



Master's degree thesis

IDR950 Sport Management

**Gender Disparity in Sport: Investigating the
Perceptions of Elite Female Athletes**

Seada Saldic

Number of pages including this page: 85

Molde, 09.06.2020



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Preface

First and foremost, I want to thank my parents for everything they have done to get me to where I am today. I have the upmost respect for my parents who fled their home country in wartime with nothing but pocket money, away from everything they knew and owned. I am a first-generation refugee, and alongside my two elder sisters, we are the first of our family to seek higher education, and (hopefully) achieve master's degrees. For this I am eternally grateful. Thank you to my sisters for their continuous support and for setting the bar so high, I had no other choice but to take the step into a master's education. Thank you to my step-in brothers for setting examples of great men. Thank you to my best friend Tatiana, whom I met the first day of my undergraduate experience and in a crucial stage of my life, for the educational, supporting, and entertaining discussions we have had over the years. I would not be the woman I am today without your support.

This thesis development process has been an experience in itself in an academic, professional and personal level. I want to thank my supervisor Oskar Solenes for his crucial support and patience during this entire process, from initial thought to finished product. I would also like to thank Solveig Straume from the HiMolde Sport Management Department for her support during the two years as a master student, and for including me in the GETZ-project where I further developed my knowledge and understanding of issues related to women in sport. Thank you to my fellow students for the shared joy and frustration we have experienced together. Finally, thank you to all the extremely talented and brilliant athletes who took the time to share their valuable experiences and perspectives. I hope the women I had the pleasure to interview felt heard and seen and that our subsequent conversations guided them in a positive manner. My aim of this is to shed light on the experiences of these athletes and further develop on their opportunities to succeed.

This thesis is a product of not only my two last years as a master student at Molde University College, but as a culmination of all of the choices I have made up until now. My work often felt superficial and irrelevant compared to the current global affairs. However, I hope this

thesis will contribute positively in one way or another, and that someone finds use in it like I have found use in the many theses of previous cohorts. 2020 has been an extremely challenging year for us all, and I have an immense compassion for my fellow 2020 graduates. Graduating and seeking employment during a global pandemic where there is not only uncertainty in the job market, but also uncertainty for the lives of our fellow humans, has been beyond stressful. On top of that, we are now fighting the most important battle of our time. This the beginning of a revolution, and we demand justice now. 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere' – Martin Luther King Jr. Black Lives Matter.

This thesis is dedicated to my niece and nephew. I wish for you to have equal and limitless opportunities to achieve your dreams, whatever they might be.

Seada Saldic,
Molde, 2020.

Summary

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the perceived opportunities and challenges Norwegian female athletes face in navigating their careers as professional athletes. Using a feminist perspective, the experiences and perceptions of six athletes competing at the highest level in their respective sport are analysed. Specifically, perspectives on women's role in media, their sponsorship opportunities, and personal branding strategy which arose through semi-structured interviews is analysed through a combination of thematic analysis, literature review and theoretical underpinnings. Four broad topics were found as significant for the female athletes and their careers, these being (1) media visibility, (2) the importance of social media, (3) the social construction of gender roles, as well as (4) barriers relating to the construction of their personal athlete brand. The subsequent discussion embraces these findings and connects it to feminist theory to depict the experiences of female athletes through their attempt to progress and succeed in their careers. The findings provide insights from a Norwegian cultural context and demonstrate that female athletes are focusing on opportunities. They are embracing new methods of marketing themselves through social media as a way of claiming their visibility and changing the outdated narrative.

Keywords: feminism, female athletes, athlete brand, brand management

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1.0 Introduction

In recent times, women in sport all around the world have been increasingly more recognised for their achievements. Rhonda Rousey becoming the first female fighter to sign with UFC and headline a UFC event in 2012, Ada Hegerberg being the first ever woman to be awarded the Ballon d'Or in 2018, and Megan Rapino named Sport Illustrated's Sportsperson of the Year 2019 are just some of these recognitions (Gross, 2012; Aarons, 2018; Elassar, 2019). Additionally, Naomi Osaka became the highest paid female athlete in 2020, surpassing the dominance of Serena Williams (Forbes Press Release, 2020).

However, when Ada Hegerberg was received the first ever women's Ballon d'Or in 2018, the male award presenter and DJ Martin Solveig asked the Norwegian football player if she 'knew how to twerk' and wanted to dance in celebration (Aarons, 2018). The incident caused an immediate uproar in social media, where Solveig's comment was criticised by, amongst others, Andy Murray as 'another example of the ridiculous sexism in sport' (Aarons, 2018). Ada Hegerberg herself said 'I didn't really consider it sexual harassment or anything in the moment. I was just happy to do the dance and win the Ballon d'Or' (Aarons, 2018). During a press conference in 2015 in relation to a major event, the Norwegian cross-country women's team were asked what kind of underwear they wore under their skiing suit (Kvam and M. Hugsted, 2015). This unravelled a nation-wide discussion of sexism in Norwegian sport media. In 2017, Hege Leirfall Ingebritsen, a former vice-president of the Norwegian Football Federation, was publicly announced as the new board leader of a major football club as 'the RBK coach's wife becomes new board leader of Bodø/Glimt' by several national newspapers (Stokstad, 2017). Moreover, although Naomi Osaka's achievement is beyond great and symbolises a movement for female athletes, she is only joined by one fellow woman in Forbes' top 100 paid athletes, namely Serena Williams who are both from the same sport (Forbes Press Release, 2020).

Scenarios like these are representative of the countless instances where women athletes to varying levels are degraded, less prioritised and go unrewarded for their equally hard work. For example, the US Women's football team have participated in every World Cup since 1991, and have won a medal in each, 4 of these being gold. Yet, the US female players were far less compensated than their male counterparts, who had their best finish in 1930, placing

third the FIFA World (Kaplan, 2019). Far too often, the discussion is met with the simplistic argument of simple economics: male sports tend to generate more revenue therefore they should earn more (Kaplan, 2019). However, focusing on these merits ignores the root of the problem; the marketing investment of female sports and the environmental and cultural factors that limit women's opportunities to generate equal revenue and in turn secure equal pay (Rogers, 2018). The problem is not what women are paid, but rather the lack of foundations that allow female athletes to capitalise from their talent.

The issue of pay disparity in sport is a circular cause. As less people watch women's sport, there is less sponsorship and endorsement money involved. Consequently, there is less money available to be invested in the marketing of women's sport, affecting the availability of women's sport consumption and the number of people watching. Without sufficient marketing, female athletes miss out on vast media rights deals and sponsorship agreements which can contribute to the generation of large amounts of revenue and close the gap of disparity between men and women in sports (Alvarez, 2019). This process continues, and women's salaries and prize money are often much lower than that of their male counterparts. With salaries and prize money being as low as they are and the existing disproportion of commercial investment dedicated to women's sport, female athletes must strategically build their brand in order to increase their market value needed for making money off-field and ensure career and post career sustainability.

1.1 Research Question

Sport often reflects the cultural values of society and is often referred to as a microcosm of society with the ability to condense the characteristics and qualities of a society at large. It is a cultural phenomenon which is both shaped by, and shapes, its surroundings (Kaufman and Wolff, 2010). Additionally, sport occupies much of society's activities, such as everyday conversations, newspapers and magazines, as well as entertainment television for both children and adults. With the profound influence sport has on the social life of people of all ages, it has the ability to drive social change (Kaufman and Wolff, 2010).

Much research has been done on sport sponsorship, both on a team and individual level. Personal branding of athletes has become increasingly popular, but less research has been done from the perspectives of athletes, and especially the perspectives of female athletes.

This thesis will investigate the perceptions of female athletes on the challenges, or opportunities, they might face in their role as elite athletes. Specifically, it will analyse the challenges and opportunities experienced in relation to their public image and brand, and their ability to leverage their brand. Additionally, it will seek to explore if these challenges and opportunities are shared across the participant group and whether these can be explained by social mechanics of gendered processes. My research question is therefore as follows:

How do elite female athletes perceive opportunities and challenges in the process of personal branding?

By using semi-structured interviews, Norwegian athletes competing at the highest level in their respective sport will be interviewed about their perception and experience of building a brand, as well as their earning potential. This includes their sponsorship attractiveness, visibility in media and online, general population's perspective of them, as well as prize money and salaries. Additionally, through the use of feminist theory, this research will seek to uncover information about shared understanding perceptions in relation to their experiences as female athletes.

This thesis has been significantly inspired by an original study done on the American female athletes and their perceived branding barriers by (Lobpries *et al.*, 2018). Although Norway and the US are both western countries, its history and culture are significantly different. Norway, for example, is ranked #2 in the The Global Gender Gap Index 2020 rankings, whilst the US is ranked #53 (World Economic Forum, 2019). Furthermore, the structure of sport is very different than the one in the US, where sport in the US is overall more commercialised (Bryhn, 2015). Norway is also often seen as the pioneer in many aspects – healthcare, work-life balance, maternity and paternity leave, as well as gender equality. However, recent studies have found significant disparities between male and female media exposure, athlete's wages and international success (Godø, 2018). More boys and men have active memberships in organised sport and take part in organised sport for longer (Idrettsforbundet, 2018). In fact, Norway has been found to be the least equal sporting nation in terms of Olympic gold medals and top finishes in world championships (Godø, 2018).

The discrimination against women in sport has been documented in many areas and countries. Feminists acknowledge that sport is a social system which is dominated by patriarchal social systems of dominance and must be dissected through a critical cultural view (Scruton *et al.*, 1999). In order to understand the forces within sport, using a feminist lens assists in understanding the institutional, often taken for granted, patriarchy. Scruton *et al.* (1999) calls for a move away from theoretical understanding of the socialised processes and duality between masculinity and femininity, towards trying to understand the experiences of women. In order to recognise the preserved significance of gendered structures of power, the experience of elite Norwegian female athletes will be investigated and analysed.

1.2 Sport in Norway

The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) is Norway's largest volunteer organisation, and is responsible for all organised sport, including recreational and elite level sport (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2020). The supreme governing body for organised sport in Norway is the General Assembly which is held every four years. The delegates are representative of the 55 national sport federations and 19 regional NIF confederations. The assembly develops laws related to sport and is independent and does not require parliamentary approval (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2020). Essentially, NIF has successfully monopolised sport in Norway, and all NIF related sport organisations must comply to their rules and regulations (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2020).

As in many other nations, the Norwegian sport society became gradually more commercialised, where it became increasingly more dependent on support from the business sector in terms of sponsorships, subsequently also eradicating the separation of amateur and professional sport (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2020). However, due to the fact that only members of sport clubs have the right to vote, these external private stakeholders have been kept out of the decision-making process in Norwegian sports. Nevertheless, due to their high financial power, they have the ability to influence sports by other means (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, there is a separation of state and sport in its funding, as NIF is entirely funded by the national lottery rather than through the government (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2020).

Sport is highly entrenched in Norwegian culture and it remains the leading nation in winter sports, such as cross-country skiing and ski jumping (Thorsnærs and Sæle, 2020). Norway also performs well in other international sports, such as athletics, football, cycling and handball. In addition to performing well within elite sports, Norway is a pioneer in focusing on recreational and grassroots sports, with one of its main values being “sport for everyone”, a sport policy giving all people the right and the opportunity to pursue sports according to their preconditions, needs and interests (Aas, 2013).

The sports industry has traditionally been an arena created and dominated by men. Women were absent from Norwegian sport for a long time, similar to that of sports internationally (Thorsnærs and Sæle, 2020). Before the so-called “sports revolution” in Norway from the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s, women only made up a small fraction of the active members in sports (Thorsnærs and Sæle, 2020). Prior to this, women were first found in sport such as gymnastics, ski sports and figure skating. Even though several sports started to open up for female participation, many sport leaders and medical doctors believed women’s sport should be different than men’s, both in regard to aesthetical and medical reasons (Thorsnærs and Sæle, 2020). The choice of sports was still based on whether or not it upheld the traditional role of a woman, and strength- and endurance sports were therefore opposed (Thorsnærs and Sæle, 2020).

The breakthrough for women in most sports occurred around the 1970s. After many years of campaigning and protesting, women were finally allowed to participate in Holmenkoll relay race and Birkenbeinrittet ski race in 1975 (Thorsnærs and Sæle, 2020). In this same period, the fight for equality progressed in the world of sports, in the public arena, and in political decisions and regulations. The Norwegian Equality Act was passed by the Parliament in 1978 and came in force a year later in 1979 (revised in 2013) (Lovdata.no, n.d.).

Since the 1980s, Norwegian women have had a solid position in the international sports arena in several sports, two of these being football and handball. The Norwegian female national team in football is one of the most successful women’s national teams in the world, and the handball team has consistently performed at the highest level, with several Olympic, and World and European championship medals (FIFA.com, n.d.). A pioneer amongst Norwegian sportswomen was, and still is, Laila Schou Nilsen. During her sports career,

Nilsen attained an Olympic bronze medal in alpine skiing, participated in two world speed skating championships, 85 Norwegian championships in tennis, four Norwegian championships in handball, five unofficial Norwegian championships in car racing and participation in four Monte Carlo races (Thorsnæs and Sæle, 2020). Other successful women in recent times include Marit Bjørgen, the most decorated cross country skier of all time regardless of gender; Suzann Pedersen, ranked second best female golfer in the world; Cecilia Brækhus “The First Lady”, the first female boxer and kickboxer to win all four World Championship belts in all major boxing organisations; Maren Lundby, Olympic champion and most decorated Norwegian ski jumper; and as previously mentioned Ada Hegerberg, one of the world’s greatest football players and the first receiver of the Ballon d’Or Femini (Bryhn, 2019a; Nordlie and Bryhn, 2020; Bryhn, 2019b, 2020a; Hold, 2020).

Norway has persistently ranked amongst the most equal countries for years. Albeit the impressive sport merits and its general equality, it is the least equal sporting nation in the world, measured in numbers of Olympic gold medals and top finishes in world championships (Godø, 2018). Moreover, a Norwegian research comparing 55 female and 55 male athletes across 10 sports found a significant disparity in wages, where Norwegian male athletes earn more than 100 million Norwegian Kroner (NOK) a year more than their female colleagues (Lie, 2017a). Given the already stated differences in performance, one might believe this is the sole factor explaining the pay wage. However, even in handball, where the female national team has repeatedly and persistently outperformed the male national team, a male handball player earns on average over 500.000 NOK more a year than a female handball player (Lie, 2017a). It is also worth noting that a male football player on the national team earns over 6.4 million NOK more a year than a female football player on the national team (Lie, 2017b). Since the agreement of equal pay between the two national teams in football as signed in 2018, no federation differentiates between genders in paying national team fees, and these sums reflect personal endorsement deals and prize money (Lie, 2017b).

Fortunately, sport in Norway has experienced a continuous improvement of male/female balance in number of active members, and as of 2017, 41.2% with a membership in organised sport are women (Idrettsforbundet, 2018). NIF has an organisational goal of composing the boards in Norwegian sport as reflective of its membership, and in 2018, 36.3% of board members were women (Idrettsforbundet, 2018). However, if one looks at

the proportion of board leaders, i.e. chairmen and presidents, 75.5% of these are men. When considering the total number of 446 coaches across the national teams, only 18% of these are women (Norges Idrettsforbund og Olympiske og Paralympiske Komité, 2018). The low representation of women as coaches is permeated across different sports at different competitive level, and in 2017, male coaches dominated the field of handball at club level in the top division, with no woman having the role as head coach (NRK Sport, 2017).

