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# Sustainability communications via sponsorship: Potential, characteristics and managerial challenges

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## Abstract

Sustainability communications have become a key issue for organisations. While most studies have focused on sustainability reporting and green advertising, other communication tools such as sponsorship are under-researched. The present study addresses this void by exploring the potential and identifying key characteristics and challenges of sustainable sponsorships, theoretically conceptualised as a social contract between sponsorship contractors and society. As such, it is the first to identify the potential and key characteristics of sponsorship for sustainability communications. The authors took an explorative, qualitative research approach, conducting 13 in-depth interviews. The interviewees highlighted eight characteristics that determined sustainable sponsorships across all three sustainability dimensions. Sustainability was identified as a key driver in managing sponsorship effectively. In light of the study's findings, it is recommended that sponsors and sponsees should adapt their sponsorship management to incorporate sustainability. Measuring the outcome and success of sustainable sponsorships could be a subject for future research.

## KEYWORDS

communication, CSR, development goals, legitimacy, sponsorship, sustainability

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of the Brundtland Commission report (United Nations, 1987) and the introduction of the 17 sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2015), the concept of sustainability has been the subject of increasing attention (Ballestar et al., 2020) among politicians, businesspeople and scholars (Mensah, 2019; Ranjbari et al., 2021). Although sport has long made a positive contribution to social advancement (e.g. the empowerment of women; Collison et al., 2019), it has recently come to be regarded as a means of promoting sustainable development. Sport management research has addressed various aspects of sustainability, such as the environmentally sustainable practices of sporting organisations

(Trendafilova & McCullough, 2018); the contribution made by sport to social change and peace (Schulenkorf, 2010); and the role played by sport in health and well-being (Cunningham & Beneforti, 2005), but it is far from reaching saturation point (Annesi et al., 2023).

Sustainability as an overarching management approach comprises several dimensions, one of which is the supervision of (sport) sponsorships (d'Astous et al., 2020; Plewa & Quester, 2011). Researchers have not yet arrived at a consensus on what *sustainable sponsorship* means; nor have they explored in detail the ways sponsorships may be managed sustainably and how these could contribute to sustainable development, albeit the ethical, moral and social aspects of sponsorship and corporate social responsibility (CSR) have been the

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subject of several studies (d'Astous et al., 2020; Demirel, 2020; Plewa & Quester, 2011).

We aimed to address the research gap described above by examining the characteristics and management of sustainable sponsorship in greater depth. We took an exploratory, qualitative approach, conducting 13 in-depth interviews with a range of stakeholders. We focused on high-performance sport using a holistic (i.e. social, economic and ecological) perspective and identified eight concrete key characteristics of sustainable sponsorship. Our study is the first to highlight the potential of sponsorship for sustainability communications and the managerial implications thereof. It is hoped that the findings will help sponsors and sponsees benefit in terms of sustainable communications by giving them clear guidance for managing sponsorships sustainably.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND STATE OF RESEARCH

### 2.1 | Conceptualising sustainability

Sustainable development should ensure that current generations address their needs without compromising those of future generations (United Nations, 1987). While sustainability is often reduced to environmental sustainability (Golob et al., 2023; Simpson & Radford, 2012), CSR is predominantly associated with social matters (Catlin et al., 2017; Sander et al., 2021). Dahlsrud's (2008) review of CSR definitions clearly pointed out that CSR includes the responsibility of an organisation for the ecological, social and economic impact of its decision and activities. In addition, CSR is characterised by its voluntarism and stakeholder involvement. From a holistic understanding, both concepts, sustainability and CSR, aim to balance ecological, economic and social aspects. Therefore, despite some minor differences, sustainability is often used synonymously with CSR (Catlin et al., 2017), which we follow in this study.

The expectations of society in general and by an organisation's stakeholders towards an entity can be considered as a social contract between the respective organisation and the society in which it operates (Mathews, 1997). This concept has been used to explain the relationship between business and society (Shocker & Sethi, 1973) and more specifically in the context of social and environmental issues (Gray et al., 1995; Sacconi, 2006). Due to shifting values and norms in dynamic societies, the terms of a social contract change over time (Brown & Deegan, 1998). Consequently, organisations need to adapt to these changing expectations and demonstrate that society values their services, which is recognised by society's legitimacy (Perks et al., 2013), a theoretical construct that is closely linked with legitimacy theory. Studies in this context have used legitimacy theory to research how organisations manage and respond to stakeholders' and society's expectations and criticisms of organisational sustainable behaviour (Deegan, 2002; Milne & Patten, 2002). Legitimacy theory posits that organisations are part of a larger social system and therefore aim to ensure congruence of their values and norms with those

of the societies in which they operate (Brown & Deegan, 1998; Suchman, 1995). In case of congruence, the respective organisation is considered a legitimate entity, while incongruence between the organisation's values and norms and those of society can threaten the organisation's legitimacy, which can consequently result in reduced demand, severed business relationships and reputation damage (Deegan & Rankin, 1997). Accordingly, organisations disclose information about their sustainability activities to be perceived as sustainable organisation and with the aim to earn legitimacy by society (Deegan, 2002).

Stakeholders often perceive contradictory information about an organisation's sustainability or CSR efforts, especially in cases of socially irresponsible behaviour (e.g. in case of corruption, violating human rights; Skarmeas & Leanidou, 2013; Vanhamme & Grobbsen, 2009). The concept of corporate social irresponsibility (CSI) can be defined as "a decision to accept an alternative that is thought by the decision maker to be inferior to another alternative when the effects upon all parties are considered. Generally, this involves a gain by one party at the expense of the total system" (Armstrong, 1977, p. 185). In reality, sustainability/CSR and CSI are not mutually exclusive phenomena. Organisations can score high in sustainability/CSR and also show CSI behaviour (Alsaadi, 2020; Kang et al., 2016; Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013). As a consequence of this coexistence, stakeholders doubt perceived information, which results in increased perceptions of corporate hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009) and scepticism (Skarmeas & Leanidou, 2013). Scepticism can be related to an organisation, an industry (Iborra & Riera, 2023), or certain corporate activities, such as marketing activities (Mohr et al., 1998; Obermiller et al., 2005) like sponsorship.

