



Exploring sponsorship's impact on paralympic athletes in Spain El impacto del patrocinio en los deportistas paralímpicos en España

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ABSTRACT

The sponsorship of Paralympic athletes has played a crucial role in transforming the public perception of Paralympic sports, especially since the London 2012 Games. Until that moment, the focus was primarily on the athletes' disabilities rather than their athletic abilities. However, the support of major brands such as Toyota, Iberdrola, Telefónica, and Fundación ONCE has allowed these athletes to be seen as elite competitors, fostering greater visibility and respect in the sports world.

This research is based on interviews conducted with ten Spanish Paralympic athletes, who share their experiences with sponsorship and its impact on their careers. Through their testimonies, it becomes evident that sponsorship not only provides the necessary financial support to compete internationally but also shifts the narrative around Paralympic sports, focusing on performance and excellence.

In conclusion, brand sponsorship has been decisive in the careers of Paralympic athletes, providing them with the resources needed to compete and improving their visibility in the media. It also strengthens the connection between brands and the community, as companies associate themselves with values such as inclusion and equality. Brand support not only enhances the image of athletes but also contributes to generating a positive impact on society, reinforcing corporate social responsibility.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Deportistas
paralímpicos
Patrocinio
Visibilidad de marca
Responsabilidad
social corporativa
Inclusión
Identidad

RESUMEN

El patrocinio de los deportistas paralímpicos ha desempeñado un papel clave en la transformación de la percepción pública sobre el deporte paralímpico, especialmente desde los Juegos de Londres 2012. Hasta entonces, la atención se centraba principalmente en las discapacidades de los atletas, dejando en segundo plano sus capacidades deportivas. Sin embargo, el respaldo de grandes marcas como Toyota, Iberdrola, Telefónica y Fundación ONCE ha permitido que estos deportistas sean reconocidos como competidores de élite, favoreciendo una mayor visibilidad y respeto en el ámbito deportivo.

Esta investigación se basa en entrevistas realizadas a diez deportistas paralímpicos españoles, quienes comparten sus vivencias sobre el impacto del patrocinio en sus carreras. A través de sus testimonios, se evidencia que el patrocinio no solo proporciona el apoyo financiero necesario para competir a nivel internacional, sino que también contribuye a cambiar la narrativa en torno al deporte paralímpico, poniendo en valor el rendimiento y la excelencia. En conclusión, el patrocinio de marcas ha sido determinante en las trayectorias de los deportistas paralímpicos, brindándoles los recursos esenciales para competir y aumentando su presencia en los medios de comunicación. Además, fortalece el vínculo entre las marcas y la sociedad, al asociarse con valores como la inclusión y la igualdad. Este apoyo no solo mejora la imagen de los atletas, sino que también genera un impacto positivo en la sociedad, reforzando el compromiso de las empresas con la responsabilidad social corporativa.

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1. Introduction

Paralympic sport has seen remarkable advances in visibility and social acceptance over recent decades, particularly since the London 2012 Games. This event not only marked a turning point in how Paralympic athletes are perceived but also sparked a significant shift in the narrative surrounding the sport itself. Prior to that moment, the dominant narrative often focused on athletes' disabilities, frequently overshadowing their athletic achievements. However, the London Games allowed athletes to be recognized for their athletic abilities and dedication to sport (Rivarola & Rodríguez Díaz, 2015).

In Spain, approximately 5% of the population lives with some form of disability, according to the Disability, Personal Autonomy, and Dependency Situations Survey conducted by the National Statistics Institute (INE, 2024). Based on 2024 data, this report indicates that over 4.3 million people (9,7%) in the country face significant daily life limitations.

This statistic is relevant in the context of the importance of the Paralympic Games and the recognition of Paralympic sports, as it highlights the need to promote inclusion and visibility for this community in society. The presence of a considerable percentage of people with disabilities emphasizes the responsibility of institutions and brands to support Paralympic sports, not only to encourage athletic talent but also to help build a more equitable and inclusive society.

While the Olympic Games have historically dominated the global sports narrative, the Paralympic Games have increasingly gained prominence as a platform for demonstrating athletic excellence and resilience (Smith & Bundon, 2018). The growing visibility of Paralympic athletes has contributed to a broader discourse on inclusion and the redefinition of societal attitudes towards disability. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) has actively promoted policies aimed at elevating Paralympic sports to the same level of recognition as the Olympics, emphasizing the role of media, sponsorship, and public engagement in shaping perceptions (Pullen et al., 2020).

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of Paralympic athletes, influencing both national identity and how these athletes are valued in society. Although portrayals often highlight resilience and success as symbols of national pride (Pullen et al., 2020), coverage remains uneven. De Leseleuc et al. (2010) found that female Paralympic athletes receive significantly less media attention than their male counterparts, with narratives frequently centering on their personal struggles rather than their athletic accomplishments. This framing not only affects how athletes are perceived but also has tangible consequences for sponsorship opportunities and professional development.