One can ask what kind of repercussions and signals this sends to young girls across the country when men dominate the field of sport in all levels and the position of men in sport is seen as the status quo. Do women not want to be leaders and coaches, or do we have leaders that only hire men? When women do take space, do we give them the opportunity to succeed? And where does media come into play? There are 475 members in the Norwegian Sport Journalist Federation, and less than 10% of these are women (NRK Sport, 2017). Do we give the female athletes the opportunity to become role models? These are only some of the issues which affect women's journey as athletes.

1.3 Relevant Research

An exhaustive review of the literature on this topic would not be possible due to the scope and space restriction of this thesis. Instead, I aim to provide a sample of relevant literature which subsequently formed my research question. I am first and foremost concerned with how female athletes and women's sport are portrayed by media and endorsers, the forces sanctioning this, as well as the implications and consequences it may have on the opportunities for marketing of female athletes and women's sport. In essence, what constitutes and affects the market worth of female athletes.

1.3.1 Female Athletes, Women Sport's and the Media

Janet S. Fink has done wide-ranging research into sport, and especially women in sport (Fink and Pastore, 1997; Fink, 2008; Fink *et al.*, 2012; Kane *et al.*, 2013; Fink *et al.*, 2014; Fink, 2015, 2016). As a nice introduction to the topic of women in sport and the different stakeholders involved in its positioning, Fink (2015) provides a resourceful review of available research. Here, the qualitative and quantitative differences in media representation of male and female athletes are discussed, and the impact mass media has in influencing

social realities is emphasised. Pan and Kosicki (1993) labels the mass media as one of the biggest and most influential institution with the power to shape social values and argues that how media depicts and frame issues directly impacts how the public will perceive reality (Fink, 2015). Subsequently, the review focuses on how media has the power to reinforce and create harmful stereotypes and gender roles, which can negatively impact perceptions of women's capabilities beyond the arena of sport and further intensify the patriarchal structure that limit women (Fink, 2015).

Fink (2015) discusses a variety of findings that show the media coverage of female athletes has been scarce in the past and has only declined despite the increase of women participation and athletic performance. One positive movement in the quantitative treatment of women in media is the opportunity that online media can be utilised to ensure less disparity. Although it was overall found more coverage of male athletes across three Olympic websites during the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, when adjusted to the relative proportion of male and female athletes, no significant differences were found (Fink, 2015). However, Fink (2015) reiterates that a large proportion of research has found significant differences in media attention allocated to male and female athletes.

The meaning and importance of these findings are drawn in parallel to the framing of women in sport as irrelevant and draws in the prevalent argument that this is no coincidence and that media remains a powerful tool in maintaining male power and privilege (Fink, 2015). Furthermore, it has been found that when female athletes are given media attention and coverage, its portrayal in media differs in tone, production and focus, 'result[ing] in a more negative description of female athletes and women's sport' (Fink, 2015) reinforcing the gendered hierarchy of sport. Fink further establishes that:

(...) many of these practices are so pervasive, and they have become so deeply woven into the fabric of the marketing and production of women's sport, that most consumers do not notice, let alone question, their insidious nature (Fink, 2015).

Compared to men's sport and how the male athlete is treated versus the female athlete, numerous topics have been studied. These include: (1) Gender marking: rendering female athletes and women's championships as secondary to that of men's competitions, assuming men's competition as the standard; (2) Infantilising: referring to highly skilled and

accomplished female athletes as “girls” or “young ladies”, as well as only calling them by their first names; (3) Differential framing and ambivalence: framing male and female athletic performances differently and typically in ways that minimise females’ athletic abilities while proliferating male superiority; (4) Focus on femininity/heterosexuality: providing more media coverage to women who compete in sports that embody the feminine ideals, less focus on sporting performance and rather highlighting sex appeal and femininity, as well as highlighting their heterosexuality by focusing on their lives outside of sport; (5) Different production techniques: fewer shot variations, less use of on-screen graphics, video frames of shorter duration, close ups to emphasise sexualised body parts, which contribute to rendering women’s sport as less important and exciting.

The highlighted topics emphasise the fact that sport consumption is a circular and mediated process, and that these disparities all contribute to the lower reputation of female athletes, reinforce existing negative, or ambivalent, attitudes about women’s sport and impacts audience perceptions of value and quality (Fink, 2015). Furthermore, Fink (2015) criticises decision makers for justifying the differential treatment as a combination of market forces and their obligation to provide viewers with ‘what they want to see’, as their decisions have power to create, or reduce, audience demand. Rather, combining a set of literature, Fink (2015) provides the following as possible explanations of the disparate coverage: hegemonic masculinity, sexism, heterosexism/homophobia and influence on marketing and promotion.

The prevalent findings of the reviewed research clearly show that sex does not sell, but nevertheless, decision makers crave abundant research and consistent findings across cultures and populations in order to amend their traditional marketing and media processes (Fink, 2015). Fink (2015) thus encourages more research across cultures and domains to change the current practices that pose challenges for female athletes and women’s sport, because ‘as long as sexist acts in sport go unnoticed or are taken for granted, progress for women’s sport and female athletes relative to the sport media commercial complex will be impossible’ (Fink, 2015, p. 340).

1.3.2 Female Athletes’ Interpretations of Sport Media Images

Kane et al. (2013) explores how female athletes respond to media portrayal within sports, and how they wish to be portrayed. This article also explores the “sports media commercial

complex” and how sports influences societies perspective of women’s sport and female athletes. This is seen in the perspective of how it has an impact beyond sports, and its contribution for preserving hegemonic masculinity and male superiority. Elite female athletes are a particularly disregarded group whose perspectives are often overlooked. By employing critical feminist theory, 36 participants from intercollegiate athletics at two American universities were recruited to take part in a mixed-method research to obtain information about their feelings and beliefs regarding their identities, self-representations, and the representations of their respective sport (Kane *et al.*, 2013).

The findings showed some ambivalence in results, but significantly found that female athletes repeatedly chose images which highlighted and focused on athletic performance, validating the notion that physical ability is preferred over those which sexualise and emphasise physical attractiveness of sportswomen (Kane *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, this particular group of participants expressed their thoughts on hyper sexualisation in marketing: they agreed that it generates interest for their sport when trying to attract a male audience, but also noted that when marketing to other groups of potential fans and consumers, such as parents and young girls and women, emphasising competence and not sexuality is more effective (Kane *et al.*, 2013). These findings support the research reviewed in (Fink, 2015).

1.3.3 Female Athletes as Endorsers

Antil *et al.* (2012) conducted an explanatory study on the impending challenges female athletes experience as endorsers. Female consumers influence or control 85% of brand purchases and are currently neglected by marketers and by using female athletes as endorsers, the market has an opportunity to tap into this consumer group’s purchasing power. However, despite female participation in sport increasing and female consumers having this power, female athletes are less used as endorsers than male athletes (Antil *et al.*, 2012).

The researchers use McCracken’s meaning transfer model, which states that celebrities can be useful as endorsers as they offer meaning to the advertisement and thus make them more believable and enhances message recall. Additionally, they use McGuire’s dimension of source attractiveness, involving familiarity, likeability and similarity, and investigate male

and female consumers' attitudes towards endorsers across nine focus groups (Antil *et al.*, 2012). The results from the study found that male consumers recall sport celebrities as endorsers far more often than non-sport celebrities, and that female consumers generally recall more celebrities, most of these being non-sport related. Both male and female consumers recall very few female sport celebrities as endorsers, and if given the chance, both consumer groups were more likely to select male athletes as endorsers for products and brands (Antil *et al.*, 2012).

All in all, female athlete awareness was found to be very low compared to that of male athlete awareness (Antil *et al.*, 2012). It is likely that this is due to the lack of consistent public attention female athletes receive, as discussed earlier in the work of Fink (2015) review of qualitative and quantitative difference. McGuire's source attractiveness model proposes that the effectiveness of a message will be heavily influenced by familiarity, likability and similarity of the source, and public attention is required in order to create visibility and consequently familiarity. This in turn affects endorser effectiveness, and low familiarity provides less credibility to the endorser and the endorsed product. Due to this lack of familiarity, consumers are not provided with enough information about the athlete, and consequently cannot form a valid assessment of the athlete's likeability (Antil *et al.*, 2012). However, where knowledge and familiarity were present, the participants did match the athletes with products and brands. Additionally, the participants reported that they would be more likely to be influenced by a female endorser with similarity to themselves, which was found particularly true with mothers who indeed hold much influence over purchasing decisions. When using athletes that were much younger than them, or when the endorser was highlighting sex appeal, the credibility of both the endorser and the product suffered (Antil *et al.*, 2012). The significance of this questions the usefulness of highlighting of sexual appeal in marketing. It raises the importance of rather focusing on similarities between endorser and the target consumer group, which can significantly influence purchasing behaviour (Antil *et al.*, 2012).

All in all, this research is useful as it questions if female endorsers are seen as less successful because of their general role as female athletes, or because it is related to the design of the communication strategy and marketers have inefficiently used them in ads. This study reveals that the advantages of using female athletes as endorsers has not been utilised effectively. This is especially true for gender congruent products, where a female endorser

might seem more suitable and appropriate for the product and is more likely to be trusted and listened to (Antil *et al.*, 2012).

1.3.4 Branding Barriers Faces by Elite Female Athletes

Lobpries *et al.* (2018) reports that female athlete branding and the barriers they experience in process of building their brands is not well-explored in sport management, marketing, or diversity literature. Through semi-structured interviews with professional female elite athletes and agents who represent elite female athletes, the focus was to examine these barriers and obtain rich understanding of gender barriers experienced in regard to brand building activities of US athletes. Their findings showed that there are in fact perceived barriers that exist in the brand building process for elite female athletes which are based upon social role expectations. Moreover, these barriers hinder an athlete's ability to effectively build their brand, as social gender roles do not facilitate the necessary qualities needed, such as self-promotion. Specific to branding strategies, the lack of media exposure and the limited capacity to build brands as a result of poor management were also reported as barriers. Additionally, the researchers found that physical attractiveness plays a significant role in female athletes' attempt to build their brand and navigate through a commercial society.

Another interesting finding is the fact that the athletes did not believe they could succeed in personal branding based solely on sporting success, and often have to 'do more than that', such as help the community or build their brand on the basis of physical attractiveness (Lobpries *et al.*, 2018, p. 12). This circles back to the findings of where the forces of differential treatment influence the marketing of female athletes and women's sport, believing the way to market them is by focusing on something other than their athleticism (Fink, 2015). Closely linked to this is the lack of visibility in media, marketing activities such as co-branding, and lack of management facilitating brand building.

Although providing important and intriguing findings, the authors stress the importance of culture and the role it plays in how athletes experience or perceive barriers to impede their branding potential. Furthermore, as only a small sample has been used to analyse this topic, validity and generalisation is contested. It does however contribute greatly to the field of endorsement literature, especially linked to female athlete branding (Lobpries *et al.*, 2018).

2.0 Theory

2.1 The Concept of Brands

The last few decades have seen the dominance of the brand concept. Everyone, from countries to political parties to individuals in the work force, is encouraged to think of themselves as a brand. At best, this requires one to think of themselves in the eyes of someone else. It means ‘caring about, measuring and understanding how others see you, and adapting what you do to take account of it, without abandoning what you stand for’ (Clifton et al., 2004, p. xiii). At its worst, it means misleading and manipulating those who you seek to exploit by putting on a cynical gloss.

The word brand is used in different, but interrelated manners. A brand is often used to refer to a product or service, as a trademark and as a way of referring to consumer’s beliefs and expectations about offerings sold under this trademark (also known as reputation, and formally known as brand equity) (Montoya and Vandehey, 2002). In essence, the brand equity is the ‘value added to a product by associating it with a brand name and other distinctive characteristics’ (Clifton et al., 2004, p. 3). Brands are intangible assets that combine name, slogans, logos, product design, packaging, advertisements and marketing into a physically recognisable product (Clifton *et al.*, 2004). In addition, brands have a cerebral function which decides what status it gets in the eyes of the consumers. This aims to generate positive connotations and associations to the brand, in order to endorse brand loyalty (Clifton *et al.*, 2004). Brands are stable and sustainable assets whose legacy lives longer than most management teams, offices, technological breakthroughs and short-term economic troughs (Clifton *et al.*, 2004).

Brands symbolise a promise to the consumers that their expectations will be fulfilled, and the real power of success lies behind kept promises. If the seller keeps to its side of the bargain, the buyer will be satisfied and stay loyal to the brand; if not, the buyer will look elsewhere in the future (Montoya and Vandehey, 2002). Branding has always been around, and companies have worked to create an aura around their products to make them more desirable for a long time. It has become a dominant concept in marketing, and a compelling brand is now widely regarded as the key to customer loyalty. Once a consumer has

developed brand loyalty, it is nearly impossible to erase that brand identity from the consumer's mind (Arai *et al.*, 2014).

2.1.1 Athletes as Brands

In recent years, many athletes have expanded their influence beyond their sport by getting involved in a variety of social activities and businesses. These athletes are seen as social symbols, expressing individuality and inviting desire and identification through sharing cultural meanings and ideological values (Arai *et al.*, 2014). Athletes are no longer just considered as 'vehicles for advertisements or product endorsement, but also as cultural products to be sold as "brands"' (Shank and Lyberger 2014, p.272). A common consensus of the definition of a human brand is not yet been achieved, and as such, the definition of brands in sports is the most useful. Hodge and Walker (2015, p. 116) defines brands in sport as 'a name, design, symbol, or any combination that a sports organisation uses to help differentiate its product from the competition'. Building on this and other basic concepts of branding, Arai *et al.* (2014) adapts the definition to athletes and includes the practice of interacting with the consumer. Their definition states that 'any professional athlete, with sponsorship or endorsement deals, is considered a brand' (Arai *et al.*, 2014, p. 116).

The concept of branding athletes as products has proven to be well suited as it has shown positive outcomes, such as influencing the probability of brand choice, willingness to pay premium price, marketing communication effectiveness and promotion of positive word of mouth (Arai *et al.*, 2014). A brand determines how fans, sponsors and the sports world perceive the athlete, and building a strong personal brand is the first step for new and emerging athletes in creating a long and sustainable career. Individual athletes also reap benefits of successful branding as they are able to attain price premiums on their salary, transfer fees, contract monies and an ability to maintain fan support even in cases where performance has declined (Arai *et al.*, 2014). This last point is important due to the fact that athletes are considered unstable products as there is high risk of career-hindering factors such as injuries or slumped performance. Furthermore, athletes with a strong brand equity have the potential to attract companies who seek effective endorsers and can help their post-athletic career as they are able to leverage their brand value even after resigning. Michael Jordan and his Nike Jordan's are a prime example of leveraging one's personal brand long after the end of one's athletic career (Badenhausen, 2020). On the women's side, Nina

Sharapova built a brand for life, which has extended into the business of candy through her line Sugapova (Carayol, 2020). Viewing athletes as brands gives them the potential to use their sports career as a platform or other endeavours and can potentially move into a variety of sectors (Hodge and Walker, 2015).

