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The Sport Sponsorship of Disabled Athletes and its impact on consumers and companies

A cross-sectional study on the Loire-Atlantique region (France)



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ABSTRACT

This cross sectional study examined whether the sport sponsorship of local disabled athletes could somehow help companies to reach their business goals and improve their results, thanks to the influence this sponsorship has, or might have on consumers and athletes.

Pluralistic research approach is employed to explore the beliefs and feelings of consumers and athletes according to situations, like whether they would be more influenced knowing a company is sponsoring a local disabled athlete or not; and to highlight the possibilities and advantages of this strategy for all sized-firms within the Loire-Atlantique region (L.A region).

This study makes contributions. First, it presents the willingness and the desire of consumers and athletes to see and being more concerned by sport sponsorships (including the sponsorship of disabled and local athletes) through significant results coming from questionnaires and interviews. Second, it shows and highlights companies needs and wants in accordance to athletes' ones: the advantages of the sponsorship strategy are put forward by companies themselves, showing that the L.A region has the potential and ability to see more sponsorship cases in the next future. Third and last, but not least, this study focuses on the disability point and proves the benefits companies could get from a sponsorship of disabled athlete (all kinds of benefits like financial, image, etc).

Despite the fact that a lot of participants could not answer the questions concerning sport sponsorship, that does not mean participants did not feel concerned or influenced by this strategy; that has been proved through the data collection showing that they do consider the social responsibility of companies and believe this is a good and social action. This study recommends athletes to ask local companies to build sponsorship contracts, and companies to consider this strategy, even if the investments might be important, so would be the benefits.

METHODOLOGY

The research methods are composed by both qualitative and quantitative studies. Questionnaires are made according the first and third research objectives, interviews are made according the first, second and fourth objective; finally focus-groups are organized for the fifth and last research objective.

INTRODUCTION

The sport sponsorship has been used as a viable marketing strategy, from the past decades until nowadays. This strategy reaches all kinds of targets and can achieve multiple different brand objectives,

But its use is not really extended to the French territory, particularly in the Loire-Atlantique region. Moreover, we can notice that small-sized and local firms do use it less than big-firms and do not acknowledge yet the potential of sponsoring a new segment: disabled athletes.

Thus, the research question is:

To what extent do sponsorship of disabled athletes can be useful for companies in France (specifically in the Loire-Atlantique region)?

The research objectives are:

- Understand how sportspeople and companies choose to sponsor/be sponsored by each other
- Explore companies' perceptions of sport sponsorship in France
- Explore people' perceptions of sport sponsorship in France
- Have an outlook on how disabled athletes are perceived by people and companies
- Analyse the influence of sponsoring disabled athletes on consumer behaviour in France

The hypotheses are:

- Companies do hesitate to build sponsorships with athletes because of potential negative information
- Companies are looking for athletes whose performances are good and well-known
- Sport sponsorship of a disabled athlete will help companies in improving the brand' image and identity and will make them benefit from other opportunities
- Perception of social responsibilities from the company will improve the brand image
- Sportspeople are influenced in their choices by the company's values and image
- Companies' growth results are linked to the athlete progress and image

RESULTS/CONCLUSION

Positive results were to note, thanks to the fact that consumers, athletes and companies themselves were sensible to the topic of disabled athletes and their sponsorship within the Loire-Atlantique region,

As precised in the discussion, the three different points of view we looked for during this research study showed a positive influence of the sport sponsorship strategy on people and organisations, of disabilities on people and entities also,

Thus, even if the benefits are not total and easily measurable by the companies, lot of objectives are noticed at mid-term, then, to note an potential increase in the purchase intention, companies would have to wait longer and to dispose of an easy measurement tool,

DISCUSSION

As a resume from the research study; the discussion has been divided in three distinct parts represented the three possible perspectives of the study:

The athlete's perspective showed that athletes from the L.A region are interested in the sponsorship activity and in being sponsored, and do believe there is room for improvement concerning the place of disabled athletes in the society, including the building of relations with companies,

The company's perspective showed that all type companies were interested in the sponsorship strategy, but often confront limitations to build such strategies. The participants were interested in sponsoring disabled athletes and in sponsoring more local, which shows the potential of this study,

Finally, the consumer' perspective is put forward, because even if most of the participants did not acknowledge being influenced by companies' strategies, they all agree on the fact that they might change their minds about companies if those were more socially responsible, for example by associating themselves to sportspeople, and disabled athletes,

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This dissertation subject has been chosen according to my personal and professional goals in the next future.

Glossary

Track & Field: T&F

Loire-Atlantique: LA

Years old: YO

Research objective: R.O

Hypothesis: H

Abstract

This cross sectional study examined whether the sport sponsorship of local disabled athletes could somehow help companies to reach their business goals and improve their results, thanks to the influence this sponsorship has, or might have on consumers and athletes.

Pluralistic research approach is employed to explore the beliefs and feelings of consumers and athletes according to situations, like whether they would be more influenced knowing a company is sponsoring a local disabled athlete or not; and to highlight the possibilities and advantages of this strategy for all sized-firms within the Loire-Atlantique region (LA region).

This study makes contributions. First, it presents the willingness and the desire of consumers and athletes to see and being more concerned by sport sponsorships (including the sponsorship of disabled and local athletes) through significant results coming from questionnaires and interviews. Second, it shows and highlights companies needs and wants in accordance to athletes' ones: the advantages of the sponsorship strategy are put forward by companies themselves, showing that the LA region has the potential and ability to see more sponsorship cases in the next future. Third and last, but not least, this study focuses on the disability point and proves the benefits companies could get from a sponsorship of disabled athlete (all kinds of benefits like financial, image, etc.).

Despite the fact that a lot of participants could not answer the questions concerning sport sponsorship, that does not mean participants did not feel concerned or influenced by this strategy; that has been proved through the data collection showing that they do consider the social responsibility of companies and believe this is a good and social action. This study recommends athletes to ask local companies to build sponsorship contracts, and companies to consider this strategy, even if the investments might be important, so would be the benefits.

I. Introduction

Sponsorship strategy is acknowledged as a trendy and powerful communication strategy and is increasingly used by companies desirous of benefiting from a competitive advantage and various outcomes (brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand image and purchase decisions). Because sponsorship strategy can reach multiple audiences and different brand objectives, it is present in a lot of domains like music, arts or sports. Despite the evident benefits of this marketing and communication strategy and the easy use of it, a visible gap is noticed between customers' expectations of the company to be social oriented and what companies do in terms of social responsibilities and to improve their image. A another gap is evident between the sponsorship strategy, very basic and simple, used by companies having enough resources, and the possibilities companies could have in terms of sport sponsorship, if they would acknowledge those benefits. That leads to the fact that companies miss interesting consumers in their organization, they miss the benefits of positive word of mouth and other informal communication, and they miss the possibility to differentiate themselves from the competition as customers' expectations are not met (consumers, athletes included).

Through the past decades, sport media coverage increased a lot and sponsored events became very popular. The expenses allocated to that strategy grown up also all around the world, meaning that more companies spend and a lot more than before. But that does not touch only the companies, but also the population. The focus on the French territory is made, as this research study answers to a French problem.

Studies have been made by the French Government showing that French people' expenses in sports are increasing every year, showing therefore a growing interest for the sport domain. This interest is also visible thanks to the fact that more and more people were watching at the Olympic Games.

Despite this growing consideration of people and companies and the positive image and values sport continues to vehicle, there is still a gap we can notice according the sport, but also between the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The problem lied here in how people perceive and differentiate able and disabled athletes and to know if they are as much interested in Paralympics as Olympics. This assumption was supported by the fact that Olympic Games are much more popular and appreciated. Consequently, companies tend rather to spend money in an event or athlete appreciated and known by the public, representing adequate values expected by the population, than disabled athletes. The predictions there, through the research methods were that disabilities

could be seen like a plus for companies, included in the social responsibility of the organization and would show a positive image of it to the population, which leads then to the gain of new consumers and their loyalty, a better brand awareness and an increase of the purchases. Thus, the unique research question then became the following one:

To what extent do sponsorship of disabled athletes can be useful for companies in France (specifically in the Loire-Atlantique region)?

Through the research question, we studied and looked for understanding how people, athletes and companies consider the sponsorship strategy in France, how they perceive and behave when they face a disabled athlete and how consumers behave towards a company socially engaged. To prove the predictions, we assumed that a company would benefit from a sport sponsorship strategy, especially based on local or/and disabled athletes. Because we know that big-sized and international companies have enough resources to build sponsorship contracts, we assumed that small-sized companies/local companies are less advantaged. That could, indeed, explain why this strategy is not often used in this region, and why lot of athletes wait being performant before asking companies for being sponsored, and do not really consider asking to local or small-sized firms because of the ignorance of the benefits for both parts.

This research study confronted an important number of limitations: the focus on disabilities represented a sensible topic, on which one had to be careful about how to lead the research without offending people. Participants to the quantitative and qualitative studies felt also sometimes not confident: they needed to understand the aim of the study, seeking to understand behaviors and feelings.

The disability point represented an opportunity: the market is becoming saturated and companies have to find other segments to evolve on to stay competitive and positively different.

Another limitation concerned the focus on one sport, so is the access to participants and to information smaller than it could have been if all sports were included. But like previously mentioned, no study focused on this particular domain exists and the access to T&F sportspeople is easy and quick.

The last limitation taken into consideration was the location on which the study focused. Because the location was limited to the LA region, the sample was somehow limited also. But there

was an evident lack of time to accomplish this research study, therefore the sample sizes we had access to were largely sufficient to get the expected answers.

This research study answered to few different research objectives and the hypotheses, as follows:

The objectives

1. Understand how sportspeople and companies choose to sponsor/be sponsored by each other
2. Explore companies' perceptions of sport sponsorship in France
3. Explore people' perceptions of sport sponsorship in France
4. Have an outlook on how disabled athletes are perceived by people and companies
5. Analyse the influence of sponsoring disabled athletes on consumer behaviour in France

The hypotheses

H1: Companies do hesitate to build sponsorships with athletes because of potential negative information

H2: Companies are looking for athletes whose performances are good and well-known

H3: Sport sponsorship of a disabled athlete will help companies in improving the brand' image and identity and will make them benefit from other opportunities

H4: Perception of social responsibilities from the company will improve the brand image

H5: Sportspeople are influenced in their choices by the company's values and image

H6: Companies' growth results are linked to the athlete progress and image

Those research objectives and hypotheses were answered through the process of data collection and analysis thanks to different quantitative and qualitative methods. Some were easy and quick to answer; others lead to deeper analyses for more profound results on which this study would not focus, but for which we recommend further investigation in the next future.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Modern Marketing and Communication Strategies

Communication and marketing strategies evolved very quickly those past decades and are continuing today. Companies of any domain of activity, all around the world spend important amounts of money to promote their products/services, or more widely, themselves to consumers. Thanks to this communication, companies desire to be known by consumers (brand awareness), to be differentiated from the competition (brand recognition), to be chosen and preferred (purchase intention and loyalty). But the global economic context makes the things harder for companies to survive, face the competition and the growing needs and expectations of the consumers.

But despite this current economic conjuncture, expenditures in communication and marketing strategies are increasing; indeed, those kinds of investments are expensive for companies which have the resources, the returns on investments are much more important. Actually, various reasons might explain the increased expenditures, like the fact that companies want and need to differentiate them from the competition and look for/try to keep a competitive advantage.

Those strategies are evolving also because people and cultures are changing too. The apparition of the new technologies in everyday lives and on another side the interest people have towards the sustainable development, for example are changing the way populations and companies behave, but also how companies communicate to this population. New ways and means of communication cannot be avoided nowadays, using those new technologies to promote an offer, to communicate about an image or about companies' values and engagement (social media is an example of new way to promote and engage populations).

Another kind of communication strategy which made its proofs recently and is getting more and more popular is the celebrity endorsement. Indeed, the use of a spokesman/woman who highlights the values of the brand, the engagement, the social responsibility (more generally the image) or the quality of the offer might have an influence on consumer, depending on the image the spokesman/woman possess his/herself. Even if those endorsements are generally expensive due to the fact that those celebrities are well-known and desired by lot of companies, if the celebrity do

have some characteristics in common with the brand and represents therefore adequately the brand, then the returns on investments might be huge and largely overcome the expenses. Other benefits like the brand awareness, the engagement and recognition or the loyalty are expected and often reached.

From the past until today, consumers were used to normal faces of everyday life population, in order for people to feel concerned by the advertising and to be possible for them to compare. Those two past decades saw the use of celebrity and well-known people increase to push consumers wanting to act like the celebrity, a challenge for the company for choosing the right celebrity to create desirability from the consumer and increase the purchases.

The abilities of this strategy evolved; indeed, well-known people are still used nowadays by big-sized companies or famous brands (cosmetics, perfumes, etc.) and companies still look for celebrities representing the brand. Nevertheless, companies do take into consideration the fact that anyone cannot positively represent the brand without any points in common like personal values, personality, etc. Therefore, when it came to represent some sport brands or to promote a sporting event, those celebrities have been chosen according their professions and their potential to represent the brand. This strategy to use adapted and representative people, well-known or not, in order to highlight the values of an event or brand, through which the company expects transferring the values and popularity from the ambassador to the event is named: the sponsorship strategy.

2.2 *The (sport) sponsorship strategy*

The sponsorship is considered as a part of the marketing and communication strategies, and more clearly, a “part of the overall promotional plan” (Fortunato, 2013). Indeed, this strategy can be used by companies to reach different kinds of objectives, measurable or not, all different from a company to another. The main aim is to use the image of the sponsee (person sponsored) and to transfer his/her values and personality to the event or brand in order for consumers to do the same, by transferring their appreciation of the sponsee to the brand itself. But even if this strategy made its proofs and is trendy nowadays, lot of brands do not use it because of the cost of it and the need to have enough resources to make a good sponsorship relation. Indeed, this strategy can be define as ‘an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity’ (Meenaghan, 1991, p. 36). Despite its cost and the reluctance of companies to use it due to a misunderstanding of its benefits and advantages, sponsorship has the advantage to reach multiple audiences (Crowley, 1991) and to answer to a lot of business and corporate objectives.

Sponsorship strategy has an easy use in the fact that it can be applied to various domains like arts or sports for example. A lot of different objectives could be reached also, having different strategies, like for example the fact that some organisations need to improve their image, other to engage consumers to retain them, etc. This difference of strategies is visible because sponsorship lies in the exchange of resources whereas image sponsorship focuses on the fact that companies try to appropriate to themselves the image of the sponsee (event, group, athlete). Like mentioned previously, this is the representativeness of the sponsee/event that ensures the transfer of the image and the other linked benefits. More generally speaking, we can say that the corporate image is the most important benefit for companies looking for signing a sponsorship contract, because thanks to the image, the other benefits will logically follow. A positive corporate image ensures that the company will benefit from its values and ideas, from its positive image to make people (employees and consumers) become engaged and loyal to the brand.

But before establishing a sponsorship contract between an entity and a group/person, the company needs to find out what brand objectives and corporate objectives it has to reach. Those objectives will reach a different public, we cut in two parts: the internal one (employees) and external one (consumers). Concerning the internal target, the main objectives are linked to the development of staff recruiting, to reinforce the image of the brand from an employee' perspective (including values, social responsibility, etc.), reinforce employees' involvement within the firm, which can be made thanks to the good behavior of the company and the association of the company to an event or a person benefiting from a good image. Another target included in the internal organization are the stakeholders: the same objectives are concerned and play a role in the choice and relation with them.

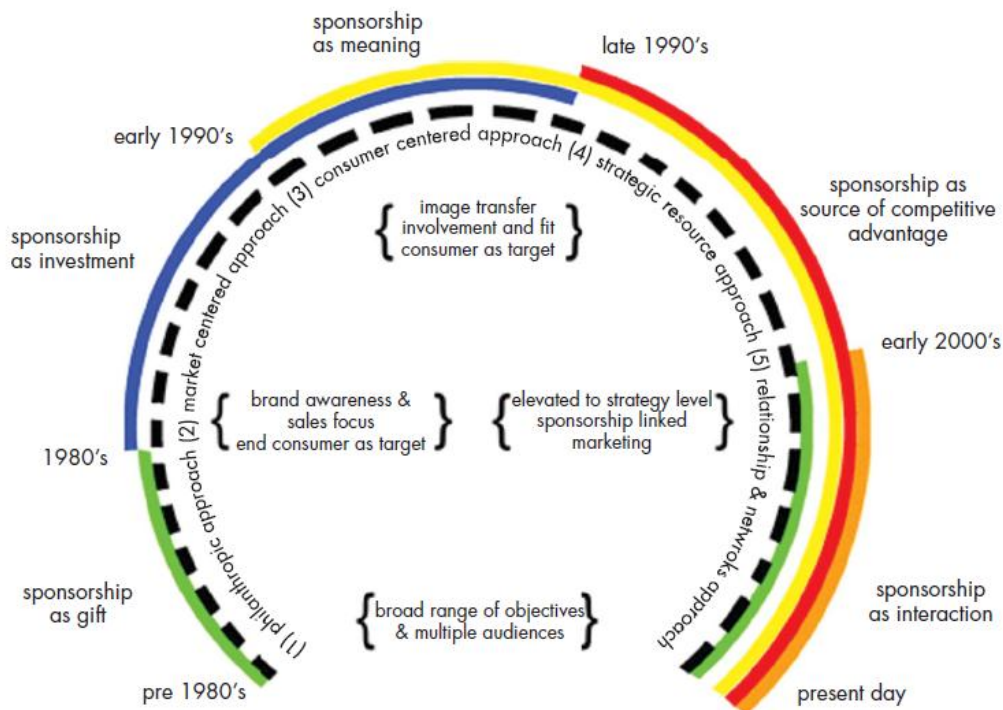
The other aims linked to the external targets (consumers) of the sponsorship strategy are to be more involved with the community and communicate it, to increase the brand awareness, reach new target markets, increase the purchase intention/decision and the brand loyalty, develop and keep a competitive advantage and by the way, strenghten the brand (Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006).

All those objectives are achievable thanks to the increase, for most sponsorship cases, of both exposure and access, according to Cunningham, Cornwell, and Coote (2009). The exposure and access are developed through the growth of the media coverage, itself increased depending on the sponsorship contract, more specifically the sponsee (group, person, etc.). But this sponsorship contract is not the same from a company to another. This contract is a negotiation between the sponsor and the sponsee, on which the advantages for both parts are not the same and depend on

different variables. Thus, objectives and their results mainly depended on the size and the resources of the companies. It is assumed that small-sized companies probably do not have the same resources than bigger or international companies. That is often the case because of the fact that the activity is not extended to other territories, thus to more potential consumers. But studies revealed that small businesses could get advantages and benefits from a sponsorship relation and that could be possible, but would depend on who is the sponsee, on what criteria is this sponsee chosen, and does the sponsee represent well the company?

