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**Sport Marketing: Cooperation of Sports Organizations with Pakistani Athletes**

**Farah Zahid**

Higher Education Department, Government of Punjab, Pakistan

**Rida Qasim**

Department of Emerging Allied Health Sciences, FAHS, Superior University, Lahore, Pakistan

**Muhammad Abdul Jabar Adnan (Corresponding Author)**

Department of Sport Sciences and Physical Education, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

**Hafiz Ghulam Nabi**

Department of Sport Sciences and Physical Education, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

**Sehab Afzal**

Department of Sport Sciences and Physical Education, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

**Tahira Fozia**

Higher Education Department, Government of Punjab, Pakistan

**Muhammad Tahir Latif**

Higher Education Department, Government of Punjab, Pakistan

**ABSTRACT**

*Sport marketing and athlete sponsorship represent increasingly important strategic tools for organizations seeking to engage consumers, build brand equity, and expand market presence in Pakistan's growing sports economy. Despite the global expansion of sports sponsorship estimated at over USD 65 billion annually and the Pakistani sports market remains largely under-theorized and under-researched, particularly with regard to structured frameworks for initiating and managing sponsor athlete relationships. This paper investigates how sports organizations can effectively cooperate with Pakistani athletes and presents a step-by-step practical guideline for initiating, implementing, and evaluating such sponsorship relationships. Employing a qualitative research design, the study draws on: (1) a comprehensive review of sport marketing and sponsorship theory, including the Sport Marketing Framework, the Lifecycle of Sponsorship, and the Four Domains of Sport Marketing; (2) in-depth unstructured interviews with the head representative branch and a sponsorship property of HEAD Swimming Pakistan; and (3) an online survey of 100 respondents examining consumer attitudes toward athletes, sponsorship, and endorsed advertising. Results indicate that 55% of respondents prefer products used by their role model athletes, 61% value athletes' endorsement in purchase decisions, 62% hold a neutral to positive attitude toward sponsored athletes, and 77% exhibit a positive attitude toward sponsored advertising. Interview findings highlight the divergent motivations of sponsors (brand credibility and authentic endorsement) and athletes (financial support for competitive participation), a tension described as a language gap between commercial and athletic priorities. Synthesizing theoretical frameworks with empirical findings and the lived experience of HEAD Swimming Pakistan, the study produces a seven-step sponsorship development guideline covering: sport market research, objective-setting, athlete selection and typology, budget and sponsorship type decisions, sponsorship agreement design, decision-making, and performance*

*evaluation. The research concludes that the Pakistani sport sponsorship landscape is at a developing stage, with significant opportunity for growth through structured, mutually beneficial sponsor athlete relationships. Practical implications are offered for both Pakistani and international organizations seeking to enter or expand within the Pakistani athlete sponsorship market.*

**Keywords:** Sport Marketing, Sports Sponsorship, Athlete Endorsement, Pakistan, Sponsorship Lifecycle, Brand Awareness, HEAD Swimming Pakistan, Marketing Strategy

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background and Context**

Marketing is fundamentally the science and art of investigating, creating, and delivering value to satisfy customer needs and generate sustainable competitive advantage (Kotler et al., 2015). Within the specialized domain of sport, these principles converge with the unique attributes of athletic performance, fan loyalty, and event-based consumption to create a distinctive marketing environment. As defined by Smith and Stewart (2015), sport marketing is a process of developing relationships between a sport brand and its consumers, with the primary goal of planning and executing how a sport brand positions itself and communicates its value to a target audience.

Sport marketing operates through two complementary channels: marketing of sport the direct promotion of sport products, athletes, and events and marketing through sport the use of sport properties and athletes as conduits to reach wider consumer segments on behalf of non-sport brands (Scola & Gordon, 2019; Fullerton & Merz, 2008). Both modalities are anchored in the concept of athlete endorsement: the capacity of athletes, by virtue of their public visibility, performance credibility, and role-model status, to lend authentic commercial appeal to partner brands.

Globally, sports sponsorship has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the marketing communications mix. According to Statista (2018), North America has maintained leadership in global sponsorship spending since 2006, with worldwide figures exceeding USD 65 billion annually. Major international brands including Nike, Adidas, JBL, and Adidas Pakistan have long recognized the value of cooperation with Pakistani athletes as a mechanism for brand building, market penetration, and consumer engagement yet systematic, theoretically grounded frameworks for structuring such relationships within the Pakistani market context remain underdeveloped.