Recent research suggests that sponsorship plays a crucial role in transforming public perception. According to Ripoll González and Gale (2020), support from influential brands not only provides athletes with the resources needed to compete internationally but also shifts the narrative around Paralympic sports, focusing on performance and excellence. This support from brands such as Toyota and Fundación ONCE enables Paralympic athletes to be seen as elite competitors, fostering greater acceptance and respect within society.

Leng and Zhang (2023) argue that branding and sponsorship are essential in shaping the image of Paralympic sports. They emphasize that effective partnerships between brands and athletes create positive perceptions and increase visibility. This approach benefits athletes while allowing brands to align with values of inclusion and diversity, resonating with broader audiences. Vila-López et al. (2024) further emphasize that sports figures, such as Rafael Nadal, significantly enhance a country's destination image. Their findings underscore the strategic value of sports sponsorships in increasing tourists' intention to visit the country and purchase its products. This highlights the potential of leveraging globally recognized athletes to build compelling narratives of inclusion, resilience, and cultural pride, boosting both tourism and economic growth.

The national identity of Paralympic athletes is reinforced by their recognition as ambassadors of their countries in international competitions (Peers, 2021). Zarei Mahmoudabadi et al. (2019)

argue that Paralympic athletes not only represent their nations but also advance a movement advocating for equality and respect toward people with disabilities. Their sporting achievements embody fundamental values such as resilience, personal growth, and transformative potential.

Their presence in international competitions signifies not just athletic success but also the construction of national narratives that challenge traditional notions of disability (Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021). A collective identity is built through these athletes, who embody the strengths of their nation and demonstrate that physical limitations are not barriers to excellence. Their individual journeys translate into collective stories that inspire and mobilize society as a whole, fostering a deeper awareness and appreciation of functional diversity.

Social media has proven to be a key tool for increasing the visibility of Paralympic athletes, enabling them to connect directly with the public and society at large. These platforms allow athletes to reach a broader audience, build a personal brand, and engage with their followers.

Sponsorship plays a transformative role in the visibility and perception of Paralympic athletes, functioning as more than just a source of financial support. It provides a platform for deconstructing stereotypes, promoting inclusive narratives, and recognizing functional diversity. Mañas-Viniegra et al. (2024) emphasize that social media engagement is critical for fostering connections between athletes and the public, attracting sponsors, and building a sense of community. When combined with digital platforms, sponsorship enables Paralympic athletes to reach broader audiences, share their personal journeys, and inspire narratives of resilience and achievement.

The financial ecosystem supporting Paralympic athletes differs significantly from that of traditional Olympic sports (Rocha et al., 2021). Historically, Paralympic athletes have relied heavily on governmental support and smaller sponsors, with limited private investment. However, corporate sponsors that choose to invest in Paralympic sports do more than provide financial backing; they actively contribute to societal change (Legg & Dottori, 2017). These partnerships often leverage corporate social responsibility strategies to emphasize values of inclusion, resilience, and diversity, allowing brands to differentiate themselves in their communications and align with broader social goals.

Kolotouchkina's (2018) research further highlights the role of civic participation in mega sports events, underscoring how such engagement enriches the overall experience and amplifies its societal impact. Sponsorship extends this civic engagement by enhancing the visibility of Paralympic athletes and promoting a discourse centered on inclusion and excellence. This synergy between financial support and societal advocacy positions sponsorship as a key driver of change in the perception of Paralympic sports.

Moreover, the legacy of the Olympic and Paralympic Games has a significant impact on how host cities are perceived globally. Ripoll González and Gale (2020) note that sponsorship not only elevates the visibility of Paralympic athletes but also enhances the reputation of the cities that host these events. This underscores the importance of integrating Paralympic sports into city branding strategies, which aim to attract tourists while promoting an inclusive and equitable identity. Cities can build a compelling narrative of inclusion and diversity that resonates globally by aligning their efforts with the values represented by Paralympic athletes.

Regarding the brands, Sports sponsorship has emerged as a pivotal strategy for brands aiming to enhance their reputation and connection with the public. Cornwell et al. (2001) and Biscaia et al. (2013) state that brands that sponsor sporting events can experience a significant increase in the positive perception of their image, which translates into greater consumer loyalty. Furthermore, sponsorship enables companies to reach specific audiences and build emotional relationships with fans, thereby strengthening their market positioning.