Athlete brands are an important as much of an athlete's future success depends on their ability to leverage and promote a desirable image (Hodge and Walker, 2015). Athletes can possess unique identities and characteristics similar to those of organisational brands. They can have their own logos, fan groups, and are even sometimes associated with attributes that differentiate them from their sporting competitors (Hodge and Walker, 2015). Athletes have the opportunity to earn large sums of money by using their status as cultural icons, all from promoting products online and in real life, to launching their own clothing lines (Montoya and Vandehey, 2002).

2.1.2 Branding Athletes

Personal branding is the process of establishing a unique personal identity and developing an efficient communication to a specific target market in order to fulfil personal and professional objectives (Ballouli and Hutchinson, 2012). It involves establishing a brand identity, developing the brand's positioning, and evaluating its brand image. Similar to traditional branding, athlete branding involves 'the interaction, reaction and emotional experience fans feel when they engage with an athlete brand' (Carlson and Donovan, 2013, p. 56). The emotions evoked by these brands has the ability to make athletes attractive prospects for a variety of endorsement deals, but this is highly dependent on the ability to persuade consumers. This again is dependent on the development and management of the athlete's brand personality, a key aspect of the personal branding process. Brand personality is the 'observable characteristics such as media depictions, endorsed product associations, and sport associations' (Arai et al., 2014, p. 196).

There is a general lack of theoretical understanding of how athlete image is constructed, and Arai et al. (2014) provides the first conceptual framework of athlete brand image. A theoretical model for athlete brand image is constructed by combining theoretical background of branding and modifying this to athletes as endorsers. These consist of three main dimensions, namely athlete performance, attractive appearance and marketable life

cycle. These three dimensions are further divided into 10 sub-dimensions, each contributing to the successful branding of an athlete and can potentially influence consumer brand equity. The 10 sub-categories incorporate athletic expertise, competition style, sportsmanship, rivalry, physical attractiveness, symbol, body fitness, life story, role model and relationship effort as important brand-building influences. This is a helpful paradigm that can be used not only to understand the concept of athlete branding but can assist agents and managers in assessing which part of their client/athlete's brand image is weak, and subsequently work strategically to enhance this aspect (Arai *et al.*, 2014).

Although this is the first attempt to conceptualise athlete brand image, it also gives rise to the importance of strategic branding based on marketing theory for athletes, as the modern media culture shifts the focus away from athlete performance in terms of winning or losing, and on to the activities around this that create their overall brand image (Arai *et al.*, 2014). This conceptual model does not however, take the differences between male and female athletes into account, and assumes a shared theoretical framework for both. Many reports and studies imply that this might not be the case, as the same behaviour from female and male athletes have been interpreted differently, and physical attractiveness and sex appeal has been found significantly more important (Lobpries *et al.*, 2018; Kane *et al.*, 2013).

As such, the athletes need for strong branding strategies is significant. In order to overcome the inevitable win-loss cycles that exists in the sports industry, sport marketers should seek other branding strategies, such as establishing a strong brand identity, to overcome losing records and sustain loyalty (Arai *et al.*, 2014). As this is an increasingly more a competitive industry, managing brands for athletes is becoming an essential part of an agent's workload. Numerous sport agencies are currently working with a wide portfolio of client services in order to build strong personal brands for sporting people in order to maximise their potential and earnings. Although athletes may employ marketing firms to build and promote their personal brands, it is ultimately up to the athlete to decide how to best implement their personal brand strategies (Hodge and Walker, 2015). Quester and Bal (2013) explored personal branding and personal brand development strategies from the professional athlete perspective, and found athletes suffering from lack of knowledge, lack of time and/or support, and differences in career stage as affecting their branding. This study again, did not take gender differences into consideration.

2.1.3 Athletes as Sponsored Entities

By building their brands, athletes also increase their attractiveness as sponsored entities. Sponsorships are strategic communication mediums which involve some sort of exchange between the entities involves which commonly results in a mutual benefit (Dumont, 2016). The rise of celebrities from sports, movies, fashion, arts and other industries, the commercial market has acknowledged the power held by these personas and the potential in contribution of increasing brand awareness and product sales and has opened up for sponsorship at the individual level.

Athlete sponsorships derive from the commonality of athletes making the headlines due to their athletic performance, intriguing love life, and scandals. These athletes function as cultural icons with a highly influential role in contemporary society, and brands acknowledge this power of exposure as an opportunity to help promote products and brands. Charalambous-Papamiltiades (2013) identifies athletes as cultural products as intermediaries linking the economic, cultural and social spheres together through the products they represent. However, athletes are also unstable and high in risk entities to sponsor due to their proneness of scandals of individual behaviour. The importance of sponsorship 'fit' has been highlighted by the works of many and signifies the importance of congruence between the sponsor and the sponsored entity (Dumont, 2016). Moreover, sponsorship of athletes has focused on choosing the "optimal" athlete based on the organisation's strategy, brand personality and features of their target group (Enns and Sinacore, 2001).

2.2 Feminist Theory

Feminist theories are 'conceptual frameworks that organise beliefs about the nature and causes of women's oppression and inequality and that propose methods for eradicating oppression and establishing gender equality' (Gill, 2001, n.p.). Feminist practice and theory 'incorporates gender scholarship, emphasises neglected women's experiences and takes a non-hierarchical, empowering, process-oriented approach which shifts emphasis from personal change to social change' (Bloomfield, 1988, p. 1009). It seeks to provide perspectives regarding the unequal power held by women and men, how knowledge has been accumulated by and for men, and how we all can rectify these problems and achieve

equality. It builds on the ideology of feminism, which advocates for the liberation of women from the sexist patriarchy and its connected institutions (Enns and Sinacore, 2001).

‘Qu’est-ce qu’une femme?’ In the introduction of *Le Deuxième Sexe – The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir asks ‘What is a woman?’ (Beauvoir, 1969). ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ de Beauvoir continues, where in her formulation she distinguishes sex from gender and suggest that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired through social interaction (Connell, 1987). This difference between sex and gender is crucial in feminist theory. In earlier days, sex and gender was used interchangeably. However, a social movement of psychologists and activists developed a more precise definition of the two terms, where sex is used to refer to a person’s biological maleness or femaleness, and gender as the nonphysiologically aspect of being male or female, i.e. the cultural expectations for femininity and masculinity (Enns and Sinacore, 2001). This distinction is important as it separates female-male differences in behaviour and experiences from biological differences between the sexes.

Feminist theories arose as critiques of the dominant ways of thinking that excluded women and women’s issues. These theories and schools of thoughts involve a series of rapidly evolving and developing frameworks which takes the analysis of gender as an experience in society. It aims to offer an explanation of the cultural dynamics we live in, by forming a general pattern of experience across the society (Ferguson, 2017). Generally, it follows the notion of de Beauvoir’s insight that women are not born, but rather become women (Enns and Sinacore, 2001). As a foundation, feminist theory focuses on the analysis of personal experiences and being able to see these in a broader perspective of systemic oppression. Common for all feminist theories is the argument that women are oppressed within a structure of patriarchy. Patriarchy is defined as the social order based on the domination of women by men (Enns and Sinacore, 2001). This gender oppression is seen as endemic, a normal, ordinary and engrained process in our society.

There are several strands of feminism, which are under constant development by their producers and users (Martin, 2003). Unsatisfied with its scope, focus or the limitations of the theory, these frameworks are ever evolving, and feminists themselves are indeed feminist theory’s worst critics. Albeit many varieties within the theories, they all share two objectives: to reveal obvious and subtle gender inequalities, and to reduce or eradicate these

inequalities (Enns and Sinacore, 2001). Academics identify three 'waves' of feminism that have evolved throughout the history (Enns and Sinacore, 2001). The first wave, which took place between the 17th and 19th century, consisted of feminists who worked to achieve equality for women and the right to participate more widely in society, and worked primarily within the existing systems of rules and laws. The second wave of feminism which took place between the 1960s and 1980s, provided theories about gender oppression, as well as how to reach the optimal goals of feminism. This is when the first four major schools of thought of feminism arose: liberal, cultural, radical and socialist feminism. The third wave of feminism overlapped with second-wave feminism, and further developed the theories in order to include the modern thought of post modernism, women of colour, lesbian, global, and Generation-X third wave feminisms. These recent theories focused on highlighting women's perspectives and values diversity, flexibility, and multiple perspectives on gender relationships McDonagh and Pappano (2008).

2.2.1 Gender and Sport

Much of what we give meaning to today, is socially constructed. Money, language, countries and more importantly for this thesis, gender. Sport is commonly spoken of as reflecting society, but Alsarve (2018) reminds us that it does not – rather than reflecting social and gender realities, it plays a key role in constructing them. Sport is therefore an important microscope of studying the social construction of gender. Historically, modern sport was invented by men in order to turn boys into "real men". Competitiveness, toughness, aggressiveness and endurance are characteristics that have always been perceived to develop "masculine" traits and thus "real" sportsmen (Birrell, 2000a). As a result, women have been regarded as deviants in the world of sport, never really acquiring the same level of respect (Birrell, 2000a).

The feminist approach is especially useful in the arena of sport as it focuses on power and how gender relations are produced by, resisted in, and transformed through sport. Feminist studies involve an examination of the role of culture in the production of inequalities and considers how the analysis of gender can contribute to an understanding of culture (Birrell, 2000a). It assumes that power is unequally distributed and restricted based on gender, class and race, where power is not enforced by law, but rather through casual and subtle forms of ideological terrain. Ideologies, as expressed by Theberge and Birrell (1994, in Birrell,

2000a), serves the interest of dominant groups which is interpreted as social norms and common sense, even by the oppressed and disempowered group(s). Sport is an example of such an ideological domain where gender relations and representations are powerfully produced and reproduced and is therefore a useful site for the exploration of cultural studies and intersections of gender, race and class. Birrell (1988, in Birrell, 2000a) identified four factors central to the critical feminist analysis of sport:

1. The production of an ideology of masculinity and male power through sport.
2. The media practices through which dominant notions of women are reproduced.
3. Physicality, sexuality, the body as sites for defining gender relations.
4. The resistance of women to dominant sport practices.

Sport is considered a cultural process and a set of social structures and practices, highly influenced by the individuals who engage within the context. The focus lies not on the specific sporting activities (although these might also be gendered), but rather the sporting context as a microcosm of society, producing and reproducing cultural representations of social relations, meaning, power, and subjectivity (Eagly, 1987).

2.2.2 Social Role Theory

Social gender roles refer to the shared expectations about behaviour which apply to people on the basis of their socially identifiable sex (Eagly, 1987). Social role theory is a social psychological theory which conceptualises the similarities and differences between sexes in terms of social behaviour. Its main hypothesis assumes that these sex-differences arise from the distribution of men and women into socialised gender roles, and subsequently gender stereotypes (Eagly, 1987). This distribution is seen as a result of the variable factors represented by the social, economic, technological, and ecological forces present in society, as well as the differences in physical attributes and related behaviours, especially women's childbearing and nursing of infants, and men's physical superiority of size, speed, and upper-body strength (Eagly, 1987). The combination of these forces influences the roles held by women and men because of the assumption that certain activities are more efficiently accomplished by one sex. This in turn yields sex-differentiated behaviour as it creates gender roles. This subsequently creates expectations of which characteristics each sex should have

in order to equip them for the tasks they typically carry out, and thus guides social behaviour (Gill, 2001).

The concept of sex and gender has undergone an evolution, from an emphasis on sex differences, to the emphasis on gender roles as a personality, to the current sociological perspective which emphasises social context and processes (Gill, 2001). Gender roles are dependent on the culture and social structure in society, and our current gender role expectations vary throughout societies, ethnicities, social classes and sexual orientation. The sporting arena has been said to elicit these gender stereotypes than other social settings, strongly emphasising the masculine and feminine gender expectations Eagly (2001). Furthermore, Eagly (2001) argued that gender stereotypes and roles are less rigorous and traditional in countries where the sexes have greater social and political equality.

The movement to a more socially attentive approach of understanding gender focused on how our stereotypes remain regardless of how small the actual differences between men and women are. These stereotypes and perceptions have a strong influence, and arguably elicit further gender differences (Gill, 2001). Eagly (2001) emphasises that it is this cycle which reflects the feminist position that gender is socially constructed. Further, the author argues that these gender stereotypes are harmful because we act on them by exaggerating gender differences and restrict female and male opportunities and behaviours.

According to social role theory, the limitations women encounter is often based on society's expectations of gender roles and desirable behavioural tendencies for each gender accordingly (Wood and Eagly, 2002). For women, gender role expectations are often referred to as communal traits, and include being affectionate, helpful, interpersonally sensitive, kind, nurturing, sympathetic, and gentle (Wood and Eagly, 2002). Gender role expectations encourage girls and women to be passive, gentle, delicate and submissive. Such characteristics directly contradict the traits that are often associated with sport; assertiveness, competitiveness, physical endurance, ruggedness and dominance (Eitzen, 2014). Consequently, young women were encouraged to bypass sport unless it retained an acceptable level of femininity. Specifically, these included sports that were aesthetically pleasing, involved no bodily contact, and where athletes were protected from over extortion (Eitzen, 2014). As social approval weighs heavily on one's competency, this contrast between idealised values for females and the sporting athlete limits female's access to sport

(Wood and Eagly, 2002). In contrast, men are seen as having agentic traits, such as aggression, strength, assertiveness, self-confidence, and self-sufficiency (Eagly, 1987). According to Eitzen's (2014) argument, one of the minimising processes of female athletics which maintains male dominance in sport is the very definition of sport as a masculine, or male, activity.

Evidence of gender roles is connected with the research done on gender stereotypes, which has consistently established that people have differing beliefs about typical behaviour of men and women (Eagly, 2001). These behaviours are described using two dimensions and labelled communal and agentic. Women are typically thought to possess communal traits and be friendly and unselfish. Men on the other hand, are said to typically possess agentic traits, such as being independent and masterful. These gender stereotypes also include beliefs of other aspects of the individual, such as their physical characteristics, cognitive abilities, typical roles, specific skills, and emotional dispositions (Eagly, 2001). It is important to note that these gender stereotypes do not only arise from experiences of how people behave, but also expectations of how they ought to behave. Such descriptions for typical and desirable behaviour also tend to be shared and consensual, with a common awareness (Eagly, 2001). Consequently, people assume role-consistent behaviour will be rewarded approvingly, whilst inconsistent role behaviour will be disapproved. This results in the penalisation of both men and women for deviating from their roles (Eagly, 2001). For example, both female and male athletes can be aggressive, but the male athlete is more likely to be socialised to reinforce this behaviour, whilst the female athlete is prone to be socialised to be less aggressive and more tentative. They will be further socialised to keep quiet, be obedient, and let others take the lead (Gill, 2001). A concrete example of this happening in the world of sport was seen when Serena Williams was labelled as 'showing rage' for arguing with the umpire during a tennis match in 2018. Williams herself accused the umpire for sexism and treating her more harshly than her male colleagues, as similar occurrences have happened on the men's side with far less penalisation. This incident caused a wide debate of women's treatment in sport, and Williams vowed to continue the fight for women (Associated Press, 2018).