Pakistan's sports economy presents a distinctive combination of characteristics: an increasingly large and youthful population with growing interest in sport participation and spectatorship; a competitive inter-varsity and national sports program administered by the Higher Education Commission (HEC); a rapidly expanding social media ecosystem through which athlete-brand interactions are visible and scalable; and a sponsorship culture that remains at a developing stage, characterized by informal relationships, limited formal agreements, and divergent expectations between sponsors and athletes (Gill et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2021). These conditions create both opportunity and challenge for organizations seeking to enter the Pakistani athlete sponsorship market.

The present research addresses this gap by developing an evidence-based, practical guideline for sports organizations whether Pakistani or international seeking to initiate, manage, and evaluate cooperative sponsorship relationships with Pakistani athletes. The guideline synthesizes insights from established theoretical frameworks, empirical findings from interviews with HEAD Swimming Pakistan representatives, and consumer attitude data from an online survey of 100 respondents.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

The study pursued the following objectives: (1) to review and synthesize the theoretical foundations of sport marketing and athlete sponsorship relevant to the Pakistani context; (2) to examine how sports organizations exemplified by HEAD Swimming Pakistan currently initiate and manage cooperation with Pakistani athletes; (3) to assess consumer attitudes toward athlete role models, endorsed products, and sponsored advertising in Pakistan; and (4) to produce a practical, step-by-step guideline for organizations seeking to establish sponsor–athlete relationships in Pakistan.

## 1.3 Research Questions

The primary research question is: How can sports organizations effectively initiate and manage cooperative relationships with Pakistani athletes? Sub-questions include: (i) How should organizations identify and select suitable athlete partners? (ii) What personal and professional characteristics are important in athlete selection? (iii) What are the advantages and disadvantages of athlete sponsorship in the Pakistani context? (iv) How can athlete sponsorship be leveraged as a strategic marketing tool?

## 1.4 Delimitations

This study focuses specifically on the Pakistani sports market and athlete sponsorship within it. While international examples and theoretical frameworks are drawn upon for analytical grounding, the empirical research and practical guidelines are designed for application within Pakistan. The empirical component centers on the sponsorship practices of HEAD Swimming Pakistan as a case organization, supplemented by survey data on consumer attitudes. The target audience comprises sports organizations domestic and international seeking to engage Pakistani athletes as sponsorship properties.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Defining Sport Marketing

Sport marketing as a scholarly and applied field has evolved significantly since its emergence in the 1970s. Chadwick (2005) describes it as a process through which contests with uncertain outcomes are staged, creating opportunities for the simultaneous fulfilment of objectives among sport customers, businesses, participants, and allied organizations. This definition emphasizes the centrality of competitive uncertainty the spectatorial and participatory appeal that distinguishes sport as a marketing vehicle from conventional product categories.

Smith and Stewart (2015) advance a comprehensive Sport Marketing Framework comprising four sequential phases: identifying sport marketing opportunities; developing a sport marketing strategy; planning the sport marketing mix; and implementing and controlling the strategy. The third phase planning the marketing mix encompasses six elements: product, price, place, promotion, sponsorship, and services. Sponsorship occupies a structurally distinctive position within this mix because it operates through relational rather than transactional mechanisms: it builds brand associations through the symbolic transfer of athlete or event attributes to the sponsoring brand (Meenaghan & Shipley, 1999).

The Four Domains of Sport Marketing framework, developed by Fullerton and Merz (2008), provides a further conceptual map of the field, distinguishing between theme-based, alignment-based, product-based, and sports-based strategies across both sport-related and non-sport-related product categories. This framework clarifies that the two fundamental types of sport marketing of sport and through sport are not mutually exclusive but rather represent complementary strategic orientations available to organizations with different product portfolios and consumer relationships.

## 2.2 The Sport Marketing Landscape in Pakistan

Pakistan's sports marketing landscape is characterized by rapid evolution alongside significant structural underdevelopment. The country has produced internationally recognized athletes across multiple disciplines cricket, squash, hockey, swimming, athletics, and increasingly e-sports creating a pool of commercially viable sponsorship properties at both elite and emerging levels. Nike's celebrated cooperation with Pakistani women athletes, culminating in the re-imagined 'What are girls made of' campaign featuring elite Pakistani female athletes, illustrates how multinational brands have leveraged Pakistani athlete visibility to communicate values of empowerment, strength, and aspiration (Prasad, 2014).

However, the infrastructure supporting systematic athlete sponsorship including formal agency representation, standardized agreement frameworks, athlete brand management education, and performance measurement tools remains nascent. Hussain et al. (2021) documented the growing participation of Pakistani women in competitive gaming and e-sports, reflecting broader trends in Pakistani sport diversification. Yet across these emerging sport categories, athletes frequently navigate sponsorship relationships without formal support, while organizations approach athlete selection and management on an ad hoc basis.

