	1.036	0.094	11.058	<.001
OI6	<---	F4	0.877	1.278	0.132	9.675	<.001
EBI1	<---	F5	0.720	1			
EBI2	<---	F5	0.785	1.097	0.108	10.110	<.001
EBI3	<---	F5	0.775	1.167	0.117	9.988	<.001
EBI4	<---	F5	0.823	1.229	0.116	10.586	<.001
EBI5	<---	F5	0.538	0.717	0.104	6.920	<.001
RET1	<---	F6	0.812	1			
RET2	<---	F6	0.745	0.950	0.084	11.307	<.001
R_RET3	<---	F6	0.530	0.660	0.089	7.433	<.001
R_RET4	<---	F6	0.543	0.700	0.092	7.638	<.001
R_RET5	<---	F6	0.583	0.743	0.089	8.297	<.001
RET6	<---	F6	0.881	0.968	0.068	14.338	<.001
EP1	<---	F7	0.897	1			
EP2	<---	F7	0.885	1.066	0.059	18.026	<.001
EP3	<---	F7	0.863	0.992	0.058	17.034	<.001
EP4	<---	F7	0.811	0.892	0.060	14.960	<.001

Source: Own work

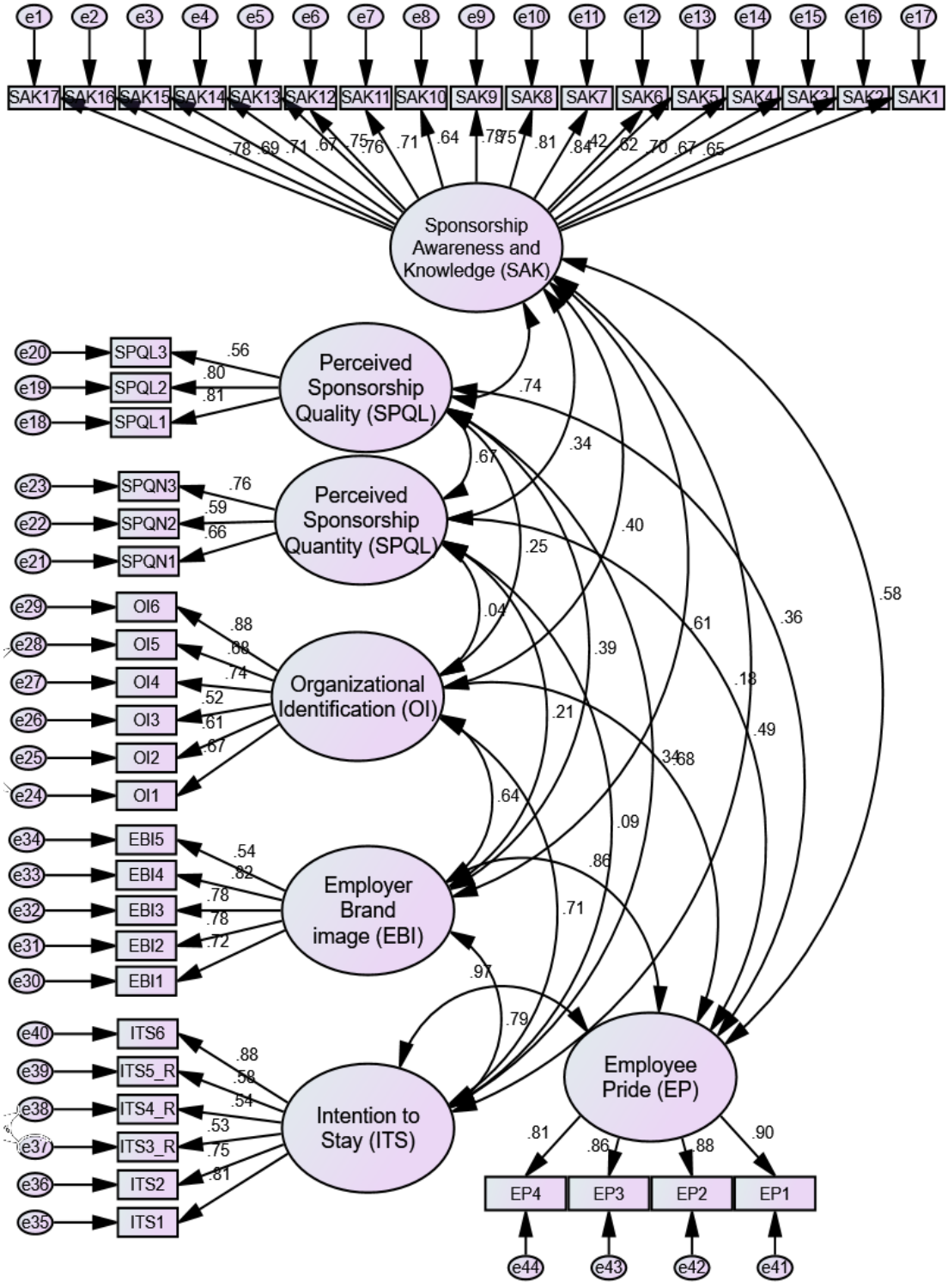
Inter-factor Correlations and Discriminant Validity