### 2.2 | Sustainability in a marketing and communication context

Following the theoretical grounding, sustainability communication is a key issue for an organisation and has recently gained increased interest in academia (Golob et al., 2023; Rathee & Milfeld, 2024). Weder et al. (2021) distinguished three modes of sustainability communication: (1) communication for sustainability, (2) communication about sustainability as a public discourse and (3) communication of specific sustainability issues and actions. This study will focus on the latter. Golob et al. (2023) identified different manifestations of sustainability communication, including sustainability reporting and green advertising. These two areas are dominant in sustainability communications research (Golob et al., 2023), while other communication tools, such as sponsorship, are under-researched in terms of their potential and efficiency.

A relevant and decisive factor for efficient sustainability communication is the 'source characteristics', more specifically 'endorsers' (Rathee & Milfeld, 2024). As previously described, stakeholders may perceive contradictory information about an organisation and its sustainability activities. In these cases, the source of the information (internal vs. external) has a major impact on the motive attribution

process and, finally, on the overall perception and evaluation of the organisation by stakeholders (Ellen et al., 2006; Flöter et al., 2016). While communication by the organisation itself (internal) might be biased and increase scepticism among stakeholders, organisations use external endorsements for their (sustainability) communication, which are generally considered an unbiased source and can increase the legitimacy of an organisation's activities (Perks et al., 2013). Associating sustainability with third parties (i.e. endorsers) is a communication technique that reduces the impact of self-serving source bias on organisations, especially for profit-driven companies (Morsing et al., 2008). While for-profit organisations are generally perceived as competent and non-profit organisations are seen as warm (Aaker et al., 2010), non-profit organisations can be considered perfect endorsers. By communicating the association with non-profit organisations, corporations can make use of the transfer of warmth and admiration to themselves. In addition, they can benefit from a higher level of trust in a non-profit than in for-profit organisations (Dawkins, 2005; Perks et al., 2013). Since many sponsees are non-profit organisations, sponsorships offer the potential for endorsed corporate sustainability communication by including the sponsee as an endorser for the sponsor and its sustainability activities.

Nevertheless, excessive sustainability communication can cause negative effects on an organisation's legitimacy, when stakeholders get the impression that the organisation exploits the sustainability efforts for self-interest (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). Stakeholders are increasingly sensitive and sceptical when organisations communicate their sustainability activities (Vlachos et al., 2009; Walker & Kent, 2009). The criticism of potential 'greenwashing' or any other form of washing (e.g. white-, social- and pinkwashing) is often the negative consequence, which refers to making an organisation seem greener, whiter, pinker, or more socially conscious than it is (Bowen, 2014; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Any form of washing in this context often has a negative influence on consumers' attitudes and purchasing behaviour towards the respective organisation (Chen & Chang, 2013; Newell et al., 1998; Parguel et al., 2015; Yoon et al., 2006). Sportswashing is a relatively new phenomenon (Chanavat & Bodet, 2021; Davis et al., 2023) and can be defined as (mis)use of sport by organisations to legitimise their marketing activities and distract from negatively perceived organisational matters (e.g. promoting unhealthy products via sport sponsorship) with potentially negative effects for the brand (Boykoff, 2022; Davis et al., 2023).

### 2.3 | Sustainability in the (sport) sponsorship context

The global sponsorship market with a volume of 65.8 billion USD in 2018 (IEG, 2018) is largely dominated by sponsorships in sport (Cornwell et al., 2024). While research on CSR activities in sport generally (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Walzel et al., 2018) as well as on sustainability in sport (McCullough et al., 2016; Millington et al., 2022; Trendafilova et al., 2013) is overwhelming, "the lack of research

considering sports sponsorship in CSR is surprising" (Plewa & Quester, 2011, p. 305). The same applies to sports sponsorship and sustainability (Loinaz & Cabinte, 2015). Interestingly, most sustainability and CSR studies in the sport context have been conducted in North America (Cury et al., 2023; Walzel et al., 2018), where the political, social welfare and sporting systems differ tremendously from many other—here specifically European—countries (Andreff & Staudohar, 2000; Houlihan, 1997). These make it difficult to transfer and apply knowledge in other contexts without hesitation (Breitbarth et al., 2019).

To some extent, this also applies to sponsorship research (Walliser, 2003). Contextual differences in sponsorship research can be demonstrated by comparing frequently cited definitions of the term. Anglo-American studies preferably used Meenaghan's (1991) definition, while the French research community most frequently referred to Derbaix et al.'s (1994) definition and German researchers often quoted Bruhn (1987). There is a common agreement among these definitions that sponsorship consists of an exchange between sponsor and sponsee and the sponsor aims to exploit the association with the sponsee for its own marketing objectives (Walliser, 2003). However, Meenaghan's (1991) definition differs in one aspect from those of Derbaix et al. (1994) and Bruhn (1987). Both latter studies pointed out sponsorship is not only about the self-serving interests of the sponsor but also about supporting and promoting sport at different levels as an important part of society's life. We can assume that without the support of corporate sponsorships, many sport events and sport organisations would not exist. Bearing this in mind and referring to the social contract and legitimacy theory, it can be concluded that sponsorships can help corporations to fulfill their social contract (Koronios et al., 2022) and increase their legitimacy (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009) because sport can be considered as socially desired (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007) and sponsorships help to enable and enrich sport and sport events.

From the sponsor's perspective, an increased perception of a socially sustainable corporation leads to greater attributed legitimacy (d'Astous et al., 2020); more positive attitudes towards the sponsor, which can further result in positive word-of-mouth (Lichtenstein et al., 2004); sponsorship patronage resulting in higher intentions or actual behaviour to purchase the sponsor's products and services (Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2010; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001); consumers' support to contribute to the cause (Lichtenstein et al., 2004); improved corporate brand attitude (Plewa et al., 2016; Uhrich et al., 2014); enhanced identification with the sponsor (Pérez et al., 2013); and enhanced financial performance (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006).