In this context, sponsorship becomes a transformative tool, bridging the gap between financial necessity and social change. By supporting Paralympic athletes, brands and cities alike have the

opportunity to challenge societal perceptions, foster a greater appreciation for functional diversity, and advance the cause of equity and inclusion in sports and beyond. The primary goal of this research is to analyze the impact of sponsorship on the visibility and professional development of Paralympic sports from athletes' perspectives. Specifically, it explores how ten Paralympic athletes perceive sponsorship's contribution to the visibility of their sport and to their professional trajectories, particularly in terms of access to resources and competition opportunities. Accordingly, this study is guided by three research questions: RQ1: What is the impact of sponsorship on the visibility of Paralympic sports? RQ2: What is the importance of sponsorship in the careers of Paralympic athletes, and how does it influence their professional trajectory? RQ3: How does the presence of Paralympic sports sponsors on social media influence the visibility of their brand and its association with Olympic values?

These questions aim to analyze how sponsorship enhances the visibility and public perception of Paralympic sports, highlighting its role in shaping narratives that emphasize athletic identity over disability. They explore the impact of financial and promotional support in increasing media coverage and fostering public recognition, while reinforcing values such as inclusion, resilience, and equality. Additionally, the questions examine how sponsorship facilitates the professional development of athletes by providing access to resources, equipment, and facilities, helping them overcome structural barriers and advance in their careers. Furthermore, they investigate the influence of sponsorship on social media, considering how these platforms allow sponsors to align with Olympic values, craft inclusive narratives, and amplify the visibility of Paralympic sports, ultimately benefiting both the athletes' identities and the sponsoring brands.

With this approach, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted impact of sponsorship, laying the foundation for the methodology described below.

2. Methodology

This study investigates the influence of corporate sponsorship on the visibility and professional development of Spanish Paralympic athletes. Spain's significant achievements in Paralympic sports, coupled with support from prominent brands such as Toyota, Iberdrola, Telefónica, and Fundación ONCE, provide a valuable context for understanding how these partnerships promote inclusivity and enhance the profile of Paralympic sports. By examining the dynamics between sponsors and athletes, the research aims to shed light on the role of sponsorship in shaping national identity and fostering global inclusion within the realm of Paralympic athletics.

This study adopted a longitudinal approach to data collection. The period analyzed spanned from 2022 to 2024. In the first phase of the research, a qualitative approach was employed, while the second phase focused on quantitative research. Therefore, this study also illustrates the evolution of the discourse surrounding the Paralympic Games.

In addition, to examine the association between brands and Paralympic values on social media, this study employs a social listening approach, leveraging data collection and analysis from key social platforms such as X, Instagram, and Facebook (Westermann & Forthmann, 2020). The first step was to identify and monitor posts, comments, and hashtags related to the official sponsors of the Paralympic sports (e.g., #Paris2024, #OrgulloNacional, #deporteinclusivo, #Toyotapatrocinador). The search was through the platform Talkwalker.

Then, we perform sentiment analysis to classify posts as positive, neutral, or negative (Dhaoui et al., 2017) concerning brand perception and alignment with Paralympic values: respect, tolerance, inclusion, teamwork. This action helps to evaluate the tone of discussions and public reactions, focusing on the themes of inclusion, national identity, and collaboration.

2.1. Data collection strategy

The data collection process involved conducting semi-structured interviews with ten Spanish Paralympic athletes throughout 2022 (Table 1). Participants were selected using purposive non-

probabilistic sampling, ensuring a diverse representation across various sports disciplines, genders, and levels of competitive experience. This approach continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, as recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2015). The athletes were chosen for their extensive experience and insights into sponsorship dynamics within Paralympic sports.

Table 1.
Theoretical purposive sample of Spanish Paralympic athletes (n=10).

Paralympic athlete	Specialization	Date of interview
Eva M ^a . Moral	Triathlon	08/04/2022
Martin de la Puente	Wheelchair Tennis	04/07/2022
David Casinos	Athletics	10/10/2022
Lorenzo Albaladejo	Athletics	11/10/2022
Maria Delgado	Swimming	13/10/2022
Jordi Morales	Table tennis	17/10/2022
Victor González	Snowboarding	26/10/2022
Lionel Morales	Triathlon	27/10/2022
Toni Ponce	Swimming	28/11/2022
Loida Zabala	Powerlifting	17/12/2022

Source: own elaboration, 2025

In alignment with ethical considerations outlined by Gibson and Braun (2009), participants were informed that their contributions would be acknowledged, highlighting the significance of their expertise in enriching the research. This transparency aimed to honor their professional identities and the value they bring to the study.

To maintain consistency across interviews, tailored guidelines were developed for each participant, considering variables that influence perceptions of sponsorship in Paralympic sports. While core topics were uniformly addressed, specific areas pertinent to each athlete's unique experiences and sport were incorporated (refer to Table 2). This strategy ensured comprehensive coverage of relevant themes while respecting individual contexts.