Latent factor correlations were positive and mostly moderate, consistent with theoretical expectations that perceptions of sponsorship, identification, employer brand, pride, and retention are related but distinct aspects of employees' psychological relationship with the organisation. For example, Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge correlated strongly with Perceived Sponsorship Quality (r = .74) and Employer Brand Image (r = .61), suggesting that employees who are more informed about sponsorships also evaluate them more favourably and view their employer more positively. Organisational Identification showed substantial correlations with Employer Brand Image (r = .64) and Employee Pride (r = .68), consistent with identity-based accounts of employer branding.

However, several correlations – particularly between Employer Brand Image and Employee Pride (r = .86) and between Intention to Stay and Employee Pride (r = .97) – are very high, indicating potential conceptual overlap and raising questions about strict discriminant validity among these constructs. In summary, the CFA on the pilot sample provides substantial support for the reliability and convergent validity of the seven hypothesised constructs and indicates that the measurement model has an overall acceptable level of fit. At the same time, the high correlations among Employer Brand Image, Employee Pride, and

Intention to Stay point to overlapping variance that will be addressed in the subsequent refinement of the measurement and structural models using the full-sample data.

Figure A2: Initial CFA results with Pilot Sample Data



Source: Own work

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Revised)

Following the exploratory phase, a revised CFA model was estimated using 183 pilot responses to assess the factorial validity of the refined measurement structure. The pilot testing phase resulted in systematic purification of the measurement instrument. Specifically, items were removed based on the following criteria:

- low standardised factor loadings (< .50),
- high cross-loadings across multiple constructs,
- high modification indices indicating item redundancy, and
- large standardised residuals suggesting poor item fit.

As a result of this refinement process, twelve items (including the four Pride items) were deleted from the original scale pool, leading to a reduced model comprising 32 observed items loading on five latent constructs: Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK), Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE), Organisational Identification (OI), Employer Brand Image (EBI), and Intention to Stay (ITS). The results demonstrated a substantial improvement in model performance compared to the initial CFA model.

Factor Loadings and Indicator Reliability

All constructs exhibited strong factor loadings, providing evidence of convergent validity. For Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (F1), standardised regression coefficients ranged from 0.637 to 0.847, with the majority above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating that items consistently captured employees' awareness and knowledge of sponsorship initiatives. The Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (F2) construct demonstrated particularly high standardised coefficients (SPQL1 = 0.86, SPQL2 = 0.79, and SPQN=0.50), confirming a solid three-item structure.

Organisational Identification (F4) also performed well, with loading estimates from 0.635 to 0.858, supporting theoretical expectations that identification is multidimensional and internally consistent. Employer Brand Image (F5) showed strong indicator reliability, with standardised loadings between 0.727 and 0.832, suggesting that the four EBI items adequately represent perceptions of the organisation as an employer. Finally, Intention to Stay (F6) revealed the strongest item performance overall, with loadings from 0.558 to 0.842, demonstrating adequate to excellent measurement reliability. Although R_RET3–R_RET5 exhibited slightly lower coefficients (< 0.60), these remained within an acceptable range for pilot studies, given that their theoretical relevance is supported in previous literature. Collectively, these results indicate that the retained items adequately explain their respective latent constructs and represent meaningful psychometric improvements over the initial model.

Model Fit Evaluation

The revised CFA model produced an overall improved fit relative to the initial measurement model. The χ^2 statistic was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 741.199$, df = 424, $p < .001$), which is expected for complex models and moderate sample sizes. The normalised chi-square ratio ($\chi^2/df = 1.748$) fell well below the upper threshold of 3.0, suggesting an acceptable model–data correspondence. Comparative fit indices demonstrated robust performance: CFI = .906; TLI = .897; IFI = .907; NFI = .807; RFI = .789.