When sponsees are perceived as socially sustainable, they benefit from greater legitimacy (Close Scheinbaum et al., 2019); increased event outcomes, such as fan attachment or positive word-of-mouth (Close Scheinbaum et al., 2019; Close Scheinbaum & Lacey, 2015); improved brand image (Plewa et al., 2016; Walker & Kent, 2009); enhanced sponsorship outcomes for sponsors (Plewa et al., 2016); and sponsorship patronage (Close Scheinbaum et al., 2019; Close Scheinbaum & Lacey, 2015), which helps in acquiring and bonding

sponsors as well as generating higher sponsorship revenues (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Hovemann et al., 2011).

Plewa and Quester (2011) were among the first researchers to examine the potential of leveraging sponsorships in sport with CSR activities as a means of sponsorship-linked marketing activities, defined as 'the orchestration and implementation of marketing activities for the purpose of building and communicating an association to a sponsorship' (Cornwell, 1995, p. 15). For sponsors with a commitment to sustainability as part of their corporate strategy, sponsorship-linked marketing activities are a perfect opportunity to communicate the sustainability efforts via sponsorship (Habitzreuter & Koenigstorfer, 2021). Research on leveraging the sponsorships in sport with sustainability is limited and focuses predominantly on social sustainability and addresses needs outside the sporting sphere (Lacey et al., 2010; Plewa et al., 2016; Uhrich et al., 2014). Prior research provides empirical evidence that leveraging sponsorship with social sustainability has a more positive influence on the sponsorship outcomes in contrast to not leveraging the sponsorship with sustainability (Menon & Kahn, 2003; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006).

In summary, the literature review revealed that it is still largely unexplored how sponsorships can be managed and implemented in a sustainable way and what characterises sustainable sponsorships. Prior research considered almost exclusively social sustainability in the (sport) sponsorship context and neglected economic and environmental issues. Furthermore, the sponsee's perspective is underrepresented and the consumer perspective is dominant, while other stakeholders have been widely neglected (e.g. athletes).

### 3 | METHOD

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, we opted for a qualitative research approach to gain in-depth knowledge about sustainable sponsorship in the sport context. The outcome of the literature review demonstrated that the understanding of sustainable sport sponsorships is very limited, and there is no clear meaning or definition of the term. Therefore, we used semi-structured individual in-depth interviews, which facilitate an intensive discussion with the interviewees as well as reveal new aspects in this context (Edward & Skinner, 2009). Apart from investigating an unexplored issue, qualitative research methods offer the advantages of (1) the ability to explore and understand perceptions, values and beliefs of different stakeholders involved; (2) a dynamic research process that allows the continued collection of data and their interpretation; (3) the determination of meanings (Öberseder et al., 2013) and (4) the identification of contextual factors (Sinkovics et al., 2005).

#### 3.1 | Interviews and interviewees

We conducted 13 in-depth interviews with representatives from different stakeholder groups. The interview guideline was developed

based on the identified gaps from the literature review and was pre-tested (McCracken, 1988). We opted for semi-structured interviews, since they allow an open yet focused discussion. The questions derived from the literature review were as follows: (1) What do sustainable sponsorships characterise? (2) What makes (sport) sponsorships unique for sustainability communications? and (3) What challenges are associated with implementing and managing sustainable sponsorships? The interviews were conducted electronically, when possible, but otherwise in person, and they were recorded. The time of the interviews varied from 00:22:56 to 01:09:57 (Ø 00:36:59; total interview time 08:00:52). All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were the basis for the qualitative content analysis.

For the selection of the interviewees, we employed purposive sampling, which ensured interviewees could provide information about the research problem addressed in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, it was important for us to consider many different perspectives. All interviewees were assured of their anonymity because granting anonymity has obvious advantages for the study: (1) it extends the number of respondents and (2) reduces social desirability bias and posturing (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004). We conducted interviews with representatives from five different stakeholder groups: three individuals representing the sponsors from different industries (bank, automobile and supermarket chain), three representatives of sponsees (two sport clubs, one national sport federation), two senior managers from sponsorship service providers, four sport consumers with different sport backgrounds and one elite athlete. When selecting specific interviewees, two criteria were important: (1) affinity for sports and (2) existing awareness of sustainability. The authors were united by the conviction that interviewees without such awareness could not contribute to this research. While all other stakeholder groups could be well represented by several individuals, elite athletes were only represented by one person. The requested elite athletes were rather reluctant or the time availability at the time of the study was not given. The total sample of the interviewees consists of four women and nine men, with an age range from 25 to 54 years old. Table 1 gives an overview of the interviewees and their key characteristics.

#### 3.2 | Content analysis approach

In accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), we started with an inductive analysis of the data by carrying out an open coding of the interview contents, which helped to identify the first categories and themes. In the second step, we encoded and uncovered relationships and connections between and among the codes with the aim to cluster fragmented data into groups. In the third and final step, we carried out a detailed analysis of the results. Intercode reliability was ensured through mutual review by the co-authors. In case of any deviations, the authors discussed these aspects and found a common base.

**TABLE 1** Overview of interviewees and some key characteristics.

Interview	Stakeholder group	Gender	Age	Length of interview (hh:min:sec)	Number of transcribed pages
1	Sponsor	Female	46	00:36:28	15
2	Sponsor	Male	38	00:55:38	27
3	Sponsor	Male	36	00:22:56	12
4	Sponsee	Female	54	00:34:24	16
5	Sponsee	Male	53	00:31:17	14
6	Sponsee	Male	26	00:24:59	14
7	Service provider	Male	42	00:23:52	9
8	Service provider	Male	38	00:35:45	14
9	Sport consumer	Male	29	01:09:57	29
10	Sport consumer	Male	28	00:27:14	13
11	Sport consumer	Male	42	00:24:01	13
12	Sport consumer	Female	42	01:05:01	33
13	Elite athlete	Female	25	00:29:20	15

## 4 | RESULTS

The interviews revealed results that have been clustered in two thematic areas: (1) characteristics of sustainable sponsorships and (2) managerial challenges.

### 4.1 | Characteristics of sustainable sponsorships

In total, eight characteristics were identified that determine sustainable sponsorships. Following the three dimensions of sustainability, four characteristics can be summarised under the economic dimension and three fall under the social dimension. The environmental dimension is represented by one characteristic.