In relation to success in both sports and branding, agentic traits are deemed necessary. In pure sport performance, confidence and competitiveness is seen as vital for success in order to overcome mental barriers and maintain motivation. For personal branding, self-promoting

by highlighting accomplishments, talking about one's strengths and talents, as well as attributing these to internal rather than external factors is part of the strategy of building a brand (Arai *et al.*, 2014). These are all considered agentic characteristics which are commonly ascribed to males. Women, on the other hand, are socialised to be modest (Eagly, 1987). Consequently, when women are able to overcome the social barrier their gender poses and take part in personal branding activities such as self-promotion through discussing one's worth, they are often seen as having the masculine characteristics of dominance and arrogance (Shaw and Hoerber, 2003). Due to the position sport has in our society and its general position as a male domain, female athletes who challenge the hyper-feminine and hyper-heterosexual behaviours face negative retaliation which in turn can hurt their brand building processes (Parmett, 2015). As discussed earlier in the literature review, Fink (2015) emphasises the common trend amongst female athletes and associated marketers in highlighting this hyper-femininity and hyper-heterosexuality as the only acceptable way of building a brand, albeit its success is widely questioned.

However, social role theory is a dynamic process and accounts for changes in gender roles. The increasing numbers of women going into paid labour and higher power positions reflect a decrease in traditional gender roles and a redefinition of the behavioural structures deemed appropriate for men and women (Eagly, 2001). Both scientific findings and people's beliefs suggest that the polarisation between men and women is decreasing. For example, there has been found a convergence in personality, as well as cognitive and physical characteristics throughout the past 50 years, and this converging is only predicted to further continue (Eagly, 2001). This is participating in the fight and quest for increased gender equality, and gender roles are predicted to change as more societies produce conditions of equality or near equality (Eagly, 2001).

2.2.3 Hegemonic Masculinity in Sport

Masculine hegemony is closely related to the disruption of gender barriers mentioned in the work of Simone de Beauvoir. This concept of masculine hegemony has considerably influenced our perception of men, gender and social hierarchy (Scruton *et al.*, 1999). As discussed, women and men are socialised differently from an early age. The constant reminder from several agents where men are taught to play and watch sports, whilst women have formerly been thought that such activities are for men only. This reinforces the thought

that sport and masculinity become synonyms to each other, and that one cannot be without the other (Scruton *et al.*, 1999). As shown in the literature review by the works of Fink (2015), media is a crucial site in constructing and maintaining masculine hegemony in sport.

Hegemony is defined as ‘a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organisation of private life and cultural processes’ (Connell, 1987, p. 297). Put simply, it refers to the social superiority of men and inferiority of women. Hegemony does not mean complete cultural dominance with the absolution and obliteration of alternatives, but that other patterns and groups are subordinated rather than eliminated. The exact fact that other groups are subordinated rather than eliminated is what allows this process of social control to occur and pass (Connell, 1987). The public face of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support. Few men fulfil the role of the model of masculinity, but many collaborate in sustaining those images. The reasons for complicity are, as Connell (1987) reports, many, some of them being fantasy gratification and displaced aggression. In essence, the major reason for complicity for these standards is that most men benefit from the subordination of women. Hegemonic masculinity is the cultural expression of this ascendancy (Connell, 1987).

The origins of masculine hegemony dates back to a field study of social inequalities in Australian high schools done in the 1980s by Kessler et al. (1982, in Connell, 1987), as well as other related studies done on masculinity. This high school project provided empirical evidence of multiple hierarchies, both in terms of gender as well as class, intertwined with active projects of gender construction (Connell, 1987). As Connell (1987, p. 295-296) described it:

There is an ordering of versions of femininity and masculinity at the level of the whole society, in some ways analogous to the patterns of face-to-face relationship with institutions. (...) The forms of femininity and masculinity at this level are stylized and impoverished. Their interrelation is centred on a single structural fact, the global dominance of men over women.

It is important to note that hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to various subordinate masculinities in addition to femininity, as the interplay of these are significant in the process of a patriarchal society. The standard of masculine hegemony does not benefit

all men, and (Birrell, 2000b, p. 67) notes that some men see ‘their own gendered roles as hyper masculine jocks difficult to fulfil.’

Sport and physical activity demand instrumental and assertive behaviours and are stereotypically masculine. Not only does this affect women, but it also socialises boys into a narrow definition of masculine identity. Its built on the conception of ‘real men’ and how they should avoid everything feminine. It is further connected with pervasive homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality. Sandra Bem (Gill, 2001) argued that sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia are related consequences of the same gender perceptions of society. Gill (2001, n.p.) elaborates and contents that ‘we expect to see men dominate women, and we are uncomfortable with bigger, stronger women who take active, dominant roles expected of athletes.’

Based on the literature reviewed, theoretical underpinnings and the current issues that are present in the sport industry, I approach this research with a certain framework of assumption that there are inequalities present specifically in the commercial aspect of sport, as well as differences in the journeys of male and female athletes which sets the fundament for their aspiration for success. Namely, this includes women’s secondary role in sport, socialisation into gender roles that do not facilitate what is considered “necessary” traits for sport performance and brand building, as well as a preference of an idealistic notion of masculinity and subsequent rejection of femininity. What I now wish to investigate is the experiences and perceptions of the participant group and how they navigate their career through structural issues. Moreover, there is high focus on their awareness of these structural issues, and how they traverse their way around these.

3.0 Methodology

This thesis seeks to explore athlete personal marketing and branding strategies of Norwegian female athletes and analyse their perceptions and experiences regarding gender barriers in the process. In order to answer the research question, interviews with 6 top level female athletes from five different sports who are or have competed at the top level of their respective sport were conducted. The interviews were planned and conducted in order to satisfy the interview objectives' preference in regard to time, method and language.

In this chapter I will be justifying which method has been used in order to collect data and aid in the research of my thesis, as well as why this particular method has been chosen. Additionally, I will be discussing how the collected data has been analysed and finally discuss some of the ethical considerations that must be taken into account in order to assess the data's quality.

3.1 Research Design

Veal and Darcy (2014) separates the research design into three different types: descriptive -, explanatory-, and evaluative research design. Descriptive research, also referred to as exploratory research, seeks to 'discover, describe or map patterns of behaviour', usually in fields which have not previously been studied or where information needs updating (Veal and Darcy, 2014, p. 6). Explanatory research moves beyond descriptions and focuses on explaining how and why things are as they are and using this to predict. Finally, evaluative research is used to make 'judgements about the success or effectiveness of policies or programmes' (Veal and Darcy, 2014, p. 8). The distinction between descriptive research and explanatory research is often blurred, as any explanation requires description and describing something without explaining it is difficult (McNeill and Chapman, 2005). However, as this research project aims to investigate the behaviour of athletes and the wider society, the most appropriate research design according to (Veal and Darcy, 2014) is descriptive design.

Veal and Darcy (2014) further acknowledge the usefulness of descriptive research design in researching aspects of sport, due to the constant change the sport industry faces, such as difference in sport popularity, social changes, emerging technologies, and new policies. Descriptive research focuses on explaining the aspect of a study in a detail matter and is

useful for a problem that has not been well researched before. It is not used to give conclusive evidence, but rather helps to understand the problem more efficiently (Veal and Darcy, 2014).

In order to obtain rich and detailed information about my particular research question, qualitative research methods were chosen. This is also crucial as it is necessary to dive deep into each athlete's story to unfold their experiences and perceptions as I expected much of the information would have to be interpreted, rather than said explicitly. This type of research, often referred to as intensive research, is suitable where the subjects contain few units, but many variables (Veal and Darcy, 2014). It provides the opportunity to obtain large amounts of detailed information, rather than limited information about a larger number of cases one would get from for example quantitative research. It is also better suited for theory and concept development through different types of inductive approaches which allow wide collection of data, combined with the sensitivity for the complexity of social contexts (Veal and Darcy, 2014). Some argue that the qualitative method of collecting data, combined with the human ability to assess, allows the collection and interpretation of data tapped in "the black box"; the information that cannot be explained by statistical analysis (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Although quantitative research gives great insight into statistics, qualitative research gives the explanation and why of the statistics (Veal and Darcy, 2014).

As the goal of this research is not to develop something which can be generalised, but rather aims to explain a unique phenomenon in order to create awareness and an understanding of the situation and how this affects different stakeholders, the qualitative methods of researching are better suited.

3.1.1 Data Collection

The population of this research are Norwegian female athletes who have been competing at the top level of each respective sport in the period 2015-2020. Purposive, criterion sampling was utilised in order to obtain elite female athletes as participants of the data collection, which allowed for acquiring well-known and successful athletes in their respective sport. Purposive sampling is the most common strategy and groups participants according to preselected criteria relevant for the research question (Mack *et al.*, 2005). Here, sample sizes depend on the resources and time available, as well as the study's objectives. As the sample

size is often determined on the basis of theoretical saturation, purposive sampling is most successful when the data review and analysis is done in conjunction with data collection (Mack *et al.*, 2005). A total of 17 elite athletes were contacted on a rolling basis, where 6 elite female athletes were interviewed (N=6) to obtain their testimonies of their experiences and understandings of the barriers they experience with personal marketing initiatives associated with the sports industry. Some were in the beginning of their sporting career, at the peak of their career, and some were recently retired athletes but still active within the sport industry. All participants were white, ethnic Norwegians.

The athletes were contacted through professional and personal networks, by email, phone and through social media. Each participant was informed about the research' purpose and required to sign consent forms prior to the interview (see appendix 2 and 3). A larger sample was contacted, but the lack of responses resulted in 6 participants. An interesting observation of recruiting participants is that everyone who were ultimately interviewed were contacted through some kind of mutual connection, either professional or personal. This shows to prove several things, but some of these being that the barrier to participate is lower, and consequently willingness to participate higher, when feeling some kind of obligation through social connections.

Pseudonyms for each interview is provided in Table 1. The process of anonymising research interviews through the use of pseudonyms is a common and acceptable practice in qualitative research in order to protect interviewee confidentiality (Guenther, 2009).

Interview Number	Name (Pseudonym)	Role
1	Anne	Retired Pro Team Athlete, Commentator
2	Sarah	Established Pro Athlete
3	Elise	Established Pro Athlete
4	Andrea	Pro Athlete
5	Stine	Retired Pro Team Athlete, Commentator
6	Julie	Pro Athlete

Table 1 – Participant Characteristics

3.1.2 Context

As the type of sport each of these athlete is a strong variable in not only their visibility in media due to the popularity of each sport, but also on the popularity of the women's side of the sport contra the men's side, I find it crucial to put the sports in context with the Norwegian setting. Therefore, a description of each sport, as well as their status in Norway is provided.

3.1.2.1 Handball

In Norway, 2/3 active handball players are female and the national women's team outranks the men's team in both popularity and international merit (Broch, 2014). Women "dominate the field of play the definition of the game and its representation in the media" (Broch, 2014, p.2). It's popularity in Norway drastically developed after World War II and is now the third most popular competitive sport in Norway, after football and skiing (Bryhn, 2020b). Marit Breivik, a Norwegian handball legend, believes much of the reason why women's handball holds the position it does today, is due to the political policy passed by the Norwegian handball federation in 1976 ensuring equal commitment to both teams (Godø, 2018).

3.1.2.2 Ski Jumping

Ski jumping has a controversial history with women, and the sport was the last Olympic event to exclude women from participating. Additionally, the IOC decided not to include women's ski jump at the 2010 Winter Olympics and Paralympics Games (Vertinsky *et al.*, 2009). Women ski jumpers have been barred from serious competition as it was not seen appropriate for females, which in turn has damaged their opportunity to establish themselves as a sport to the same level the men have. To this day, female ski jumpers are fighting for equality. Women are allowed to compete in one event, whilst the men compete in three. Additionally, the gender gap stretches further than only participation. Gelineau (2018) reports that the male winner earns more than three times what the female winner receives. Furthermore, men receive so-called "pocket-money" and receive up to four times more travel reimbursement (Gelineau, 2018). The discussion and fight for parity in ski jumping is a central topic in Norway, where some Norwegian athletes are at the forefront of the battle. Representation at the top often influences grassroots participation, and in 2016 the proportion of active men in the sport of ski jumping was 70.5%, and the remaining 29.5% were women (Norges Skiforbund, 2018).

3.1.2.3 CrossFit

Branded as ‘the sport of fitness’, CrossFit (CF) is a growing exercise regime that has surpassed the growth of well-known fitness franchises. The primary CF competition is the Reebok CrossFit Games™ (the Games) which awards individual winners the title of “Fittest on Earth™” and is regarded as the “World Championship” (Mangine *et al.*, 2020). Although CF itself is not a “real” sport as it is first and foremost regarded as a brand, these modern-day athletes represent the future of sport and hold massive power in social media as well as through endorsement deals (Mangine *et al.*, 2020). As a modern-day sport, CF represent modern-day values. Men and women compete in the same events, the same arenas, as part of the same competition, and receive the same amount of airtime, as well as equal recognition and compensation (Davidsdottir, 2016). CF holds a strong position internationally and is especially popular in North America. CF was first formally introduced to Norway in 2007 and has since then grown to become widespread and known to people across both gender and age but is still relative unknown to the national media and sponsor market (Westeng, 2018).

3.1.2.4 Alpine Skiing

Although alpine skiing is the most popular winter sport internationally, it is often put in the shadow of cross-country skiing in Norway. However, by population popularity, Alpine skiing places on 4th between the 25 most popular sports in Norway (Svenning, 2016). Olympian Lindsay Vonn has on several occasions confronted the international ski federation for its inherent sexism, where female alpinists must ‘accept less exciting hills, and less attractive competition destinations’ (Johannessen and Rønning, 2017). Although the prize money for races are the same, in reality men make significantly more than the women due to different sponsorship and endorsement deals (Elkins, 2018). This is true also for Norway, where it has been found that the wage gap between women and men is significant, much due to the fact that the men perform better internationally (Godø, 2018). However, it was found that women ranked at the same level as the men actually outperform them in terms of financial gain (Godø, 2018). This includes personal equipment and endorsement deals. The alpine ski field is largely male dominated, and in 2016, it was reported that 41.5 % of active alpinists in Norway were women and 58.5% men (Norges Skiforbund, 2018).

3.1.2.5 Football

Football is the biggest sport in Norway, both on the women's and men's side. There is, however, a significant disparity between the genders in relation to economics and media attention (Nilsen, 2019). Since the 1970s, women's football established itself as a sport to be reckoned with and has since then grown to be the biggest girls' and women's sport in the country (Pedersen and Holm, 2019). The Norwegian football federation is the biggest national sports federation considering the number of registered female players, and the distribution between female and male players is 29.5% versus 60.5% as of 2017 (Pedersen and Holm, 2019). Moreover, there are 147 professional female football players in Norway, where 96 of these are semi-professional (UEFA, 2017). In comparison, there are 1483 professional male football players (FIFA, 2019).

3.1.3 In-Depth Interviews

Interviews is the most utilised method of data collection in qualitative research and is defined by Holloway (in Sparkes and Smith, 2014) as "a conversation with a purpose". Here, the interviewer aims to obtain the perspectives, feelings and perceptions from the participants. In-depth interviews are optimal for collecting data on individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, especially when sensitive topics are explored (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). In order for the participants to reveal as much meaning to their experiences as possible and thereby provide deeper knowledge, a semi-structured interview was chosen. This also allows for more control to the participants and opens up for flexibility of expression about own opinions, feelings and attitudes about the topic (Sparkes and Smith, 2014).

Albeit semi-structured interviews can provide rich information about personal knowledge and experiences, there are also some weaknesses related to this method of data collection. In some cases, there might be a barrier between the interviewer and the participants which might result in some experiences being left unshared (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Furthermore, it risks losing the complexity of people's lives as experiences might lack context. Finally, such interviews are also more difficult to analyse than a structured interview (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Having said this, I paid special attention to these flaws and tried to improve the quality and reliability by starting each interview with an informal conversation in order to make the interviewees comfortable, as well as keeping a continuous

friendly and non-judgemental tone throughout the interviews. I will elaborate on this matter in the following sections.