Table 2.
Thematic blocks explored in interviews.

Paralympic athlete	Related items
Brand image	Sponsorship history, brand ambassador roles, and processes of becoming a representative of a brand.
Collaboration and projects	Details of collaborations with sponsors, expectations from sponsorship, and significant sponsorship initiatives or actions.
Career impact	Influence of sponsorship on athletic career development and professional trajectory.
Visibility	Impact of sponsorship on the visibility of Paralympic sports at national and global levels.
Challenges in paralympic sports	Impact of sponsorship on the visibility of Paralympic sports at national and global levels.
Social media usage	Existing challenges in Paralympic sports, including funding, visibility, and societal perceptions, and the role of sponsorship in addressing these challenges.
	Favourite platforms, follower engagement, and content strategies for building an online presence.

Source: own elaboration, 2025

An extensive literature review was conducted to inform the development of research questions and interview guides. This review immersed the researcher in existing knowledge, facilitating the generation of pertinent interview questions and providing a framework for situating the information obtained from interviews. Such a comprehensive approach is advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2015) to enhance the depth and relevance of qualitative research.

2.2. Data collection on social media

Social media data were collected in two phases (September 2024 and October 2024) using Talkwalker. First, a broad mapping of the Spanish conversation around Paris 2024 and the Paralympic Games was conducted to identify dominant topics and recurring narratives. This initial retrieval yielded 1,289,150 posts containing #Paris2024 and Paralympic Games. The dataset was then filtered to include only posts in Spanish and originating from Spain, resulting in 856,345 posts. The observation window was set from August 20 to September 10, 2024, covering the days immediately before and after the Paralympic Games.

Second, to address sponsorship more directly, a sponsor-focused sub-corpus was created using brand-specific queries (brand names and, when available, official accounts) combined with Paralympic-related keywords. This step aimed to ensure that the analysis captured communications and public interactions explicitly connected to major sponsors referenced by athletes (e.g., Toyota, Iberdrola, Telefónica, Fundación ONCE), rather than relying exclusively on broad event hashtags.

2.3. Data analysis procedure

This qualitative study examines the impact of sponsorship on Spanish Paralympic athletes, using Grounded Theory methodology facilitated by ATLAS.ti software version 23.4 (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020; Miani et al., 2023; Smit & Scherman, 2021). Grounded Theory is esteemed in marketing research for its efficacy in uncovering social processes (Colucci & Pedroni, 2022), making it particularly suitable for exploring complex phenomena such as sponsorship dynamics in sports.

Grounded Theory methodology is applied through the constant comparative method and theoretical sampling across four stages: research design, data collection and classification, data analysis, and confrontation with existing literature (Aldamman et al., 2024) (Table 3). The iterative process integrates data, literature, and emerging categories until theoretical saturation is achieved, aligning well with the objectives of exploring sponsorship impacts on Paralympic athletes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

Table 3.
Phases of qualitative research.

Grounded Theory Phase	Atlas.ti moment	Key processes	Brief description/output
Research design	Before Atlas	Define problem; sampling plan	Research problem defined via literature review; theoretical (non-probabilistic) sampling refined throughout the study.
Data collection	Before & during	Interviews/observations; transcript cleaning	10 athletes interviewed; automatic transcriptions reviewed and corrected after each interview.
Project setup	Start of Atlas	Create project; upload documents	Project created and updated as transcripts became available; final corpus: 10 primary documents (analytical adequacy reached within the core categories).
Data analysis. Textual level	During Atlas	Quote segmentation; open coding	Relevant segments highlighted and reviewed; initial codes generated to conceptualize key ideas.
Data analysis. Conceptual level	During Atlas	Axial & selective coding; network building; review	Codes linked and grouped (axial); core category selected and integrated (selective); relationships mapped in conceptual networks; full review of coding.
Theory construction & literature confrontation	End of Atlas	Draft theory; discuss with literature	Preliminary conclusions drafted; emerging theory contrasted with literature to refine nuances; conclusions and discussion written.

Source: own elaboration, 2025

3. Analysis & findings

3.1. Elements shaping the visibility of Paralympic sports

The findings from the qualitative analysis suggest that enhancing the visibility of Paralympic sports is strongly influenced by effective sponsorship and its impact on the public perception of these athletes. Sponsorship appears to be a significant factor in creating a compelling image for Paralympic sports, thereby contributing to their recognition and social acceptance. To achieve meaningful visibility, brands are encouraged to thoughtfully select sponsorship strategies that foster positive associations, support, and inclusion, which in turn helps to craft a strong public image for these sports. These findings support the arguments of Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon (2021).