The Pakistani sponsorship market is further shaped by the dominance of informal financial exchange norms. As the interviews conducted for the present study reveal, Pakistani sponsors frequently prefer product-in-kind arrangements over financial support, while athletes seek financial backing to cover competition costs a structural misalignment that limits the depth and sustainability of many sponsorship relationships in the domestic market.

## 2.3 The Phenomenon and Typology of Athlete Sponsorship

Athlete sponsorship is a contractual relationship in which an organization provides goods, services, or financial support to an athlete in exchange for commercial benefits including brand promotion, image endorsement, and market access (Fahy, Farrelly & Quester, 2004). Gardner and Shuman (1988) define sponsorship as investment in causes or events to support corporate and marketing objectives such as image enhancement and brand awareness. Gross (2014) operationalizes it as a business-oriented relationship combining cash, in-kind support, or services in exchange for exploitable commercial potential.

The sponsorship literature identifies several distinct typologies applicable to athlete cooperation. Product sponsorship involves providing branded equipment, apparel, or goods to athletes who wear or use them in competition and social media contexts, generating authentic visual endorsement. Service sponsorship extends this logic to non-tangible offerings such as medical, travel, or nutritional services. Financial sponsorship a salary-equivalent mechanism is reserved predominantly for high-profile athletes capable of generating substantial brand exposure. Commission sponsorship rewards athletes proportionally for consumer conversions attributable to their endorsement. Competition sponsorship, accommodation and transport sponsorship, and brand ambassadorship represent further arrangements along a continuum from in-kind to financial commitment (Saunders, 2016; Smith & Stewart, 2015).

Four athlete typologies shape the strategic fit between sponsoring organization and sponsorship property (Saunders, 2016). Aspirational athletes motivate through work ethic and goal pursuit rather than peak performance credentials. Relatable athletes share authentic lived experience including struggles and limitations. Informational athletes provide detailed, credible product knowledge to their audiences. Inspirational athletes including Olympic medalists and elite international competitors function as aspirational role models capable of influencing large audiences. The appropriate typology selection depends on the organization's brand values, target audience, and commercial objectives.

## 2.4 Challenges in Sport Sponsorship

Three primary challenges confront organizations entering athlete sponsorship arrangements. The first is the absence of standardized return-on-investment (ROI) measurement. Unlike conventional advertising, sponsorship effects are diffuse, delayed, and mediated by multiple contextual variables making pre-commitment ROI estimation inherently approximate (Mazodier, Henderson & Beck, 2018). Organizations must develop proxy metrics such as social media reach, brand recognition uplift, and consumer recall to evaluate effectiveness.

The second challenge is athlete reputation risk. High-profile cases such as the suspension of sponsorship agreements between Nike, Porsche, and Tag Heuer with Maria Sharapova following her positive drug test at the 2016 Australian Open illustrate the reputational exposure inherent in tying brand image to individual athletic performance and conduct (Kwak, Lee & Chan-Olmsted, 2018). In the Pakistani context, where formal athlete management systems are limited, due diligence in character and lifestyle assessment becomes particularly important.

The third challenge is the conceptual confusion between sponsorship and donation. Some organizations in Pakistan approach athlete cooperation as philanthropy rather than strategic investment, resulting in unrealistic expectations and abandoned relationships. Effective sponsorship is a bilateral commercial arrangement generating measurable benefits for both parties; clarity on this distinction is essential for sustainable cooperation (Jeanrenaud, 2006; Volozova, 2016).

## 2.5 The Lifecycle of Sponsorship

The Lifecycle of Sponsorship framework, proposed by Saunders (2016), provides the principal theoretical scaffolding for the empirical guideline developed in this study. The lifecycle comprises three sequential phases: Obtain, Maintain, and Retain.

The Obtain phase encompasses all pre-implementation activities: conducting sport market research, defining sponsorship objectives, identifying and analyzing potential athlete partners, budgeting, selecting the appropriate sponsorship type, drafting the sponsorship agreement, and making the final cooperation decision. This phase is fundamentally analytical and strategic, requiring organizations to align their marketing objectives with the commercial profile and personal attributes of potential sponsorship properties.

The Maintain phase covers strategy implementation: signing the sponsorship agreement, launching the project, and managing ongoing athlete relationships through the five implementation pillars of leadership and commitment, communication and delegation, teamwork and project management, rewards and reinforcement, and control and feedback (Smith & Stewart, 2015). The quality of this phase determines whether the sponsorship agreement translates into authentic brand value or remains a nominal commercial arrangement. The Retain phase involves systematic performance evaluation: measuring brand awareness and recognition uplift, analyzing tangible commercial benefits (sales, traffic, conversion), collecting feedback from sponsorship properties, and deciding whether to renew, modify, or terminate the agreement. A six-step control process setting performance measures, defining critical success factors, measuring performance, comparing results, identifying variations, and making corrections guides this analytical phase (Yuan et al., 2009).