The sponsorship strategy evolved a lot those past decades until today. To study the evolution of the strategy according to the right approach, linked to the business objectives, a five distinctive approach of sponsorship have been studied by Ryan and Fahy in 2012. On this figure, companies need to analyze and chose the right approach in accordance with the organization and its values, in order to answer then to the business objectives. Therefore, by focusing on the objectives of the business, the company has then to choose the right sponsee (person, event, etc.) who would then adequately communicate for the brand.

Figure 1: Graphical representation of the evolution of sponsorship thinking and changing priorities over time (Annmarie Ryan, John Fahy, 2012)



The figure represents the evolution of the sponsorship strategy from the past decades until the present day. It shows five distinct approaches of sponsorship that have been identified from an extensive review of the literature: philanthropic approach (at the early beginning, but coming back this last decade), the market-centered approach (spending a lot, seen like an investment, totally removed), the consumer-centered approach (willingness to communicate a value, an idea), strategic resource (seeing the strategy like a competitive advantage, still existing today) and the sponsorship as interaction (implying the networks and the technologies to reach people and be associated to

their interests). Companies need to determine which strategy they want/have, to be successful and in accordance with the modern times. The market-centered approach is the only one which is considered like non-applicable nowadays.

In accordance with the current study, we noticed the link between the three last approaches and the behavior and desires of companies today: companies want to communicate values and a positive image, to use this image to have a competitive advantage comparing to the competition and finally they use this strategy trying to be closer to consumers, adapting their communication means and messages.

Even if the objectives are different from a company to another, the main idea for them by using the sponsorship strategy would be to benefit from the sponsee' positive image, but also from the entertainment of the event/relation, which could in some cases be a plus for the public. This is the case with Red Bull for example, which sponsors extreme sports. Those events are unique, extreme and entertaining, the budget allocated is huge and the values and message of the brand are in accordance with the targeted events. Moreover, their product and slogan 'it gives you wings' are significant and appropriate to the events. Because existing sponsorship strategies proved the advantages and the positive effects of those strategies, some companies do not hesitate to build sponsorships without considering their values and the potential danger this association with a sponsee might represent. Indeed, when signing a contract between sponsor and sponsee, the announcement of this relation can have an impact on consumers and populations in general. This impact would depend on the sponsees' identity. According to Schnitta, Sattler and Farsky (2013), announcing sponsorships, when appropriate 'is leading to positive effects for the brand'. But are those effects always positive? As previously mentioned, if the choice of the sponsee is not studied, and if the choice of sponsees is based on the wrong criteria, the event or company could get small and/or unclear effects.

But having a simple sponsorship strategy is not enough nowadays. After signing a sponsorship contract, the company needs to update its communication plan and to develop the promotional actions. The communication of this sponsorship relation has to be done to let population know and follow the company's news. Thus, to do so, the company has to give a second additional investment to the one allocated to the sponsorship contract itself. A precise and complete study has been made on the sponsorship activation, by John A. Fortunato (2013). He showed that to be really efficient and to benefit from a competitive advantage, sponsorship activation, described like 'the implementation of programs to communicate and associate the brand to the property and

customers', needed to be implemented. He went further saying that to improve brand image enhancement, 'one possible activation strategy is to include a social responsibility initiative'.

The activation of the sponsorship strategy (being the investment in the strategy to benefit from promotional actions) is the idea highlighted there by J.Fortunato: the need to invest in a social responsibility (to create one if needed or support if existing). Knowing that the social side is important and that a lot of people do care about it nowadays, companies should think a lot more about current issues like the sustainable development for example or helping people in the need. Those examples illustrate what the social responsibility of the firm could be. Once the social responsibility is taken into consideration, companies need communicating about their good intentions and willingness to do better, being consumer and social-oriented. Thus, that will help companies to be seen responsible and to be appreciated by consumers.

The activation of the sponsorship strategy and its importance and need for companies has been proved through J.Fortunato' study, which gave the example of MasterCard, 'which understands the importance of communicating its social responsibility initiative and effectively uses the assets of Major League Baseball to promote its efforts'. Thus, thanks to this activation, MasterCard can benefit from a good image and a positive association now with the sport event. If any return is wanted by the company from its sponsorship activation, then consumers 'have to be aware of those programs' (David, Kline and Dai, 2005) and thus the company has to communicate about it.

Therefore, sponsorship can be really useful and efficient if the goals are clearly defined. Companies know now the importance of the activation of the sponsorship programs and have ideas on how to activate them. Nevertheless, the point that they have to take into consideration now is the fact that activating a sponsorship program includes important expenses, which are not possible to implement for lot of companies because of their sizes and domain of activity, but also because of the global economic context. The amount spent in its activation does not guarantee reaching the brand goals; nevertheless, companies cannot avoid activating it if it wants to see returns on investment (Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2009). They argued then that if the activation is not made, companies 'miss opportunities to achieve brand goals'.

What has been said earlier is adapted for both sponsorship strategy in general and sport sponsorship, as this study is going to exclusively focus on sport sponsorship, more specifically the T&F activity. For some clarifications, the T&F focus is justified by the fact that no prior research has

been found on the literature, despite the fact that some studies exist on the sport sponsorship in general and on disabled sportspeople.

Even if what has been said for sponsorship is applicable to sport sponsorship, we reminded some points of sport sponsorship and began with its evolution. The sport marketing business at its early stages was all about 'cheap media' (Alan Pascoe, 2014). The author justified then that in the past (80's), the sport communication was concerning the TV spots, some 'billboards' campaigns. With the apparition of sponsorship, the means to communicate increased, the entity to sponsor changed (from the event, to the person or group itself), allowing for both sponsors and sponsees a 'package of rights'. Money was almost the unique possible exchange sponsor could offer to sponsee, and the brand awareness the exchange sponsee could offer to sponsor.

An additional point could be added to this definition: sponsorship contracts could build a BtoB relationship between a sponsor and a sport entity. In other words, we could use the following idea, that a sport entity receives financial support or other kind of resources to improve some managerial aspects of the club. The sponsor obtains in return the tangible and intangible benefits of being associated with the sport entity (Chen & Zhang, 2011; Yang, Sparks, & Li, 2008) which could be the image of sport and a positive communication on their relationship, the transfer of the appreciation of the club to the sponsor, the engagement and involvement within the club transferred to the sponsor also.

Nowadays, a lot of benefits and advantages are allowed through sport sponsorship, thanks to the evolution of the image of sport itself. 'Sport is an international phenomenon, carrying with strong and positive images' (Ferrand and Pages) which 'represents values like competition, friendship or courage' (Anne, 1992). Thus, sport brings values and is associated to a certain positive behavior. Thanks to the fact that companies do sign sponsorship contracts and according to the sponsee or the event itself, the sponsorship contract signed by the company shows its values-orientation. That is to say also that when signing a sponsorship contract, company communicates about it and about the activation of its sponsorship (communicating for example about the fact that it is more socially responsible than being a profit-oriented organization).

This communication is positive for the company thanks to the image sport do represent today and the image of the social responsibility: past studies showed that companies benefit from the fact that 'fans are emotionally involved when attending sporting events'(Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Maroco, & Ross, 2012; Kwak, Kim, & Hirt, 2011; Madrigal, 2003). Thus, signing sponsorship contracts

and communicating about the activation of this program allow consumers, and people more generally to get involved with the sponsored event or the sponsee. Following this same idea, Santomier (2008) argued that 'global brands use this emotional impact of sport to connect with the consumers'.

Therefore, sport has and communicates positive values and is beneficial for the company for various reasons we gave before (image, values and social responsibility, involvement of consumers) and might help the company building a positive and strong relationship between the entity and consumers.

2.3 Consumer behaviour & sport sponsorship

The objective of this part was to see and understand the impact sport sponsorship could have on consumer behaviour towards the company. As a reminder, the objectives of building a sport sponsorship strategy were first given. The most prevalent objective of a company is to build brand awareness. The brand awareness is needed for all companies at a different stage; some would need to be known and recognised because of the hard competition, others would like to communicate about their image to differentiate from the others, etc.

The other objectives like brand recall, recognition, the purchase intention or engagement are often present in the business and communication goals but depend on the size of the firm and its situation and position on the market place. Indeed, the size of the firm often determines the resources and therefore may place those objectives in a different order and answer to them by different means.

Like previously noticed, to be efficient in its sponsorship strategy, a company has to communicate its strategy to the public (external audience) and to the organisation (internal audience), and to adequately choose an entity or group/person whose core values and image are similar and appropriate to the firm's identity. The image of the sponsee is crucial for the brand which associates itself with it. Actually, we can say that when people think about a sponsor, they automatically think about the sponsee, and the inverse transfer is feasible too. That is how the transfer of image is made and why the choice of the sponsor and sponsee is so important for both parts.

This is even more the case when the company sponsors a local athlete/event. We can affirm, thanks to the support of Ferrand and Pagès (1996) study that if a local event is designed for the population of this locality, this event has high credibility for this population, creating then an 'emotional attachment'. This emotional attachment is a plus for the company because it allows populations to get involved and engage in the event/to the athlete and to be loyal to the brand then. Another benefit from this attachment is the brand experience.

This has been showed through some studies, like the one of Fransen, van Rompay and Muntinga (2013) exploring the issue whether creating brand experience could improve the effectiveness of the company's sponsorship investments. The study proved that the use of brand experience during a sponsored event can add success to the sponsorship like being for example top of mind awareness or enhanced brand recall. The information given by this event and the returns on it from participants is quite positive. But sometimes sport events do not guarantee delivering only positive information.

Studies from Schnittka, Sattler, Farsk (2013) tested and validated the hypothesis that 'negative sponsorship information has a negative impact on (a) consumers' attitude towards the sponsor and (b) the favorability of attributes and benefits about the sponsor. And it has clearly been demonstrated that if the communication is negative, this would directly impact consumers and their attitudes towards the brand, influencing then the purchase intention, their engagement and loyalty, and their indirect communication influence. Ideas and studies are confronting each other on this subject. No study has been found about the harmfulness of negative information on the brand image. But Schnittka, Sattler, Farsky argued that if a sponsor 'does not abandon a sponsee' with a negative image, the repercussions will be then transferred to the brand. It is seen by people as if the brand was supporting the bad behaviour of the sponsee. This idea is clearly illustrated by the sponsorship of Oscar Pistorius and the famous brand Nike (just after the announcement of their sponsorship, O.Pistorius killed his wife and Nike had to cancel their contracts to avoid being penalised by this negative communication).

That is one of the reasons why companies are looking to embody with the event' values or performant athletes; they look for having some criteria in common, a real relation and then to reinforce the message(s) towards consumers and fans. And what is true for consumers is also true for employees. This is highlighted by Khan, Stanton, Rahman (2013) who said that 'employees' favourable attitudes and behaviours towards the sponsorship can impact the investment's return'. Indeed, they are directly and indirectly affected by the corporate sponsorship. That means companies have to take into consideration their employees, and see them like an audience (internal

one) of the sponsorship strategy. If a sponsorship strategy is not approved by the employees, their attitude towards the brand will be affected, so will be their work and willingness to work within this organization. Employees might impact the external audience too.

That is the main idea found in a research study entitled 'Employees' attitudes towards the sponsorship activity of their employer and links to their organisational citizenship behaviours' by Khan, Stanton and Rahman (2013). Therefore, Marin & Ruiz (2007) added that to positively affect the company, people and employees need to identify themselves with the organisation. To do that, the company's identity has to be attractive and to do so, this identity is linked to social responsibility programmes. Lichtenstein et al. (2004, p.17) justified this idea, arguing 'When a corporate behaves in a manner that is perceived as socially responsible, consumers are likely to infer that it has certain desirable traits that resonates with their sense of self'. That can be explained by the fact that if a company and people have the same values, then people will easier identify themselves to the employer and the company. This possible identification allows the company benefiting from a good and better image, communicated by consumers, making indirectly increase the engagement of people and the purchase intention. Then, we can affirm that if companies which are socially responsible attract people and consumers, they will help also employees identifying themselves to the firm and be more efficient at work and according to Khan, Stanton, Rahman (2013), 'employees are more likely to exchange if their organisation engages in social exchanges'. The social responsibility has to be seen like a 'plus' by the company, which needs to activate the sponsorship programme, to benefit from its investments.

As it has previously been mentioned, despite the investments' amount of companies in the activation of the programme and the social responsibility aspect, this investment does not guarantee that brand's goals will be achieved and that company will gain a competitive advantage. Other studies come to contradict this last affirmation, saying that if the strategy is well implemented, the activation will ensure the transfer of the consumers' loyalty event' to the sponsor (Stipp and Schiavone, 1996). Even if studies do not agree on the same points, the second affirmation might have less impact in this study because of its date and the fact that in the marketing sector, things evolve very quickly and therefore theories need to be continuously adapted. That is the reason why marketers need to understand consumers behaviours attribute of sponsorship, to understand that brand experience increases sponsorship effectiveness. We would say then that companies have to attract consumers thanks to the social responsibility program, to communicate about it, and not to expect having a lot of returns immediately.

Thus, two hypotheses have been made and were tested in the research study:

H1: Companies do hesitate to build sponsorships with athletes because of potential negative information

H2: Companies are looking for athletes whose performances are good and well-known

2.4 The Loire-Atlantique region and the sport sponsorship

According to French sources (Consommation Sportive), LA region is the second biggest in France, after the North, in terms of figures of people practising T&F (8000 in 2014).

The focus on this region has been made thanks to the accesses and availability of the participants, but also due to the fact that no prior research has been done on this geographical area; thus this research study is completely new according to what has already been written.

Moreover, an assumption has been made on the possible generalization of the results on other similar regions of the country due to the fact that the samples used through the research methods are representative of the whole population, providing different age-groups participants, from different professional areas, practicing T&F or not, etc.

2.5 Sport disabilities

This study focused mainly on disabled athletes practicing T&F. When we talk about disabilities, we include both physical and intellectual disabilities. A lot of literature exists about the topic of the disabled persons within the society, about their difficulties to live in the same world than the able persons and benefits from the same rights.

When we talk about disabled athletes, we think automatically Paralympic Games. Thus, a definition of the Paralympic Games is first given. Paralympic Games is a division of sport specifically adapted for the disabled persons. This is an international competition with its own set of rules and regulations which has been agreed by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC).

The Paralympic Movement has come a long way since its beginnings in 1948. At its early stages, all kind of disabilities were not represented. Since the movement has been created and all the kind of disabilities was accepted to participate (visual impairments, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, amputees, wheelchair athletes), the number of disabled participants increased every Paralympic Games (4 years like the Olympic Games).

A lot of personal motives influence disabled people to do sport, at any level. The motives are different from an athlete to another; they include: the friendship, family' support and the self-realization, etc. Thanks to the Paralympics, disabled people have the same chances than abled sportspeople in participating to international sport competitions. The Games in 2000 especially shown both Olympics and Paralympics work together in an inclusive relationship; those Games demonstrated, according to Cashman & Darcy (2008), the acceptance of disabled athletes as elite sportsmen and women and the importance of providing an international and highly visible opportunity for them to show their prowess.

The main issue between abled and disabled people is the matter of the rights and possibilities which are not totally equal between both parts. Disabled individuals are often recognized as 'having low self-esteem' (Fauzee, Ali, Geok, Ibrahim, 2010). People make a lot of assumptions concerning disabled people and especially disabled athletes, like the fact that they cannot physically accomplish the same things than able athletes. Even concerning the popularity of both Paralympic and Olympic Games, the perception of populations are different: it has been proved

that a lot of people cannot even watch the Paralympics because of the pity they feel for those impaired bodies.

Nevertheless, the normality is a term very personal and depends on each person's values, perception and feelings. Van Hilvoorde, Landeweerd (2010) argued that there cannot be any normality in the elite athletes, disabled or not: 'they are considered as icons, heroes, even when impaired body'. Despite those disabilities, thanks to the prowess realized by athletes, they are icons, impaired bodies or not. They do represent force, courage and determination. That is why companies today start to consider sponsoring disabled athletes (example of Nike and O.Pistorius). Sponsoring disabled athletes could be seen as a social responsibility from the company, and like we said previously, could lead to increasing the brand image. Elite sports idealize sportsmen and women thanks to the 'athletic' and 'beautiful' body. Nevertheless, the disabled athlete's body is still seen by people like being limited, contrary to 'normal' athletes. That is the issue present nowadays and that might impact the research methods of this study.

Even if both events Paralympics and Olympics represent sportspeople in the same sports' domains, the audience for both events is not the same at all. Studies of Brittain (2010); Gilbert & Schantz (2009), Olympics are well-known by people and receive a significant media exposure contrary to the Paralympics, an event for which the audience is less important and the media exposure inferior. In addition to what has already been said about the differences between disabled and 'normal', or Olympics and Paralympics, past research has shown that people feel 'fear and pity' (Hughes, 2012) about disabled people. That might be an assumption to say that people respond to that fear by distancing them from the disabled people, but that is what mostly happens nowadays. Despite this fear and distance we notice from the population towards the disabled sportspeople, supporting the disabled people and the disabled cause is seen like a plus, like a positive action and rewarded by populations, consumers or even cities for local actions.

More than what has been said on what populations feel towards disabled athletes from the Paralympic Games, an advertising campaign studied the feelings of people in order to understand why Paralympics had less audience than Olympics, trying this way to change it. Previously, they made a study showing that most of the people are uncomfortable talking about disability because they do not want to say something wrong; others feel sadness looking at disabilities. Sometimes, they discovered that Paralympics did not seem to be like sport, contrary to Olympic Games.

It seems like when people do not know something, they are not used to be confronted to some differences, they just feel fear and try to avoid confronting those difficulties. The fear of the un-known is obvious, and that is why this can be changed by companies and the power of the

Medias. The image of disabled people has to be changed and the Paralympics to be shown like being equal to the Olympics by the media. We can assume that if the events do not seem to be equal, neither the athletes representing those events would think being either.

Those differences and feelings we got through the advertising campaign 'Meet the Superhumans' we just talked about, are the same and traduce the same feelings that non-disabled young people understand about sport disabilities. That is what Fitzgerald demonstrates through focus-groups method in which he made those young people confront questions about 'normality', 'acceptance in the society', etc. Because people are not used to confront those disabled people, they often feel uncomfortable for them and because they feel they do not behave like they should, they prefer avoiding confronting them. But what populations and most of all, companies need to understand there is that sport sponsorship of disabled athletes has 'the same revenue than non-disabled' (Ozturk, Kozub, Kocak, 2010).

Therefore, it was supposed that sponsoring disabled athletes could be as beneficial for companies as athletes, and that because of the saturation of the market, sponsoring disabled athletes could become a competitive advantage compared to the sponsoring of able athletes, like the competition does. Moreover, we can assume that it could be beneficial for athletes with disabilities because of the costs of the equipment and material needed in some cases, to practice sport (like wheelchair for example). That is one of the reasons why this study focusing on disabled athletes is new and relevant and why there is a possibility and a need for companies and disabled athletes to work together.