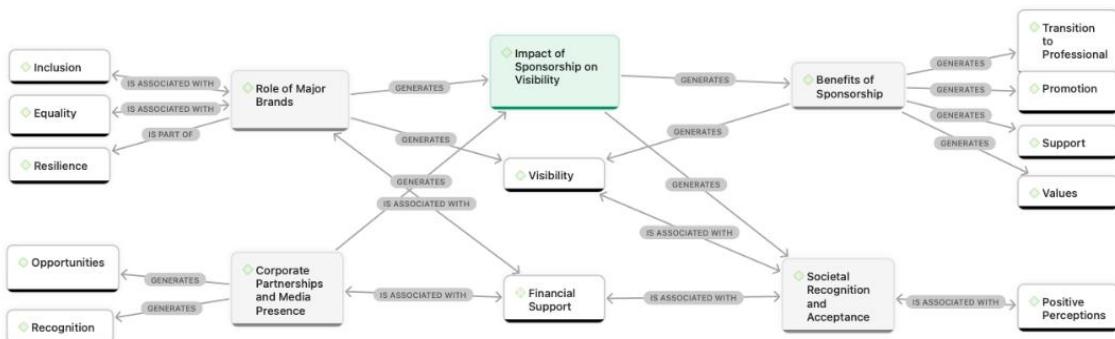
Recent research highlights the important role of brand sponsorship as a key element in shaping public perception and promoting the visibility of Paralympic sports (Biscaia et al., 2013). The qualitative analysis reveals that sponsorship from prominent companies such as Toyota, Iberdrola, Telefónica, Liberty Seguros, and Sanitas is linked with values like inclusion, equality, and resilience, which collectively enhance the public image of Paralympic athletes. It was noted during the qualitative analysis that the support from major brands contributes to athletes being perceived as elite competitors, fostering greater visibility and respect both within the sports world and in broader society.

One of the most memorable experiences highlighted by David Casinos Sierra was with Liberty Seguros, which organized an event at a Madrid cinema for all their sponsored athletes; they treated them like stars, providing a moment of great visibility. Additionally, David mentioned that Sanitas' support was crucial, as their specialized medical insurance was a great help for Paralympic athletes. Furthermore, David also pointed out that the FER Project was noteworthy due to the financial support it provided and the opportunity for athletes to represent a brand within the Valencian community, allowing them to achieve their sports goals and dreams.

The promotional aspect of sponsorship was also found to play a pivotal role in enhancing the visibility of Paralympic sports, particularly through contributions to greater media presence. According to Jordi Morales, the effective use of digital marketing and media partnerships creates opportunities for athletes to be seen not just as individuals with disabilities but as professionals whose athletic abilities are worth celebrating. This observation aligns with findings from Cornwell et al. (2001) who emphasize that corporate partnerships increase opportunities for athletes, leading to improved media presence and social recognition.

Figure 1 presents the network diagram outlining the key elements identified in the analysis that shape the impact of sponsorship on the visibility of Paralympic sports. The diagram illustrates three core areas: the role of major brands, corporate partnerships and media presence, and social recognition and acceptance. Each of these elements appears to be interconnected, generating key outcomes like increased visibility, financial support, opportunities, and positive public perception.

Figure 1.
Elements shaping the visibility of Paralympic sports.



The support from corporate partnerships was found to not only generate financial assistance but also enhance societal recognition and acceptance of Paralympic sports. These partnerships are seen as essential in promoting positive perceptions and challenging existing stereotypes surrounding disability and athleticism. Major brands help to create opportunities for athletes, promoting their stories and successes, which in turn generates broader visibility and helps establish a positive narrative about Paralympic athletes as elite performers.

The insights gained from the qualitative analysis emphasize that the "quality of partnership" and the "values" promoted through sponsorship are critical factors for increasing visibility. Figure 2, a word cloud generated from interview data, highlights frequently mentioned terms such as "sponsor", "visibility", "support", and "social" as important elements contributing to the public perception and acceptance of Paralympic sports. The words appearing in the word cloud were mentioned at least eight times during the interviews, indicating their significance in shaping the athletes' visibility.

Figure 2.

Word cloud for elements shaping the visibility of Paralympic sports (at least 8 mentions).



Table 4 provides a detailed breakdown of the codes related to elements shaping the visibility of Paralympic sports, with a particular emphasis on the role of major brands, societal recognition, benefits of sponsorship and corporate partnerships.

Table 4.