## 2.6 Social Media as a Sponsorship Platform

The emergence of social media as a dominant sport marketing channel has fundamentally transformed the sponsorship landscape (Eagleman, 2013). Platforms including Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter enable athletes to communicate directly with fan communities, amplify branded content, and generate measurable engagement metrics that proxy consumer awareness and attitude change. Lesaule and Bouvier (2017) identified social media as the

primary driver of contemporary athlete sponsorship effectiveness, a finding corroborated by Doyle, Su and Kunkel (2020) in their analysis of athlete branding on Instagram.

For Pakistani organizations, the dominance of Instagram as the preferred platform confirmed by 53% of survey respondents in the present study presents a cost-effective and scalable channel for amplifying athlete brand cooperation. Content strategies that emphasise athlete authenticity, product use-in-context, and community engagement are most likely to generate the organic consumer resonance that differentiates sponsorship from conventional advertising.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research design combining document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and an online survey. The qualitative approach was appropriate to the exploratory and prescriptive character of the research: the goal was not to test causal hypotheses but to develop a contextually grounded, practically applicable guideline for athlete sponsorship in Pakistan. Qualitative methods support the depth of understanding required to capture the motivational complexity, relational dynamics, and contextual specificities of the Pakistani athlete sponsorship market (DeFranzo, 2011).

#### **3.2 Case Organization: HEAD Swimming Pakistan**

HEAD Swimming Pakistan, a subsidiary of HEAD PK Ltd., was selected as the primary empirical case for the study. HEAD is a globally recognized manufacturer of premium sporting goods and apparel across skiing, snowboarding, tennis, paddle sports, squash, and swimming. HEAD Swimming Pakistan's philosophy prioritizes product quality, with collections spanning women's, men's, and children's competitive and recreational swimwear and equipment. The organization has sponsored Pakistani athletes for approximately four years and, at the time of data collection, maintained active sponsorship relationships with five athletes. In 2016, HEAD Swimming Pakistan served as general sponsor of SwimRun Lake, affirming its commitment to competitive sport development in Pakistan.

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

##### **3.3.1 Interviews**

Two unstructured individual interviews were conducted with HEAD Swimming Pakistan representatives. The first was with Amna Inam (head of the representative branch), who provided the organizational perspective on sponsorship objectives, athlete requirements, selection processes, and overall cooperation experience. The second was with Bisma, a sponsorship property (athlete ambassador) of HEAD Swimming Pakistan, who offered the athlete perspective on sponsorship motivation, experience, advantages, and desired improvements. Unstructured interviews were selected to allow respondents to elaborate freely on topics of significance from their own experience, enabling rich, context-sensitive data capture (Ikävalko, 2016).

##### **3.3.2 Online Survey**

An online survey was administered through the Free Online Surveys platform and distributed via Facebook and social media channels, collecting 100 valid responses. The survey comprised nine multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question examining consumer attitudes toward sport participation, athlete role models, product endorsement, sponsored advertising, and social media platform preferences. Sixty percent of respondents were from Pakistan (consistent with the study's market focus) and 40% were international, reflecting the global applicability of the resulting guidelines. Quantitative survey results are reported as percentages.

#### **3.4 Theoretical Frameworks**

The analysis is structured around two principal theoretical frameworks: (1) the Sport Marketing Framework by Smith and Stewart (2015), specifically the 'Plan the Sport Marketing Mix' phase with emphasis on sponsorship; and (2) the Lifecycle of Sponsorship by Saunders (2016), which provides the stage-based architecture of the practical guideline. The Four Domains of Sport Marketing framework (Fullerton & Merz, 2008) was used to contextualize the strategic positioning of sponsorship within the broader sport marketing mix.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

##### 4.1 Consumer Attitudes: Survey Results

The online survey yielded substantive insights into Pakistani and international consumer relationships with sport, athlete role models, and sponsored products. Table 1 summarizes the principal survey findings.