3.1.4 The Interview Guide

Veal and Darcy (2014) emphasise the standardised approach to semi-structured interviews, where the conversation between the researcher and the respondent should be similar for all interviews. I therefore chose an interview guide as the foundation for all interviews, which was developed by drawing on relevant literature in respect to the research topic (see appendix 1 and 2).

Prior to conducting the interviews, I developed an interview guide based on the athlete brand image model, previous research on issues in women's sport and female athletes' branding barriers, social gender and athlete roles, and gaps identified in the literature. As this was one of the first studies to examine female athletes' perceptions in this context, several questions were purposely fairly broad in order to gain a basic understanding of the athletes' personal branding activities and the challenges and opportunities they identify.

First, a list of questions addressing the topic in terms of experiences, behaviours and general understanding were generated by following the guidelines of interview protocols in qualitative research (Mack *et al.*, 2005). They were then grouped into central themes, before the questions that seem irrelevant to the research question and the thesis' intent were discarded. In order to extract as much information as possible from the participant, the questions were structured to be open ended and encouraged storytelling. Academic terminology was refrained from using in order to avoid confusion and rather invite to free speech about own experiences. Questions were structured in a way to keep the interview flowing and open up to issues as the interview unfolds. The participant was also given the chance to fill in any gaps that might not have been covered in the guide.

The structure of the interview followed questions on four broad topics: media (including new media and social media), sponsorship activities, personal branding, and evaluation of women in sport. As discussed through feminist theory, the patriarchy is engrained in our society and often passed as common sense or 'how things are'. Therefore, specific questions were designed to elicit responses in which the athletes could explain how they experienced

different mechanics within media, sponsorships and personal branding, without pushing the gender-agenda and rather inductively analyse the underlying reasons for their experiences.

3.1.5 The Interview Process

The interview process started by reaching out to potential participants, before informing them about the project in a more detailed fashion. Participants were then offered full confidentiality and explained the process of data anonymity. Due to the fact that the topic of the research could be perceived as somewhat controversial for some, it was necessary that the participants felt safe and comfortable enough to be honest about their own experiences and perceptions. The athletes were for example asked about their perceptions of how media treats them, and as this could potentially be used against them, it was important to make them comfortable enough to know that their anonymity would be kept and to encourage truthfulness. Although no one demanded anonymity, most of them seemed pleased with the agreement.

In each case, the interview was used as a guide and supplementary questions were asked where there was a need for more information or further explanation. In accordance with the difficulties in conducting interviews presented by Veal and Darcy (2014), these supplementary questions were carefully considered as to not ask leading questions, but rather open ones. Another issue discussed which might arise, is the dilemma between maintaining a friendly conversation and the desire to influence the answers (Veal and Darcy, 2014). The role of the researcher should always be neutral, and the questions were, to their best ability, kept open and neutral, without insinuating meaning to experiences.

It was initially planned to conduct the interviews face-to-face, as in person interviews provide information such as gestures, body language and facial expressions (Leavy, 2014). However, as the data collection was about to begin, WHO declared an international pandemic as Covid-19 spread and affected countries around the world. Quarantine and isolation were imposed and became the new norm, and social distancing was highly recommended. Therefore, the interview process was changed to video-conferencing interviews through the software Google Teams.

Google Teams allows real-time communication with both audio and video. This method is not only time and cost-efficient, but it also reduces environmental emissions caused by travel (Krouwel *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, both researcher and participant might feel safer and more comfortable as neither have to go to an unfamiliar location (Krouwel *et al.*, 2019). Video calls for qualitative research has some challenges, such as time-lags, disconnected calls, software issues, lack of body language, as well as the lack of ability the researcher has to reassure and distress the participant (Krouwel *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, the ability to keep eye contact is lost, and as live image of oneself is on the call, it is common to get distracted and look at one's own image rather than the other person (Krouwel *et al.*, 2019). Another issue in conducting digital interviews is the threat of digital safety and confidentiality.

Another occurrence I experienced, was the inability to control external distractions. As the pandemic had indeed infiltrated everyone's lives, people were working from home with children and other family members, who appeared as distractions to the participants. Other distractions such as mobile devices and notifications on the digital devices also snatched the attention away from the interview, and sometimes resulted in participants losing their train of thought.

The interviews were conducted in Norwegian as most people communicate easier in their mother tongue. The manner in which we speak is highly influenced by identity and culture and allowing the interviewees to speak in the language their most familiar with allows for a deeper understanding of their opinions and feelings (Inhetveen, 2012). Conducting the interviews in English would arguably be more suitable for the purpose of this research project as there would be no risk of losing valuable information in the translation process. However, it would most likely lead to less rich language and description of experiences.

The interviews were, as mentioned, conducted through the use of Google Teams, a user-friendly software that does not require installation or license for both users. Furthermore, the interviews were audio-recorded with the approval of the interview object, which was transcribed and used to conduct further analysis. The interviews were all conducted from the 26th of March to the 28th of April 2020, all within the timeframe of 30-60 minutes.

3.2 Data Analysis

Analysing qualitative data can be done in different ways, each posing strengths and weaknesses. For the purpose of this research and the data that has been collected, the interviews have been analysed using thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis seeks to describe patterns by collecting data in rich detail through identification, analysis, interpretation and reporting of themes within the dataset (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). This method of data analysis summarises key features, as well as highlighting similarities and differences across a set of data. It allows for social and psychological interpretation, encouraging the researcher to extract deep understanding (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). The latter point is especially important in relation to the research question as it seeks to investigate and analyse their perceptions. Unveiling and analysing perceptions requires insight into their deeper reasonings of these which is often connected to a wider context of experiences. Drawing on Sparkes and Smith's (2014) conceptualisation of the different phases of thematic analysis, the following section explains the data analysis process in this research project.

A natural first step after thoroughly transcribing the interviews was to get familiar with the dataset. This was done by reading the transcripts numerous times, as well as listening to the audio interviews in order to get a more wholesome and emphatic point of view. After this, an initial list of coding was generated by collecting data relevant to each code, which was then used to identify themes. An individual coder was used, and all data were manually coded using notebooks and a Microsoft Word document. The data analysis process involved first cycle coding (Miles *et al.*, 2014), in which several themes, or codes, were used to identify various areas within each athlete's transcript that related to the study's research questions. The data was then reviewed in order to summarise and group themes into smaller categories and reviewed in order to evaluate whether or not they formed a consistent pattern throughout the dataset, with clear distinction between the themes (second cycle coding). This made it easier to define and name the occurring themes and sub-themes. In order to get unbiased and unique findings, the researcher purposely refrained from developing themes based on previous research, especially due to the fact that no similar research has been done in the same context (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Finally excerpts from the interviews have

been used in the result section (Chapter 4) in order to demonstrate the prevalence of the themes.

Although thematic analysis of qualitative data is an analytical method that systematises, reduces and cross-examines the content of for example interviews by identifying themes, there is also a risk of ignoring contradictions within the data (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Moreover, researchers using thematic analysis are also prone to concluding with groundless analysis and wrongful interpretations (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). I have, to the best of my ability, tried to constantly ensure the theme is grounded with clear evidence across the whole dataset, and have frequently used excerpts as verification for the interpretations made. To further ensure trustworthiness, a reflexive journal with personal thoughts, emerging themes and ideas which arose under the interviewing process, was used throughout the data collection and analysis process (Lincoln *et al.*, 1985).

3.3 The Quality of the Research

Quality criteria used in quantitative research, such as internal validity, generalisability, reliability and objectivity, are not suitable in evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). Here, qualitative researchers concern themselves around the notion of trustworthiness as to whether or not the findings can be trusted. Lincoln and Guba (in Korstjens and Moser, 2018) identified the best-known criteria as credibility, transferability, reliability and reflexivity.

3.3.1 Credibility

Credibility is equivalent to internal validity and is concerned with the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings. It represents the plausible information drawn from the original data (i.e. interviews) and its correct interpretation (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). In order to ensure data credibility, all interviews were transcribed and sent back to the participants for feedback. The participants were given the chance to review the transcripts and review any changes where they felt the situation was miscommunicated or wrongly interpreted. Another method of ensuring credibility of data was prolonged engagement. The participants were asked several questions regarding the topic of perceived

barriers of branding. They were encouraged to support their statements with examples, and asked follow-up questions where uncertainty arose. Finally, persistent observation was effectively used, where codes, concepts and core themes were developed in order to examine the data in a persistent manner.

3.3.2 Transferability

Transferability concerns the aspect of applicability and is the degree to which the results can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). In order to ensure transferability of the research, a detailed description of participants, as well as the context of the study, has been provided through participant characteristics, sample strategy inclusion and exclusion criteria, interview procedure and topics. By doing this, the reader is provided with information to determine whether or not the findings are transferable to their own setting (Korstjens and Moser, 2018).

3.3.3 Reliability

Reliability is one of the most important features in determining the quality of quantitative research. However, as qualitative research does not rely on measurements and the ability to perform the same research twice, they need not to worry about whether or not the data can be reproduced. Closely related is the concept of confirmability, which is the aspect of neutrality (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). It is important to secure inter-subjectivity of the data and ensure that the interpretation is not based on personal preferences and viewpoints but grounded in the original data. Dependability and confirmability are both achieved by including an audit trail, where one justifies that the inquiry is logical, traceable and documented (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). In order to enhance reliability, discussions with my supervisor was conducted before designing the interviews, as well as at the beginning stage of the data analysis process. Here, I explained the main findings and interpretations of these and asked the scholar questions regarding the clarity of the analysis. A thorough discussion was carried out in order to clarify areas of confusion. This form of peer debriefing is useful as it helps to obtain a deeper analysis of the data as one is able to openly discuss and express interpretations and can express accuracy of results (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

3.3.4 Reflexivity

Finally, a full analysis of the quality of the qualitative data includes the aspect of reflexivity. This is the ability to examine one's own conceptual lens, the explicit and implicit assumptions, preconceptions and values, and analyse how these might affect research decisions (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). As a researcher, it is important to be self-aware about one's own role in collecting, analysing and interpreting data. Albeit this particular topic and research question has been chosen due to personal interest and values, it does not automatically follow that the findings will be slanted in favour of personal beliefs and values. This is indeed the major difference between journalism and social science, and it is our duty as social researchers to conduct a fair and balanced enquiry, without interference of personal or political values to affect what is discovered and reported (McNeill and Chapman, 2005). In order to provide transparency and openness about possible assumptions, excerpts of the interview are provided in Chapter 4 in the results-section, as well as contextual comments and reflexive notes where appropriate.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Research ethics concern the interaction between researchers and the people they study. An agreed upon standard for research ethics helps to ensure that researchers consider the needs and concerns of the people that are studied and serves to establish a foundation of trust between the participant and the researcher (Mack *et al.*, 2005). Mack *et al.* (2005) further identifies three core principles as the basis for research ethics. These are:

Respect for persons – a commitment to ensuring autonomy of participants and protect against exploitation of vulnerabilities.

Beneficence – a commitment to minimise risks such as psychological and social, as well as maximising benefits.

Justice – the people who will potentially benefit from the knowledge should be the ones asked to participate.

In ensuring respect for persons, informed consent is one of the most important tools (Mack *et al.*, 2005). Before interviewing the subjects, each participant was provided with a consent form explaining the project in detail, what it would mean for them if they chose to

participate. They were informed about full anonymity and confidentiality, as well as their right to change or withdraw their data at any point, which was signed by the participant and myself. Additionally, this procedure was repeated at the start of each interview, where oral consent was given.

All data has been collected and treated in regard to the rules and recommendations of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). Ethical clearance was obtained prior to collection of primary data, with project number 243815. The consent form was developed using a template provided by NSD.

Veal and Darcy (2014) raises the concern of harm to the participants in terms of anxiety if they are unsure of how the data will be used. In order to avoid uncertainty and establish trust between the participant and myself, the participants were thoroughly informed about the process of data collection and analysis. This included the recordings being deleted after transcription, classifying recordings and transcriptions by number and not name, as well as a final date of how long the data would be treated.

4.0 Results

Experiences and knowledge are great contributing factors to how we perceive events. Considering that the interviewees all had different backgrounds, it is fair to assume that they have also experienced distinctive and unique realities. Some were rookies and at the start of their professional career, whilst others were retired athletes. The research question sought to determine what challenges and opportunities these elite female athletes experienced and analyse if they were perceived as being a result of their gender. The following section reveals the results of the study in relation to the research question posed.

4.1 Media Visibility and Gender

The first theme identified through the coding process was the role of the media. Almost all participants mentioned the notion of media visibility as a challenge for their sport, and consequently themselves in terms of their own personal branding. Some connected the reason for the lack of media visibility to the sport itself being less popular than other sports. For example, Andrea noted that ‘Cross-country skiing gets a lot of attention in Norway, which is a rather small sport internationally. We probably have disappeared a bit compared to cross-country skiing’ in terms of media visibility. Sarah illustrated the same point, saying ‘I would say that we have a good position in newspapers and stuff, but that they prioritise other sports over us.’

However, even the athletes that believed their sport’s popularity was the reason for the lack of visibility in media, also proceed to sat that the male athletes still received more visibility than themselves. Moreover, even in instances where the females succeeded more than the male athletes, the ‘media rather speak of the boys’ downfall than women’s progress’ as stressed by Julie. This lack of visibility was identified as a challenge for personal branding, and especially identified as making it more difficult for them to obtain sponsorship deals and negotiate higher price premiums as they have little visibility to provide back. Contrastingly, Elise in fact believed it is the women who drive and attract the most media attention in her sport:

I actually think that in CrossFit, women are the ones pulling the lead in terms of media especially. And that's pretty cool because it's not always like that in different sports. (...) The girls get at least the same amount of media attention as the boys.

Additionally, Anne felt privileged she was involved with a sport which had such a strong position amongst the general public and in the media, saying:

I'm pretty lucky that I've been doing a sport which most people have a positive relationship with, and I've rarely gotten negative feedback from people in general about what I've been doing (...) and that is a privilege.

Furthermore, there was a common consensus amongst the participating athletes that there was a general trend of improvement of media treatment, both in terms of visibility and content, but that inequalities are still very present. Almost all of the participants noted that when they were in fact given media visibility, it was often due to non-sporting content. This focus on non-sporting content was explained in connection with the rise of digital media, where media platforms were forced to feed its readers about other stories rather than just sport results. The athletes mentioned that they received questions such as rating teammates' assets, questions about pregnancy and about family life. Additionally, Stine said:

I had a case last year, where I spoke about the issues of being low paid when committing to sports, but then it was portrayed as a 'poor me' article, and I think that's pretty shameful. It's not nice being left with the feeling like you've been portrayed as seeing yourself as a victim when that's not even the case.

Even when discussing important issues such as the difference in pay, the athletes were portrayed as victimising themselves by the media.

Moreover, one of the athletes has been proactive in the fight for equal rights and opportunities in her sport, feels like the label has stuck and is carried with her throughout her achievements. Sarah asserts that:

I feel like much of the talk [in media] is around equality and that bit. For me it's a positive thing, that I've fought for and contributed to achieving more equality in the sport. But I wish I was mostly featured for the results I deliver, though.