Frequencies of the elements shaping the visibility of Paralympic sport						
Category	Codes (n)				Total	
Role of major brands	Financial support (65)	Visibility (55)	Inclusion (32)	Equality (29)	Resilience (28)	209
Societal recognition	Financial support (65)	Visibility (55)	Positive perceptions (10)			130
Benefits of sponsorship	Visibility (55)	Support (35)	Promotion (15)	Transition to professional (10)	Values (7)	122
Corporate partnerships	Financial support (65)	Recognition (32)	Opportunities (3)			100

Moreover, the quote from David Casinos highlights an ongoing challenge: "The main challenge is achieving equality in opportunities, visibility, and recognition for Paralympic athletes compared to Olympians, including similar financial rewards for winning a medal. More companies still need to support Paralympic sports to reach an equal level of sponsorship as regular sports." This statement suggests the need for enhanced corporate engagement to foster a perception of inclusion and demonstrate that sports are for everyone.

Figure 1 pinpoints how financial support and social recognition interplay to create increased visibility. Financial backing is viewed not merely as funding for athletes but also as a means to provide sustainable support. As David Casinos states, "It's crucial that sponsorship remains a sustainable form of support, not something that ends once an athlete retires." This quote highlights the importance of long-term commitments from sponsors to ensure the continued presence and visibility of Paralympic athletes.

The findings suggest that major brands' alignment with values such as inclusion and resilience can be instrumental in shaping the public narrative and increasing the visibility of these athletes. The transition of athletes into professional spheres, facilitated by sponsorship, helps them receive the

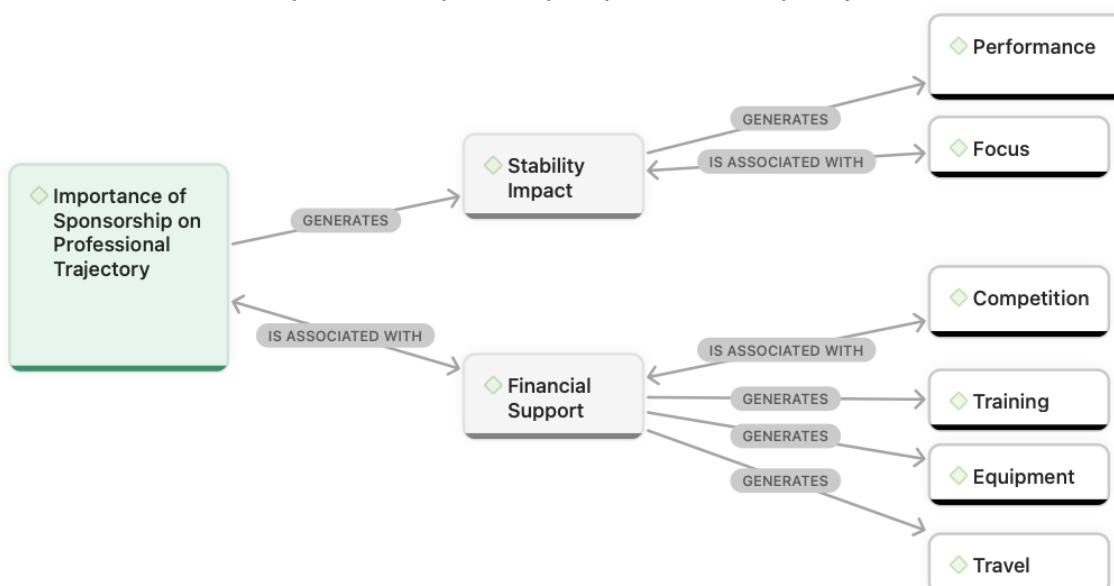
necessary support, enabling them to perform at high levels and gain recognition not only nationally but globally.

The study indicates that for the successful enhancement of Paralympic sports' visibility, sponsorship should go beyond financial aid. It requires a comprehensive promotional strategy that actively involves athletes in campaigns highlighting their professional capabilities and fostering a narrative focused on excellence rather than disability. This collective approach seems to be indispensable for creating a recognizable and positive image for Paralympic sports.

3.2. Importance of sponsorship in the professional trajectory of Paralympic athletes

The qualitative analysis also explored the importance of sponsorship in shaping the professional trajectory of Paralympic athletes. Sponsorship was found to be instrumental not only in providing financial resources but also in supporting the overall stability and career development of athletes. Figure 3 presents the network diagram outlining the importance of sponsorship for the professional development of Paralympic athletes. The diagram identifies two core areas: stability impact and financial support, which are crucial for enabling athletes to reach their professional goals.

Figure 3.
Importance of sponsorship on professional trajectory.



The insights reveal that financial support enables athletes to access essential resources such as equipment, training, competition fees, and travel. As Eva Moral noted, "Toyota's sponsorship has been crucial for my career, especially for reaching the Games. Qualifying requires constant travel and having the best equipment, and the federation does not cover all expenses. Without Toyota, I simply wouldn't have had the resources to compete internationally and make it to the Games. The support, from materials to travel funding, has been essential to achieving my high-level sports goals".