**Table 1. Summary of Key Online Survey Findings (n = 100)**

| Q# | Survey Question  | Key Finding                       | Interpretation   |
|----|--|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1  | Do consumers play their favorite sport?                                  | 65% Yes                           | Significant active participation base for sport marketing campaigns                |
| 2  | Would consumers like to use the same products as their favorite athlete? | 55% Yes                           | Majority product-transfer effect supports athlete endorsement strategy             |
| 3  | Do consumers need athletes' endorsement of products/services?            | 61% Yes                           | Strong endorsement influence; athletes drive purchase intention                    |
| 4  | Most popular social media platform?                                      | 53% Instagram                     | Instagram is the primary platform for athlete-brand content in Pakistan            |
| 5  | Do consumers have an athlete role model?                                 | 61% Yes                           | Majority identify with specific athletes aspirational/inspirational types dominant |
| 6  | Consumer attitude to sponsored athletes?                                 | 62% Neutral / 36% Positive        | Predominantly favorable; only 2% negative low reputational risk of sponsorship     |
| 7  | Consumer attitude to sponsored advertising?                              | 77% Positive (score $\geq 5/10$ ) | Strong positive reception of sponsorship-based advertising                         |

Source: Online survey (n = 100; 60% Pakistani respondents, 40% international respondents).

These findings provide robust empirical support for the commercial logic of athlete sponsorship in the Pakistani market. The 55% product preference alignment with athlete role models, combined with 61% endorsement influence on purchase decisions and 77% positive attitude toward sponsored advertising, confirms that athlete sponsorship is an effective consumer engagement mechanism in this context. The dominance of Instagram (53%) as the preferred social media platform has direct implications for sponsorship content strategy, directing organizational investment toward visual, athlete-centered Instagram content.

##### 4.2 Interview Findings: HEAD Swimming Pakistan

###### 4.2.1 The Sponsor Perspective

Amna Inam (Head of Representative Branch, HEAD Swimming Pakistan) reported that the organization began sponsoring athletes approximately four years prior to the interview, progressively building a portfolio of five active sponsorship properties. The primary objective of sponsorship is authenticated brand endorsement: enabling HEAD Swimming's target consumers to verify product quality through the visible use and recommendation of professional athletes.

*"From cooperation with athletes and their endorsement of HEAD Swimming equipment, our final consumers can be sure in quality of our products." Amna Inam, HEAD Swimming Pakistan*

The organization employs a product sponsorship model, providing athletes with equipment valued at a known estimated cost, enabling transparency about the investment. HEAD Swimming's sponsorship requirements are deliberately minimal athletes are expected to use HEAD equipment and publish content about it on social media reflecting the organization's recognition that authenticity of endorsement requires genuine athlete engagement rather than scripted commercial messaging. Instagram is used as the primary activation channel, with hashtag use and brand mentions forming the key performance indicators.

When asked about athlete sourcing, Amna Inam indicated a 50/50 split between organizational outreach and athlete-initiated contact, suggesting that HEAD Swimming Pakistan has established sufficient market visibility to attract inbound sponsorship inquiries an indicator of brand authority within the niche Pakistani swimming and triathlon community.

#### **4.2.2 The Athlete Perspective**

Bisma, a swimming athlete and brand ambassador for HEAD Swimming Pakistan, has maintained her sponsorship relationship for 1.5 years. As an ambassador, she receives access to HEAD Swimming equipment at substantial discounts and uses this equipment in competitions while promoting the brand through social media channels. Her interview surfaced a series of insights that reveal both the rewards and structural tensions of athlete sponsorship in Pakistan.

*"Sponsors are ready to support competitions with big number of participants. But they do not provide financial support. When managers of competitions need financial support for better organization, sponsors are not interested in it. It is difficult to find sponsors for a middle-level athlete. Only when you are already famous and have won competitions do you start to become interesting to sponsors. Nevertheless, the way to become a winner is the main difficult part."*

*Bisma, Sponsorship Property, HEAD Swimming Pakistan*

This testimony encapsulates the central structural tension in Pakistani athlete sponsorship: organizations target already-visible, performance-validated athletes, while the athletes who most need sponsorship to develop their competitive careers are pre-visibility and therefore commercially unattractive to potential sponsors. This 'visibility paradox' where sponsorship is awarded on the basis of already-achieved prominence rather than developmental potential limits the pipeline of commercially supported athletes and restricts the social development function of sponsorship.

#### **4.2.3 The Language Gap: A Central Structural Challenge**

Both interviews converged on a recurring metaphor of linguistic misalignment between sponsors and athletes:

*"We are not talking the same language. We talk from the sales side; in the meantime, athletes talk from the sport side." Amna Inam, HEAD Swimming Pakistan*

This 'language gap' sponsors oriented toward commercial metrics (brand exposure, consumer reach, product endorsement) versus athletes oriented toward competitive support (financial backing, competition facilitation, training investment) is a systemic feature of the Pakistani sponsorship environment. Bridging this gap requires both parties to develop a shared vocabulary of mutual benefit: sponsors must understand athletes' competitive development needs, and

athletes must appreciate the commercial value they represent to organizations. The guideline developed in this study addresses this gap through structured communication frameworks at the agreement and implementation stages.