#### 4.1.1 | Economically sustainable sponsorships

The interviews revealed four characteristics of economically sustainable sponsorships: long-term horizon/perspective, independency of individual sponsors, good governance practice and credibility and authenticity.

##### *Long-term horizon and perspective*

Several interviewees mentioned the long-term horizon as an important aspect of sustainable sponsorships. The sponsorship market is perceived as a very dynamic one. In combination with the high number of sponsors, it is hard to keep sponsors in mind from a consumer's perspective. '[Sponsorships] change so often. I cannot tell you at the moment what the [official] name of the stadium in Hamburg is [...], because the sponsor has changed so often' (I<sub>11</sub>). As a consequence of the fluctuation, consumers value the long-term commitments of sponsors. This is also something sponsors aim to achieve: 'For me, sustainable sponsorships are also always set for a longer period' (I<sub>3</sub>).

The duration of the sponsorship works like a surrogate for long-term commitment and consequently for the economic sustainability of the respective sponsorship. It is like a signal for a fruitful and meaningful partnership between the sponsor and sponsee. Another indicator of the long-term horizon is the long-term objectives that sponsors want to achieve. 'Sustainable sport sponsorship is a sponsorship that is not based on short-term objectives' (I<sub>1</sub>).

Surprisingly, the interviewed sponsees did not refer to the duration of sponsorship and the long-term commitment of sponsors. However, one consumer (I<sub>11</sub>) put forward this aspect: '[Sustainable sponsorship is] a long-term commitment at all levels of a sponsee'. Hence, sponsees also have an important responsibility in contributing to a sustainable sponsorship by committing to long-term relationships with respective sponsors. As a first premise for sustainable sponsorships, we can state:

**P1.** *Sustainable sponsorships have a long-term horizon and perspective determined by long-term set objectives, long-term commitment and the duration of the partnership between sponsor and sponsee.*

##### *Independency from individual sponsors*

The high demand for sponsorship money by sports entities results in the establishment of additional sponsorship options by sponsees (e.g. naming rights, additional advertising space at the venue or on apparel, additional tier in the sponsorship pyramid). However, the increasing commercialisation of sports is negatively perceived by consumers, as the following statement illustrates: '[sponsorship] is getting out of hand. [...] There is something on every jersey, [...], the inside [the arena], the entire programme is designed that you can somehow write a name somewhere. And that, of course, somehow, at some point massively comes to the fore' (I<sub>11</sub>).

In certain instances, consumers may exhibit a level of resistance towards the sponsor and sponsee. One such example is RB Leipzig, a



German football club. 'The feeling is that [RB Leipzig] is not really so much about football, but it is really a marketing tool. That is why this [energy drink] "can" is placed everywhere, because football is actually a means to an end for this "can"' (I<sub>9</sub>). To put this claim into context, the club is primarily sponsored by an Austrian energy drink brand that exerts substantial control over the club's management. The sponsor has been playing an essential role in the club's rise into the top-tier competitions, such as the Bundesliga and the Champions League. Such accomplishments are presumably linked to the support by the sponsor, indicating a high level of dependency.

According to the interviewees, dependency on individual sponsors is something sponsees should avoid when they strive for sustainable sponsorship. This is due to the uncertainty of sporting success: 'At the end of the day, a club is well advised not to become dependent on one or a few [...] sponsors, because things can change very quickly [from a sporting point of view]' (I<sub>11</sub>). As a consequence, sponsees have to make conscious decisions entering a partnership with a brand that is success-oriented, which is underlined by one interviewee representing a service provider (I<sub>7</sub>): 'There are certainly areas where you have to be careful what steps you are prepared to take, as a right holder often more so than from a brand perspective'.

One consumer interviewed indicated that sponsors have a certain responsibility towards sponsees. She argued sustainable sponsorships have to secure the long-term financial viability of the sponsee without being dependent on individual sponsors: 'For me, sustainability is clearly thinking about what happens when I, as a sponsor, withdraw my commitment' (I<sub>12</sub>). The interviewee proposed sponsors to proactively consider the prospect of a sponsorship termination and take necessary precautions to minimise any negative impact for the sponsee in this case.

**P2.** *Sustainable sponsorships are those that ensure independence of the sponsee by individual sponsors.*

#### *Good governance practice*

Interestingly, the consumers interviewed seek greater transparency, which is recognised as a significant element of good governance, regarding the allocation of sponsorship funds. There is a 'lack of transparency. Where does the money go? For me, it is like a big pot: money flows into it, and the clubs do what they want with it' (I<sub>12</sub>). On the one hand, this highlights the need for sponsors to request more comprehensive reports from their sponsees regarding the allocation and expenditure of sponsorship funds: 'What happens with [the sponsors'] money?' (I<sub>12</sub>). On the other hand, this also serves as a demand to the sponsees, urging them to provide greater transparency and accountability in disclosing how sponsorship funds are utilised: 'Transparency is very important to me, that you know how much money for what term and what is being funded with it' (I<sub>9</sub>).

Besides being transparent, another important aspect highlighted by the interviewees is the active engagement and influence of sponsors in addressing governance-related issues within their partnerships. One consumer (I<sub>10</sub>) raised the question about whether sponsors are expected to support sponsees to address governance matters while

utilising their platform, with an expectation that sponsors would play a role in this aspect. Furthermore, it is anticipated that sponsors would either terminate the sponsorship or have a positive impact on the sponsee in the event of a scandal. An example was given where a sponsor influenced the International Ice Hockey Federation to withdraw from hosting the World Cup 2021 in Belarus due to political circumstances and human rights violations. The ability of sponsors to address relevant issues was emphasised by one of the interviewed sponsors (I<sub>2</sub>): 'As sponsors, you have the possibility to address things because you have a certain relevance in the field'. Based on the findings, we can conclude:

**P3.** *Sustainable sponsorships are built on the basis of good governance practice of sponsor and sponsee.*

#### *Credibility and authenticity*

Sport consumers are aware of the essential role sponsorship plays in enabling high-performance sports, but the increasing commercialisation of sports has shed critical light on sponsorships. Consumers' concern arises from the perception that sponsors prioritise their own self-interests over the sport itself, deviating from the original intent of supporting sports for the benefit of society, as the following statement demonstrates: 'I very clearly associate it [sponsorship] with the fact that large sums of money are invested [in professional sport] and brands are simply interested in being present or [...] reaching a certain target group' (I<sub>9</sub>). Such sponsors' self-interest contributes to the loss of credibility and authenticity of sponsorships because 'there is a high discrepancy between what is conveyed, what the sport supposedly does or is like, and what it looks like in reality' (I<sub>10</sub>).