Another participant commented on how it often would be talk about her injuries whenever she was in the media. Additionally, the athletes all mentioned that the media twists stories and headlines in order to draw attention and creates clickbait for both male and female athletes. When asked why she thinks media shifts the focus of the story, Stine said:

The only thing I can assume is that they know what generates clicks. That's what I'm left with, that that's what is important for them. That headlines don't really comply with what actually says in the article, just because they want people to click on the article.

However, as Stine continued, 'men receive far more articles, so I feel like you get everything. You get the whining, but you also get the achievements and the good stories, whilst we have a less space'. Elise described an example about an article which was written about her career-best finish, where naturally she was proud and excited. The news outlet had then twisted her achievements in a negative manner, further explaining 'So when I was interviewed last fall, it was portrayed like I was very cocky because I said we were amongst the best trained athletes in the world'.

Throughout the data collection process, the athletes reported that they experienced comparison with men's sport and male athletes, substantially less traditional media coverage than their male counterparts, and qualitative differences in media coverage. When asked if they ever felt unfairly treated, Sarah expressed a tone of understanding, saying:

We do get differential treatment. But the question then is whether this is unfair or what it actually is. The history of ski jumping is for women is much shorter than that of men.

Additionally, she felt media's prioritisation of male athletes is a natural result of their more established sport image.

The topic of media visibility for these athletes was overall reported to be lacking. A common consensus of why was not found, although the majority of the athletes connected the disparity to male/female differences. As not only the media visibility underperformed in terms of quantitative measures, they also reported differences in qualitative terms, which

was identified as harming, or limiting, their personal branding opportunities. It also seems as though the focus on features of female athletes differs from that of male athletes.

4.2 Social Media

All athletes identified social media as an opportunity. This included opportunity for increased visibility, control over own image, creating closeness with fans, providing visibility for sponsors and an overall mechanism for creating profiles (brands). When asked her purpose of using social media, Sarah said:

From the beginning it's been a way to show what I'm doing (..) explain what we do, post about competitions or what we do. Make us interesting, simply. And it's like that still. So, I feel like I kind of run a little base which has built, or increased, some of the interest of the sport through using social media.

Stine added:

I think it's a nice platform. It's much easier now to create profiles because it's much easier to follow them on personal platforms. One is less dependent on media now than for ten years ago. (...) I think we'll come to a shift where the big media outlets will be more desperate to get stories, than that they are the one's posting them. (...) You get more power over the portrayal, profiles and what you can create.

Although the term social media was used, all athletes referred to Instagram as their main channel, which uses photographs and small video-clips as their primary communication mechanism. The athletes all highlighted the importance of showing their side as an athlete and focused on athleticism rather than using it as a platform to show their private life outside of sport. When asked if there was a conscious strategy behind the use of social media, Sarah said 'There's no special strategy, but there is mostly sport-related things and less private posts I'd say. It's mostly me as an athlete.'

Although they all agreed they see it as an opportunity, there was also ambivalence around the use of social media. Factors such as it being time-consuming, pressure around content material and pressure from sponsors. Moreover, some indicated the demanded content through social media often was body-focused and sexualised. Elise said,

I know that, if I post more pictures, with less clothes, in a bikini, in booty shorts and sports bra, then I would get more likes and probably more followers. But then I would be like 'okay, what does that give me and what does it give my followers' if I post such pictures only to get more likes and followers, and maybe more sponsorship money. But it does not align with my values to do so, and I would rather post something that I feel can give people value and which I can be proud of when I finish this.

This topic of sexualisation on social media was also brought up by Julie, where she raised the notion of double standards of how the same activity is viewed differently. She said:

Alpine-boys do look good, and it's not to be concealed that if they post a picture without a shirt on, it doesn't really get regarded as something sexual. But if we did the same, it would have gotten a completely different reaction. So, in that sense, I think it's easier for the men than the women to not be portrayed wrongly.

All of the participants exemplified displaying respectable manners and being a good role model through social media. They recognised the power social media holds, and Elise accentuated 'I am careful with what I post and think twice before I hit publish so I don't regret anything or feel like I could potentially be a bad role model for young girls.' Elise was indeed the one expressed the most ambivalent opinion of social media, and said 'I think that's why I don't like social media, because if I could choose, I would've used it to reach out to others, not to post what I do for sponsors and stuff.'

As female athletes experience a lack of visibility in traditional media and often lose control over their brand image, social media has been identified as an opportunity where these athletes are able to reclaim the control of their own image. However, the use of social media posed ambivalent attitudes, much in regard to the level of importance it has gained, as well as in terms of the content which is expected and desired to see. Although seen as an opportunity in which they were given more ownership of their own image, the pressure from sponsor of promoting them through social media, as well as the importance of followers, might be argued is only shifting the power from traditional media outlets, to the commercial market.

4.3 Sponsorship Opportunities

The third theme identified through the set of data was their relationship with sponsors and their endorsement opportunities. Here, there was a clear divide between team-sport and individual sport. The two team-sport players were far less concerned with personal sponsors, arguably due to factors such as the regulations regarding personal sponsorships teams have. Anne said:

I haven't had personal sponsorship deals, because there are own regulations and rules around having them when you're a team athlete. There's own ads and commercials for individual athletes and team athletes. (...) As you can promote yourself [through social media] (...) it's about staying loyal to the federation's sponsors that contribute as a whole and the opportunities for the team rather than promoting just yourself.

She was the only one who did not have personal sponsorship deals but was highly involved with the sponsors of her team. Between the athletes from individual sports, they all stressed the importance of having sponsorships as to be able to continue with their sport and working proactively to secure endorsement deals. Sarah said,

I've been dependent on external funds as an addition. The last two to three years I could've barely made by on prizemoney when I've performed well and succeeded, but it's a very unstable income.

Furthermore, Julie stated: 'I would have some limitations without my sponsors and would probably have to live at home.'

Common for all was the focus on authentic relationships with good relations. Julie mentioned she has 'always had a rule with myself that I should not be sponsored by something I cannot speak positively about and feel that I have a good relationship with' and rather focuses on this than what can generate the most money. Elise supported this statement, saying 'It has to be partners I feel like I have a lot in common with, which I feel have the same values I do.' Moreover, the majority stressed the role and importance of local enterprises sponsoring them, and the value of having long-lasting deals. Sarah did not feel she had to change her profile in order to conform to the sponsor's demands, saying 'I have a good grounding locally, so I have a lot of local partners. I come from a small place and in that sense, I feel like there's some value in it as well.' This included benefits both in terms

of income security for the athlete, as well as the increased opportunity to build a relationship on mutual values.

Many of them acknowledged media visibility as a factor in sponsorship opportunities. Sarah raised the importance of visibility in relation to sponsorship opportunities, posing the possibility of ‘maybe it has been a little easier for them [the men] considering that they are more profiled’, but stated that getting sponsorship deals is difficult for everyone. Elise pointed out a difference between the Norwegian sponsorship market versus the international market, as her sport is more visible internationally due to its popularity. She said:

A lot of us do very well in terms of reach-metrics with a lot of followers. In a worldwide sense it’s really good, but here in Norway, due to a lack of media attention, it’s not as easy to get good sponsorship deals.

Across all sports, also those of team-sports, the athletes recognised the increasing importance and prevalence of sponsorships for athletes, often connected with the rise of social media. Some of the athletes highlighted that getting sponsorship deals were closely related to their social media presence. Elise continued:

Unfortunately, at least I think so, whether or not you get sponsors is very dependent on the number of followers on Instagram and not necessarily how you perform (in your sport), which I am very against.

When asked if the athletes ever felt pressured by their existing or potential sponsors to do something they felt was not in line with their own values, none of the athletes problematized any demands. The only issue some of them flagged was the pressure to show their sponsors on social media frequently. Julie said:

I try not to have those sponsor deals where I have to market them a lot on Instagram, because I don’t really care for it. I do it for the sponsors I’m happy and with satisfied with the product and where it is natural of course (...). When it becomes too artificial and doesn’t really have much to do with my day to day life, it quickly becomes too much and then I feel like it’s wrong.

In essence, the takeaway from this is their need for external funds that do not come directly from excelling in their sport. Moreover, although these athletes were highly dependent on

their sponsors to be able to continue with their sport, they felt a need to be true to themselves and would not let the need for sponsorship deals pass on the expense of their moral compass.

4.4 Personal Branding

Although both of the previous themes play a significant role in the athlete's brand development, it was desired to ask the participants specific questions about their own personal branding to grasp their understanding of potential barriers they face. As an overall finding, it was difficult to get the athletes to talk about themselves as a brand. They did, however, speak of the importance of, for example, athletic expertise, being a good role model, having fans relate to their life story, and especially the notion of physical attractiveness when they spoke about what is important for their desired brand image. Elise manifested:

I think being honest and open about one's background and show that you've been through so people can relate to you. Even if I am an elite athlete, I've been through much of the same things 'normal' people have.

The athletes emphasised the importance of being unique or having a unique concept as the main component of building a brand. Furthermore, characteristics such as being honest and open, trustworthy, being a good role model were all mentioned as not only important for their perceived brand, but it was important for them to inhabit these characteristics. Specifically, authenticity was a recurring theme. Elise asserted this by saying, 'I think it is very important to be honest and open, that people trust you and that you are genuine, and that people see that it is not just something fake.'

Even though they all mentioned that they had a clear image of how they wanted to be perceived and recognised the importance of brands, many expressed that they had no intent to build a personal brand nor a clear strategy. Stine said, 'I didn't consciously think "I'm going to create a personal brand"', but I was conscious of my own personal brand and was relatively active on social media.' This was a persistent finding across the dataset, and several of the athletes said their brand is built on who they are as athletes and their performance. Good sporting performance was mentioned by some as the first step in building a brand. When asked about the potential opportunity to build a brand, Julie said:

Yeah, definitely. But I feel like it goes hand in hand with performing really well. Right now, it's about not messing up, just being alright and likable, have a good reputation. Then the day you get good, then you do something about it.

However, mentioned up the possibility of succeeding in building a brand outside of sporting performance. Andrea said, 'I feel like you have to be very good before you succeed [in building a brand]. Or you have to be very good at branding. (...) But you have to be very good at least one of them'. Additionally, Stine declared:

After all, you see that building a brand is almost as important as performing on the football field. You see people get opportunities because of who they are on the outside. You see that some players have an insane brand, but then they are nowhere near top 50 in the world. (...) You notice the importance of building a brand, especially in women's football where not all of the sporting side is shown, all matches are not shown and you do not have the same opportunity to watch all the matches from around Europe that you have on the men's side.

The athletes persistently talked about building a brand through sporting performance and "something else", reiterating that how they perform is not enough. Other athletes echoed this sentiment, and Anne stated that 'Often times good performances speak well, but of course, it doesn't hurt if you have good looks as well.' A follow up on this response revealed some uncertainty if this was the case for both men and women, where Anne said, 'It's difficult to say. I don't feel like it does... Yes and no maybe.'

Another discovery through the qualitative analysis was the reported lack of formal strategy training in terms of social media and overall branding. Some mentioned they received media-training through their federation or national team, and one of the athletes mentioned that their new-appointed federation marketing manager announced a commitment to increase individual personal branding initiatives. Moreover, only one of the participants reported having an athlete manager, committed to sponsorship acquisition, social media posting, and general brand building. Andrea, a rookie at the beginning of her career, identified this lack of training and management as one of the two biggest barriers to building her brand, saying, 'number two is getting information and for someone to help me understand how to self-promote and how they could help with that.'

4.4.1 ‘...maybe it's about daring to offer yourself’

The most predominant finding across the data set in relation to personal brand barrier was the concept of daring to be outgoing. They used the specific Norwegian saying “å by på seg selv” which is used interchangeably with ‘taking space’. This refers to the concept of being open, and quite literally translated, to offer oneself. Moreover, all the participants brought up the importance of being extroverted and the ability of self-promotion. Notably, this was identified as a barrier in branding themselves, as they found it too challenging and inauthentic to their personality. The participants frequently made reference to the difference between men and women in terms of offering themselves, and Andrea said, ‘But then maybe it's about daring to offer yourself in interviews and stuff. I feel like there is a difference there [between men and women].’ Elise identified this as the biggest barrier in branding, stating:

I think being outgoing enough in order to make people understand what I have, what I can, and what I have to offer. And to speak of myself so highly that they believe in me, want to know more, and stay tuned. And I think that is a girl-thing as well, that we shouldn't think we're better than anyone else.

Moreover, this was identified as a varying in degree between male and female athletes. Andrea further said:

I think maybe it's easier for the guys to not judge themselves too hard. That they realise that this is part of the deal and you have to be outgoing and dare to offer yourself. And then there is the Janteloven in Norway, and I feel like that applies in sport as well.

This topic of confidence was discussed on several occasions by the athletes. Anne expressed her opinion, saying:

I feel like a lot of women are focused on being 100% of something, or feeling like they have to check a list where they're like ‘I should be able to do that and that’, or ‘be like that’, whilst the boys are more like ‘yeah I'll figure it out’ and can check off two of five boxes.

Reflecting this statement, the participants connected the importance of being confident as important for their sporting performance success, as well as a needed quality in branding. Andrea said:

I think it's easier for the boys, the thing about confidence. We've discussed this about the boys having higher confidence, which helps with their skiing. They think they are good, and then they become better because of that. The girls are tougher on themselves, doubting their abilities and whether they're good enough and if they're going to succeed. Maybe this affects branding as well, thinking 'do I have something of value, how should I'. (...) And I think people fear what others are going to say, and that hinders many girls. Maybe the boys are better at not caring.

4.4.2 '...a lot of people are out to get you'

An additional theme which was identified as a barrier, not only in brand building, but a barrier for success in sport, was the persistent comparison with men's sport. Sarah said,

It's the fact that we are not as physically strong as them (the men) by nature, which is a disadvantage when doing sports. That in itself is perhaps a limitation and something people use as an excuse. If you look performance, you are compared to a boy who has completely different preconditions, and then in a way, you become not as interesting or not as good as a man for example. I would say that is a challenge.

Stine echoed this statement, saying,

There are a lot of people are out to get you and say how bad you are. When Johaug skis 5 miles, no one is saying how much faster all other guys have been. I think the biggest challenge we have in football is that it is the only sport that gets compared to the men that much. That people are not able to take our sport for what it is, as they do in handball and athletics and all other sports. That is our biggest challenge.

Men's role in the sporting world was mentioned several times. Some talked about them as having a longer sporting history, better performances, and bigger profiles. When asked about media visibility between men and women, Andrea stated that the men in her sport receive far more attention. She said:

It is mostly because the men have a more profiled team and have bigger profiles than the ladies. (...) They are much bigger profiles, have more followers on Instagram and more fans, and there is more media around them in general.

However, when asked if they believed they would have other prerequisites to leverage from their sporting career, a common consensus was not found. Some athletes, namely those from “less unequal” branches, said they have the same, if not better, opportunity to succeed and leverage from their career. Julie acknowledged that:

It is more when they are really good that the extreme divide comes. Down in the muck, it's pretty much the same. There's tough competition on the way up to success. When you reach the top, there may be some bigger differences.

The same argument was brought up by Stine, saying:

Although many female athletes are big profiles, men will always be bigger. Whether it is easier or not... Yes, it has been easier for men to build a brand than it has been for women. You have to be extremely good as a woman to take place [in the media picture].