**5. A PRACTICAL GUIDELINE FOR COOPERATING WITH PAKISTANI ATHLETES**

Drawing on the Lifecycle of Sponsorship framework (Saunders, 2016), theoretical analysis, and empirical findings from HEAD Swimming Pakistan and the consumer survey, this section presents a seven-step practical guideline for organizations seeking to initiate and sustain sponsor–athlete relationships in Pakistan. The guideline is structured around three phases: Developing (Steps 1–7), Implementing, and Analyzing. Table 2 provides a summary overview.

**Table 2. Summary Guideline: Cooperating with Pakistani Athletes**

| Phase        | Step                        | Key Actions  | Pakistan-Specific Considerations   |
|--------------|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Developing   | Sport Market Research       | Analyze market landscape; identify consumer needs; assess role model influence     | 65% of surveyed consumers actively play sport; 61% endorse athlete-influenced purchasing               |
| Developing   | Define Objectives           | Set SMART sponsorship objectives across four stakeholder segments                  | Focus on brand awareness and product endorsement given early-stage Pakistani market                    |
| Developing   | Select Athletes             | Apply athlete typology framework; assess performance, character, social reach      | Visibility paradox: consider emerging as well as established athletes for developmental impact         |
| Developing   | Budget Planning             | Determine financial envelope; select sponsorship type                              | Product sponsorship predominates; financial support limited but creates deeper athlete loyalty         |
| Developing   | Choose Sponsorship Type     | Select from product, service, financial, commission or competition sponsorship     | Instagram-led product activation (53% platform preference); social media plan essential                |
| Developing   | Draft Sponsorship Agreement | Prepare formal four-part agreement: intro, requirements, dates, conclusion         | Many Pakistani organizations use informal arrangements; formalization improves accountability          |
| Developing   | Decision Making             | Compile research; finalize athlete list; confirm partnership decision              | Match organizational values with athlete typology; bridge the 'language gap' proactively               |
| Implementing | Implementing                | Sign agreement; launch with designated leader; activate social media plan          | Leadership clarity essential; athlete content monitoring via Instagram hashtags and brand mentions     |
| Analyzing    | Evaluate Results            | Measure brand recognition, sales uplift, consumer recall; collect athlete feedback | 77% positive consumer attitude to sponsored advertising confirms evaluative value of awareness metrics |

|                  |                     |  |   |
|------------------|---------------------|--|---|
| <b>Analyzing</b> | Gratitude & Renewal | Issue gratitude letters; decide on renewal or new athlete partnerships | Gratitude letters serve as professional references; repeat lifecycle for new partnerships |
|------------------|---------------------|--|---|

Source: Adapted from Saunders (2016) *Lifecycle of Sponsorship*; Smith & Stewart (2015); survey and interview findings.

**5.1 Phase 1 - Developing the Sponsorship Strategy**

**Step 1: Sport Market Research**

Effective sponsorship begins with rigorous market research. Organizations must identify their target consumer segments, understand sport participation and spectatorship patterns, and assess consumer receptivity to athlete endorsement. The Marketing Information System (MIS) integrating primary and secondary data through collection, interpretation, and dissemination (Green, Tull & Albaum, 1988) provides the analytical infrastructure for this stage. In the Pakistani context, survey data from the present study confirm that 65% of respondents actively play their favorite sport, and 61% value athlete endorsement in product decisions establishing a strong empirical foundation for sponsorship investment.

**Step 2: Define Sponsorship Objectives**

Sponsorship objectives should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) and mapped across four stakeholder segments: general public (brand image, mass media exposure), target market (consumer awareness, brand equity, loyalty), distribution channel members (trade relationships, channel sales), and internal stakeholders (staff motivation, CSR credibility) (Clow, 2013). HEAD Swimming Pakistan's primary objectives product quality endorsement and brand awareness through athlete credibility align with the target market and general public segments.

**Step 3: Identify and Select Athletes**

Athlete selection is the highest-stakes decision in the sponsorship development process. Organizations should apply four analytical criteria: (a) performance quality and competitive trajectory; (b) personal character, lifestyle, and alignment with brand values; (c) social media reach, engagement quality, and content authenticity; and (d) athlete typology fit (aspirational, relatable, informational, or inspirational). The survey finding that 61% of respondents have an athlete role model confirms the motivational influence athletes wield over consumer communities, making character–brand alignment a non-negotiable selection criterion.