The introduction of sponsorship-linked marketing initiatives centred around sustainability also promotes the emergence of consumer perceptions regarding various forms of "washing". These include white-, green- and sportswashing. Interestingly, one interviewee indicated sponsees have a role to play in addressing such behaviour: 'The incredibility of the sponsee disturbs [me]. [...] what bothers me is [...] this discrepancy between what a club promotes and what it presents to the outside world, and what it supports at the same time by taking the "dirty" money [of sponsors]' (I<sub>10</sub>). The interviewee criticises sponsors for underestimating the awareness of sport consumers and assuming their naivety regarding hypocrisy exhibited by certain sponsors. Simultaneously, the interviewee highlights the reluctance of the sponsee to preserve the core values of both sponsors and sponsees, consequently undermining the overall credibility of sponsorship.

In contrast, the establishment of a strong brand fit between sponsors and sponsees emerges as a crucial factor for an authentic and credible perception of sponsorships. According to multiple interviewees, an authentic sponsorship is characterised by a harmonious alignment between sponsee and sponsor, ensuring a cohesive branding approach (I<sub>5</sub>, I<sub>8</sub>, I<sub>9</sub>). Among a number of different fit dimensions, the value similarity was emphasised: 'The harmony with my values, with what I as a sport, sponsee, event actually want to send out in the

direction of my stakeholders. [...] the fit is, I think, extremely important' (I<sub>8</sub>). This finding is supported by a notable case that exemplifies a mismatch in values between sponsor and sponsee: 'We had a main sponsor who was certainly less in tune with our values, but who was able to provide the financial resources. [...] With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, it was no longer compatible to have a Russian state-owned company [...] in our club with our values. [...] It has to be credible [...]. It has to be authentic; it has to fit together' (I<sub>6</sub>).

In this context, the athletes' representative further disclosed that the identification of sponsors who share alignment with athletes' personal values could enhance the credibility and authenticity of sponsorships. When sponsors align with athletes' values, individual athletes would voluntarily support the sponsorship: 'I think if we could find sponsors where we [the team] really stand behind it, each individual would also be motivated to promote it [the sponsor] even more' (I<sub>13</sub>). According to the interviewed athlete, it is beneficial for the sponsorship when athletes' voices are acknowledged and considered. However, she pointed out, 'I would wish for athletes to have a say, but that is currently not realistic' (I<sub>13</sub>). As a consequence, sponsorship agreements may fail to align with athletes' values and principles, leading to a sense of discomfort in promoting sponsors: 'I feel uncomfortable endorsing a sponsor on my match kit when its corporate values do not align with my personal ones' (I<sub>13</sub>). This discrepancy undermines the authenticity and credibility of the sponsorship. In summary, while the perceived commercialisation and forms of washing negatively affect the authenticity and credibility of sponsorships, the fit and the athletes' involvement can have a positive influence.

**P4.** *Sustainable sponsorships are perceived as credible and authentic by stakeholders.*

#### 4.1.2 | Socially sustainable sponsorships

For the social sustainability of sponsorships, we identified three characteristics: promoting sport and its values, responsibility for sport and athletes and mutual partnership with benefits for society.

##### *Promoting sport and its values*

Interviewees acknowledged that financial or in-kind resources from sponsorships are crucial for the existence of high-performance sports. In that regard, I<sub>2</sub> points out: '[...] elite sport needs sponsors in order for it to work at all. [...] It needs this money'. Another sport consumer underlines this: 'Companies put this money in, and that is why these top performances and this elite sport are possible' (I<sub>9</sub>). Furthermore, a shared awareness exists among the interviewees regarding the necessity of sponsorship funds to uphold the inherent values (among others, fair play, the integrity of sport and inclusion) associated with sports. I<sub>8</sub> assessed: 'Having a healthy economic organisation in the background can also ensure that sport can fulfil one main function [...], to actually uphold the values of sport'.

Nevertheless, the positive connotations associated with sponsorships are diminishing. This is, according to the interviewees, due to

the increasing commercialisation of sport, especially in professional football. One sport consumer raises concerns that '[sport sponsorship] is not really so much about football anymore, but purely a marketing tool' (I<sub>9</sub>), indicating that sponsors prioritise commercial interests over the fundamental values inherent in sport. According to I<sub>6</sub>, representing a sponsee, it is now the responsibility of the sponsees to counteract this trend. He continues to argue that at the core of any sponsorship, the focus should always be on the sport, with its values not being compromised.

**P5.** *Sustainable sponsorships promote the support for sport and help to secure the values of sport.*

##### *Responsibility for sport and athletes*

The competitive nature of sports and the strong emphasis on achieving excellence and performance have, at times, been accompanied by various forms of misconduct. 'A very good example [for unethical behaviour] is the Tour de France' (I<sub>2</sub>), where the widespread use of doping has compromised the integrity of the competition, which undermines an important value in sports. While sponsors may not have intentionally facilitated misconduct, it is important to acknowledge that their provision of resources has indirectly contributed to doping practices in cycling. Hence, according to one interviewed consumer (I<sub>9</sub>), sponsors can be considered partially responsible for misconduct in sports. He reasoned it by pointing out: 'If you put money into it [sponsorship in cycling] or go in as a sponsor to make it possible in the first place, you should also have that [the threat of doping] on your radar in some way'. In addition, a sponsor's representative (I<sub>2</sub>) emphasised that it is not sufficient to merely be aware of inherent issues within the sport, but actively positioning themselves accordingly. This not only serves as a self-protection measure for the sponsee but also reflects a sense of responsibility. The difficulty lies in balancing the sponsor's desired perception by the target audience with the potential impact on the overall sponsorship relationship.