2. 6 Sport sponsorship of disabled athletes and its effects on consumers, athletes and companies

Thanks to sponsorship, people associate events and sponsees to brands and their values. This trendy strategy that made its proofs in the past is evolving, but just few sport sponsorships exist nowadays between brands and disabled athletes; when that happens, the only athletes who could pretend to a sponsorship contract are international champions. It seems like disabled athletes with less good performances are still more perceived like disabled than athletes. What constitutes a real question then is, despite the media exposure and the growing facilities to establish a sponsorship contract, why companies do not consider the possibility to sponsor more disabled athletes, local and less known in the international context?

Companies do have a lot to win by reconsidering this issue. Meenaghan (2001) suggested that sponsor's investment in professional sport teams generates a goodwill effect among fans. That directly influences their attitudes and behaviors toward the sponsor. And what is applicable for teams is applicable too for individual athletes.

Companies link themselves to sportspeople who represent the same values, a similar image/identity and interests. That influences therefore the consumer, who changes then the opinion he/she has about the company; that might lead in a mid and long-term to increase the purchase intentions, and create or improve the loyalty of people towards a brand.

From the sponsor's point of view, a lot of brand objectives are important and achievable, but for most of them, the main objective stays the link to the purchase decision. The purchase intention is considered as 'the most useful indicator of sponsorship effectiveness', which can impact on future sales (Crompton, 2004). So if the purchase intentions are important for companies and often placed at the top of the brand objectives to reach, then companies should really take into consideration the sport sponsorship strategy. Thanks to a positive sponsorship strategy, more than bringing just an increase of the purchase intention, it will bring them also positive attributes like brand experience or interactivities for example.

The sport sponsorship of disabled athlete will also influence athletes in general; they will be influenced a different way. Knowing that companies might increase the sport sponsorship contracts with disabled athletes, those would be more interested to consider a sponsorship with a company. Because companies do not offer almost any sponsorship contracts to local disabled athletes, we suppose that by changing this trend and convincing companies to build relations with them, disabled athletes would be more represented and they will ask for more sponsorship contracts.

Companies are also influenced because even if the investment might be huge sometimes, the returns on investment can be higher. If the activation of the sponsorship strategy is engaged as some researcher suggest, and if the social responsibility is promoted, the results will probably increase also within the concerned company. But despite the amount of the investment and the possible activation of the sponsorship strategy, companies and athletes do have to take into consideration the possibility of creating and promoting negative information to the public and consumer, which will directly affect the returns in investments of the company and the image and appreciation of the athlete.

This negative communication can happen because for example both sponsor/sponsee did not study and took into account all the parameters of the sponsorship; in that given case, the transfer of the negative image is possible as much as for the positive communication.

In some cases, the behavior of the sponsor or sponsee comes to highlight this negative information: if something goes wrong during the relation and that the sponsor does not immediately change or cancel the sponsorship contract, the bad information will be transferred to the company. In those cases, people tend to think that brands agree with the behavior of the sponsee and start to lack of confidence (Kelley, 1973); (Rifon et al.2004). This is applicable also for the sponsee and the possible bad communication of the company.

Even if some research are quite old and might be not objective and applicable anymore, some others more recent come to support the oldest one. Thus, we do think that the loose of the trustworthiness towards the company is logic and understandable and even in an evolving global context, values and expectations are basically the same and cannot be old-fashioned. But despite those negative effects, any prior research has analyzed yet if and how the negative information can impact sponsors, especially its image.

Through this part, we made hypotheses:

H3: Sport sponsorship of a disabled athlete will help companies in improving the brand' image and identity and will make them benefit from other opportunities

H4: Perception of social responsibilities from the company will improve the brand image

H5: Sportspeople are influenced in their choices by the company's values and image

H6: Companies' growth results are linked to the athlete progress and image

This part concerning the effects of the sport sponsorship of disabled athletes in France on (a) consumers, athletes and on companies is the one which answered to the research question of the study. The term 'useful' included in the research question means all the benefits LA companies could receive by signing sponsorship contracts with disabled athletes of the same region. The research objectives found answers through the data collection and data analyses process, like the hypotheses which were validated or refuted in some cases.

Then, the following part we focused on was the research methods.

III. Research Methods

3.1 Research Methods Chapter Introduction

This section of the proposal highlighted the main elements of the methodology we applied in this research study in regards to the possibilities and benefits for companies and athletes to sponsor and be sponsored each other in the LA sector, focusing on the disable subject regarding the athletes, and looking for consumers impact on the sponsorship relation and on the company's returns on investments. This part of the proposal aimed to put forward how the research has been conducted.

During a research study, some researcher think, that practical issues exist like time or sample, and that those issues played a role in the chosen and used methodology to do the research. So the methodology is adapted according to the research question, but also according the research objectives.

Thus, the research objectives were:

1. Understand how sportspeople and companies choose to sponsor and be sponsored each other
2. Explore companies' perceptions of sport sponsorship in the Loire-Atlantique region (LA)
3. Explore people' perceptions of sport sponsorship in the LA region
4. Have an outlook on how disabled athletes are perceived by people and companies
5. Analyze the influence of sponsoring disabled athletes, on athletes, consumers and companies' behavior in LA region

Hypotheses have been created also through the Literature Review part:

H1: Companies do hesitate to build sponsorships with athletes because of potential negative information

H2: Companies are looking for athletes whose performances are good and well-known

H3: Sport sponsorship of a disabled athlete will help companies in improving the brand' image and identity and will make them benefit from other opportunities

H4: Perception of social responsibilities from the company will improve the brand image

H5: Sportspeople are influenced in their choices by the company's values and image

H6: Companies' growth results are linked to the athlete progress and image

Thus, next parts concerned the research onion approach (Saunders et al., 2011) through which different segments were analysed like the following ones in this chapter in order to highlight the relevance of the study.

3.2 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy a researcher decides to adopt contains assumptions and beliefs on how we view the world. Therefore, firstly, it could be argued that the athletes, consumers and companies points of view got from the qualitative interviews and focus-groups research design used in this study can be represented by the interpretive philosophy. This was highlighted by Saunders et al. who argued that this perspective is useful and totally appropriate when it comes 'to understand the world from humans' point of view'.

However, secondly others research on the perception and behavior of consumers and athletes through quantitative questionnaires approach were based on the positivism philosophy, in which the researcher interprets and generalize the data collected. And we assumed through the whole research study that those results were adaptable and generalizable to other populations because of the fact that each quantitative study was represented by a sample including large categories, looking for the equity between the male and female participants for example, etc.

Thirdly, the subjectivity perspective was used, following the interpretivist position. This approach explores the subjective meanings motivating the actions of social actors to help researchers understand those actions. Subjectivity was used for quantitative but also qualitative research, analyzing and interpreting the data to lead to findings.

Nevertheless, data has been interpreted by the researcher of this study, meaning that the conclusion might be quite subjective.

3.3 Research Approach

Two different research approaches exist: deductive (in which researcher tests theory thanks to generalization, concepts operationalized for quantitative measurement) and inductive (the researcher builds theory through a variety of data collection methods, using more qualitative data, understanding the way human build their world).

This research study used more qualitative data than quantitative; concerning the quantitative, the samples designs have been so small that we used a census approach. Therefore, the quantitative research is really not dominating this study. Thus, we affirm the use of the inductive approach in this research study.

A precision is made also on the research purposes used. The explanatory purpose was used there because of the link to quantitative questionnaires design and for most of the research objectives including the qualitative ones. The descriptive purpose has been used also but did concern just one research objective (the last one), linked to the qualitative focus-groups design. Both purposes are linked: descriptive study asks 'what' and then explanatory answers to the 'why'.

3.4 Research Strategy

This part of the research study aimed at planning how we were going to answer to the specific research objectives. The research methods we used in this study are different. Two of the existing research methods have been used, representing really different perspectives.

The quantitative part will be represented by surveys which belong to the objectivism, the positivism and longitudinal timeframe. According to that description, it seems necessary to remind the fact that the samples used for the questionnaires were in reality census due to the fact that the sample was small and representative enough of the targeted population. Thus, the census have been adapted and corresponded more to the subjectivity, interpretivist and cross-sectional timeframe options.

Concerning the qualitative part, it has been represented by interviews and focus-groups. Those methods represented the phenomenological research, using mostly unstructured methods of data collection.

The table regrouped the research objectives according to the strategies and methods:

Research objectives	Research strategies
1. Understand how sportspeople and companies choose to sponsor/be sponsored by each other	Quantitative (<i>questionnaires</i>) Qualitative (<i>interviews</i>)
2. Explore companies' perceptions of sport sponsorship in Loire-Atlantique	Qualitative (<i>interviews</i>)
3. Explore people' perceptions of sport sponsorship in Loire-Atlantique	Quantitative (<i>questionnaires</i>)
4. Have an outlook on how disabled athletes are perceived by people and companies	Qualitative (<i>interviews</i>)
5. Analyze the influence of sponsoring disabled athletes on consumer behavior in Loire-Atlantique	Qualitative (<i>focus-groups</i>)

Research strategy according to athletes' perspectives

Research objective 1

The first target we focused on was the athletes, disabled and non-disabled ones, from the T&F activity. Through the study, the aim was to understand their point of view about the sponsorship in general and about the behavior of companies in the LA region.

The first research objective did partly concern the athletes. Through a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended and closed questions, the aim was to know what they did acknowledge about the strategy itself and about what they would like to do if they were concerned about a sponsorship. (*Appendix #2 Athlete's questionnaire*)

The questionnaire was distributed to 50 participants, all divided and chosen according to some characteristics like age, gender, level in T&F, etc. The small sample was due to the fact of an easy access and availability of the participants.

The closed answers offered the participants the possibility to answer by 'yes' or 'no' and most of the time to justify with their own words. At the beginning of the questionnaire, questions were smaller and more closed; progressively, questions became open and required more reflection. The descriptive characteristics of each participant were asked at the end, once the contact was established and the willingness of the participants present.

Research objective 5

Another group of participants (all athletes) was asked to take part in a focus-group to answer to the research objective 5, seeking to examine the influence the sponsorship of disabled athletes could have on consumers (including athletes) and companies. (*Appendix # 4 Focus-groups*)

To answer to that research objective, the focus-group was composed by 7 athletes, which personal characteristics were different and well defined (both genders, all ages, etc.) in order to highlight the representativeness of the sample. The focus-group took 21 minutes. No recording mean has been used, that is why this research made the focus on what has been said only.

The focus-group is by definition an unstructured or semi-structured method, aiming at letting participants answer freely to a question, and deliberating with the other participants according to a given subject. Therefore, the questions asked were open; the researcher was there to mostly observe and note the arguments and ideas and to ask the questions when needed.

Research strategy according to consumers' perspectives

Research objective 3

As for the athletes, we made a second and last questionnaire for the consumers (participants chosen in the environment of the athletes we had access to). As for the first questionnaire, participants have been chosen according to some predefined characteristics which ensured the representativeness of the sample. (*Appendix # 1 Consumers' questionnaire*)

The sample was composed also about 50 people. Both questionnaires have been filled face-to-face with the researcher in order to be sure to receive the questionnaire back quickly and full.

Through this questionnaire, the research objective was to know and understand the point of view and the perception consumers did have on the sport sponsorship strategy with a point on the local sponsorship.

Like for the previous questionnaire, questions were at the beginning close-ended and progressively became open, allowing participants to write what they wanted and thought.

Research objective 5

Another group of participants was also asked to take part in a focus-group to answer to the research objective 5. The aim was the same than for the athletes' focus-group, that is to say examine the influence the sponsorship of disabled athletes could have on consumers and companies, but some questions were not asked the same way. (*Appendix # 4 Focus-groups*)

The focus-group was composed by 7 people, which personal characteristics were different (both genders, professions, etc.) in order to highlight the representativeness of the sample. The focus-group took 17 minutes. The means during the focus-group were the same than for the athletes. The questions asked were open and notes have been taken.

Research strategy according to companies' perspectives

Research objectives 1, 2 and 4

Concerning the companies, we decided to regroup the research objectives and to adopt just one research method which is the interview. In this interview, the research objectives 1, 2 and 4 are regrouped in three distinct parts, but naturally linked each other: each one is the continuation of the previous one (*Appendix #3 Companies' interviews process*)

The targets of those interviews were directors and communication managers from around 9 companies predefined and selected among the access and contacts we had. The representativeness of the sample of companies is another time respected as we asked different activities to participate, different sizes and turnover.

The first part of the interviews aimed at understanding on which criteria businesses chose to sponsor and who they target (according to values, image or director's preferences). The second part aimed at knowing the perceptions of the sport sponsorship by those managers, but also from the company point of view and expectations. The third and last part looked for understanding the perception of the disabled athletes by companies. Companies were asked how they would react facing disabled athletes or a sponsorship possibility of local and disabled athletes.

Interviews were chosen in order to avoid someone else to answer to the quantitative research. This way was also better to obtain in depth details and real explanations of the 'why' and 'how'. Thus, 9 companies were chosen; from those 9 companies, some stopped the interview before the second or third part because of the answers, showing they would not consider the possibility of sponsoring disabled athletes at all for different reasons.

The interviews took between 20 and 30 minutes according to the company. The place of the interviews was mostly at the offices of the participants; no recording mean was possible.

3.5 Research Choices

The proposed research study aimed to employ the mix-method, as for the purpose of gathering the data through quantitative and qualitative research methods. The mix-method is the most appropriate in this case because of the use of both methods, even if the qualitative is much more present due to the fact that it looks for understanding beliefs and behaviors. But the quantitative method was also needed in order to gain information and to build interpretations to answer the hypotheses and research objectives.

Thus, this method of data collection was the best in this case for assisting to answer the research questions.

3.6 Time Horizon

A cross-sectional study was used in the quantitative and qualitative parts of the research study. All the questionnaires, interviews and focus-groups collected information and data at one precise and preselected moment during the research study. Because of the lack of time and of physical and financial means, it was not possible through this study to process numerous times to the collection of data on different dates and periods in order to validate assumptions or to be sure that time or events do affect people behavior and perceptions. But through the results collected and analyzed, results would have been the same if the research had been remade several times. The only point on which assumptions could stay is the fact that a special event (sponsored event or sponsorship relation announcement within the LA region) might change the results and would have been interesting. Nevertheless, this would have been difficult to organize other studies based on a possible event, not programmed during the research study period.

3.7 Data Collection

The data collection method was different according to the research method used.

The quantitative data was concerned by the use of two questionnaires, answering to two research objectives and designed for two different targets. Both were interviewer-administered questionnaires, meaning that the researcher was present when the questionnaire when participants were filling in the questionnaire (face-to-face), contrary to the self-administered method, for which participants receive the questionnaires (internet, postal form). After getting all the questionnaires filled in, the answers have been manually analysed and given percentages in order to dress the

interpretations and conclusions; no use of a special coding scheme (would have been useful if the sample was bigger and answers more numerous). The variability of the answers also has been taken into consideration (with the minimum and maximum scores regrouped in tables).

The samples used were very small (50 participants) which corresponds to a census rather to a sample. This choice has been made thanks to the fact that researcher had a total access to the participants and because the easy and quick collection of the data was ensured. Both questionnaires have been pre-tested on another sample with the same characteristics.

A last point important to precise was the fact that for the analysis of the questionnaires, a division of the questions has been made, according to a theme. Thus, the questionnaire targeting athletes is divided in: the acknowledgment of athletes and the interest and potential in being sponsored (answering to the concerned research objective). The questionnaire targeting consumers is divided in three distinct parts: firstly the acknowledgement of participants, secondly the influence of sport sponsorship and thirdly the local side aspect.

Concerning the qualitative data, two means have been used: interviews and focus-groups.

First, the interviews answered to three research questions. The three objectives were linked, from the more general to the most in-depth question. One person/participant was met at a time, face-to-face and notes were taken.

Second, both focus-groups regrouped seven participants with different personal characteristics, and each focus-group answered to the unique and same last research objective, targeting two different targets.

3.8 Population and Sample

3.8.1 Quantitative sample

The population samples differed according to the methods used. The sample sizes should have been of hundreds for the minimum for the quantitative research, to get enough answers to analyse data. But again thanks to the access easy and quick access to participants, we created a census, which allowed us concentrating on a particular population: athletes and their access. We assumed that this census generalised the whole population.

We asked 50 persons and got 50 returns for each questionnaire. On the table 1 and 2 above are regrouped the demographic details and characteristics of each sample, illustrated thanks to percentages.

Table 1 Information on the quantitative sample – Questioning the athletes (R-O 1)

Variables	Answers categories & percentages
Gender	Males (56%); Females (44%)
Age-groups	15-20 years old (24%); 20-30 YO (32%); 30-40 YO (20%); 40 and plus (24%)
Discipline	Running (76%); Jump & Shot put (24%)
Level	Regional (62%); National (28%); European (6%); World (4%)
Disability	Disabled athletes (22%); Abled athletes (78%)

Table 2 Information on the quantitative sample – Questioning the consumers (R-O 3)

Variables	Answers categories & percentages
Gender	Males (52%); Females (48%)
Age-groups	15-20 years old (18%); 20-30 YO (34%); 30-40 YO (36%); 40 and plus (12%)
Professional activity	Students (29%); Civil Servant (18%); Executive Managers (21%); Worker (12%); Freelance (7%); Retirees (11%); Others: artists (2%)

The average duration to fill in a questionnaire was between 3-7 minutes (according to the answers, if they knew, they took more time to write examples and thoughts).

The first questionnaire targeting athletes was composed by 6 mains questions; some were composed by sub questions aimed at knowing why these answer, or asking an example. At the beginning of the questioning, questions are closed and possible answers to tick are already given. Progressively, questions become open-ended and asked participants to write their thoughts and feelings with their own words.

The second questionnaire targeting consumers is different; 9 questions are asked, most of them were composed by sub questions two, asking for precisions about the previous answer. The two first questions were more wide and were open questions contrary to the rest of the questions which were closed-ended questions to lead the reflection and benefit from instant answers, without asking one's deep vision about the subject contrary to the focus group made later in the study.

3.8.2 Qualitative Sample

Concerning now the qualitative research, we divided the interviews from the focus-groups. Thus, companies easily accepted to participate to the required interviews thanks to the access we had on the participants and the samples. 9 companies have been selected and chosen for their representativeness and availability (see **Table 3**). The characteristics of those companies were different according to their size or their domain of activity. Nevertheless the focus was still made on the LA region for accessibility reasons and because we think that, as businesses, that the results would be generalizable to other cities (with the same characteristics than LA region).

The interviews had to answer to three different but linked research objectives. Thus, the interview was divided in three distinct parts (in the paper, not during the interviews), each one answering to its own goals and issues.

Progressively during the process, some interviews were stopped due to the fact that their answers to the issues were totally negative, showing there could be no chance for them to consider the situations we gave to them. Thus, the following questions could not be answered.

Most of the interviews took between 14 and 18 minutes and were done at the firm's location.