Figure 4, a word cloud generated from the interview data, highlights terms such as "brand", "financial", "focus", and "equipment" as critical components influencing the professional trajectory of Paralympic athletes. The words in Figure 4 were mentioned at least eight times during the interviews, indicating their significance in shaping the athletes' experiences.

Figure 4.

Word cloud for importance of sponsorship in professional trajectory.



Table 5 presents the frequencies of the importance of sponsorship in the professional trajectory of Paralympic athletes, categorized into financial support and stability impact. These categories include specific codes such as equipment, training, competition, travel, focus, and performance.

Table 5.
Frequencies of importance of sponsorship on professional trajectory.

Category	Codes (n)	Total
Financial support	Equipment (30) Training (28) Competition (10) Travel (5)	130
Stability impact	Focus (24) Performance (22)	122

Loida Zaballa also emphasized the role of sponsorship in providing stability and enabling focus: "They have had a very positive influence, as they help me focus on the things, I am passionate about". This focus is essential for athletes who need to prioritize their training and competitions without being distracted by financial concerns.

Since the research method only considers posts written in Spanish, the word cloud is in this language. The Figure 5 highlights the most frequently used hashtags and topics within the filtered dataset, emphasizing themes such as #Paris2024, #PartidazoCOPE, #Discapacidad, and #Deportes. These prominent hashtags suggest widespread engagement with topics related to the Paralympic Games, sports, inclusion, and Spanish representation. Additionally, hashtags like #Cuba and #MadridCaminaAParís point to broader discussions about geographic connections. The sponsor's brands have a lack of viability on these social contents. This visualization provides insight into the public discourse of Olympic and Paralympic narratives in Spain.

Figure 5.
Social conversation around the Paralympic sports 2024



The sentiment analysis of social media conversations surrounding the Paralympic Sports reveals a predominantly positive tone, reflecting widespread admiration and support for the event and its athletes. Posts often highlight themes of inspiration, resilience, and inclusion, aligning with the core values of the Paralympic movement. Keywords and hashtags such as #InspiracionDeportiva and #Discapacidad frequently appear alongside expressions of national pride and encouragement for the athletes. While the positive sentiment dominates, a minority of posts exhibit neutral or critical tones, often focusing on logistical challenges, media coverage, or perceived gaps in accessibility and representation.

The social media conversation tracking shows that 80% of posts related to the hashtag #InspiracionDeportiva (#SportsInspiration) are linked to the fitness world, and also feature other outstanding figures in the sports field, such as Spanish tennis player Rafael Nadal; Soccer player Messi; the Spanish Olympic swimmer Mireia Belmonte, and British runner Jazmin Sawyers. Therefore, it cannot be asserted that there is a direct relationship between these keywords and the Paralympic Sports follow up.

The analysis of social media data reveals significant engagement with topics related to the Paralympic Sports, particularly emphasizing themes of sports, inclusion, and national representation. This suggests that the Paralympic Sports serve as a powerful platform for fostering discussions on diversity, inclusion, and national pride, particularly within the Spanish-speaking digital community.

The findings indicate that the stability provided by sponsorship allows athletes to improve their performance and maintain focus, both of which are crucial for reaching high levels of success (Vila-López et al., 2024). The results confirm the states of Hessling et al. (2018), who established that long-term sponsorship commitments ensure that athletes are able to access continuous support throughout their careers, which is vital for their development and achievements.

Additionally, Eva Moral reiterated the need of having consistent and reliable financial support to manage expenses that are not covered by federations, such as travel and specialized equipment. She said, "Qualifying requires constant travel and having the best equipment, and the federation does not cover all expenses. Without Toyota, I simply wouldn't have had the resources to compete internationally and reach the higher level."

The importance of sponsorship extends beyond financial resources, encompassing a supportive environment that fosters growth, stability, and professional success for Paralympic athletes. Sponsorship is seen not just as a transactional relationship but as a partnership that provides the

necessary resources and emotional support needed to pursue athletic goals. This holistic approach is key to building a sustainable and successful career in Paralympic sports.

Figure 6.
Posts from a Sponsoring Brand



The posts from Toyota España demonstrate how sponsoring brands use social media to amplify the visibility of Paralympic athletes and their achievements. In one example, a post celebrates Eva Moral's bronze medal, reinforcing her role as a brand ambassador and associating her athletic success with the values of perseverance and inclusion promoted by Toyota. This post features a professional image of Eva Moral with her medal, accompanied by the brand's logo and a supportive message, highlighting the direct connection between the athlete and the company.

In another post, Toyota showcases its campaign "El gimnasio de los imposibles" ("The Gym of the Impossible"), a corporate initiative aimed at supporting athletes from the Paralympic team, including prominent figures such as Eva Moral. This content combines impactful visual elements, like images of athletes in action, with a message focused on overcoming challenges and the brand's commitment to inclusive sports. Nevertheless, these materials are not representative in the data collection. That means that are just a few posts.