Values above .90 for CFI/IFI indicate that the final model captures the covariance structure of the data adequately. The TLI value near .90 also suggests a well-specified measurement model. Although the NFI is slightly below the conventional 0.90 benchmark, CFA literature consistently emphasises CFI/TLI over NFI due to sample-size sensitivity. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = .064, 90% CI [.056, .072]) falls below the widely accepted upper bound of .08 and is close to the ideal range of .05–.06. Taken together, the model exhibits good absolute fit, strong incremental fit, and satisfactory parsimony, confirming that the refined factor structure provides a stable and interpretable representation of the underlying constructs.

Table A3: Standardised and Unstandardised Estimation of Revised CFA Analysis

			Standardised	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
SAK17	<---	F1	0.784	1			
SAK16	<---	F1	0.687	0.793	0.080	9.920	<.001
SAK15	<---	F1	0.709	0.719	0.070	10.300	<.001
SAK14	<---	F1	0.671	0.805	0.084	9.635	<.001
SAK13	<---	F1	0.753	0.967	0.087	11.103	<.001
SAK12	<---	F1	0.756	0.924	0.083	11.166	<.001
SAK11	<---	F1	0.712	0.811	0.078	10.367	<.001
SAK9	<---	F1	0.786	0.993	0.085	11.729	<.001
SAK8	<---	F1	0.757	0.978	0.087	11.183	<.001
SAK7	<---	F1	0.811	0.959	0.079	12.215	<.001
SAK6	<---	F1	0.847	1.165	0.090	12.929	<.001
SAK3	<---	F1	0.693	0.795	0.079	10.021	<.001
SAK2	<---	F1	0.664	0.685	0.072	9.531	<.001
SAK1	<---	F1	0.637	0.666	0.074	9.063	<.001
SPQL2	<---	F2	0.776	1			
SPQL1	<---	F2	0.866	1.190	0.126	9.475	<.001
SPQN3		F2	0.510	0.564	0.047	11.888	<.001

To be continued

Table A3: Standardised and Unstandardised Estimation of Revised CFA Analysis (cont.)

			Standardised	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
OI1	<---	F4	0.734	1			
OI2	<---	F4	0.635	0.804	0.098	8.171	<.001
OI4	<---	F4	0.715	0.950	0.103	9.219	<.001
OI5	<---	F4	0.746	1.029	0.107	9.618	<.001
OI6	<---	F4	0.858	1.137	0.104	10.949	<.001
EBI1	<---	F5	0.727	1			
EBI2	<---	F5	0.804	1.114	0.108	10.342	<.001
EBI3	<---	F5	0.759	1.131	0.116	9.763	<.001
EBI4	<---	F5	0.832	1.231	0.115	10.667	<.001
RET1	<---	F6	0.822	1			
RET2	<---	F6	0.765	0.963	0.084	11.428	<.001
R_RET3	<---	F6	0.558	0.685	0.089	7.720	<.001
R_RET4	<---	F6	0.596	0.758	0.091	8.340	<.001
R_RET5	<---	F6	0.588	0.741	0.090	8.218	<.001
RET6	<---	F6	0.842	0.914	0.070	12.98	<.001