Table 3 Information on the qualitative sample – Interviewing companies (R-O 1, 2 and 4)

Companies	Interviewees	Sizes and locations
1. Endurance Shop	Managing Director	Small-sized co. Nantes
2. BNP Paribas	Communication Manager	Medium-sized co. Nantes
3. Bannette	Managing Director	Small-sized co. Vertou
4. Ma commode dorée	Managing Director	Small-sized co. Nantes
5. Numéricable	Communication Dept employee	Big-sized co. Nantes
6. Carrefour City	Managing Director	Medium-sized co. Nantes
7. Société Générale	Agency's employee	Small-sized co. Nantes
8. Go Sport	Communication Manager	Medium-sized co. Nantes
9. Le Boost	Communication Manager	Medium-sized co. Nantes

The focus-groups were totally focused on the last research objective, targeting consumers and athletes. Two different focus-groups were prepared, composed by 7 participants for each one, plus the researcher at guide during the process.

Athletes have been selected thanks to the access we had to the athletic clubs of LA region and consumers were chosen from the entourage of those athletes. As for companies, all demographic differences were represented: males and females, young and less young, having a professional activity or not, etc. The important point there was to have a representative sample of the population. Thus, 7 was a good number: not too high to concentrate on the subject and let all participants speak freely and not too low in order to represent all kinds of demographic possibilities we needed.

From the beginning until the end of the focus-groups, questions were open-ended and required reflection; questions were not progressive according to the reflection. Nevertheless, questions were progressive in terms of the issue of the question: they began on wider subject like sport sponsorship, to finish with questions about the disabilities in sport and the behavior of companies.

The focus-groups took between 18 to 23 minutes.

Table 1 Information on the focus-group 1 sample - consumers

Demographic characteristics	Figures per participant (out of 7)
Gender	Males (4) ; Females (3)
Age-group	15-20 years old (1); 20-30 YO (2); 30-40 YO (2); 40 and plus YO (2)
Activity	Students (2); Retirees (1); Professional (3)
Practicing sport (in club)	Yes (2) ; no (5)

Table 2 Information on the focus-group 2 sample – athletes

Demographic characteristics	Figures per participant (out of 7)
Gender	Males (3) ; Females (4)
Age-group	15-20 years old (1); 20-30 YO (3); 30-40 YO (2); 40 and plus (1)
Discipline	Running (4) ; Jump (2) ; Put Shot (1)
Level	National (1); Regional (3); Local (3)
Disability	Yes (1); no (6)

3.9 Ethical Issues

To be and stay ethical during the process of collection of data, we informed participants of the purpose of the research and the nature of it, asked them if they agreed to participate, and if that was the case, to simply sign the questionnaire after they filled it, to prove they agree with the mentioned information, and to affirm they read the abstract of the questionnaires. Concerning the focus-groups, due to the presence of 7 participants, it has been mentioned face to face that the answers would not serve any other goal, just the research study. For the interviews of companies, if they had secret information, they just did not give it.

3.10 Limitations to the research

A lot of limitations can take place during a dissertation, from the development of the idea and the subject, until the analysis of the data collected. As far as this research study is concerned, the time left to do the dissertation was not an issue but an important aspect to keep in mind no avoid being late in the processes of the research methods, the data collection, etc. Because of the situation of the researcher, there was a need to juggle between the dissertation and the studies, which was very difficult in terms of time and concentration.

Another limitation was the resources. Because of limited financial resources, there was a need to change the research methods defined at the beginning, in order to choose methods that did not require personal investments.

The limitation in the material also had an importance. To be effective, researchers need to possess the appropriate material to get the dissertation done. The fact there was that there was no possible access to internet from home and that the computer broke down twice.

In a more professional context and directly linked to the dissertation, a limitation in terms of references touched the dissertation process. Indeed, according to the subjects, references varied from some references to a lot and there was a need to 'trier'. According to the research made on the literature review concerning the sport sponsorship of disabled athletes, and the focus on LA region, references and similar studies was inexistent. That explains and validates the fact that this research study is new and relevant, but difficult to base ideas on existing work and studies.

IV. Data analysis

Quantitative analysis of the athletes' sample

Generally speaking, according the results from this first questionnaire, athletes do not know a lot about sport sponsorship cases in LA region, even when that concerns their own athletic club (86% do not know the sponsors of the club), although it seemed they are interested in the fact that they could themselves be sponsored by a company (70%).

This first questionnaire (*Appendix # 1*) aimed at understanding how athletes choose to be sponsored by companies and on what criteria. Through the research, the analysis showed that there were no results allowing the study to assume or declare that there was a significant difference between the demographical characteristics (males/females or young and less young).

This questionnaire was thus divided in two themes: the acknowledgment and the interest/willingness.

Thus, all participants did acknowledge that their athletic club was benefiting from sponsors, but only 32% could remember and cite at least 1 sponsor.

Within those 16 athletes (32%), just 2 did not know what benefits their club was getting from the concerned sponsorship they previously cited. The other 14 athletes cited benefits we assembled by order of importance: ¹ clothes, ² events, ³ materials, ⁴ money, ⁵ food (*see Table 1 (a) and (b)*).

Table 1, (a) Responses related to the acknowledgement of the sponsorship

	No	Yes	Citations (X times)
1. Your current T&F club has sponsors	0 0%	50 100%	-
Do you know/remember (one of) them?	34 68%	16 32%	Assembled in the table 1(b) above
What types of sponsorships are concerned? : Clothes (21 citations), events (10), materials (7), money (2), food (1)			
2. Are you personally and currently sponsored by a company?	48 96%	2 4%	-
What is your contract duration?		5Y and more	
What benefits are offered to you? : Financial, Material, Clothes			

Table 1, (b) responses related to the acknowledgement of sponsorship in Nantes (decreasing order)

Citation times	Sponsor(s)	Domains of activity	Type of sponsorship
9	Endurance Shop	Sport retailer	Clothes, events*
5	Decathlon	Sport retailer	Material, clothes
4	Adidas	Sport retailer	Clothes
2	Go Sport	Sport retailer	Material
2	Realités	Estate Agency	Events, money
2	Super U	Food-processing industry	Clothes
1	Intermarché	Food-processing industry	Events, food
1	Mc Donald's	Fast food	Events
1	Intersport	Sport retailer	Clothes, events
1	Loca-Ponton	Transport	<i>Do not know</i>
1	TAN	Transport	<i>Do not know</i>
Total: 29 citations	11 sponsors	5 activities	5 types of benefits

*events= when the company is promoted during events thanks to billboards, flyers, etc.

As showed on this table, almost the half of the cited sponsors was sport retailers and has been more often cited than the others (21 times against 8). Events and clothes donations are the most known and the most used in sponsorship relations.

This result is explained by the fact that sport retailers are directly concerned by T&F area (Endurance Shop); and often specialized in T&F apparels. This result seemed evident, so it did not need proofs.

Most of the people would have say that money had to be better placed, that clubs and sponsees do receive money for their communication actions. Nevertheless, the T&F area was not in the past and still is not a sport that needs high financial resources. This is even more the case when we look at a small-sized geographical location.

Benefits in nature (material) are more appropriate to that sector and often used. The other kinds of sponsors previously cited are totally unique and rare; it becomes possible when/if an athlete works within an organization wishing to sponsor.

The 68% of athletes left did not know (7 people) the sponsors or did not remember (27 people). The lack of interest might be in cause because of the fact that they did not feel concerned.

An interpretation could be made according those first results about the acknowledgement of athletes about the sport sponsorship of their club and in their environment. The lack of

communication within a club could also explain why 68% of the participants were unable to give an example of sponsorship strategies. Lot of athletic clubs in the whole country (including LA region) are associations, directed by volunteers within the club. Thus, the communication strategies are not very effective, sometimes they do not exist.

More than not knowing the sponsors, 16 athletes out of 27 could not say what type of sponsorship was concerned at all. The 11 others answered: 1 events, 2 clothes, 3 materials.

Table 2, the 11 'did not remember' the names but did remember the types of sponsorships

Number of votes*	Sponsors	Types of sponsorship cited
7	?	Presence/participation in events
5	?	Clothes
2	?	Material

**Knowing that each participant could answer to more than only one option*

Within the 50 participants, only 2 athletes (4%) were currently sponsored.

- Athlete 1: female of 17 years old, currently the Young Olympic Champion for the 100m-hurdles (August 2014). Sponsored by Puma, she benefits from money and clothes. Their contract is signed for more than 5 years.
- Athlete 2: male (30-40years old) was currently sponsored by the firm employing him (TAN, local transport company) and receives money every year. He is physically disabled (not totally blind) and participated to the Paralympic Games in long jump.

None of the others participants with a lower level than the World one was at this moment, sponsored. The interpretation there could be that, to be sponsored, a local athlete needs to benefit from an international level. No matter the type of company sponsoring (Puma: international brand – TAN local company), the athlete needs to perform to vehicle a strong and good image. Going more in depth, that could mean also that all types of company of all sizes, with the condition that they have enough resources, are interested and have the possibilities to sponsor sportspeople.

	No	Yes
3. If you had the possibility, would you like to be sponsored?	0 0%	50 100%

4. For what reason(s) would you sign a sponsorship contract? : Financial, Material/equipment, Clothes, Transport		
5. If you had to be sponsored, does the domain of activity of the company influence your choice of the sponsor?	22 44%	28 56%
Which domains of activity would you choose rather than others? : Sports domain		

¹ clothes, ² material, ³ money, ⁴ public apparitions*, ⁵ transport*

**(Others' option: they could write whatever they wanted); possible to tick more than one*

Next part concerned the interests of the athletes about the sport sponsorship strategy. According to the results, 70% of the participants would be interested in being sponsored during their sport career.

Being sponsored means being performant (at least in people's beliefs). Some athletes could not consider this option because of their unwillingness to become better and had to work hard to keep the level. Being sponsored also means being engaged with a brand thanks to a contract, in which the criteria have to be agreed and respected. Within each contract of sport sponsorship, there must be well defined benefits and duties from each part. Those duties concern (for the athletes) usually the use of his/her image by the brand for the communication and marketing needs. The anonymity would not be guaranteed anymore. Nevertheless, reasons for signing a contract could be imagined: ¹ clothes, ² material, ³ money, ⁴ public apparitions*, ⁵ transport*.

Table 4, the interests of athletes in sponsorship

Number of votes – want to be sponsored (35 athletes)	Number of votes – do not want to be sponsored (15 athletes)	Type of benefits cited Total votes
28	7	Clothes (35)
19	3	Material (22)
15	5	Money (20)
3	0	Public apparitions* (3)
0	2	Transport* (2)

¹ clothes, ² material, ³ money, ⁴ public apparitions*, ⁵ transport*

**(Others' option: they could write whatever they wanted); possible to tick more than one*

Next question (5th) focused on the influence of the domain of activity of the sponsor on athletes. Following this question, the factors influencing participants were asked and regrouped.

56% did acknowledge being influenced by the activity of the firm but if athletes had the choice, they would all (100% of the participants) be more influenced or chose the sport activity.

Those 56% represented little more than half participants, which is a high score; if people could chose, due to the fact that they are athletes, they logically would prefer being sponsored by a company with which they have similar interests. But almost the half participants did not care about the activity; what generally interests more are the benefits athletes can get from a sponsorship relation; despite the evident interest in the sport activity and a high representativeness sponsor/sponsee if the sport domain was concerned, nothing proved that sport companies did offer more benefits or advantages to their sponsees than other firms.

Last question was focused on the factors differencing sponsors according to participants' interests. This open-ended question form allowed participants to write any factor they had in mind at this moment: ¹ image of the company, ² quality of its products/services, ³ size, ⁴ social responsibilities (The illustration is available in the appendices, *Figure 1*).

Sample characteristics have been detailed earlier in a table, and illustrated on the appendixes, *Figure 2*.

At seeing the sample of this first questionnaire, we noticed that all age-groups, levels and disciplines were concerned. No major differences have been seen between a young runner and an older jumper for example, in terms of potential to be sponsored by companies and in terms of the interest sport sponsorship represent to them. Visions of the strategy are globally similar, excepting when questions were focused on their personal behavior.

(Levels repartition was illustrated on the appendixes (*Figure 3*). The disabled participants were also regrouped in the appendixes (*Figure 4*)).

Quantitative analysis of the consumers' sample

Through this questionnaire targeting consumers, we got the results that generally speaking, sport sponsorship is the most known sponsorship strategy (been cited by every participant), the examples given represented well-known events/sportspeople and famous and big-sized brands.

The aim of this questionnaire within the study was to know and to understand how consumers from different horizons, with different demographic characteristics do perceive sport sponsorship in general. By going more in-depth, the study looked also for knowing how those consumers behave when facing sport sponsorship actions.

The questionnaire has been divided in small parts, one different from the other in order to study first, the acknowledgement of consumers about this strategy, second the influence of sport sponsorship on consumers but also on companies, thirdly and finally, the local side of sport sponsorship and its potential according to those consumers.

The acknowledgement part

<p>1. What type(s) of sponsorship do you know? : Sport sponsorship (50), Institutional sponsorship (19), Cultural sponsorship (13)</p>
<p>2. What old or existing sponsorship do you know? : Radio channels with local or national events (9)</p>
<p>3. What existing <u>sport</u> sponsorship do you know? : Rolex / Wimbledon – Roland Garros (38), Puma / Usain Bolt (34), EDF / London Olympic Games (28), Adidas / Football French Team (13), Michelin / Renaud Lavillenie (9)</p>

At seeing at the table above, sport sponsorship has been cited by each participant, far ahead from the two other sponsorship domains. When it came to the old or existing sponsorships, a large part of the participants did not have any example in mind; just 9 consumers answered Radio as sponsor of local and national events. But for the following question, participants seemed to know more things about the sport sponsorship, thus we assumed they were more interested or more informed. Moreover, the examples cited did concern very famous athletes or brands, including teams and individual athletes. Being more informed would have meant that companies do spend more in sport sponsorship communication or that consumers had a bigger interest towards sport than other domains. That could be interpreted due to the fact that those participants, most of them came from the entourage of the athletes' sample; thus, most of them were familiar with sports.

The influence of sport sponsorship

	No	Yes
<p>4. Do you think, as a consumer, being influenced by existing sponsorships?</p>	38	12
<p>How does sponsorship influence you? : Image of the brand through the advertising (12), Image of the brand through its reputation (10), Quality of the products and services (7), Values of the brand (2)</p>		
<p>9. To your mind, would the sponsoring of disabled athletes change somehow the benefits of the company?</p>	0 0%	50 100%
<p>For what reasons? : The influence of the image on companies</p>		

**Each participant had the possibility to tick more than one option (12 participants there, thinking they can be influenced)*

The small number of persons believing they were influenced by sponsorship strategies did surprise (12 out of 50). Indeed, directly or indirectly, as people and consumers, we all are sensible to communication and marketing strategies, but also according to the company and its values. Even if this influence does not extend until the purchase decision, people usually are influenced in a way that they would prefer this company thanks to the values it represent, or the fact that the athlete sponsored by this firm is a performant one, or a nice one. The interest in athletes and in sport influences the image and the feelings we have about the company sponsoring this athlete, because we link both together. We assumed there that most of the participants did not acknowledge the fact that they were sometimes influenced, and if they did, most of them did not want to confess that. It is assumed that people want to buy products because they decided of it, and not because brands decided for them.

This influence appeared the most when it came to talk about the image (the communication of the brand image and the brand image itself). Indeed, the strategy linked to the communication of the brand image exists to persuade consumers to choose the company and to buy its products. The image of the company itself depends more about the behavior of the company in general, and what people think about it.

The fourth place of the values surprised; nevertheless, even if this is not the first factor influencing people, they do look for values and social responsibility. This would be a plus for a company, helping the brand differentiating itself from the competition.

The results from the question about the sponsorship of disabled athletes were totally positive: all the participants agreed saying that this would be good and an advantage for the brand in terms of image.

The local side part

The local side is important in this study because it is focused on the LA region, looking for answers about the behavior and the beliefs of consumers, athletes and companies within this region. Thus, participants were asked to give examples of sponsorships in this region. Results were easy to give: none of them could give an example of sponsor/sponsee within the LA region, although they could when it came to speak about sport sponsorship (listed in the table under).

According to the results for this third part, most of the participants said that companies should sponsor more than what they do currently. The numbers are evident and significant: companies have to use this strategy to communicate to consumers; they do want this and could be the first loyal and engaged consumers thanks to this strategy.

	No	Yes
5. Do you know any kind of sponsorship cases on the LA region? (including sport sponsorship)	16 32%	34 68%
How did you heard about it/them? : Word of mouth, events Examples: Endurance Shop /NEC, Réalités/NMA, Mizuno/ASPTT, Intermarché/ALPAC		
6. Do you think companies in Nantes should more sponsor?	2 4%	48 96%
For what reasons? : interesting strategy, do not know a lot so might be something more to do		
7. Do you think companies in Nantes should sponsor more local?	9 4,5%	41 95,5%
For what reasons? : ROI (37), Image/reputation (35), Stakeholders (21), Competition (18)		
8. Concerning the sport sponsorship, do you think companies should consider sponsoring directly athletes rather than clubs?	13 26%	37 74%
For what reasons? : plus for the image of the company, human oriented and social responsibility		
9. Would the sponsoring of disabled sportspeople change somehow the benefits of the company?	0 0%	50 100%
For what reasons? : change of the image, which then might impact other corporate objectives		

Sponsoring local athletes for the minority of participants did not represent real advantages for both parts: the company would not benefit from the athlete due to the fact that he/she is not famous. Risks are the same, so are the prices. The other talked about a win-win relation. They gave some reasons, including the Return on Investment (ROI) factor at the first place, followed closely by the Image. They agreed that sponsoring local would be beneficial for both sponsees and companies. The benefits and reasons were linked: if the image were improved, that would influence the stakeholders. All this process would lead the company to differentiate itself from the competition.

A larger part of the participants would recommend companies to sponsor individual athletes: were highlighted the close relation between both parts and their image. The other participants denounced the fact that companies would take risks in sponsoring one non-famous sportspeople, rather than clubs or teams which are more known and followed during events (interpretation that could explain the statements). But that would not mean that companies would stop sponsoring

entities too. The consideration there was just for companies to increase the number of sponsorships without forgetting the demand of athletes.

Last question was focused on the sponsorship of disabled athletes and the benefits companies could get from this sponsorship. 100% of the participants thought this was a good idea and advantage for the company, saying that the image would be impacted. Thanks to the image of the social responsibility and engagement of the company, other benefits would come after the sponsorship relation. None study has never proved that being social oriented had a negative impact on the company.

Qualitative analysis of the companies' sample

To facilitate the analysis and comprehension of the results, it has been decided, thanks to the small sample of companies that we were going to sum-up the interviews of each company at a time. Thus, interviews were divided according to the company, but also in three distinct parts representing the three research objectives to which they answered to.

The details about the sample have been given earlier, (page). We referred then to this table and to the series of questions placed in the appendixes.