Both examples reflect branding strategies that aim not only to promote the athletes but also to position the company as a leader in diversity and social responsibility values. These types of posts strengthen the brand's positive image while increasing the digital visibility of the athletes, reaching broader audiences and generating recognition for both the athletes and Toyota's inclusion-driven initiatives.

Between 2022 and 2024, the online discourse surrounding the Paralympic Games experienced a significant transformation in terms of volume, communicative formats, and narrative framing. In 2022, discussion remained relatively stable but was largely limited to niche audiences, advocacy groups, and conventional media coverage. By contrast, in 2024—particularly in the lead-up to the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games—engagement across social media platforms increased substantially, with markedly higher levels of visibility, interaction, and audience reach compared to previous Paralympic Games.

Also, the scale and professionalism of social media activity—measured by views, partnerships and editorial strategy—grew. The International Paralympic Committee and broadcast partners reported record engagement metrics and expanded digital distribution in 2024, while platform

operators and rights-holders experimented with new forms of activation (official TikTok activations, emoji campaigns, accessibility features) that increased visibility and usability for diverse audiences. At the same time, event organisers and platforms implemented stronger moderation and technological safeguards to reduce abuse and protect athletes during high-visibility moments.

Finally, we identified 3 trends on the social content production:

1. The rapid growth of TikTok and Reels as the primary vector for viral Paralympic content, multiplying impressions and discoverability beyond established para-sport audiences.
2. Athlete-led storytelling and influencer dynamics, where there is a shifting authority over narratives from institutional accounts to individual competitors.
3. A general movement from “inspiration” frames to coverage emphasizing competitive achievement, technique and records reflected in both, social posts and academic commentary.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study emphasize the intersection of identity, citizenship, and branding in the context of Paralympic sports. The social recognition and brand support received by athletes directly impact their sense of pride and belonging, highlighting the transformative potential of sponsorship. Inclusive branding not only benefits athletes but also provides companies with a unique opportunity to align themselves with values of perseverance, resilience, and inclusion. However, persistent challenges such as unequal sponsorship and limited visibility compared to Olympic athletes remain significant barriers.

This research underscores the urgent need for increased attention to Paralympic sports, particularly regarding sponsorship and visibility. Paralympic athletes are not merely competitors; they serve as ambassadors of a movement that champions inclusion and celebrates diversity. Brands play a crucial role in this narrative by recognizing and promoting athletes' identities, contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and equitable society. Interviews revealed that while athletes like Eva Moral have secured meaningful sponsorships, many face substantial challenges in accessing financial support. Despite Spain's achievements as one of the countries with the most medals in Paralympic competitions, the lack of equitable sponsorship and media coverage remains a significant hurdle. This indicates that while progress has been made, much work is still needed to elevate the profile of Paralympic sports.

Evidence from this research demonstrates that sponsorship plays a critical role in the professionalization and visibility of Paralympic athletes. Beyond financial support, sponsorship acts as a strategic alliance that enhances not only their competitive success but also the broader perception of Paralympic sports in society. By aligning with these athletes, brands contribute to reshaping public attitudes towards disability and elite sport, fostering greater inclusion and recognition.

Sponsors must plan an effective communication strategy in order to maximize their investment and enhance their brand visibility. Despite the global reach and prestige of the event, many sponsors struggle to achieve significant visibility on social media, limiting their ability to connect with audiences and associate their brand with the Olympic values. Therefore, it is necessary to create a well-designed strategy that leverages targeted campaigns, engaging content, and real-time interactions can help sponsors stand out in a crowded digital landscape.

The diverse roles of Paralympic athletes as brand ambassadors reflect their varying levels of support and visibility. Those backed by renowned brands tend to enjoy greater visibility and recognition, enhancing their identity as elite athletes. Conversely, those without significant sponsorship often struggle to achieve the same level of prominence. Social media's impact also emerged as a key theme. Many athletes recognize its importance for promoting their careers and engaging with followers, yet time constraints from training and competition often limit their ability

to maintain an active presence. This restricts their capacity to share their stories and shift public perception from narratives of pity to those of achievement and excellence.

The legacy of the Paralympic Games also plays a critical role in shaping public perception of host cities, fostering inclusion and diversity. However, challenges in infrastructure and institutional support must be addressed to ensure equal opportunities for all athletes to compete and succeed. Future research should focus on how brands can collaborate more effectively with Paralympic athletes to maximize positive community impact and enhance the public perception of Paralympic sports. Such insights will not only benefit athletes but also provide new opportunities for brands seeking to align with values of inclusion and social responsibility.

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