Organizations should also consider the visibility paradox described in Section 4.2.2: restricting sponsorship to already-famous athletes limits both the developmental contribution of sponsorship and the organization's capacity to build long-term, loyal athlete relationships from early in the athlete's career. A tiered approach combining one or two high-profile properties with developmental athletes receiving lower-level support broadens portfolio diversity and brand reach.

**Step 4: Budget Planning**

Sponsorship budget is shaped by organizational scale, strategic ambition, and the selected sponsorship type. HEAD Swimming Pakistan's product-only model represents a cost-efficient entry point for small-to-medium organizations, providing authentic athlete visibility without the cash flow implications of financial sponsorship. Budget planning should account for initial provision cost, monitoring and administration, and social media activation investment (Beech & Chadwick, 2007). A seven P analysis (product, price, place, promotion, people, physical evidence, process) provides a structured framework for aligning budget allocation with marketing mix priorities (Mahmood & Khan, 2014).

**Step 5: Choose the Sponsorship Type**

Organizations should select the sponsorship type most appropriate to their objectives, budget, and target athlete profile. Product sponsorship the model employed by HEAD Swimming Pakistan is the most common entry-level arrangement in the Pakistani market, providing athletes with branded equipment or apparel in exchange for social media visibility. As relationships mature and commercial returns are demonstrated, organizations may progress to service, commission, or financial sponsorship models. Social media platform selection should align with consumer preferences: with Instagram commanding 53% of surveyed consumer preference in Pakistan, Instagram-first activation strategies are advised.

#### **Step 6: Draft the Sponsorship Agreement**

A formal sponsorship agreement is the legal and relational foundation of the cooperation. The agreement should comprise four sections: (1) an introduction establishing company background, brand values, and the basis for selecting the athlete; (2) a requirements section specifying what athletes must do (content posting, equipment use, event attendance) and what they will receive in return; (3) operational terms including activation dates, duration, and manager contact details; and (4) a closing section expressing mutual commitment and welcoming the athlete's response. HEAD Swimming Pakistan's experience operating without formal written agreements and managing requirements through informal meetings highlights the risks of under formalized arrangements, including miscommunication, unmet expectations, and limited accountability.

#### **Step 7: Final Decision-Making**

With market research, objectives, athlete options, budget, sponsorship type, and draft agreements in hand, organizations are positioned to make an informed final decision on cooperation partners and contractual terms. This stage involves synthesizing all preceding analytical work into a coherent sponsorship proposal and identifying the athletes whose typology, commercial profile, and personal alignment best serve the organization's marketing objectives.

### **5.2 Phase 2 - Implementing the Sponsorship**

Implementation begins with formal agreement signing and project launch. A designated leader with defined responsibility for the sponsorship portfolio, athlete communication, content monitoring, and performance tracking is essential to implementation integrity. Smith and Stewart's (2015) five implementation pillars provide the operational framework: leadership and commitment (designating an accountable project lead); communication and delegation (clearly briefing athlete responsibilities); teamwork and project management (coordinating cross-functional support); rewards and reinforcement (motivating both internal teams and athletes); and control and feedback (monitoring athlete content compliance and performance metrics).

In practical terms, HEAD Swimming Pakistan monitors implementation through Instagram channel audits verifying that athletes post content featuring HEAD equipment, include appropriate hashtags, and tag the brand account. This lightweight monitoring model is appropriate for small-scale product sponsorship but should be supplemented by more structured performance reporting as sponsorship portfolios grow.

### **5.3 Phase 3 - Analyzing and Retaining Sponsorship Value**

Performance evaluation should be systematic and multi-dimensional. Key evaluation criteria include: (a) brand recognition and recall uplift (measured through consumer surveys comparing pre- and post-sponsorship awareness metrics); (b) tangible commercial benefits including sales uplift, website traffic, and social media follower growth attributable to athlete activation; and (c) value of consumer impacts the cumulative weighted exposure generated by athlete content across platforms (Scilly, 2017).

Athlete feedback collection through structured post-sponsorship interviews or questionnaires identifies relational strengths and improvement areas from the athlete's perspective. Bisma's feedback on HEAD Swimming Pakistan highlighted two concrete improvement opportunities: resolution of product sizing challenges in the Pakistani market (a logistical rather than strategic failure) and provision of product samples for athlete testing prior to competition. These are actionable insights that, if addressed, would meaningfully improve athlete satisfaction and retention.

The issuance of a formal gratitude letter to departing or renewing sponsorship properties serves dual functions: it acknowledges the athlete's contribution professionally, strengthening relational goodwill; and it provides a reusable portfolio document that athletes can present in future sponsorship negotiations, indirectly extending the organization's brand credibility within the athlete community. The final decision whether to renew, upgrade, or terminate the sponsorship agreement completes one cycle of the lifecycle and initiates the next (Saunders, 2016).