1. Endurance Shop

After the small presentation of its organization and place within it, the interviewee answered to the first question asking, what were the communication and marketing objectives of the company. Brand awareness, promotion of the products and the increase of the purchase decision were the three objectives cited, in this same order. Then, the interviewee explained, first of all there was a need to make the brand known by consumers, then make them know the products, to finally buy them.

Is the sponsorship strategy a viable strategy? The interviewee did not hesitate at all by saying that whatever the domain of activity or the objectives, a plus would be to adopt this strategy. Then it needs to be adapted. But to do that, a company needs to have resources. That is why by building a sponsorship relation, there has to be a win-win relation. This company was sponsoring athletes from the region. The interviewee added that it was easy for them to sponsor local athletes due to the fact that the company was focusing on the sports articles; the interest and the benefits for

both were not to prove. This company was the only one which already sponsored local athletes, and would continue in the years to come, totally convinced by this strategy and its advantages.

But how did this company choose with whom to build a sponsorship relation and on what factors? Values of the sponsee, the personality and his/her image in the sport area were the factors to choose an athlete to sponsor. Because the athlete did represent the company, the firm was going to be sure about the representativeness of the athlete and be sure his/her image is not associated to bad information. By personality, the interviewee meant how the sponsee behave during games in front of the public.

This part concerned the second research objective. The question asked to the interviewee was if the sponsorship contracts the company built already gave some results and what types. The impact on the sales for this company increased since its creation (at medium term). Nothing changed about the image, they always benefit from the same image according to the interviewee. Actually, he did not see any changes somewhere else like the purchase decision for example or on social networks. Some customers also came saying they heard about... word of mouth has always been a plus for companies.

A question then looked for personal feelings and visions about the sponsorship strategy and its efficiency. This strategy is seen like a plus from the company, explaining that communication strategies are often expensive and hard to evaluate the results. The sponsorship strategy is the best mean the company found until now and the results positively answered to the expectations. But the work behind of choosing the right sponsee was huge. If none similarities exist between sponsor and sponsee, the relation might be 'chaotic'.

This third and last part concerned the link of sponsorship with disabled athletes. The first question of aimed at knowing what the interviewees thought about the sponsorship of disabled athletes. The answer was given very quickly, saying that there were potential sponsoring disabled athletes in the region for companies like this one. The unique potential negative point was for this interviewee the fact that sponsoring disabled athletes could not confirm an increase of the sales or the turnover. A positive final result was represented by this answer. Thus, the relation was seen like positive when some conditions are regrouped like the level of the athlete, its good image, the kind of discipline and disability. Those aspects did play a role according this interviewee in the interest companies had towards them. The issue there was that despite the obvious interest of those companies about the sport sponsorship strategies of disabled athletes, some of them would not or never engage themselves in such contracts. According to this interviewee, the first thing seen

through the athlete was the occasion to reach the high goals and benefit from a positive image and engagement. Thanks to the previous sport sponsorship contracts built between Endurance Shop and local athletes, benefits proved the efficiency of those relations and gave to the company the expected returns on investment.

2. BNP Paribas

The interview started like the previous one and like the following ones with a small presentation of the company by the interviewee. Then, the first question asked was looking for the communication and marketing objectives of the company. Because this company was an agency, present all over the country and dependent from headquarters, the goals are those of all the agencies in France. The interviewee cited then the promotion of the products and services (as it is a banking company), increase the loyalty of the customers and the brand awareness. Due to the fact that this company is well-known all over the country, the objectives are not the same that the other companies interviewed, and not placed in the same order of importance. Thus, they are known and what was important for them was the differentiation from the competition thanks to the promotion of products for example.

The sponsorship strategy was seen like a positive and advantageous strategy for the company that could be adapted to each objective. The interviewee went further saying that they did already built sponsorship contracts for some local events but the brand itself sponsored also big sport teams in France. Then, at a local scale, the sponsorship contracts were still established by the headquarters and required less investments due to the fact that the city is smaller and thus the resources too. The interviewee said then that the strategy was viable and that was the reason why they still use it. So, the focus on sponsorship in Nantes has been made, they did sponsor locally, but never individual athletes.

Next question was hard to answer because of the fact that the decisions are not taken in this agency; thus, answers could be imagined because the interviewee did know how it worked but could not be sure 100%. According to him, the choice of sponsoring or not an event or team was based on the values represented by the event, the image of that event or team and its performance when it concerned teams. This same order has been given during the interview.

Because again of the impossibility to reach the appropriate documents to inform us, the following answer was an estimation. The impact of the sponsorship strategies could visibly be seen on the sales (number of customers signing in this bank). Thus, at a local scale it has been noticed that more customers were signing during a promotional period of a sponsorship. The interviewee assumed then that if that was local, that could be national and would explain that they kept this strategy. According to him, the company will still adopt this strategy and build new sponsorship contracts in the next future, but he is not really sure about a real efficiency of that strategy. He explained that the banking sector has no real similarities with sports, even if results seemed to prove that the strategy still worked. But sponsoring an individual athlete would be different to him, and impossible to justify in terms of similarities and common values, saying that consumers would be tired of this promotional activity. But this strategy represented a positive point in the fact that it has engaged employees within the organization, and that helped the efficiency at work.

Sponsoring local seemed to stay logical for this interviewee; its company already does. But again concerning athletes, this would seem exaggerated and risked. But he mentioned then that if he was the one to choose, he probably would try once, and take precautions about the choice of the sponsee, to be sure for the strategy to work. The financial issue was not seen as an issue there.

Last part of the interview asked first the feelings and thoughts about sponsoring disabled athletes. Again, when we talked about athletes, the answers were mostly negative there. But talking about sponsoring disabilities in sports seemed to interest more the interviewee. Indeed, the social responsibility would be seen and that would represent the values of the company, which would then differentiate it from the competition. The potential was real and interesting. The point also about the engagement of employees in the company was highlighted, saying that they might feel better and more engaged in a company that is itself engaged in social responsibility.

But the work on the contract and the choice of the athlete/team was really important to him, saying that because of the size and image of the company, no risks and no negative information could be allowed.

3. Numéricable

This company is a national one, present in all medium- and big-cities in France. They offer internet and mobiles accesses all over the country. Thus, this company was not able to give the objectives because of the fact that they were national company: not allowed to give details. After some explanations and orientations of the interviewee, the assumption was made that even if sometimes some objectives were more adapted for some rather than others, there were objectives

needed by all types of companies. For this kind of activity and by looking at the current market place, we assumed that this company had the increase of the brand awareness as objective, then the promotion of its products and lastly the loyalty of its members. Thus, the question about the efficiency of this strategy concerning this company was not to prove anymore.

The sponsorship strategy is a viable one according to the interviewee. This was even more the case for this company, which already used this strategy, including in sport by sponsoring national teams. The good of this strategy according to the interviewee was that the company had the required financial resources to develop strategies like this one. Thanks to the size and the image of this company, returns on investments did exist (could not give more details), that was the reason why they currently continue to sponsor sport teams. Thus, an assumption was made again on the fact that impact on sales must have been detected. Nevertheless, the company never sponsored a local team. The decisions are made in Paris, for the agencies all over the country. No decision could be made at a local scale because that would differentiate this agency from the others. That is not the objective.

A lot of factors for choosing the team/event have been cited. The values of the team or sport, the image and personality of the team or event have been highlighted as being very important to ensure a positive relation and linkage to that sponsee. Lastly, the performance has been mentioned. If the company did sponsor national teams, that was not only because of the size and organization of it, but also because national teams benefited from a certain level of performance, and therefore the sponsorship is less risky.

Sponsoring disabled athletes was seen like being positive for the company thanks to the social image shown to the public and its benefits concerning the awareness and engagement of companies in this social action but also the engagement of consumers and employees within the firm. But there might be also negative effects like the fact that people would always criticize, saying the company just wanted to benefits from the disability of the athlete to succeed. The relation between sponsor and sponsee might be seen like being disadvantageous for the sponsee because of the power and the non-equity of the company towards the sponsee. The interviewee added, that due to their size and turnover, they could be very easily criticized and that the expectation of positive information could rapidly turn into bad information.

Despite the acknowledgement of the good sides of this strategy, the interviewee did think that this strategy was beneficial for its company because they were focusing only on famous sport teams and that this was sufficient. Even if it could have been considered to develop the strategy and

make it evolve somehow, the headquarters would have to think a lot before taking a decision, the time to count and state the pros and cons.

4. Go Sport

This company is well known all over the country, and exists in some big cities, like Nantes (LA region) and sells sport apparels. Thus, each shop had the power to choose its communication strategy, but had to be approved by the headquarters.

Thus, communication and marketing objectives were the same between all the shops in France, but the means to reach them could be adapted. The one we interviewed has the increase of the brand awareness, the promotion of its products and the increase of the purchases in main objectives. Because of a hard competition on the market place (physical and on the web), they had to find other solutions to succeed rather than continually decrease the prices. The company already sponsored sport events in the region, and always stayed in this geographical area to still benefit from similarities. But the company never sponsored an individual athlete.

The interviewee said, that they could do that, but that sounded a little risky due to the choice of the athlete. They would focus on the values, the personality and the image. The performance is also important; they would not sponsor only performant athletes, but would not sponsor athletes that were not fully engaged in T&F. Thus, similarities would have to be found and the representativeness of the athlete ensured in order to avoid bad information or none information at all. But the idea seemed to interest the interviewee because that would differentiate the company from the competition, which generally did not sponsor like that.

Until now, the sponsorship contracts established with club and events did not give a lot of returns. The unique return was a better image, seen on social networks thanks to comments and notes. But the purchase intention has not be really proved, due to the fact that it was difficult for them to differentiate what has been done thanks to this sponsorship. We could assume that the efficiency of the strategy was not total, nevertheless, the interviewee precised that changes and adaptations had to be made. That was the reason why the interviewee thought that sponsorship individual and local athletes could be a solution.

Sponsoring local athletes would be what the company would consider in the years to come; indeed, if the athlete is a local one, chances are numerous to see his/her level lower than the

European one. From the national level and under, athletes stay at a local scale; their demands and needs are not that high comparing to international athletes. Therefore, the company would not risk much by supporting the athlete without any kind of results. The image also of the athlete and the image of the relation sponsor/sponsee would be easier for the company to control, to avoid bad information.

Concerning the sponsorship of disabled athletes, the interviewee did think that this could be a positive manner to be seen by the public and to be preferred. This would show the engagement of the company and its social responsibility. Moreover, this would help the company trying to get new customers (possible from new segments) and to show the human side of the company but also of the sport domain. Sponsoring disabled athletes is seen like a positive thing, manner to reach the corporate objectives, it helps also developing new ones that might support the others, and help by the way disabled athletes in need of material, of advertising and others. The interviewee was ready to give a chance to the sponsorship activity of disabled and local athletes.

5. Société Générale

This banking company is well-known and located all over the country. The agency we interviewed is a small-sized agency. All the French agencies do depend on the headquarters, thus an agency cannot decide for itself and all demand has to go to this headquarters first. Thus, the interviewee told that the objectives of the agency were to increase the brand awareness, to increase the promotion of the products and services and to have more customers. This seemed logical because of the competitive market place, and the fact that people today are less loyal toward brands than in the past. Therefore, by promoting the services, the agency hoped retaining its customers.

The whole company and some agencies like this one did use the sponsorship strategy for some events or to support teams. But those events were big and famous, offering the company an important visibility, like the support of national teams. No individual athlete has ever been sponsored by this agency, or by the whole company. The sponsorship strategy in itself is recognized by the interviewee as being viable and efficient, due to the fact that the company used it a lot and that the results always proved its efficiency (increase of the number of customers). This strategy made its proofs also thanks to the communication Department that always did look very carefully at the values, the personality and the image of the events/teams. This was very important to them to be sure that the sponsee fully corresponds to the sponsor in order to be represented adequately. They will thus continue to use it in the newt future.

According to the sponsorship of local athletes, this might be more complicated due to the fact that the one taking the decisions of this kind is the headquarters. They could still give ideas, but the existing and past sponsorships always included all the agencies, that is to say that each one was promoting the same things, the same sponsorship and was giving the same image. Thus, this might be not possible for the sponsor to accept that the agency does whatever it wants. Nevertheless, the whole company could maybe be interested. In that context, the interviewee said that they could probably adapt their communication strategy, if they are ensured of the returns. But if the whole company offers a sponsorship contract to a local athlete, then that would mean that the athlete would need to possess a good level and benefit from a good image, and be appreciated by the local public. If those conditions were not respected, then the image of the company would probably be impacted by bad information and the use of this strategy might be forgotten.

Concerning the sponsorship of disabled athletes, the answers are quite similar than for local athletes; that is to say that the company had no objection of sponsoring disabilities, but this would be again the fact that they would sponsor locally and just one individual rather than a team. But the disability factor is seen like another benefit of the sponsorship, showing the humanity and the social side of the company; the interview added that it was hard to communicate a positive image and be close to consumers when the company has a banking activity. Thus, disabled athletes could be a plus to face the competition and improve their image.

6. Carrefour City

This company is a big-sized one and is present all over the country and even in the international context. Thus, we would talk about franchises in France, including in the LA territory. The franchisee there was a small-sized franchise (from the food industry sector). The objective then, even if the brand has its own restrictions and corporate goals, each franchise did function differently, according to the managers. Thus, this franchise we interviewed had the objectives of increasing the brand awareness, increase the purchase decision and the loyalty of consumers. The brand awareness always needs to be taken into consideration if companies do want the other goals to be reached. Due to the activity of the company, that could seem normal to set the objective of increasing the purchase decision. Then, the loyalty choice is explained because the competition on the market is very hard, and that thanks to loyalty cards and reductions, consumers could prefer staying loyal and then would be engaged with the brand. That would finally lead to more purchases or more customers.

This company (franchise) has never been engaged with sponsees of any form (entity, team, athlete, etc), contrary to the brand itself which is seen as supporter of the national teams of some sports. The answer of the interviewee was that it could be a good idea to consider sponsorships relations. The idea of building a relation sponsor/sponsee and benefiting one from the other sounded good to the interviewee. The participant also said that she really think this strategy is viable, due to the fact that they know the results of the headquarters after the promotional plans and before. The comparison is not always clearly visible at short-term, but is at medium and long-term. Thus, even if this franchise has never sponsored before, she would consider this strategy in the years to come, in order to increase the brand awareness and the purchases. This strategy had simply not be acknowledged and thought by the company; no financial issue or other kind of limitation did impact this choice.

The factors on which the interviewee would base its choice of sponsoring an athlete rather than another are firstly, the values represented by the sponsee, that had to be in accordance with the values of the sponsor; secondly the image of the sponsee, he/she would have to give good impressions and a good image, or the sponsor would be directly impacted. Then, the win-win relation would have to be ensured; that is to say that both sponsor and sponsee would have to gain some benefits, and give the accepted and negotiated parameters in return (like time, or availability). She added that the human factor had to be the one showed to the public.

Because no sponsorship strategy has never been developed, the company cannot give the possible returns of the strategy. Thus, the company could not really answer to the following question on the efficiency of this strategy either. But, at seeing the headquarters results, the interviewee said believing in the potential of this strategy.

Next question asked about sponsoring local athletes. Question or not, the company did want to consider the sponsorship strategy, but it would always concern local athletes. Due to their size and their location, sponsoring an athlete not from the region (even if the level was high), would not even be good and efficient for Carrefour City. That would show the engagement of the company, representing a plus.

Finally, concerning the disabled athletes, the interviewee said that this sponsorship could be positively seen by the public and the stakeholders, thanks to the social responsibility of the company and its support. They would not personally focus only on disabled athletes, but would consider this idea, because it is different from what exists on the market and that would be positive for their own communication. But the focus on local and disabled would have to be ensured, in order to show the

engagement of the company in the region and to have similarities with the sponsee. Needs and wants would have to be discussed in order to give the best to the sponsee, and not thinking that sponsoring a disabled athlete is done, wait now and see the results.

7. Commode Dorée

This company never used this strategy before due to the fact that it was new on the market (less than one year) and that the financial resources were lacking. But it recognized the benefits of this strategy and seemed interested to use it once the resources increase. Thus, the answer to next question was positive; once the total implementation on the market done and finances entered, this company will consider the building of sponsorship relations linked to the sector of activity of the firm.

Sponsoring disabled athletes would always be seen like a plus due to the social action and responsibility that represent. Nevertheless, the interviewee talked about the need of resources and to be patient concerning the potential returns on investment. Due to the financial issues of this company and its recent creation, the investments issues were to be considered. The returns on investments cannot always be ensured by the sponsorship relation, and that constitutes a problem when this concerns a small-sized company.

8. Le Boost

Firstly, the study looked for knowing the communication and marketing objectives of this small-sized company. The brand awareness is the unique objective of this company. Indeed, the interviewee explained that the company was small (around 3 full-time workers and then in average 10 temporary workers linked to the company with a contract renewable each weekend). Moreover, because this is a small-sized company and due to the activity of this one, the turnover of the company is quite low comparing to other small businesses. Thus, the important objective for them is to be known by the public in order to be invited in more clubs and bars, to take more pictures and thus to be more demanded by the public. But there would be no sales or promotion of a product; they do not sell anything.

The activity of this company (offering services by taking pictures in night clubs and bars and then publishing them on their website) was not really the kind that would sponsor. If they were going to sponsor someone or an event, that would be directly linked to the artistic activity but not sport. Despite the fact that the sponsorship strategy has been recognized as being viable, interesting and

adaptable, the issue there lied mostly in the turnover of the company, because excepting brand awareness, almost no other return on investment could be noticed.

Thus, despite this interest, no sponsorship activity has been developed in the past, and probably no one would be created in the next future. The interview stopped at this stage because of the unwillingness and impossibility to consider building a sponsorship relation due to their lack of resources, size and activity.

9. Bannette

This company is a small one, preparing and selling bread and pastries, located not far from Nantes (the bigger city in the LA region). The objectives concerning the communication and marketing strategy were first to increase the purchase intention, by promoting the products and developing the brand awareness. The objectives are numerous and the interviewee answered that the sponsorship strategy, to his mind was viable and made its proofs. He added that a company like this one could afford this kind of strategy due to the fact that the turnover is important.

But the interviewee said the company never sponsored anyone or any event, not for financial reasons, but more because of, despite the acknowledgment of the benefits, the activity of the company. According to him, the sponsee has to be chosen according personal values and the image it vehicles. But the existing sponsorships he acknowledged were totally, to his mind not adapted to this kind of activity. Risks were too high, and he would prefer wait seeing if another competitor would adopt this strategy before risking himself. The choice of the sponsee had to be directly linked to the company and similarities had to be evident; by looking at the existing sponsorships he knew, none could be adapted to his company. Thus, the interview was stopped at this stage because of the unwillingness and impossibility to consider building a sponsorship relation due to the sector of activity (pastries); indeed, despite its positive vision of the sponsorship strategy, the interviewee could not consider taking a risk without being sure of a direct and positive impact on the sales.