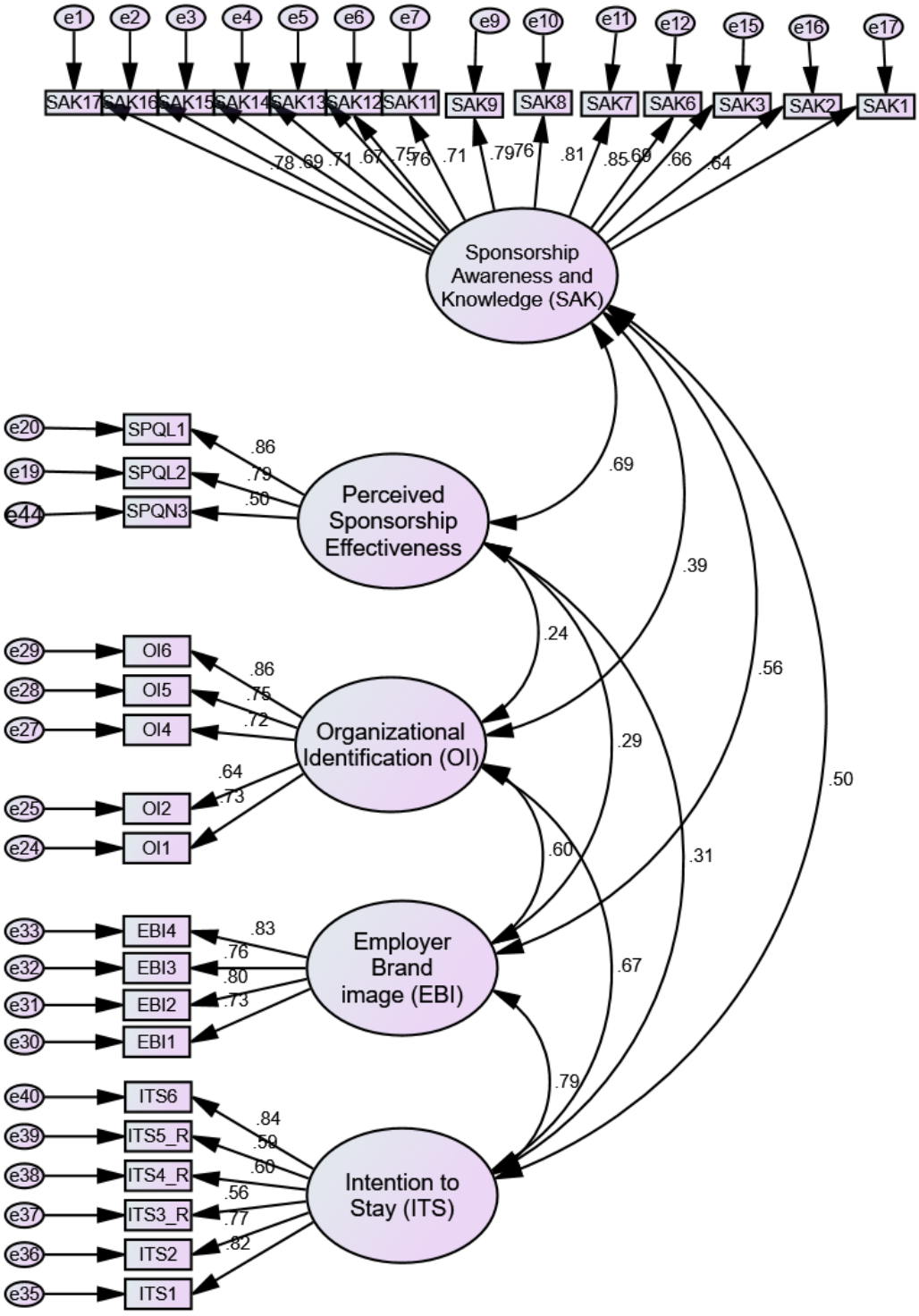
Source: Own work

Latent Construct Relationships

Covariance estimates between latent variables further validate the conceptual alignment of the model. Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (F1) demonstrated moderate to strong correlations with SPQN (r = .712), Employer Brand Image (r = .564), and Intention to Stay (r = .496), underscoring the central role of sponsorship exposure in shaping brand perceptions and employee behavioural intentions. Substantial inter-construct associations were seen between Employer Brand Image and Intention to Stay (r = .788), which is consistent with employer branding research suggesting that positive organisational image strengthens organisational attachment and decreases turnover intentions. Organisational Identification also displayed meaningful linkages to EBI (r = .604) and ITS (r = .672), supporting theoretical predictions regarding identity-based motivations and retention behaviour. These latent correlations indicate conceptual coherence and align with established theoretical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory and Employer Branding Theory.

The revised CFA confirms that the refined measurement model demonstrates adequate psychometric performance across several validity dimensions. The constructs show strong item reliability, meaningful theoretical interrelations, and fit indices within acceptable statistical thresholds. The improved fit relative to the initial CFA validates the item reduction decisions made after EFA and supports the suitability of the final scale for use in the subsequent full-scale survey.