Additionally, as mentioned by one sponsee, sponsors are encouraged to also consider the welfare of athletes they directly or indirectly support through their sponsorship (I<sub>4</sub>). This is attributed to the specific risks faced by professional athletes, including the potential for career-ending injuries or limitations in pursuing alternative occupational paths compared to their non-athlete peers. Consequently, sponsors need to acknowledge and address these challenges, taking into account the distinct circumstances and requirements of professional athletes within the scope of their sponsorship commitments: 'Sponsorship money makes it possible to create framework conditions for athletes that put the athlete at the centre and promote their personality trait and long-term career' (I<sub>4</sub>). In that regard, one representative of the sponsees (I<sub>4</sub>) pointed out that, 'With the sponsorship money [...], we only support [at the instruction of the sponsor] athletes who follow a dual career path', providing an example of a sponsor considering the long-term well-being and security of athletes.

**P6.** *Sustainable sponsorships accept the responsibility for athletes and sport, and act accordingly.*



### *Mutual partnership with benefits for society*

Sustainable sponsorship can be described as a partnership that yields benefits, at least for both parties involved. One interviewee (I<sub>13</sub>) expressed this concept, stating: 'For me, sustainable sponsorship is definitely advantageous for both sides'. This highlights the principle that such partnerships are designed for mutual gain, sponsor and sponsee. Those agreements are based on shared growth, as emphasised by another interviewee (I<sub>5</sub>). In relation to that, one sponsee points out that in a mutual growth-oriented partnership with focus on sustainability, the priority extends beyond short-term sporting success. As articulated by an interviewed sponsee (I<sub>4</sub>): '[...] because it is not just about sports anymore. Pure sporting success, simply wearing a sponsor's logo on the chest, is no longer what appeals to the sponsor, what they desire, what they demand. Instead, it is more about the values in sports'. This comment shows that sponsors view their involvement not only as a means to boost brand visibility but also as a chance to get associated with the core values sport represents. This perspective leads to the implementation of sponsorship-linked marketing activities that address societal issues and foster positive change in communities. From the consumer's perspective, an important first step is '[...] to identify [sponsors] with the same values, to contribute something to society' (I<sub>6</sub>). Interestingly, this is also reinforced by the athlete (I<sub>13</sub>). From the athlete's standpoint, as sponsors and sponsees collaborate in a sustainable manner, they take on the responsibility of addressing societal challenges with benefits for society, which was supported by one service provider (I<sub>8</sub>).

**P7.** *Sustainable sponsorships are understood as a mutual partnership between the sponsor and the sponsee with benefits for society.*

### 4.1.3 | Environmentally sustainable sponsorships

According to one interviewed sport consumer (I<sub>9</sub>), the current environmental focus of sponsorships seems to be primarily on engaging in compensation narratives: 'Right now, everyone is running after the great tree donation campaigns' (I<sub>9</sub>). The interviewee did not offer a general criticism of such compensatory activities. However, sponsors should prioritise evaluating the potential environmental impacts that sponsorships might have and take proactive measures to minimise the ecological footprint. As the following statements demonstrate, the demand for critical evaluation of sponsorship-linked marketing activities is only emerging: 'The only thing that is still missing in most of them [sponsorships] is green sustainability: so no clap banners any more [...]', said I<sub>1</sub>. In the past, the sponsor provided clap banners at the seats in the venue for every spectator. Through the sustainability lens, this particular sponsorship-linked marketing activity generates avoidable waste, prompting the sponsor to seek out more environmentally conscious alternatives to leverage its sponsorship.

Moreover, the critical examination of sponsorship-linked marketing activities goes beyond assessing past implementations; it extends to exploring new measures as well. One interviewed sponsor

expressed concerns regarding the utilisation of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and the metaverse for leveraging their sponsorships. These technologies rely on blockchain technology, which 'is very carbon dioxide intensive [...]'. This means that right from the start it is now also about finding the right block chain provider that is the most carbon dioxide neutral', when using NFTs and the metaverse for leveraging sponsorships (I<sub>2</sub>).

**P8.** *Sustainable sponsorships are implemented in the most ecologically friendly way.*

## 4.2 | Challenges in managing sustainable sponsorships

The interviews additionally revealed a number of managerial insights, which can be summarised in three main challenges: (1) defining sponsorship principles, (2) athlete-centred approach and (3) evaluating sustainable sponsorships.

First, sustainability will be one decisive factor for sponsors in the selection of new sponsorships but also for the prolongation of existing ones, as two sponsor's representatives stated (I<sub>1</sub> and I<sub>2</sub>). 'Clubs and federations have to put sustainability on their agenda, because it will become a point for us to evaluate our sponsorships' (I<sub>1</sub>). Some sponsors and sponsees have started to break down the corporate sustainability strategy to sponsorships (I<sub>2</sub> and I<sub>5</sub>). In addition, sponsors '[...] expect that sponsees also have corresponding criteria that have to be fulfilled in order to enter into a partnership' (I<sub>2</sub>). This idea is strongly supported by all interviewed sport consumers (I<sub>9</sub> – I<sub>12</sub>) and the athlete (I<sub>13</sub>). Sponsees should define 'principles and guidelines from whom do we [sponsees] take money and from whom not' (I<sub>9</sub>) and 'which sponsors I give access to get associated with the sponsee' (I<sub>10</sub>). In this context, three interviewees (I<sub>6</sub>, I<sub>9</sub> and I<sub>10</sub>) pointed out the geographical proximity as an indicator for sustainability. 'I do not know why I associate it [regionality] positively. Maybe just because it has a regional proximity to the club' (I<sub>10</sub>). One interviewed sponsee confessed: '[...] we have to develop alternative sponsorship concepts and present them together with the athletes' (I<sub>4</sub>). Another interviewee indicated that to some extent such guidelines exist: 'We have no alcohol sponsor, because the product does not fit to sport' (I<sub>5</sub>). Other products and industries may fall under the same principle, like tobacco or betting companies. However, one sponsee representative (I<sub>6</sub>) brought to attention that the exclusion of critical sponsors might be difficult due to economic and financial constraints of the sponsee and the sporting ambitions: 'We had a main sponsor that [...] was certainly less in line with the values [of the club], but was able to provide the financial resources that are sometimes needed in competitive sport' (I<sub>6</sub>). In summary, sponsees have the opportunity to position themselves as sustainable organisations through the conscious selection of sponsors (I<sub>11</sub>).