Generally speaking, a sum-up can be done on those interviews: despite all the differences between those interviewees, all of the present companies did have almost the same corporate objective (brand awareness, purchase intention and loyalty). Some had already experienced this

strategy and would like to build contracts again, contrary to some which never used it and due to some characteristics (size, turnover), could not consider this in the years to come.

Almost all the companies that did use the strategy could not measure very well the returns: the increase of the purchases was not guaranteed; but the better image and the indirect communication were functioning. Those firms affirmed they would like to build other sponsorship contracts and that sponsoring local and disabled athletes would be a plus for the company. But to benefit from it, a lot of work needs to be expected by firms, in order to avoid losing more money and from its image than gaining from this strategy.

Qualitative analysis of the focus-groups

It has been decided to answer to the last and fifth research objective through the focus-group method, one focus-group with athletes, and the other with simple consumers. A small presentation of the reason why we asked participants to come has been given; by the way, it has been ensured that the answers would not be recorded and that they will keep a total anonymity.

Focus-group 1: Consumers

Firstly, the aim was to know the factors that led consumers to purchase. Due to the representativeness of the sample to the population of LA region, answers are really different. The factors have been classified by order (most cited first) in the table above:

Number of citations*	Factors influencing the purchase decision
5	Quality
4	Price
2	Brand
1	Services
1	Technical advantages
1	Image
1	Simplicity of use

To answer to that question, it was needed to precise that this did not concern the food industry at all. Thus, the answers are different, and some have been cited by others, because they heard that before or because they really thought being influenced like that. The illustration of this table is available in the appendixes.

The purchase decision comes from a particular need or a simple desire, but is often influenced by some characteristics of the product. It was assumed that the quality and price would be the two first to be cited and agreed by most of the participants.

This question aimed to know if the image and the brand would influence consumers or not, in order to link the answers to companies' interviews, which wanted adopt a sponsorship strategy and communicate on it, to benefit from a better image. Image is really not what consumers do look to decide to buy or not. Brand is a better placed characteristic, meaning that if a company had to build a sponsorship strategy, it would have to communicate on it and to make it become the values and the identity of the firm.

Due to the different demographic profiles of the participants, we assumed that some factors did influence more a certain profile than others.

Next question thus did concern the purchase of specific products like sports apparel and if they were somehow influenced by sportspeople promoting those products. Just two participants did answer that they were influenced. But was could explain this low result could be the fact that among those seven participants, all probably did not practice any sport, or not enough to buy specific apparels. Thus, how could they be influenced if they were not interested in the product? This was the first element of answer. The second was, after asking for more explanations, that the two consumers being influenced did mention that they were practicing but not a lot, which was the reason why they did not really know what to purchase. Thus, they accepted being influenced by the sponsorships strategies and ambassadors of the brands. If they decided to trust a sportsperson due to the appreciation of him/her or to the performance, then the consumer transfers the image of the sportspeople to the brand itself and thus to the products. Participants could not believe that brands would associate themselves to people, offering products you cannot trust.

Those non-influenced people said that they could be influenced because they know how companies function nowadays and that this is just a question of advertising. They do not want to spend because brands push them to. They still wanted to believe that they could buy just because they decided that and not because they might be influenced. Thus, they ask information when needed, to know each characteristics of the products, and do not look at the image of the ambassador.

In order to get more reflective answers, a situational question was asked to participants, asking them if someone they know appreciate was going to be sponsored, do they think they would be somehow influenced. By answering to the question, it has been noticed that more than two participants agreed saying they would certainly be influenced. Thus, we assumed that the influence and the impact is bigger when the sponsee is known, recognized and appreciated; this means that the athlete has to be known, thus be performant enough. So companies could easily sponsor athletes, by choosing them thanks to appropriate criteria, in order to affect consumers.

All participants said they would be influenced but at a certain degree. Some would be influenced according the image they had about the company, others according their loyalty, etc. This sponsorship would not push them to purchase more than usual, but to make choices differently, basing their choices on other factors as usual like the values, rather than the product or price. Other participants said that might happen if they really like the sponsees. Thus, this might also happen with a local athlete.

Then the question was about how they would react towards a company sponsoring local athletes. Firstly, they all agreed together, saying that they would be positively surprised if they could see more cases of sport sponsorship of local athletes. Some of them evoked the fact that a lot of companies today (most of them are local ones) give more importance nowadays to local suppliers for example, or more generally, local stakeholders. They like the fact that companies give work to small local ones and allow them to gain money. Because of a high competition in a hard economic context (with the crisis), a lot of local and small companies do have to file for bankruptcy because they cannot compete big firms and do not gain enough money to make profits. The fact that companies do prefer working with local companies and local workers is a plus, for the firm because they are engaged in the local economy and that it builds a good image. They can communicate about their engagement and values, and that might influence consumers different ways. Thus, the idea there was that people would like to see companies (local or not) sponsor local athletes, because that would prove their real interest in the human, in the competition and sport's values. By sponsoring a local athlete, the company can communicate on its values, can benefit from a better image and reputation and can also find easier stakeholders because when you are locally oriented, there is like a local network. The fact that companies could sponsor local athletes would probably not make them buy more. But, according to their answers, they said they would appreciate the brand, they would speak about it in good terms and make it benefit from a positive word of mouth and indirect communication. The image of the firm to consumers and stakeholders will be positively modified, building loyalty and engagement.

This question highlighted well the hypotheses we made earlier in the research study and showed the real benefits of the sponsorship strategy of local athletes.

When it came to talk about disabilities, participants did not react the same way. For 3 out of 7 participants, the disability of the athlete might not make the company benefit from its communication strategy.

Therefore, according to what has been said during the discussion, some participants mentioned that it was a bad idea, from a company point of view to want to communicate about the sponsorship of a disabled athlete: they would use the disability to make profits. Excepting for companies from the social activity, they did believe that all companies could act this way. And despite a possible willingness to act like they should do, some companies would have to confront the assumptions of some consumers. Those points of view were understandable because companies do use nowadays a lot of different communication and marketing strategies in order to gain money. Ethical issues are not always the priorities. Moreover, they did have the example of O.Pistorius in mind, the example of a sport sponsorship of a disabled athlete, a contract that Nike had to cancel due to negative information.

The other participants did understand the point of view but none agreed: the fact a company was sponsoring a local and disabled athlete was showing its values and humanity rather than showing the profit orientation. They also talked about the fact that just few companies did sponsor disabled athletes, almost none in LA to their opinion, established a sponsorship contract with a local disabled athlete. The example of Oscar Pistorius is not adapted to the local aspect, but the characteristics were similar. The public did not see the profit-making of the company or of the athlete, they just (again, to their opinion) felt that disabled athlete were more recognized than in the past, that they were considered as being equal to other non-disabled athlete and that this is totally human and positive to think like that. The acceptance of disabled people in our society is not total and perfect, that is why this would make the things change progressively. And even if we can have suspicions about the real interests of companies, we cannot deny that what is really important for both sponsor and sponsee is to gain something from each other.

Focus-group: Athletes

After welcoming and introducing the subject, the focus-group began. The first question did concern the purchase habits, and the factors making them purchase, more especially sports apparel. Answers have been listed in the table.

After welcoming and introducing the subject, the focus-group began. The first question did concern the purchase habits, and the factors making them purchase, more especially sports apparel. Answers have been listed in the table. For this sample, the quality stayed the first factor which influences athlete’s purchase decision; that was even more the case they say, when it comes to buy sports apparel. Because they did run a lot, in all seasons, few times per week, they needed to wear quality shoes to avoid having painful foots after training, or just to feel good during the exercises. Thus, they often buy in the same shop, the same brands. A lot of athletes are loyal to a brand. The style is placed in second, justified by which brand the athlete buys. “We just run, but we also meet people and friends” said a female athlete.

Number of votes*	Factors influencing the purchase decision
7	Quality
5	Style
4	Brand/Image
3	Price
1	Services
1	Technical advantages

But that did not influence all the participants. The two older participants said they were not influenced by the style. A difference between the age-groups was to make, the older ones preferring spend for quality, values of the company and looking for a good quality/price ratio, whereas the younger ones are influenced by the quality, but also by the price and the style.

Contrary to the previous group, athletes’ participants regrouped ‘brand’ and ‘image’ together because, to their opinion, when you bought a special brand, this was because you wanted to benefit from a certain image. The second and third factors are linked. Only then came the price. The price was important but not decisive for athletes, when it comes to talk about sports apparel. The other factors have been less cited because of the kind of articles which are represented. In a lot of disciplines, athletes would not use technical apparels or accessories.

Therefore, athletes felt more concerned by the quality, the style and the brand itself. They are influenced by other factors, those factors being influenced also according to some characteristics like the age-group or the discipline.

According to the brand's attitudes, athletes were asked if the attitude and behavior of the brands and their decisions were important to them, and able to influence their purchase decision. All participants positively answered to that question, saying they were influenced. Some talked about the attitude towards the social responsibility and the engagement of the company. Spending money for a company helping local stakeholders, organizations, etc. would be much more appreciated by consumers than spending for a company which did not respect the rules of employment, which delocalizes, etc. Consumers did support also the local economy, explaining the attitude of the brand. Thanks to a positive attitude, they can engage their consumers, increase their loyalty and eventually gain new customers.

But they also said that if the attitude and the image of the brand are negative, consumers might have a bad opinion about the company and its products. Sometimes consumers continue to buy, sometimes the company loses consumers. People might not stop easily to buy, but they can choose another company to replace the previous one. Those 7 athletes from different horizons, with different backgrounds, from different age-groups did think the same way.

The third question put the athletes into a given situation: they imagined that an athlete they knew and appreciated signed a sponsorship contract with a company; would they want to buy products from the sponsoring brand? Some of the participants did really think they would be influenced (3). What happens very often is that people consciously choose to buy a product, knowing that they are directly or indirectly influenced. Others tended to say that if this sponsor has been chosen, then the company might have good values and engages itself. The athlete had also values; if the company had a so bad behavior, the sponsee would have probably refused the sponsorship relation. Thus, to their minds, if both are linked, and that the athlete is appreciated, so would be the company. So the sponsee has to be known to influence athletes.

Some others thought they would not be influenced at all (4). The sponsee benefits from the sponsorship relation, thus the article he/she promotes can be either good or bad, but the sponsee do not change the quality of the product or other characteristics. Athletes would not be pushed to consume more or rather in a given company than another, but that might influence the image they had on the given company, the engagement and loyalty of the consumer, etc. Thus, the company won't lose anything, but it cannot be confirmed that positive results would appear so simply in the turnover.

The fourth question asked the opinion of participants in a situational context: what would they think about a company sponsoring a local athlete? The difference had to lie in the fact that we ask an athlete point of view, and not a simple consumer or person out of the T&F area.

A local scale for a local athlete seemed to be positive for our 7 participants. The fact that companies might give a chance to local athletes to get known and to reward their performances and encourage them to go further is a plus and might show the implication and engagement of the companies. It proves that the companies has values, respects the human and the motivation and that it is able to spend money because it believes in the future of the athlete. The image and the reputation of the company will help him/her to succeed, to get known.

The athletes might need materials and money to go to competitions or pay medical fees. All those expenses are often not paid by the T&F clubs. Therefore, if the company follows the athlete and help him/her to overcome the hurdles, both parts gain: a better image for the firm and probably at mid-term/long-term, it would benefit from the increase of the sales or new customers. The athletes will gain financial and material support.

The fact that we added the local side helps because this engages even more population and helps increasing the appreciation people have about a company. Participants also answered that they would like to see more sponsorship of local athletes because that reminds the human side of the company, a thing becoming rare nowadays. Nevertheless, this would not influence more participants.

Therefore, athletes, even if most of them do not think they would buy more, they would surely change their minds about the company itself. Therefore, by looking at the results, just one participant felt influenced by those sponsorships. Even if the purchases are not directly concerned, the company does not have to forget that other advantages might appear (image, engagement).

The last question is focused on disability: would the sponsoring of disabled athletes by the company change the opinion you have about the brand? Would it influence you somehow? A participant said that, as an athlete but also as a consumer, he did not know any case of disabled athlete sponsored by a company at the exception of Pistorius and Nike. Because they were not faced to that kind of cases in everyday life, he cannot imagine what it would really be like. To his mind, that could just be positive. Even if the Pistorius case was a failure, the participant added that maybe the failure was due to the fact that this athlete was too famous and that was why the negative

information was been so quickly transferred to the brand. There is often a gap between what the company wants and what really happens.

Companies cannot always avoid bad advertising. Another participant said this would be very positive even there might be hurdles and difficulties, the success of the company and the sponsee is more often guaranteed than not. To this participant, the disabled cases stay an important issue nowadays because the society does not always include equally disabled people as non-disabled ones. Therefore, as a human he would like to see this kind of sponsorship in Nantes, between a company and a disabled athlete. Another added, as an athlete, that he would be emotionally touched if disabled athletes were more concerned by sport sponsorships because he was used to train with physically disabled athletes and knew how hard it was for them to feel included in the group, to feel equal and to be happy to be there. Moreover, the disabled athlete might need material to train. Therefore, there might be more reasons to sponsor a disabled athlete for the company, but also for the sponsee because the needs are real and important; the athlete can hardly do without.

The answers showed a same guideline, highlighting the fact that the sponsorship of disabled athletes would be positive for both parts, even if to be sure to not fail, companies would have to look for athletes with the same values and personality. This would ensure a win-win relation and they would benefit more from that sport sponsorship contract.

V. Discussion

5.1 Athlete' perspectives

The research study needed to take into account its overall goal being to understand to what extent sponsoring disabled athletes in Loire-Atlantique would be somehow beneficial for both sponsor and sponsee and thus to examine each possible perspectives in relation to the sponsorship' success: the athletes', the customers' and the companies' perspectives. The fact that we divided people in two categories: athletes and consumers is justified because of the different visions and understanding in the research question and its context. Athletes do somehow already take part in it, contrary to some consumers who might be indifferent to this context of sport sponsorship and disabled athletes.

In the current investigation, we did not use any kind of model to examine or analyze the data, due to the fact that quantitative and qualitative research' results were easy and quickly drawn thanks to the small samples.

Through this investigation, we looked at knowing the reasons leading athletes to be sponsored by a company rather than another (RO.1). The answers showed that most of the questioned athletes did not know a lot about the sponsorship activity of their clubs and in their region. Most of those athletes were interested in being sponsored once in their career but for those interested, the choice of the company depended on lot of criteria, the most important being the image of the company. This questionnaire confirmed that the company's behavior and image had an importance for the athlete, as far as those factors might impact the athlete's personal image. The results affirmed that sportspeople were influenced by the values of the company (like the social responsibility), by its image and the benefits they can get from it (H4). This result was linked to the consumer-centered approach used by companies (Annmarie Ryan, John Fahy, 2012) in order to transfer the images and communicate values. Thus, the hypothesis is confirmed.

Thanks to the athlete's focus-group, the findings support the hypothesis 3 (H3), focused on the understanding of the points of view and beliefs of the athletes, concerning the sponsorship of disabled athletes and the impact on a company in terms of brand image, sales, loyalty, etc. Even if habits and beliefs were not exactly the same, all the interviewees went the same way: this kind of sponsorship is positive, even if somehow risky for the company if the process is not well imagined, both parts would benefit from the sponsorship contract. More specifically, disabled athletes would benefit from the advantages offered by the company such as money, gifts or donations and companies would benefit from a positive image of being socially responsible, engagement, transfer

of image and valued, and indirect communication (like word of mouth). Thus, this confirms what Ozturk, Kozub, Kocak said, 'sport sponsorship of disabled athletes has the same revenue than non-disabled' (2010).

Despite the fact that all participants to those quantitative and qualitative research did not always agree on a given question, mostly all participants did orient their thoughts and feelings towards the same directions and ideas: the sponsorship in general is less known than sport sponsorship; sport sponsorship' cases are known and appreciated; athletes are mostly personally interested in signing a sponsorship contract; sponsoring local and disabled athletes is positive and beneficial for both parts.

5.2 Company' perspectives

On another side, we looked at knowing how companies did choose athletes to build a sponsorship contract (RO.1). Results proved and thus, we can confirm that 'values' is the most important factor on which the company can base its choices. After the values came the identity of the athlete. Thus, being socially oriented is an example of values the company might have. We linked again this kind of sponsorship to the consumer-centered approach (Annmarie Ryan, John Fahy, 2012), which focuses on values and on the image.

This social value is so important that even within the firm, workers and stakeholders might be influenced by the organizations' behavior. Indeed, employees may feel proud being associated to the corporate citizenship of the company (Dutton et al. 1994). Consumers could be proud to buy and support a company which cares and act for the socially good.

Even if the performance might influence some companies, it came on the third place. We could not objectively affirm that the results support the hypothesis 6 on the fact that companies do look for athletes with good or well-known performances (H6). But we could see that big-sized firms had more possibilities sponsoring performant and well-known athletes rather than small- or medium-sized firms, which often cannot afford that and which identities have no similarities with famous sportspeople. Deeper research could be done to test this assumption.

Not looking at the level is positive, highlighting the real interest of the company in the person and not the performance; nevertheless, more the performances are big, more are the benefits, and so is the impact. That is why companies do often look for well-known athletes to sponsor with, which might positively or negatively impact then on the image of the company. Thus, an assumption has been made on sport sponsorship, which may be less popular nowadays because of the potential negative communication that might impact the sponsor. That is even more the case when we talk about small-sized firms, which might not be able to face a negative advertising due to financial issues.

Thus, more the athlete benefits from a good image and is doing better in terms of performances, more the company sees an evolution within its organization. That confirms the hypothesis 2 (H2) concerning the growth opportunities of the companies which are linked to the athletes image and personal performances.

In addition, interviews aimed to answer to the research objectives 2 and 4 (RO.2; RO.4), seeking to know and understand companies' perception of sport sponsorship in the region and the perception of disabled athletes. When it came to talk about the sponsorship of disabled athletes, the

results were totally positive and made us confirm that sponsoring disabled athletes was a plus for the company.

The main issue would be to know what exact benefits could come from the sponsorship and how to measure them. Crush (2001) argued that small businesses need to put their efforts on building a measurement method of the effectiveness of the sponsorship. But small businesses commonly tend to be limited in terms of using measurement tools (Coviello et al. 2000). Thus, it could be hard for small businesses to measure the efficiency of this strategy.

Benefits were not the same according the sponsee, the sponsor and the context in which the relation is made. The results confirmed that from a company point of view, a sport sponsorship strategy is a plus, if it is well prepared and defined (in accordance with the sponsee). Thus, the study and choice of the sponsee by the company has to be done and the results have to prove the similarities and identic values of both parts. Once the relation is created and the accordance between both parts ensured, then benefits will come to sponsee/sponsor through different ways. Thus, the hypothesis 3 is supported (H3).