Figure A3: The Revised CFA Model with Standardised Regression Coefficient for Pilot Study



Source: Own work

Convergent Validity (Composite Reliability and AVE)

Convergent validity was assessed using Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each latent construct, based on the standardised loadings from the revised CFA model. CR was computed as:

$$CR = \frac{(\sum \lambda_i)^2}{(\sum \lambda_i)^2 + \sum \theta_i},$$

where λ_i are standardized factor loadings and θ_i are corresponding error variances. AVE was calculated as

$$AVE = \frac{\sum \lambda_i^2}{k}$$

Table A4: Composite Reliability and Average Variance Extracted

Construct	**CR**	**AVE**	**√AVE**
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK)	0.943	0.541	0.736
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE)	0.806	0.676	0.822
Organisational Identification (OI)	0.858	0.549	0.741
Employer Brand Image (EBI)	0.862	0.611	0.782
Intention to Stay (ITS)	0.852	0.497	0.705

Source: Own work

All CR values are well above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating good internal consistency for each factor. The AVE values for SAK, SPE, OI, and EBI are all above the conventional cut-off of 0.50, suggesting that these constructs explain more than half of the variance in their indicators. The AVE for Intention to Stay (0.497) is marginally below 0.50, but, given the strong CR (0.85) and substantial factor loadings (0.56–0.84), it can be considered acceptable in the context of a pilot study. Overall, the pattern of CR and AVE statistics provides strong evidence of convergent validity for the refined measurement scales.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, which requires that the square root of AVE for each construct be greater than its correlations with other constructs. The square roots of AVE (shown in the Table A5 above) range from 0.705 to 0.822. Inter-construct correlations from the CFA were as follows:

Table A5: Correlation Matrix of Latent Constructs

Construct	√AVE	SAK	PSE	OI	EBI	ITS
SAK	**0.743**	1				
PSE	**0.821**	0.71	1			
OI	**0.726**	0.39	0.25	1		
EBI	**0.796**	0.56	0.3	0.6	1	
ITS	**0.787**	0.5	0.33	0.67	0.79	1

Note: SAK = Sponsorship Awareness & Knowledge; SPE = Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness; OI = Organisational Identification; EBI = Employer Brand Image; ITS = Intention to Stay

Source: Own work

For most construct pairs, the square root of AVE for each construct clearly exceeds the corresponding inter-factor correlation. This pattern indicates adequate discriminant validity among SAK, SPE, OI, and EBI. However, the correlation between Employer Brand Image and Intention to Stay is relatively high ($r = 0.79$; $r^2 \approx 0.62$), exceeding the AVE for both constructs (0.61 and 0.50, respectively). This suggests partial overlap between EBI and ITS, i.e., employees who perceive their employer as highly attractive also tend to report strong intentions to remain, and these constructs are not entirely distinct at the empirical level. Given the strong theoretical justification for treating employer brand perceptions and intention to stay as conceptually different, both constructs were retained, but the high association is acknowledged as a limitation and interpreted cautiously in the structural analysis. Aside from this pair, the Fornell–Larcker criterion is largely satisfied, supporting discriminant validity across the majority of constructs.

In conclusion, discriminant validity was assessed using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio approach. The square roots of AVE values exceeded their respective inter-construct correlations, confirming that each latent variable shared greater variance with its own indicators than with other constructs. HTMT values ranged from 0.32 to 0.84, remaining below the conservative 0.85 threshold recommended for social science research. These results demonstrate that the proposed measurement model maintains adequate

discriminant validity and that the latent constructs represent conceptually distinct dimensions.

Assessment of Common Method Variance (CMV)

Potential common method variance (CMV) was examined using the Harman single-factor test applied to the pilot data. An unrotated exploratory factor analysis including all 32 initial items yielded a first factor that accounted for approximately 36% of the total variance, which is well below the often-cited threshold of 50% for concern about a dominant general method factor. Moreover, the CFA results demonstrate a clearly superior fit for the multi-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 1.75$, CFI ≈ .91, RMSEA ≈ .06) compared with what would be expected from any plausible single-factor representation, further indicating that the observed covariance structure is not driven by a single underlying method artifact. Taken together, these findings suggest that CMV is unlikely to pose a serious threat to the validity of the measurement model in this pilot study.

Supplementary tables relocated from Chapter 5 (data screening and demographic mean comparisons).