Moreover, Andrea referred to two current champions in her sport, one from each gender. She believed the male athlete had a bigger chance of succeeding in terms of branding than the female athlete, due to daring to seize opportunities. She continued saying, ‘It’s difficult to answer, but I think it's still seen as a bigger achievement to win on the men’s side than on the women’s side, because the sport is bigger.’

Essentially, apart from one athlete, the predominant result showed that there is a lack of strategic thinking of oneself as a brand, as well as a lack of management of their brand. Additionally, the athletes feel limited in their process of brand building and leveraging due to the demanded notion of promoting oneself, as well as a general disbelief in the capabilities of female athletes.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Social Gender Roles

The athletes within this participative group all made reference to behaviours of female and male athletes as ‘typical’ social gender norms, which hindered, not only their ability to build their brand through self-promotion, but also as affecting their ability to perform in their sport. These findings resonate with earlier discussion of social role theory as discussed by Wood and Eagly (2002). They noted the importance of confidence and competitiveness as vital for sporting success, as well as the need for self-promotion in personal branding, as athletes must be able to speak highly of their strengths and accomplishments. They further brought up the fact that societal expectations and preferences do not align with what is needed to successfully promote themselves. These are all considered agentic traits, often ascribed to males as argued by Wood and Eagly (2002). On the other hand, women are socialised to be modest and often employ communal traits. From this dataset, it is clear to see that the female athletes feel restricted by the socialised gender roles and expectations of behaviour, as highlighted by the statements of Elise, Anne and Andrea. However, it is important to note that one of the athletes did not blame gender roles or expectations, and rather highlighted that it might be individual differences rather than gender related. As the studied sample only consists of female participants, it is not possible to conclude that this is an issue only affecting women because they are women. Nevertheless, based on the experiences and perceptions collected from the participants, it forms a pattern of common occurrences, rather than random experiences.

Based on this and feminist theory on social gender roles discussed through the works of Eagly (2001), one could argue that the socialisation of women and men into gender roles affects their behaviour and thought processes. Are we limiting young girls and women by collectively imposing a thought process in which they do not thrive in? As Andrea highlighted, the men’s confidence not only aided them in branding and promoting themselves, but it also helped them perform in their sport. What was interesting to observe was how these socialised gender roles affected how the athletes spoke and perceived themselves. The participants all spoke in collective terms, often including their team-mates or fellow female athletes when speaking of experiences. This was especially clear when they spoke of success, whilst they spoke in individual terms when speaking of lack of ability.

Julie, for example, said, 'I'm not extreme. I'm not super-unique. There's more extreme people than me you can follow [on social media].' Several of the participants said they did not enjoy being in the media, nor to stand out. As Eitzen (2014) argued, gender roles encourage women and girls to be passive, gentle, delicate and submissive. The findings of some of these interviews reflects this. There seemed to be an overall trend of low confidence, but whether this is rooted in actual low confidence or an act of humbleness is not possible to know at this point. In either case, it reflects socially idealised characteristics of femininity and contradicts the ideal and needed characteristics in personal branding (Arai *et al.*, 2014).

The socialisation of the ideal female gender role which constitutes what is considered acceptable, appropriate and desirable for being a woman is immediately opposite to what is associated with sport and athletes (Eitzen, 2014). As Julie said, even though women are no longer expected to stay in the kitchen and out of the sporting world, 'Sport is tough and hard, (...) maybe it is still unusual to see women look tough.' This echoes the work of Gill (2001) who argued that we expect men to be dominant and rough and feel uncomfortable with bigger, stronger women who take an active and dominant role. It is also important to see these mechanisms as a part of sport facilitating hegemonic masculinity and that everything other than the ideal masculine man who refrains everything feminine has historically been frowned upon in sport (Gill, 2001).

However, although some argued that the very fact that sport is seen as masculine and tough limits their validity of being strong, rough sportswomen as it contradicts the feminine expectations, some actually saw defying these gender roles as opportunities. Elise stressed that today's fans like to see strong female athletes as good role models, running as fast and lifting as heavy as the male athletes. In fact, she built her brand on opposing the traditional feminine values, and emphasises strength, toughness and bravery throughout her own activities, but also through her sponsorships. Maybe this is a reflection the many years of feminist work and is symbolising a shift in how we view women, how women want to be viewed and more importantly, how women want to be.

5.2 Sport: A Male Preserve?

The socialisation of gender and sport has enforced the thought that sport and masculinity are synonyms to each other. Sport started as a domain for men in which masculinity was shaped,

and in some way also obtained. For too long, women were not allowed to play in this same arena, excluded and discriminated based on their gender and the ideal notions of femininity. Consequently, the sporting arena became a “male preserve” supported by institutional practices and discrimination against women (Eitzen, 2014). As such, women’s position in sport has been regarded as secondary to that of men, threatening the hegemonic masculinity associated with sport. As recognised earlier, media is a crucial site in constructing and maintaining this masculine hegemony, and specifically in sport (Fink, 2015). The participants exclaimed remarks such as media’s framing of accomplishments as of higher significance than those of female athletes and the overall dominance of male sport in traditional media. Julie expressed this by saying, ‘Even though the girls are starting to succeed in terms of performance, the media rather speak of the boys’ downfall than women’s progress.’

Having established the quantitative differences in media visibility, this research also reflects the findings of Fink (2015) qualitative media differences. Fink (2015) found that the portrayal of media focus often differs in tone and focus, which depicts female sport and athletes in a negative tone and reinforces the gendered hierarchy of sport. By labelling Elise as “cocky” for speaking and highlighting her success, or Stine’s attempt to raise awareness of pay disparity, media continues to uphold the hegemonic masculinity which dominate the sporting arena. Due to the lack of visibility, cases like these take up the small space available for women, giving little to no room for sporting performance visibility. This circular, mediated process continues as a loop. Without the sufficient, fair, media visibility, women’s sport will always be seen as secondary to that of men.

One of the most critical findings of this study are perhaps the underlying, taken-for-granted patriarchal social values in sport. As discussed earlier through the work of Gill (2001), feminist theories assume that women are oppressed in a structure of patriarchy which is often seen as endemic, normal and engrained part of our society. So engrained, that even the oppressed group accepts the practices as commonalities. Only one of the athletes directly spoke of the patriarchal structure or sexism in society or sport. Some referred to a movement towards equality as a reason for the improved treatment and feeling lucky to be seen as equal to their male counterparts. What was more common, was an overall internal blame. When asked about media visibility, Sarah said ‘it’s about how popular we are, put simply. And that’s something only we can affect.’

It seems as if the majority of the athletes did not explicitly recognise a structural system of oppression as limiting factor. They did however refer to the fact that there were different expectations and commonalities for women and men. As mentioned earlier, Sarah felt she was given the label of women's rights activist by the media, when really, she just wanted to ski in the same slopes as the men. Other than the fact that there is concrete inequality between men and women in ski jumping as they are not allowed to jump the biggest slopes, Sarah did not seem to have any strong attitude towards gender inequality across sport in general, or on in the wider sense of society. She stated that:

I've been very keen on us being able to jump in the big slopes and be able to do ski flying to get more of the extreme in. We'll be seen as even better and people will think it's cool to follow us. It's about creating a product that is interesting to the spectators, which will in turn increase our media visibility.

Arguably, this could be seen as reflecting the Norwegian society and its attitude towards gender related issues. As a predominant finding in this research, the athletes persistently reiterated that if given the same opportunities, the same media coverage, the same investment from the commercial market, their sporting product would be no less in quality than that of men's sport. Although acknowledging that equality requires an investment, the athletes all embraced an empowering embodiment of modern feminists and did in no way expect anyone else but themselves to create a sporting product that could generate just as much interest and financial return as the men if they are given the opportunity to create the same products.

The importance of the quality of the sporting product in the eyes of the spectator is maybe most visible from the examples from CrossFit and alpine ski jumping. In CrossFit, women and men compete in the exact same events, sporting arenas and do the same movements (Davidsdottir, 2016). In ski jumping, however, women are still not allowed to jump from the biggest slopes, which is hurting their ability to create a product of the same level of excitement as the men (Johannessen and Rønning, 2017). It is also often discussed that women's football should be scaled down to fit the physical capabilities of female athletes in order to increase excitement (Botnen and Lersveen, 2019). It could be argued that female athletes have never been the issue – maybe traditional sports were created for the male body. The opportunity here lies thus in the sanctioning of equal sporting rights. With this comes

the importance of representation of women in leadership positions and in the board rooms. As mentioned earlier, less than 25% of board leaders in Norwegian sport organisations are female (Idrettsforbundet, 2018). Elise raised the concern and importance of representation in positions of power in regard to the practical playing field, saying:

I do sometimes feel unfairly treated by those in power (...) who decide and rule but aren't really involved in the sport or the process at all and have opinions about women jumping on skis which aren't even correct.

The fact that the athletes did not recognise a direct structure of oppression may be signalling that the extensive work of feminism throughout the years have achieved not only structural changes, but also interpersonal beliefs and expectations where women and men are seen to have equal abilities. However, in order to drive further change, it is important to increase the proportion of female leaders and decisionmakers (Burton, 2015).

5.3 Branding in Women's Sport

A significant finding throughout this study was the lack of strategic thinking of oneself as a brand, lack of management, and lack of knowledge of branding strategies. They did, however, speak of the importance of many of the same components of branding which Arai et al. (2014) highlighted in their brand image model, such as the significance of athletic expertise, being portrayed as having good values, being a good role model, and being a genuine good person. Furthermore, although they acknowledge the use of social media as a tool in showcasing their athletic abilities, providing visibility to their sponsors, and interacting with fans, none of the athletes had a strategy for their social media profile nor to measure their success. As Hodge and Walker (2015) found in their study, this seems to be an issue for all athletes, irrelevant of their gender.

The importance of brand building in women's sport has several positive repercussions. A concept that arose throughout the data set was that 'People do not support athletes or sports; they support profiles', a statement made by Julie. When female athletes then suffer from a lack of visibility in traditional media, as discussed through literature review and found from the data collection, as well as fail to purposefully and strategically build their brand, they do not have profiles of the same magnitude as male athletes. This again, becomes a cycle in

which female athletes are restrained from escaping. This reflects the findings of Fink (2015), and reiterates the notion that sport consumption is a circular and mediated process. Media's role is not a reactive role to external market and social forces, but rather that of a producing role, where their decisions have the power to create, or reduce audience demand, and reinforce existing negative attitudes about women's sport which impacts audience perceptions of value and quality (Messner et al., 1993 in Fink, 2015).

Due to the lack of media visibility, many of the athletes referred to the use of social media as a bridge to claim their space and create a brand for themselves. In this regard, Julie noted the difference between male and female athletes and the content fans want to see. She said, 'I think it is very different what fans are interested in seeing with female versus male athletes.' Stine supported this argument, saying:

I think women's football has more value of being open to inviting people in. The men have such big profiles, so they can keep distance and people will still follow them. I think female footballers have to be more down to earth, open and honest than maybe the biggest (male) footballers have to be.

This statement echoes the myth of the hero in sport discourse. Male athletes have been naturalised as heroes, a concept which resonates through sport and especially sport advertisement (Jackson and Andrews, 2004). The limitation of women as heroes is rooted both in the way children are socialised to perceiving heroes, as well as the biases that prevent women from achieving the status of hero. As Jackson and Andrews (2004) explain, neither women nor the values of conventional femininity have historically been represented as heroic. Distance and mysteries which feed male profiles through a heroic concept might not, as Stine mentions, be successful in women's sport. Approachability of women's sport has been argued to be one of their greatest selling points and given the greater thirst for continuous behind-the-scenes content and storytelling around events and athletes, digital and social will become ever more important (Women in Sport, 2014). As fans crave closeness with female athletes, their use of social media as a branding strategy allows fans to create meaningful connections with the athletes.

It is no secret nor lie that female athletes make significantly less than their male counterparts across all domains, sport, sponsorships, endorsement deals and own brands. Many Norwegian female football players are actually living below the poverty line and often either

study or work part-time in addition to pursuing a career within sport (Strøm, 2019). This issue itself is complex, and some of these reasons have been discussed in this thesis. Although fighting for equal pay and equal opportunities remain important issues, it is also important to work around challenges and see opportunities. In women's sport, branding is the opportunity. Even if female athletes are at the top of their game, they are far from ensured to make enough money to even make a living, and sponsorships and endorsement deals are crucial for their basis of survival. As Hodge and Walker (2015) emphasised, a strong, attractive brand image for athletes' sponsorship and endorsement opportunities is essential. As men can easily live off their skills, women have to make most of their earning on the side. This is why creating a persona is becoming more and more important for female athletes, especially in this modern day of internet and a digitalised age.

Given that female athletes receive less traditional media visibility, disparity in pay, and a hunger for authentic connections, social and new media opens an opportunity. As Julie said, people tend to root for profiles, not athletes or their specific sport. This emphasises the importance of strategic knowledge of social media marketing and brand building. It can allow the creation of profiles, which can create hype around the athlete, consequently creating media visibility and ultimately increased earning potential. The getaway from this is for federations to invest in proper marketing training for athletes and give them the tools needed to effectively build their brand, interact with their fans, and further build their fan base. This can in turn lead to more media investment, and eventual commercial investment. Brands must realise that instances in which female athletes have been used as endorsers and seen less unsuccessful is due to its inefficient communicated as reported by Antil et al. (2012). Given the appetite for authentic connections, as well as the findings that these athletes put importance on being true and authentic to themselves, there lies a clear and effective opportunity for brands to build on this and effectively strategies the use of female athletes as endorsers. It is imperative for brand and marketing agencies to realise the potential of authentic connections with inspirational female athletes as a powerful way to cut through the noise and demonstrate a commitment to equality. After all, as Sarah said

If they want to take equality seriously, it costs. In the long term it will be a good investment to build a new and good product. Maybe it won't yield a return on investment in the beginning, but in the long term it can generate just as much as on the men's side.

6.0 Conclusion

In the beginning of this thesis I stated an aim of investigating the perceptions of elite female athletes in a Norwegian context in order to depict the perception of opportunities and challenges in their career. The findings and subsequent discussion composed through literature review, theory analysis and primary research show that the female athletes interviewed do indeed experience challenges in the process of building their brand related to their gender, both external and internal. The external factors that limit and act as barriers for their opportunities includes a lack of media visibility, focus on non-sporting content, a general scepticism towards the “quality” of female athletes and women’s sport, and a history of inefficient use of female athletes as endorsers. Internal factors that hinder their progress are strongly linked to social gender roles of what is considered acceptable and ideal for women and femininity, identified as affecting their sporting performance, as well as their ability to build and leverage from their personal brand.

Although it is difficult to establish the root of many of these issues, it is important to see the pattern of experiences across cultures. Lobpries et al. (2018) found that American female athletes experienced barriers related to their expected social roles and struggled to leverage their brand due to the of visibility and proper management. Even in Norway, a country which has consistently been ranked as one of the most equal countries for years, women and men still experience different journeys in several aspects of their lives. Just by being women, these athletes face challenges from their early lives through socialisation that will follow them throughout their lives. Media, peers, businesses, and society will all act as barriers for their success. This does not mean the barriers are of a prohibitive nature, but it does mean they must be resilient and entrepreneurial in the process.