5.3 Consumer' perspectives

Consumers' point of view can vary from the others because of the fact that they might not be and feel directly concerned by a sponsorship strategy. But this sponsorship strategy touches consumers and makes them react towards the company through different ways: increase of the purchases, increase of the loyalty, engaging themselves, etc. Thus, their beliefs and habits are important for the company.

This investigation examined the perception of sport sponsorship and looked at the impact sport sponsorship might have on consumers (RO.3; RO.5). Firstly, the acknowledgement and interest of consumer in sport sponsorship is evaluated. Most participants could not give a lot of examples of sponsorship, and almost 3 out of 4 persons did think they are not influenced by sponsorship strategies. In comparison, it has previously been indicated that sponsorship strategy could generate favorable consumer reactions (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). Thus, we could explain this by the fact that most of the people did think that they could not be influenced, due to the knowing of the product/company or the strategy itself; imagining being influenced may mean to participant that companies could make them buy anything they want. The image of the product/brand is the most influencing factor, again like the factors for choosing a sponsor and sponsee. Thus, companies often look first to change their image. And according Pagès and Ferrand (1996), image sponsorship seeks to transfer images sponsor/sponsee but this is possible only if similarities exist.

Few examples were given for local sponsorships, but they represented different firms (in terms of size, images, domain of activity); whatever the activity of the company, the image of the sponsorship and the choice of the athlete/event are the most important criteria the company needs to focus on.

The 'local' point we highlighted through this study was important and showed through the analyses positive results. Those findings were supported by Ferrand A. and Pages M. (1996) arguing that 'an event attracting a part of a local population is credible for this population and creates an emotional attachment'. Thus, what is said for the event could be adapted to a local athlete, saying if a local company sponsor a local athlete, known by the population, credibility and emotional attachment would be ensured.

Sport sponsorship of a disabled athlete constitutes an issue that might need deeper analyses in future research. We tried to understand the points of view of consumers according to the sponsorship of disabled athletes and the benefits they could bring to companies (H3). Answers and explanations were different. Different examples were given, the two main ideas were firstly that the company thinks about the human and seeks to be socially oriented. Being socially oriented proves the

social responsibility of the company, which defines the company's identity attractiveness. In fact, Lichtenstein et al. (2004) argued 'when a corporation behaves in a manner that is perceived as socially responsible, consumers are likely to infer that it has certain desirable traits that resonate with their sense of self'. But some people continue to feel uncomfortable when faced to disabilities. We confirm that the sponsorship of disabled athlete will change the image of the company into a positive image, but the other advantages would depend on the athlete, the company and how their relation is perceived by consumers.

The second main idea is that disability is a good reason and mean for companies to gain customers and turnover, without considering the human. For both ideas, we saw that for people, the fact for companies being socially responsible is really and surely a benefit for it, in increasing brand awareness, recognition and other measurable benefits (H1). Hypothesis 1 is therefore supported. But according to the hypothesis 3, a deeply research and analysis would be required in order to define more precisely if using the image of a disabled athlete would positively or negatively influence the consumer.

Thus, the research objectives we answered to were:

1. Understand how sportspeople and companies choose to sponsor and be sponsored each other
2. Explore companies' perceptions of sport sponsorship in the Loire-Atlantique region (LA)
3. Explore people' perceptions of sport sponsorship in the LA region
4. Have an outlook on how disabled athletes are perceived by people and companies
5. Analyze the influence of sponsoring disabled athletes, on athletes, consumers and companies' behavior in LA region

The hypotheses we answered to were:

H1: Perception of social responsibilities from the company will increase brand awareness and brand recognition

H2: Growth opportunities are linked to the athlete progress and image

H3: Sport sponsorship of a disabled athlete (in Loire-Atlantique) will help companies in improving the brand' image and will make them benefit from other opportunities (increased sales, increased loyalty and engagement, etc.)

H4: Sportspeople (disabled and abled) are influenced by the company's values, image and the benefits they can get from a possible relationship

H6: Companies are looking for athletes whose performances are well-known

VI. Conclusion

Whereas lot of research studies have been directed towards the sponsorship strategy and its use within all types of organizations, focused for some on special domains of sponsorship like sport, with respect to understanding the marketing needs and consumers desires, this paper especially studied the sport sponsorship of disabled sportspeople, coming from the Track & Field area, within a defined geographical location from local businesses, athletes and consumers perspectives.

A sum-up has to be done concerning the results of the research objectives.

Research Objective 1: Understand how sportspeople and companies choose to sponsor/be sponsored by each other

The choice of both parts is finally made on the values and the personality or identity of the individual or the entity. Both parts did understand the need to have common values and to associate together only if similarities do exist and that each one agree with the other. The choice is really based on human values and behaviors that have to be appreciated by the public.

Research objective 2: Explore companies' perceptions of sport sponsorship in France

According to workers or consumer, sport sponsorship is a viable and efficient communication strategy that reaches all kinds of targets (Crowley, 1991). In the same time, this strategy can bring advantages only if the process and implementation of the strategy is thought and well-defined before the beginning of the campaign, and businesses have to find an efficient and not too costly way to measure the results of this strategy. This strategy is a plus, is appreciated by the public and demanded by the sponsees. It can be adapted to all kinds of corporate goals and to all types of organizations. Thus, this strategy is positively seen and judged, by users but also non-users.

Research objective 3: Explore people' perceptions of sport sponsorship in France

People in general know sport sponsorship strategy the most. They do have a lot of examples in mind, which shows that they are interested or that it catches their attention. Nevertheless, even if some people do accept and say that they are influenced by those strategies; a lot do not agree and think they are totally not. The fact is that even if those people can be influenced, they do not want to believe they buy because of the strategy of the company. They want to buy because they decided it. Thus, they often think companies would do anything possible to gain new customers. But the strategy in itself is positively seen and recognized by the public.

Research objective 4: Have an outlook on how disabled athletes are perceived by people and companies

In accordance with what has been said previously, disabled athletes have a positive image from people and companies perspectives. This is the reason why we assumed later that if companies were using the sponsorship strategy of disabled athletes, consumers would feel more influenced and would change their opinion according to the brand. From the companies' perspectives, disabled athletes are seen like a potential to reach the corporate objectives. This represents for them a plus, a change in the way they usually work. Thus, most of them would be ready to sponsor disabled athletes if positive returns could be ensured.

Research objective 5: Analyze the influence of sponsoring disabled athletes on consumer behavior in France

Companies did see the power disabled athletes could have on the sponsorship investments. Thanks to the image consumers have on disabled athletes, companies would like more and more to use it in order to reach some corporate objectives like the brand awareness, the increase of the purchases and the loyalty. Thus, if some conditions are respected concerning the reasons to associate with a sponsee, then thanks to a better image of the company, this one would progressively be known, people will talk about it in positive words, which will attract more consumers and some would like to be loyal due to the social responsibility represented.

The focus on local disabled athletes is a point on which we focused this study, but for which results are not so evident and objective. Nevertheless, the studies examined the possibilities for

companies of sponsoring disabled athletes and the advantages for both parts; results are mainly positive, according to the consumers, athletes or companies perspectives. In the study in general, we can affirm at this stage that sponsoring disabled athletes is positive for each part and for the public, but again on the conditions that the company prepares itself to the building of the contract, the implementation of the strategy and the following and measurement of the results.

Most of the firms stayed at the local stage because they are small-sized companies, composed by few employees, focused on a unique or one range of products and not more in order to stay qualitative oriented. This study highlighted Zinger and O'Reilly's study on the examination of the sport sponsorship from a small business perspective. They suggest, thanks to qualitative research that small businesses have different corporate objectives and a different organization, that the resources are not the same but the benefits they could get from a sport sponsorship are real and evident. There is thus a potential for businesses (all sizes included) for using a sport sponsorship strategy, and this study affirmed, through quantitative and qualitative research that local companies could sponsor local athletes benefiting then from the advantages of this marketing and communication strategy.

Thus, this paper examined the viability of the sport sponsorship strategy on T&F' athletes composed by disabilities, in the LA region (in France). Even if the focus there is on the disabilities, results also answered to the issue of sponsorship abled local athletes. Those examinations were made from different perspectives: companies, athletes and consumers. It gave new insights into the sport sponsorship strategy of athletes, into the sport sponsorship in the LA region, into the locality of the companies and the sponsees, and to finish into the disabilities in T&F and the advantages and drawbacks this strategy could represent for each part: companies, athletes and consumers.

VII. Recommendations

Big-sized companies do take into consideration the sponsorship activity and use it for their business and communication goals. But some smaller and more local businesses do not consider at all using this strategy to reach their goals.

This investigation highlighted the possibilities all sized-companies could have, and the benefits they could gain by implementing a sponsorship strategy, especially the sport sponsorship one. It highlighted also the fact that sport sponsorship strategies nowadays could focus on disabled athletes, thanks to the visions and point of view of the consumers, thanks to the willingness of athletes to be sponsored and to the returns companies could get from this strategy.

The gains and positive returns companies could get are the (1) image, (2) brand awareness, (3) purchases increased, (4) engagement, (5) loyalty. Most of those benefits could be related to some recommendations to companies. Those recommendations require money and investments; they also need time and a change in the organization within the company. But those costs might be reimbursed by the gains.

- (1) Image – The results of the quantitative and the qualitative research showed that the image is the main important factor for consumer to be loyal, for athletes to choose a company to sponsor with or for companies to choose an athlete to offer a sponsorship contract. The image is the center of the sponsorship relation. Although, when knowing that the sponsorship strategy can bring lot of money to a company, firms do avoid building sponsorship contracts for the following reasons: (1) negative communication, (2) expensive, (3) too local. Some examples of local sponsorships which succeeded showed that the sport sponsorship strategy of local athletes was possible for all kind of companies; what is important is the choice of the athlete, in accordance with the identity of the firm. Thus, companies have to take into consideration that building a sport sponsorship contract with a local athlete (disabled also) would positively improve their image, despite the costs and time.

- (2) Brand awareness – This is not an objective companies did answered to the questions during the quantitative and qualitative research. But through brand awareness, companies promote their products and services; get more customers, which naturally lead to the increase of the purchases. The recommendation there for companies is to take into consideration the brand awareness objective, which through a sponsorship strategy could make the brand known at different geographical scales, giving then the company a wider image. Through sport sponsorship of local disabled athletes, thanks to the rarity of this kind of sponsorship, the company would benefit from a better image, the brand will be known and the other business objectives will logically follow. That is the reason why company has to make sure that consumers are aware of the sponsorship program
- (3) Purchases – Through the qualitative and quantitative research, consumers and athletes did talk about the importance of the quality of the products and services: the sponsorship activity talks about the brand, but the products and services it offers have to be in accordance with what is communicated. If the offers are not good enough to be sufficient for consumers to buy, then the sponsee can play an important role, by promoting those products. That is the reason why if, thanks to the sponsorship relation, the company can benefit from a positive image and can communicate more to be known by the public, more the products will answer to consumer' specific needs, more the purchases might increase. Companies seem to feel more concerned by the purchases, rather than the image or the engagements. But to benefit from the purchases, other previous stages have to be thought.
- (4) Engagement – The recommendation to make at this stage is that the company will benefit from engaging itself with social events, organizations, etc. The engagement of the company is a plus for the company due to the fact that it allows consumers to differentiate the company from the competition, and at the end, to choose the company the most socially engaged. Making the choice to sponsor a local disabled athlete, in accordance with the identity of the company, and communicating this relation to the public would show people (stakeholders included) its engagement and increase the positive image, the awareness, recognition, purchases, etc. This point is really important and has to be taken into consideration.

(5) Loyalty – This gain is not really perceived by companies like being possible nowadays, due to the rude competition and the open market. But there is a trend expending itself which pushes people to consume more responsible, that is to say, to choose smaller companies, offering higher quality products and respecting social or environmental actions. Local companies are more often involved in those kinds of social or green engagements, to consumer more local, etc. Thus, they might already benefit from a better image and engagement. Companies need to know and believe that loyalty is still possible but its needs to answer to customers' needs and make them benefit from their loyalty. Thanks to a sport sponsorship strategy, the engagement can be made thanks to the disabled athlete, and if the products and services corresponds to the needs, then customers would even more be loyal to the brand.

Recommendations there mostly concerned the companies. In fact, companies are the ones that have to work on the sponsorship strategy in order to offer athletes a good contract and whose benefits are expected then to be higher. Athletes have needs but fewer chances to fail, except if their image is fully destroyed due to the company bad behavior or the athlete's own behavior or personality.

The other recommendations that could be made to athletes (disabled or not) would be to dare asking local companies for a sponsorship relation and explain them the benefits they could get from it, because most of the small-sized companies do not know or understand the advantages.

Some results could be more detailed and analyzed for future research; qualitative research should be registered in order to analyze each behavior and answer to draw broader conclusions. Concerning quantitative research, larger samples could be reached in order to validate the generalizations we made.

The geographical localization could also be changed because there is no evidence that the results can be the same in other regions or countries, depending on the habits and cultures of the population and companies. In this study, we preferred not to do lot of generalizations to broader contexts to not limit the validity and reliability of the study.

VIII. Self-Reflection on own learning and performance

To describe my personal reflections, they were cut in two parts, the first based on the preparation of the research study (the before), the second on the action phase concerning the research study itself (during period).

Preparation of the research study

Before beginning the MSC in Marketing Management, the acquired knowledge of the theories and concepts were somehow limited. Nevertheless, this Master's degree has been chosen due to the interest one had. This interest was acknowledged thanks to previous learnings and applications of marketing concepts to answer to global and specific marketing issues.

Thus, the research study was based on the issue of the disability and the equity problem between abled and disabled persons. Due to the interest of one on the sport area, it has been decided to regroup both parts and to extend the research to examine the sport sponsorship of disabled athletes and its impact on the public (consumers and athletes) and the companies. This study could be used by the companies that participated to the research and become an added-value to them, helping companies to understand and build sport sponsorship contracts.

After reviewing the existing literature on the use of the sport sponsorship by companies, a model merged: Five distinct approaches. This model was used to define the kinds of sponsorship through the past decades and their evolution; thus, the sponsorship strategy used could give the company's goals and methods to attract consumers. To be sure getting information about the three targets (consumers, athletes and companies) and to validate that information, different research methods have been used: qualitative and quantitative, answering to different research objectives.

A number of the references used in this research study tested models and concepts in order to study consumers' behaviors towards the company and also the benefits got by the company thanks to the sponsorship strategy. Therefore, to adapt the subject and add newness, the focus of disabilities, on Track & Field and on the LA region has been made. My knowledge and past experience were a plus to do this research study: being an athlete for 8 years, within an athletic club; having worked for 3 years as trainer and communication manager of the club. Those experiences contributed to the choice of this research study and helped to manage the research, thanks to contacts and accesses. Even if this work might need corrections and developments at some stages,

what is sure is that without the experience and knowledge, this research proposal would not have been as well conducted.

Action phase

The development of this research study and the research methods conducted to get information from the participants were easy to manage, thanks to the knowledge of whole samples of the quantitative and qualitative research. Thus, this surely helped participants to answer to the questions, to feel more comfortable and give details on the subjects, as they knew they could trust one and that they would be understood and not judged.

The encountered issues during the research and collecting phases have been quickly and easily solved. Lot of data has to be summed-up in order to facilitate the analysis and reading.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix # 1: Athlete's questionnaire – English version

What factors do attract sportspeople to engage themselves with a sponsor?

Please tick the options that best describe your opinion, attitude and feelings in the questions below. This survey has been designed to provide me information for my MSC in Marketing dissertation. The survey ensures you a complete anonymity; feel free then to answer as accurately as you can. Thank you for your help.

Question 1: Is your T&F club currently sponsored by companies?

- No
 Yes

If you remember some, can you cite them? :.....

- Do not know
 Do not remember

What type of service is engaged? : Financial Material/equipment Club's events
 Other:
 Do not know

Question 2: Are you personally sponsored by a company?

- No
 Yes

What types of benefits are offered to you? : Financial Material Clothes
 Other:

What is the sponsorship' duration? : 2years or less 2-5year 5years and more

Question 3: If you had the possibility, would like to be sponsored during your sport career?

- No
 Yes

Question 4: For what main interests would/did you sign a contract of sponsoring (new one if already sponsored)?

- Financial
 Material/equipment
 Clothes
 Transport
 Other:.....

Question 5: If you had to be sponsored, would you be looking for a company with a particular domain of activity?

- No
- Yes

Which one(s)? :

Question 6: If you had to choose between two different companies, offering you the same benefits, on what criteria do you think you will chose one rather than the other?

.....
.....
.....



- Gender: Male Female
- Age-group: 15-20 20-30 30-40 40 and more
- Discipline: Running Jump Shot put
- Level: Regional National Europe International
- Disability: None Physical Intellectual

Thank you!

Objet : Les raisons qui amènent un athlète à être sponsorisé par une marque

Ce questionnaire a été réalisé pour collecter des informations dans le cadre de mon mémoire de Master 2 dont le sujet est le sponsoring d'athlètes handisport dans la région nantaise. Cette étude ne requiert en aucun cas vos coordonnées personnelles ou professionnelles. N'hésitez donc pas à répondre librement et franchement à chacune des questions qui vous sont posées.

Veuillez donc cocher les options présentées ci-dessous décrivant au mieux votre point de vue ou sentiment par rapport à la question concernée.

Question 1: Votre club d'athlétisme a-t-il actuellement des sponsors?

- Non
- Oui

Pouvez-vous en citer? :

- Je ne les connais pas
- Je ne m'en souviens pas

Quel(s) type(s) de sponsoring est/sont concerné(s)?

- Financier
- Matériel/equipement(s)
- Evénements/compétitions
- Autres:

- Ne sais pas

Question 2: Etes-vous personnellement sponsorisé en tant qu'athlète ?

- Non
- Oui

Quelle marque/entreprise vous sponsorise? :

Quels bénéfices vous sont offerts? : Financiers Matériels Vêtements
 Autre(s):

De quelle durée est le contrat? : 2ans et moins 2-5ans 5ans et plus

Question 3: Si vous aviez le choix, voudriez-vous être sponsorisé en tant qu'athlète ou continuer de l'être ?

- Non
- Oui

Question 4: Pour quels intérêts signeriez-vous un contrat de sponsoring (un de plus si déjà sponsorisé)? :

- Financiers
 - Matériels/equipements
 - Vêtements
 - Transport
 - Autre(s):
-

Question 5: Si vous deviez être sponsorisé, le domaine d'activité de l'entreprise influencerait-elle votre choix?

- Non
- Oui

Quels domaines d'activité vous paraissent favorables? :

.....

Question 6: Si vous deviez choisir entre deux marques vous offrant les mêmes bénéfices, sur quels critères vous baseriez-vous pour faire votre choix?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

-
- Sexe: Masculin Féminin
- Tranche d'âge: 15-20 20-30 30-40 40 et plus
- Discipline: Courses Sauts/lancés
- Niveau: Regional National Europe International
- Handicap: Aucun Physique Intellectuel

Merci pour votre aide!