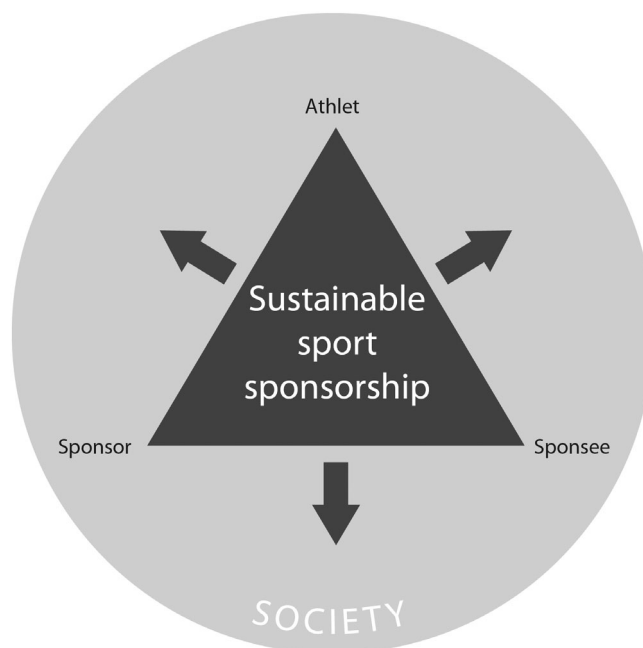
Second, athletes can be a key driver for sustainable sponsorships. 'Obviously, it makes a difference, when an athlete explains to me, why a company is the sponsor [...]. They naturally have a different

credibility' (I<sub>9</sub>). One sponsor representative confirmed this view that athletes can increase the acceptance and credibility of a sponsorship when they get involved (I<sub>2</sub>). This is more likely when taking a holistic view of athletes in terms of sustainable sport sponsorships, for example, through promoting dual career perspectives. This could be one avenue for promoting sustainability with sponsors for athletes (I<sub>4</sub>). The interviewed athletes shared this perspective of the sponsee and pointed out, 'I like sponsors who also do something for the athletes and support them directly' (I<sub>13</sub>). However, this also requires mature athletes (I<sub>9</sub>). Some athletes are role models when it comes to sustainability, and they aim to differentiate themselves from others by promoting sustainable development. Once these athletes find sponsors, they really stand behind them and 'everyone would push it much more individually. That is, without always being asked to do so' (I<sub>13</sub>).

Third and last, what is missing so far and represents a major challenge in this context is how we measure the effectiveness of sustainable sponsorships. 'What can I measure? Where should I measure?' (I<sub>8</sub>). One sponsor representative (I<sub>2</sub>) wondered: 'What is my sustainability ROI [return on investment]?' Furthermore, he pointed out that it is important to provide guidance for sponsors, sponsees and partners to optimise and adopt measurements. This found support by another sponsor, who requested to 'quantify the effects' (I<sub>3</sub>). Monitoring and controlling these effects are also an important issue for consumers. One interviewee indicated that quality control and ideally a kind of quality label would be good to differentiate sustainable sponsorships from a claimed one (I<sub>12</sub>).

## 5 | DISCUSSION

We aimed to discover whether sponsorship might be used as a communication tool by looking at sustainability from various stakeholder perspectives. One of the most significant findings was that athletes were integral to successful sustainable sponsorships. While the role of sponsors and, to a lesser degree, sponsees has been well documented in the sport sponsorship literature (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020), the contribution of athletes to sponsorship outcomes has not. The interviewees suggested that achieving sustainable sponsorship has to be a joint effort, that is, between sponsor, sponsee and sponsored athlete(s). The authenticity and credibility of sponsorship deals depend largely on the commitment and behaviour of all three parties; if one party fails to contribute, there is a risk that stakeholders will perceive the actions of the remaining partners as a form of *greenwashing* (Schönberner et al., 2024). Sponsor, sponsee and sponsored athlete may in some cases be regarded as one and the same, but they must be understood as having differing (and even conflicting) interests. The present study has shown that value creation in sustainable sport sponsorships is the result of collaborative effort (Buser et al., 2023; Schönberner et al., 2024) on the part of sponsor, sponsee and sponsored athlete(s), and that such sponsorships should be understood as engagement platforms (Buser et al., 2022). The interviewees clarified the value issue by revealing that sustainable sponsorships (which are tripartite endeavours) provide value for society as a whole



**FIGURE 1** Sustainable sport sponsorship as an engagement platform with the three key actors.

rather than just the actors involved (Figure 1). The present study is the first to conceptualise sustainable sport sponsorship in this way.