## **6. DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 The Pakistani Athlete Sponsorship Market: Opportunities and Challenges**

The findings of this study collectively portray a Pakistani athlete sponsorship market at a formative but commercially viable stage of development. Consumer attitude data confirm the basic commercial logic of athlete sponsorship: role model influence is strong, product endorsement is persuasive, and sponsored advertising is well received. The interview data from HEAD Swimming Pakistan reveal a functioning, if informal, sponsorship ecosystem characterized by genuine mutual benefit brand credibility for the sponsor, competitive equipment access for the athlete alongside structural tensions that, if unaddressed, limit the depth and sustainability of partnerships.

The 'language gap' between sponsor and athlete motivations is the most important structural challenge identified in this study. This misalignment between organizations seeking authentic commercial endorsement and athletes seeking financial competitive support is not irresolvable, but it requires deliberate bridging through structured communication frameworks, mutually developed objective-setting, and formal agreement architectures that make expectations explicit and reciprocal obligations enforceable. The guideline developed in this study directly addresses this gap at every stage of the developing phase.

### **6.2 Social Media as a Democratizing Force**

The emergence of Instagram as the dominant platform for athlete–brand interaction in Pakistan has significant democratizing implications for sponsorship. Social media erodes the historical advantage of high-profile athletes with mass broadcast exposure, enabling emerging athletes with smaller but highly engaged followings so-called micro-influencers to offer sponsors cost-effective, highly targeted audience access. For organizations with limited sponsorship budgets, Instagram-based product sponsorship with emerging Pakistani athletes represents an accessible, measurable, and commercially relevant entry point into athlete cooperation.

The content expectations embedded in HEAD Swimming Pakistan's sponsorship model equipment use in competition, branded posts with hashtags, brand account tagging represent a template that is scalable, auditable, and aligned with Instagram's native content formats. As sponsorship matures, organizations should invest in social media analytics to quantify reach, engagement, and conversion metrics attributable to athlete posts, translating social media activity into the commercial ROI metrics that justify sponsorship investment to senior leadership.

### **6.3 Implications for Policy and Institutional Development**

Beyond individual organizational practice, the findings of this study have implications for the institutional development of sport marketing in Pakistan. HEC, the Pakistan Sports Board, and national sport federations could meaningfully accelerate market development by: establishing standard sponsorship agreement templates for athlete use; developing athlete brand management education modules within university sport science curricula; and creating talent showcasing platforms digital athlete portfolios, annual sports marketing summits that reduce the information asymmetry between potential sponsors and eligible athletes.

The visibility paradox where sponsorship accrues to already-prominent athletes and excludes those most in need of developmental support could be partially addressed through HEC-administered developmental sponsorship programs that provide emerging athletes with baseline support (equipment, travel, competition fees) in exchange for brand visibility, creating a pipeline of commercially literate, sponsor-ready athletes for the private sector.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This paper has investigated how sports organizations can effectively cooperate with Pakistani athletes through structured, theoretically grounded sponsorship relationships. Drawing on sport marketing theory (Smith & Stewart, 2015; Saunders, 2016; Fullerton & Merz, 2008), qualitative interviews with HEAD Swimming Pakistan, and consumer survey data from 100 respondents, the study has produced both empirical insights into the Pakistani sponsorship landscape and a practical seven-step guideline for initiating, implementing, and evaluating athlete cooperation. Key findings confirm that: (1) Pakistani consumers are receptive to athlete endorsement, with 55% preferring athlete-aligned products, 61% valuing athlete recommendation in purchase decisions, and 77% holding positive attitudes toward sponsored advertising; (2) Instagram is the dominant platform for athlete-brand communication in Pakistan; (3) the Pakistani sponsorship market is at a developing stage, characterized by predominantly product-based arrangements, limited formal agreement infrastructure, and a 'language gap' between sponsor commercial objectives and athlete financial aspirations; and (4) effective athlete sponsorship in Pakistan requires structured market research, strategic athlete selection based on typology alignment, formal agreement frameworks, and systematic performance evaluation.

The guideline synthesized in this study provides a practical resource for Pakistani and international organizations seeking to enter or expand within the athlete sponsorship market. Future research should extend this inquiry through multi-case analysis of sponsorship relationships across different sport disciplines, larger athlete samples, longitudinal tracking of sponsorship ROI, and examination of the growing role of digital influencer athletes including e-sports competitors within Pakistan's evolving sport marketing ecosystem.

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