However, it is refreshing and empowering to see that these female athletes in no way perceive these challenges as an evaluation of victimisation. Their perceptions are clear: men and women have the same ability to generate financial return from their sport if they are given the opportunity to create the same product. The overall trend of recognising an improvement of attitudes within the general population, the commercial market as well as the different media outlets, represent a significant movement towards true gender equality. It will hopefully lead into further improvement to the point where female athletes indeed become more marketable and equal to their male peers. If more women pursue sports and

see this as a viable career opportunity, it will have several positive repercussions on all levels, including increasing female participation at grassroots level sport, which in turn will increase the health of the population. Moreover, as sport has the ability to drive social change, equality within the sporting arena can further extend to the wider notion of society.

This thesis has investigated the experiences of elite female athletes and serves to give insight of their perceptions of activities in building their athletic brand as they try to navigate in an increasingly commercial sport society with structural barriers for their success. It also gives general insight in the sport marketing activities of Norwegian athletes, as well as how athletes are taking control of their own image in a digital world. These findings may be useful for independent athletes, as well as their managers/agents, clubs, federations or national teams, as it articulates the barrier their athletes may face and how they can draw opportunities from challenges. It is important that any athletes, but specifically for this context, female athletes, recognise themselves as a brand. The findings may also prove useful for brands seeking endorsement opportunities and who are looking to contribute to decreasing the gender pay disparity in sport. They must employ a good business mindset and be willing to take the time to further build their brand in order to not only attract commercial investment, but also to create popularity for their sport and drive interest from the commercial market. A strong brand identity and brand equity will work favourably for any athlete, as they will be able to attain price premiums on their salary, increase fan loyalty, differentiate themselves in a pool of athletes which are sought-after objectives to endorse a brand's product.

As with any research, this thesis does have its limitations. The first is the narrow sample of athletes chosen, making it difficult to give an accurate representation of common experiences. Future research could include more athletes from different sport properties at varying level of expertise. I expect that in typical summer-sports, such as athletics and volleyball, the perceived sexualisation will be significantly higher due to the imposed clothing regulations. Additionally, the lack of diversity in the sample excludes other minority groups, in terms of sexuality, gender identification, ethnicity, religion and racial background. Moreover, in order to compare the experiences of male and female athletes to properly assess the reasons for their experiences, it would require research including both male and female athletes. Obtaining the perspectives of sponsors themselves and their attitude towards sponsoring women and men would also be a valuable perspective in

depicting the inequalities sourced from the commercial market. Maybe more importantly, all carried research should provide solutions to drive practical change.

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8.0 Appendixes

8.1 Interview guide Norwegian (Original)

IDRETTSBAKGRUNN

- Kan du fortelle litt om deg selv og idrettshistorien din?

MEDIA

- Hvordan føler du media generelt fremstiller kvinnefotballen?
- Hvordan vurderer du medias forhold til kvinnefotball?
- Hva slags holdninger føler du folk generelt har til idretten din?
- Når du tenker på reportasjer og saker som har blitt gjort om deg i media, hvordan vurderer du medias fokus her?
 - Er du fornøyd med dette? Hvorfor, hvorfor ikke?
- Føler du at de har skapt og kommunisert et slags bilde av deg som både person og utøver?
 - Beskriver de deg på en spesiell måte?
 - Bruker de noen spesielle bilder av deg?
 - Er det noe som går igjen?
- Kan du fortelle om en gang der du syns media sin framstilling av deg var feilaktig?
- Hvorfor tror du eventuelt fokuset blir endret i media?

SOSIALE MEDIER

- Hvilke sosiale medier buker du mest aktivt?
 - Med hvilken hensikt bruker du disse plattformene?
 - Bruker du det som et verktøy for å komme nærmere fans og samarbeidspartnere?
 - Mottar du veiledning eller hjelp til hva og når du skal publisere?
- Hvilke innstillinger har du til bruken av sosiale medier?
 - Føler du at sosiale medier er en hindring eller en mulighet?
- Hvilke råd ville du gitt til kvinnelige utøvere i dag i forbindelse med bruk av sosiale medier?

SAMARBEIDSPARTNERE

- Kan du fortelle litt om ditt forhold til samarbeidspartnere/sponsorer?
- Hvor avhengig var du av å bygge partnerskap/skaffe sponsoravtaler?
- Var dette noe du jobbet aktivt opp mot, eller var det noe som kom naturlig til deg som et resultat av synligheten du opplevde som idrettsutøver?
- Føler du at du har måttet endre din oppførsel eller dine verdier for å sikre et partnerskap, eller tilfredsstillte samarbeidspartnere?
- Opplevde du noen gang at du måtte takke nei til et samarbeid? Eventuelt hvorfor?

MERKEVAREBYGGING

- Hvilke tanker hadde du rundt mulighetene til å skape en merkevare av deg som idrettsutøver?
- Fokuserte du strategisk på hvordan du skulle skape en attraktiv merkevare utfra synligheten du opplever som idrettsutøver?

- Ut ifra din kunnskap og dine erfaringer, tror du visse egenskaper er mer attraktive og ønskelige når det gjelder å bygge en personlig merkevare enn andre?
 - Eventuelt hvilke?
 - Tror du disse er forskjellige for kvinner og menn?
- Hvilke tanker har du rundt det å være kvinne og mulighetene rundt å skape en personlig merkevare?
 - Føler du det er en begrensning, eller en mulighet?
- Under karrieren din som idrettsutøver, mottok du noe hjelp eller veiledning med tanke på personlig markedsføring?
 - Enten det er gjennom agent, landslaget eller sponsorer?
 - Mottar du annen uformell veiledning?
 - Skulle du ønske du fikk mer hjelp?

EVALUERING

- Basert på din egen erfaring, hva ser du på som den største barrieren /utfordringen i merkevarebygging for kvinnelige atleter?
 - Tror du disse er de samme for mannlige utøvere?
- Hvilke tanker har du rundt mulighetene for å kapitalisere av det å være idrettsutøver, spesielt da med tanke på kjønn?
 - Har du noen gang følt deg urettferdig behandlet?
- Basert på erfaringene dine, hva er tankene dine om det kvinnelige idrettssamfunnet globalt sett?
 - Hva tror du blir det største hinderet i fremtiden?
 - Hva tror du blir den største muligheten i fremtiden?
- Tror du du hadde hatt andre forutsetninger til å tjene penger som idrettsutøver, både direkte fra sporten og samarbeidsavtaler o.l. hadde du vært mann?

Andre kommentarer?

8.2 Interview guide English (Translated)

SPORTS HISTORY

- Can you tell me a little about yourself and your sports history?

MEDIA

- How do you feel media in generally portrays women's (insert sport)?
- How do you evaluate the media's relationship with women in your sport?
- What kind of attitudes do you feel your people usually have for your sport?
- When you think about features and reports that have been done in the media on you, how do you evaluate the media's focus?
 - Are you satisfied with this? Why/why not?
- Do you feel that they have created and communicated a kind of image of you as a person and an athlete?
 - Do they describe you in a special way?
 - Do they use any special pictures of you?
 - Is there anything that is repeated?

- Can you think of a time where you felt like medias view of you was wrongly portrayed?
 - Why do you think the focus was changed in the media?

SOCIAL MEDIA

- Which social media platforms are you most actively using?
- For which purpose are you using these platforms?
- Do you receive guidance or help on what and when to publish?
- What attitudes do you have towards the use of social media?
- Do you feel social media is an obstacle or opportunity?
- What advice would you give to female athletes today concerning the use of social media?

PARTNER- AND SPONSORSHIPS

- Can you tell me a about your relationship with partners and sponsors?
- How dependent were you on building partnerships/securing sponsorship agreements?
- Was this something you were actively working on, or was it something that came naturally to you as a result of the visibility you experienced as an athlete?
- Do you feel that you have had to change your behaviour or your values to secure a partnership, or satisfy partners?
- Did you ever have to decline the opportunity for a collaboration? Why?

BRANDING

- What thoughts do you have around the opportunity to create a brand of yourself as an athlete?
- Did you focus strategically on how to create an attractive brand based on the visibility you receive as an athlete?
- From your knowledge and own experience, do you think that some characteristics are more attractive and desired in terms of personal branding than others?
 - Do you think these are different for women and men?
- What thoughts do you have about being a woman and women's opportunity to create a personal brand?
 - Do you feel being woman is a challenge, or an opportunity?
- During your career as an athlete, did you receive any help or guidance in regard to personal marketing?
- Whether through an agent, national team or sponsor?
 - Do you receive other informal guidance?
 - Do you wish you received more help?

EVALUATION

- Based on your own experience, what do you see as the biggest barrier/challenge in branding for female athletes?
 - Do you think these are the same for men in sport?
- What thoughts do you have about the opportunity to capitalize on being an athlete, specifically in relation to gender?
- Have you ever felt that you have been treated unfairly?

- Based on your own experience, what are your thoughts on the global women's sports community?
 - What do you think will be the biggest challenge in the future?
 - What do you think will be the biggest opportunity in the future?
 - Do you think you would have other prerequisites for succeeding being an athlete, both directly from the sport and commercial partnerships, had you been a man?
- Other comments?

8.3 Consent form Norwegian (Original)

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet ”Kvinnelige toppidrettsutøvere og personlig merkevarebygging”?

Dette er en forespørsel til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke kvinnelige toppidrettsutøveres erfaringer og oppfatninger av markedsaktiviteter i idretten. I dette skrevet vil jeg gi informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Formålet med dette intervjuet er å innhente personlige opplevelser og erfaringer, samt meninger om hvordan det er å være en kvinnelig toppidrettsutøver i et kommersielt samfunn. Fokuset i intervjuet vil være på personlig erfaring og tanker rundt temaene media, sosiale medier, og merkevare-konseptet. Dette vil bli brukt til en masteroppgave under studiet MSc Sport Management ved Høgskolen i Molde, der forskningsspørsmålet er som lyder: **Hvordan opplever kvinnelige toppidrettsutøvere muligheter og barrierer i prosessen av å skape en personlige merkevare?**

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Høgskolen i Molde er ansvarlige for dette prosjektet. Jeg som student vil utføre forskningen i praksis, og Oskar Solenes (førsteamanuensis V/HiM) er prosjektansvarlig.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Utvalget har blitt valgt med utgangspunkt i kvinnelige toppidrettsutøvere som har vært aktive utøvere mellom 2015-2020. Ca. 6-10 utøvere vil få henvendelse om å delta i dette prosjektet, og jeg håper akkurat du tar deg tid til å bidra til mitt prosjekt.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Hvis du velger å delta i prosjektet, innebærer det enten en telefonsamtale eller et personlig intervju som vil ta ca. 45 minutter. Intervjuet vil inneholde spørsmål om forskjellige temaer innenfor markedsføring av idrettsutøvere, deriblant sponsoravtaler og media. Intervjuet vil bli tatt opp og lagret i en kryptert database, der det vil bli anonymisert og kodet.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykke tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle opplysninger om deg vil da bli anonymisert. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrevet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

- Data og informasjon vil bli behandlet på den måten at det ikke vil være mulig å gjenkjenne eller identifisere enkeltutøvere.
- Jeg som student og forskingsansvarlig, samt min veileder, vil ha tilgang ved behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.
- For å sikre at ingen uvedkommende får tilgang til personopplysningene dine, vil blant annet navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine bli erstattet med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data, og datamaterialet vil bli lagret på forskningsserver som vil være innelåst og kryptert.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes 30.06.2020. Dine personopplysninger og opptak av intervju, samt kodeliste for anonymisering vil bli slettet ved prosjektslutt.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få slettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få utlevert en kopi av dine personopplysninger (dataportabilitet), og
- å sende klage til personvernombudet eller Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Høgskolen i Molde har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- Høgskolen i Molde ved Oskar Solenes (epost: oskar.solenes@himolde.no eller telefon: 99 01 1213)

- Vårt personvernombud: Merete Ludviksen
(epost: merete.ludiksen@himolde.no eller telefon: 71 21 41 18)
- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS, på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Prosjektansvarlig
Oskar Solenes

Student
Seada Saldic

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet ”Kvinnelige toppidrettsutøvere og personlig merkevarebygging” og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- delta i personlig intervju med lydopptak
- at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet, ca. 30.06.2020.

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

8.4 Consent form English (Translated)

Do you want to participate in the research project “Female athletes and personal branding”?

This is a request for you to participate in a research project whose purpose is to examine the experiences of female top athletes and perceptions of marketing activities in the sport. In this document, I will provide information about the goals of the project and what participation will mean for you.

Purpose

The purpose of this interview is to gather information of personal experiences and experiences, as well as perceptions of how it is like to be a female top athlete in a commercial community. The focus of the interview will be on personal experience and thoughts on the topics: media, social media, and the commercial environment. This will be used for a master's thesis part of the study MSc Sport Management at Molde University

College, where the research question is as follows: *How do elite female athletes perceive opportunities and challenges in the process of personal branding?*

Who is responsible for the research project?

Molde University College will be responsible for this project. I will be conducting the research in practicality, and Oskar Solenes (Associate Professor at HiM) is responsible for the project.

Why are you asked to participate?

The selection has been selected on the basis of female top athletes who have been active athletes between 2015-2020. Aproximately 6-10 practitioners will be invited to participate in this project, and I hope you will take the time to contribute to my project.

What does it mean for you to participate?

If you choose to participate in the project, it involves either a phone call or a personal interview that will take you approx. 45 minutes. The interview will include questions on various topics in the field of athlete marketing, including sponsorship agreements and the media. The interview will be recorded and stored in an encrypted database, where it will be anonymized and coded.

Participation is voluntary

It is voluntary to participate in the project. All information about you will be anonymized. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw your consent at any time without giving any reason. It will not have any negative consequences for you if you do not want to participate or later choose to withdraw.

Your privacy - how we store and use your information

We will only use the information about you for the purposes we have stated in this letter. We treat the information confidentially and in accordance with the privacy policy. Data and information will be used in a way where it will not be possible to identify the individual athletes.

- I as a student and research manager, as well as my supervisor, I will have access to the data through the institution responsible for treatment.
- To ensure that no unauthorized person has access to your personal data, your name and contact information will be replaced with a code stored on your own name list separate from other data, the data material will be stored on research servers that will be locked and encrypted.

What happens to your information when we finish the research project?

The project is scheduled to end on 30.06.2020. Your personal details and recording of interview, as well as the coding for anonymity will then be deleted.

Your rights

As long as you can be identified in the data material, you are entitled to:

- insight into what personal data is registered about you,
- obtaining personal information about you,
- have personal information about you deleted,
- obtain a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- submit a complaint to the Privacy Ombudsman or the Data Inspectorate regarding the processing of your personal data.

What gives us the right to process personal information about you?

We process information about you based on your consent.

On behalf of Molde University College, NSD - Norsk senter for Forskningsdata AS has considered that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with the privacy regulations.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the study, or wish to exercise your rights, please contact:

- Molde University College at Oskar Solenes (email: oskar.solenes@himolde.no or telephone: 99 01 12 13)
- Our Privacy Ombudsman: Merete Ludvigsen (email: merete.ludvigsen@himolde.no or phone: 71 21 41 18)
- NSD - Norwegian Center for Research Data AS, by e-mail (personvernt services@nsd.no) or by phone: 55 58 21 17.

Best regards

Project manager
Oskar Solenes

Student
Seada Saldic

Consent

I have received and understood information about project “Female athletes and personal branding” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I consent to:

- Participate in a personal interview
- For my details to be processed until the end of the project finishes, ca. 30.06.2020

(Signed by participant, date)