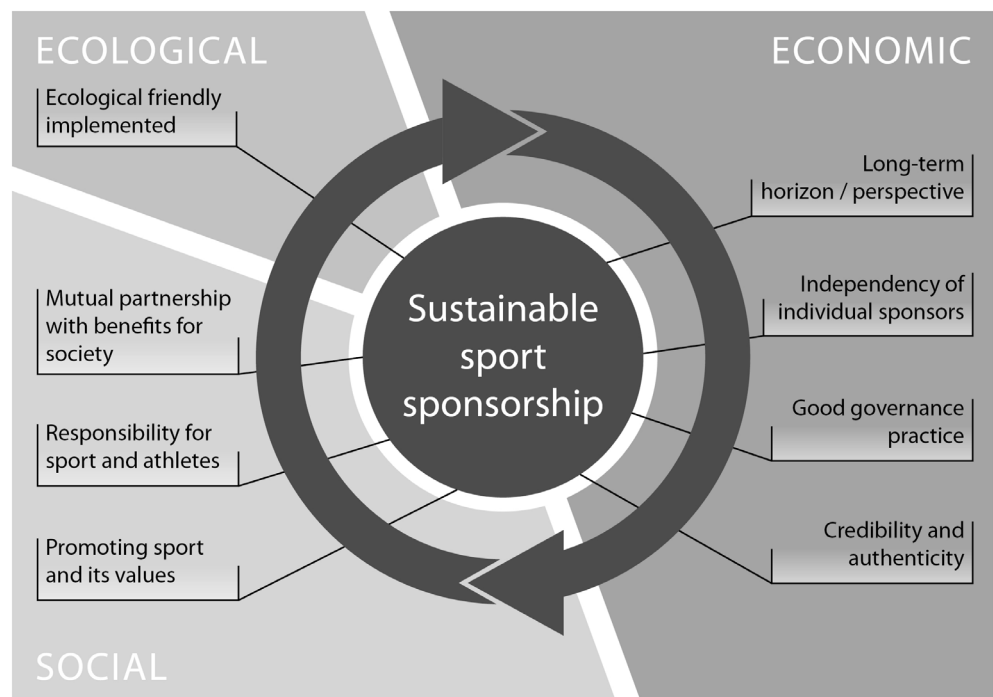
The interviewees identified eight characteristics of sustainable sport sponsorships across three sustainability dimensions. These characteristics have been formulated as interrelated fundamental premises for a sustainable sponsorship (Figure 2). Although previous studies have discussed sustainability sponsorships (Close Scheinbaum et al., 2019; d'Astous et al., 2020; Plewa et al., 2016), the present one is the first to identify four of their economic characteristics and the importance thereof. Paying heed to these fundamental premises will enable organisations to counter scepticism and accusations of hypocrisy, which previous studies have identified as barriers to improved performance (Skarmas & Leanidou, 2013; Wagner et al., 2009). In light of the study's findings, sustainable sponsorship may now be defined as a partnership between sponsor, sponsee, sponsored athlete(s) that creates social, economic and ecological value for society.

### 5.1 | Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, as with all qualitative studies, its findings are non-generalisable (Sinkovics et al., 2005). Future researchers might conduct larger-scale qualitative studies involving participants from different countries. Interviews with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and regions with different levels of development in terms of sustainability and sponsorship prevalence might yield contrasting results.

Secondly, we know from previous research that sponsorship differs according to the context (Olson, 2010). In particular, the

**FIGURE 2** Characteristics of sustainable sport sponsorships.



emotional setting of fans and the politics of sports systems can influence research outcomes (Close Scheinbaum et al., 2019). We cannot, therefore, be certain that our findings will be applicable to other types of sport (e.g. leisure and disability), different forms of sponsorships (e.g. naming rights and event sponsorships), or different sponsorship settings (e.g. art sponsorship). Sustainability sponsorships in such scenarios may require different criteria. Finally, future research should address the above shortcomings by conducting both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

To the best of the authors' knowledge, the present study is the first to explore sponsorship as a tool of sustainability communication from a holistic perspective and involving several stakeholders. It is hoped that the study will make managers more aware of the potential of sponsorships for sustainability communications and enable them to work more sustainably, as well as contribute to sustainable development (and, in particular, the United Nations' sustainable development goals).

### 6.1 | Theoretical contributions

The present study makes two valuable theoretical contributions to the sustainability and marketing literature. First, while previous studies have pointed out the importance of sustainability communication (especially reporting and advertising) for organisational performance (Golob et al., 2023; Morsing et al., 2008; Perks et al., 2013; Rathee & Milfeld, 2024), the present one is the first to highlight the potential of sponsorship. The findings have revealed that sponsorship can enhance

an organisation's legitimacy, first, by promoting sport as a way to improve health and well-being and benefit society generally (e.g. by fostering social inclusion); and secondly, by enhancing the credibility of sustainability communication through partnerships between for-profit and non-profit organisations.

Secondly, to the best of the authors' knowledge, the study is the first to identify and define sustainable sport sponsorship according to eight characteristics and theoretically conceptualise it as a social contract between the sponsorship contractors (sponsor and sponsee) and society. Sponsors and sponsees might take this into consideration when selecting partners and conducting sponsorship-linked marketing activities. Indeed, previous studies have already stressed the importance of the sponsorship fit and the influence of various fit dimensions on sponsorship outcomes (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Olson & Thjomøe, 2011; Rifon et al., 2004; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). The present study complements the literature by introducing the sustainability fit dimension and showing how it can significantly influence sponsorship outcomes.

### 6.2 | Managerial implications

The present study has three valuable managerial implications. First, to achieve more legitimacy via sponsorships, the integration of athletes' perspectives in sponsorship-linked marketing activities is crucial. Sponsees should actively involve athletes in the decision-making process when selecting sponsorships. By choosing sponsors that align with athletes' values, sponsees will create a more positive and motivating environment, thereby enhancing the well-being (and enthusiasm) of said athletes. As a result, the latter may be prepared to go beyond their contractual obligations. The alignment of values and

greater athlete engagement will then benefit sponsors by enhancing their legitimacy among stakeholders.

Second, the findings highlight the significance of well-established practices in measuring the outcome of sustainable sponsorships. Clear key performance indicators (KPIs) can act as a framework, guiding activities towards measurable outcomes and serving as evaluation criteria for measuring success, for example by helping sponsees avoid partnerships with sponsors who engage in greenwashing. From the sponsors' perspective, sharing their progress reinforces their credibility and helps convince target groups of their goodwill and desire to make a meaningful impact. Clear measurement of sponsorship-linked marketing activities enables both sponsors and sponsees to accurately assess the success of their partnership. A data-driven approach helps all concerned make informed decisions about the continuation, modification, or termination of their sponsorship agreement.

Third, from a policy perspective, it is equally important that both sponsor and sponsee are committed to sustainability in general and to sustainable sponsorships in particular. Sponsorship policies should therefore include sustainability-based sponsorship selection criteria. From the sponsor's perspective, the establishment of clear sustainability criteria will make navigating the sponsorship landscape that much easier, for instance by facilitating the strategic identification of sponsees with a mutual commitment to sustainability. Such an alignment would not only enhance the credibility of the sponsorship among stakeholders but also ensure that it goes hand in hand with the organisation's mission and core values. Finally, policymakers could use the present study's findings to revise current policies regarding the restriction or prohibition of sport sponsorship deals involving industries or product categories (e.g. tobacco, alcohol, betting and unhealthy food and beverages).

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