Table A6: Result of Univariate Outliers Based on Standardised values

Construct Variable	Item	Standardised value (Z-Score)	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge (SAK)	SAK1	-3.77	0.87
	SAK2	-3.56	1.00
	SAK3	-2.70	0.99
	SAK6	-2.20	1.36
	SAK7	-2.40	1.12
	SAK8	-2.39	1.21
	SAK9	-2.31	1.26
	SAK11	-2.75	1.27
	SAK12	-2.02	1.49
	SAK13	-1.85	1.54
	SAK14	-2.15	1.51
	SAK15	-3.12	0.89
	SAK16	-2.88	1.03
	SAK17	-2.77	1.05
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness (PSE)	SPQL1	-2.92	0.98
	SPQL2	-2.90	1.05
	SPQN3	-2.75	1.21
Organisational Identification (OI)	OI1	-1.74	1.79
	OI2	-2.25	1.45
	OI4	-3.00	1.13
	OI5	-2.52	1.24
	OI6	-2.58	1.27
Employer Brand image (EBI)	EBI1	-2.97	1.20
	EBI2	-2.99	1.62
	EBI3	-3.13	1.22
	EBI4	-2.81	1.47
Intention to Stay (ITS)	ITS1	-2.91	1.20
	ITS2	-2.77	1.01
	R_ITS3	-1.44	2.00
	R_ITS4	-2.69	1.02
	R_ITS5	-2.46	1.21
	ITS6	-3.87	1.05

Source: Own work

Table A7: ANOVA Results based on Qualification

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge	Between Groups	3.166	4	.791	1.169	.323
	Within Groups	334.383	494	.677		
	Total	337.549	498			
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness	Between Groups	.620	4	.155	.209	.933
	Within Groups	366.143	494	.741		
	Total	366.763	498			
Organisational Identification	Between Groups	5.395	4	1.349	1.851	.118
	Within Groups	359.993	494	.729		
	Total	365.388	498			
Employer Brand image	Between Groups	2.868	4	.717	1.134	.340
	Within Groups	312.533	494	.633		
	Total	315.402	498			
Intention to Stay	Between Groups	2.512	4	.628	1.019	.397
	Within Groups	304.317	494	.616		
	Total	306.829	498			

Source: Own work

Table A8: ANOVA Results based on Age Groups

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge	Between Groups	12.075	4	3.019	4.582	.001
	Within Groups	325.474	494	.659		
	Total	337.549	498			
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness	Between Groups	2.539	4	.635	.861	.487
	Within Groups	364.224	494	.737		
	Total	366.763	498			
Organisational Identification	Between Groups	22.544	4	5.636	8.121	.000
	Within Groups	342.844	494	.694		
	Total	365.388	498			
Employer Brand image	Between Groups	2.917	4	.729	1.153	.331
	Within Groups	312.485	494	.633		
	Total	315.402	498			
Intention to Stay	Between Groups	3.297	4	.824	1.342	.253
	Within Groups	303.531	494	.614		
	Total	306.829	498			

Source: Own work

Table A9: ANOVA Results based on Employment Experience

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge	Between Groups	10.819	7	1.546	2.323	.024
	Within Groups	326.730	491	.665		
	Total	337.549	498			
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness	Between Groups	12.943	7	1.849	2.566	.013
	Within Groups	353.820	491	.721		
	Total	366.763	498			
Organisational Identification	Between Groups	16.781	7	2.397	3.376	.002
	Within Groups	348.607	491	.710		
	Total	365.388	498			
Employer Brand image	Between Groups	14.720	7	2.103	3.434	.001
	Within Groups	300.682	491	.612		
	Total	315.402	498			
Intention to Stay	Between Groups	10.751	7	1.536	2.547	.014
	Within Groups	296.078	491	.603		
	Total	306.829	498			

Source: Own work

Table A10: ANOVA Results based on Job Position

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Sponsorship Awareness and Knowledge	Between Groups	2.291	3	.764	1.127	.337
	Within Groups	335.258	495	.677		
	Total	337.549	498			
Perceived Sponsorship Effectiveness	Between Groups	.679	3	.226	.306	.821
	Within Groups	366.084	495	.740		
	Total	366.763	498			
Organisational Identification	Between Groups	18.986	3	6.329	9.043	.000
	Within Groups	346.402	495	.700		
	Total	365.388	498			
Employer Brand image	Between Groups	2.469	3	.823	1.302	.273
	Within Groups	312.933	495	.632		
	Total	315.402	498			
Intention to Stay	Between Groups	6.700	3	2.233	3.683	.012
	Within Groups	300.129	495	.606		
	Total	306.829	498			

Source: Own work