Appendix # 2 : Consumers' questionnaire-English version

Please tick the options that best describe your opinion, attitude and feelings in the questions below. This survey has been designed to provide me information for my MSC in Marketing dissertation. The survey ensures you a complete anonymity; feel free then to answer as accurately as you can.

- **Question 1:** What types of sponsoring do you know? *Possibility to tick more than one*

- Institutional
- Cultural
- Sport
- Social
- Other:

- **Question 2:** What old and/or existing sponsorship do you know? *(Give the name of the sponsor and/or sponsee)*

.....
.....

- **Question 3:** What existing sport sponsorship do you know? *(Give the name of the sponsor and/or sponsee)*

.....
.....

- **Question 4:** Do you think, as a consumer, being influenced by some existing sponsorships?

Yes

How do you think you are influenced? :.....

.....

No

- **Question 5:** Do you know any kind of sponsorship case on the Loire-Atlantique Region or more precisely in Nantes?

Yes:

How do you know it? *(Communication, word of mouth, etc.):*

.....

No

- **Question 6:** Do you think companies in Nantes should more sponsor?

Yes

For what reasons:

No

- **Question 7:** Do you think companies in Nantes should sponsor more local?
 Yes
 For what reasons:
 No

- **Question 8:** Concerning the sport sponsorship, do you think companies should consider sponsoring directly athletes rather than clubs?
 Yes
 For what reasons:
 No

- **Question 9:** To your mind, would the sponsoring of disabled sportspeople change somehow the benefits of the company?
 Yes
 For what reasons:
 No



Gender: Male Female

Age-group: 15-20 20-30 30-40 40 and more

Professional activity: (student, liberal profession, office worker, etc.):

Disability: None Physical Intellectual

Thank you!

Objet: Le sponsoring et son utilisation dans la région nantaise

Ce questionnaire a été réalisé pour collecter des informations dans le cadre de mon mémoire de Master 2 dont le sujet est le sponsoring d'athlètes handisport dans la région nantaise. Cette étude ne requiert en aucun cas vos coordonnées personnelles ou professionnelles ni votre identité. N'hésitez donc pas à répondre librement et franchement à chacune des questions qui vous sont posées.

Veillez donc cocher les options présentées ci-dessous décrivant au mieux votre point de vue ou sentiment par rapport à la question concernée.

Question 1: Quels types de sponsoring connaissez-vous? (Vous pouvez cocher plus d'une case)

- Institutionnel
- Culturel
- Sportif
- Social
- Autre(s):

Question 2: Quels anciens et/ou nouveaux sponsoring connaissez-vous? (Nommez le sponsor et sponsorisé)

.....
.....

Question 3: Quel sponsoring sportif récent connaissez-vous? (Nommez le sponsor et sponsorisé)

.....
.....

Question 4: Pensez-vous qu'en tant que consommateur vous êtes influencé par le sponsoring?

- Oui, je suis influencé(e)

De quelle(s) manière(s) l'êtes-vous? :.....

.....

Pensez-vous cela efficace pour les entreprises? Oui Non

- Non, je ne le suis pas

Question 5: Avez-vous connaissance d'un cas de sponsoring en région nantaise?

- Oui:

Comment l'avez-vous connu? (Communication, bouche à oreille, etc.):

.....

- Non

Question 6: Avez-vous connaissance d'un cas de sponsoring sportif en région nantaise?

Oui:

Comment l'avez-vous connu? (*Communication, bouche à oreille, etc.*):

.....

Non

Question 7: Pensez-vous que les entreprises nantaises utilisent suffisamment le sponsoring ?

Oui

Non

Pour quelle(s) raisons?:

Question 8: Pensez-vous que les entreprises nantaises utilisent efficacement le sponsoring?

Oui

Non

Pour quelle(s) raison(s) ? :

Question 9: Pensez-vous que les entreprises nantaises devraient sponsoriser plus "local"?

Oui

Non

Pour quelle(s) raison(s) ? :

Question 10: Le sponsoring d'athlètes plutôt que de clubs vous paraît-il être une bonne alternative pour une entreprise locale ?

Oui

Non

Pour quelle(s) raison(s) ? :

Question 11: A votre avis, le sponsoring d'athlètes handisport changerait-il d'une manière ou d'une autre les bénéfices d'une entreprise?

Oui

Non

Pour quelle(s) raison(s) ? :

Sexe: Masculin Féminin

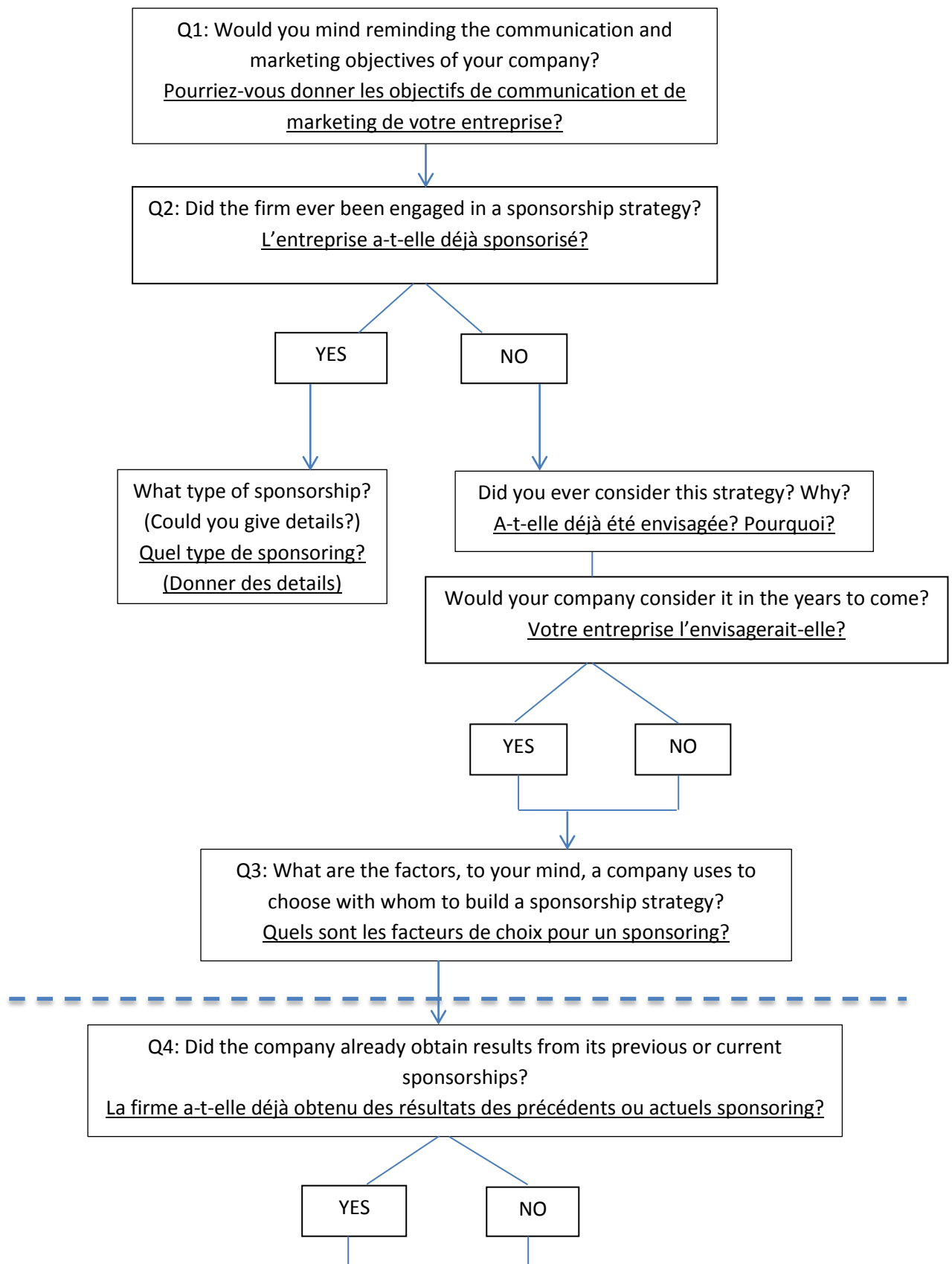
Tranche d'âge: 15-20 20-30 30-40 40 et plus

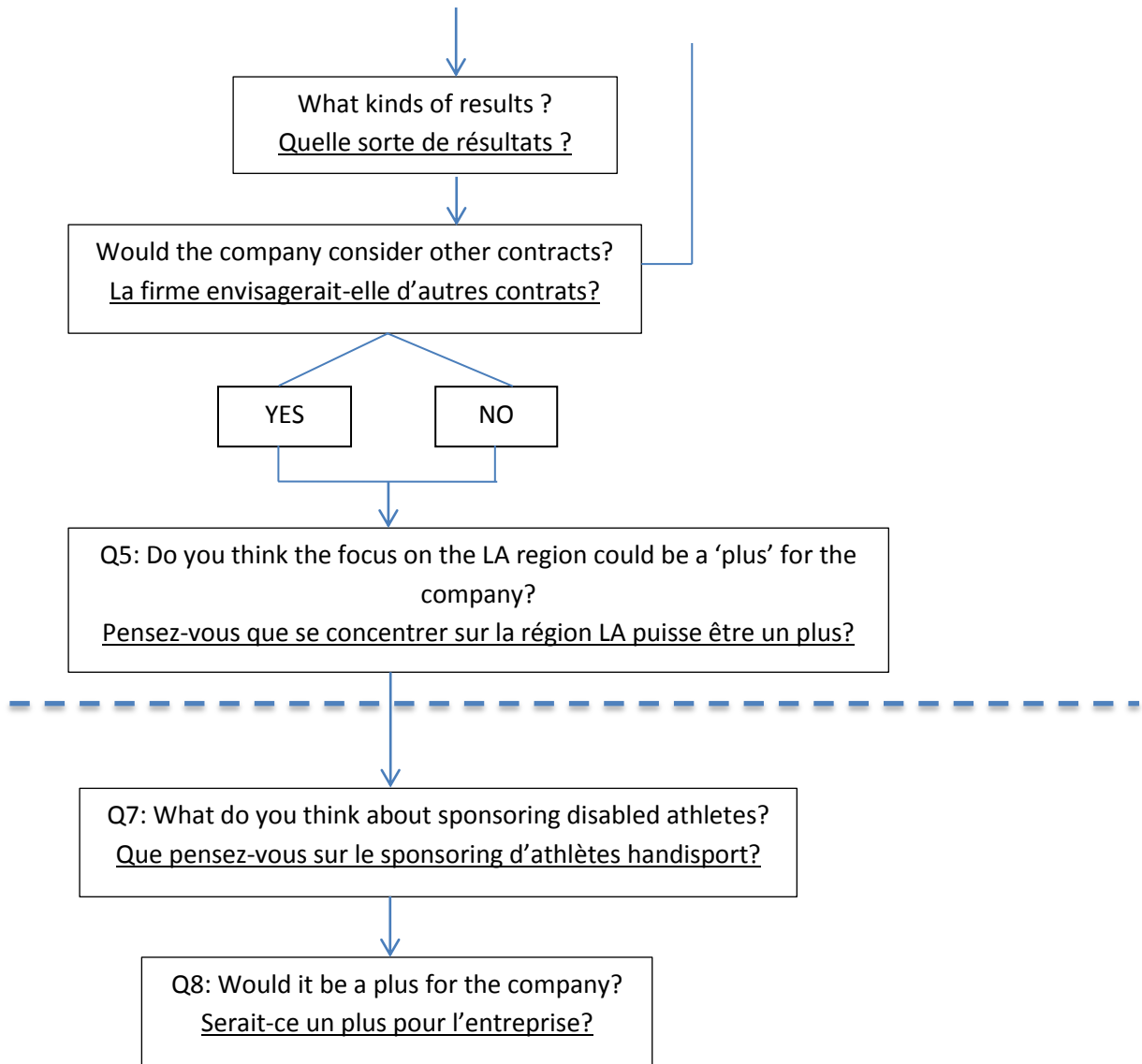
Activité professionnelle (étudiant, ouvrier, profession libérale, etc.) :

Handicap: Aucun Physique Intellectuel

Merci pour votre aide !

Appendix # 3: Companies' interviews process





----- : changing parts of the interview

Appendix # 4: Focus-groups questions-English and French versions

a) Targeting people

- **Question 1:** What factors encourage you to purchase?
Question 1: Quels facteurs vous encouragent à acheter?

- **Question 2:** When the purchase concerns sports apparel, does the sportspeople influence you to buy?
Question 2: L'ambassadeur ou représentant de la marque vous influence-t-il dans votre décision d'achat de vêtements de sport ?

- **Question 3/situation:** You appreciate an athlete who is going to be sponsored. Do you think that will influence you to buy or be more loyal to this particular brand?
Question 3: Vous appréciez un athlète qui va être sponsorisé. Cela vous influencera-t-il à acheter plus ou à être loyal envers cette marque ?

- **Question 4:** What would do think of a company which will sponsor a local athlete? Would you consume more from this company?
Question 4: Que penseriez-vous d'une entreprise qui sponsoriserait un athlète local ?
Consommeriez-vous plus ?

- **Question 5:** And what would you think if the brand sponsors also disabled athletes? Would you have a better opinion about the company itself?
Question 5: Que penseriez-vous d'une marque qui sponsoriserait aussi des athlètes handisport? Auriez-vous une meilleure image de l'entreprise ?

b) Targeting athletes

- **Question 1:** What factors encourage you to purchase? And especially sports apparel?

Question 1: Quels facteurs vous encouragent à acheter (des vêtements de sport) ?

- **Question 2:** Is the attitude and image of the brand really important to you to purchase?

Question 2: Le comportement et l'image de l'entreprise contribuent-ils à vos achats?

- **Question 3:** If an athlete you appreciate is going to sign a contract of sponsoring, do you think that might push you to buy from this brand?

Question 3: Si un athlète que vous appréciez est sponsorisé, cela vous influencera-t-il à acheter de cette même marque ?

- **Question 4:** At a local scale, if an athlete is going to be sponsored by a local company, what would you think about it? Would it influence you in any way?

Question 4: Si un athlète est sponsorisé par une entreprise à échelle locale, qu'en penseriez-vous ? Cela vous influencerait-il ?

- **Question 5:** And what if this company was going to sponsor disabled athletes? Would that change the image and opinion you have about the brand?

Question 5: Et si l'entreprise sponsorisait des athlètes handisport? Cela changerait-il l'image et l'opinion que vous avez de cette entreprise ?

Figure 1, The differentiation's factors

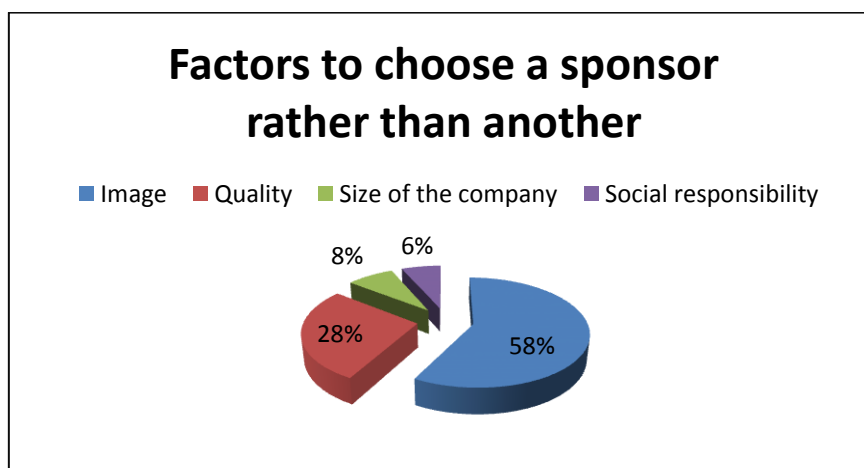


Figure 2, Classification of the participants according to the genders and age-groups (athlete's questionnaire)

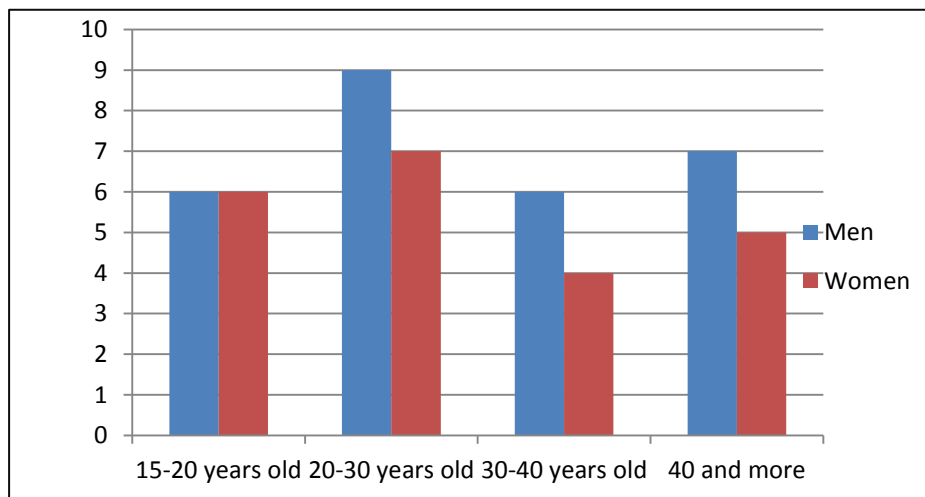


Figure 3 & 4, Distribution of the men and women according to the level & the disabled athletes

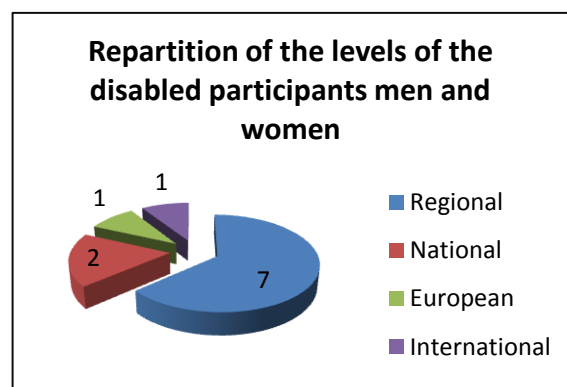
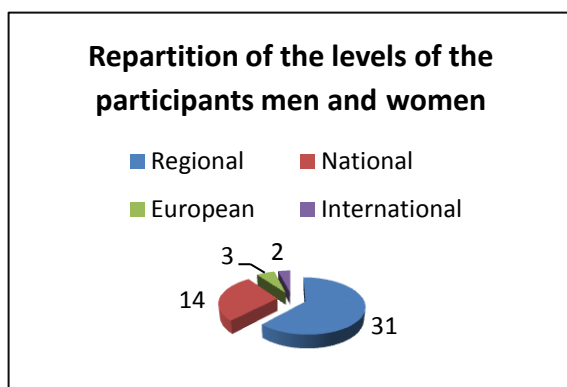


Figure 5, Classification of the genders per age-groups (consumers' questionnaire)

