

The Role of Group and Individual Endorsements in Shaping Para Athlete Performance

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of endorsements on the performance of Para Athletes in Kenya, focusing on dimensions such as athletic expertise, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry, guided by the Athlete Brand Image model. Using an exploratory case study design, twenty Para Athletes were selected through theoretical sampling, with data collected via in-depth interviews and observations, supplemented by a pilot study to ensure validity and reliability. Grounded theory analysis revealed a significant lack of endorsement opportunities, with most athletes reporting limited or no interaction with sponsors. Two key themes emerged: the absence of structured endorsement support and the critical role of leadership within Para Sports in shaping the endorsement landscape. Participants unanimously expressed willingness to embrace endorsements, citing potential benefits such as improved training, motivation, visibility, and financial support. The findings underscore the urgent need to reconfigure organizational structures within the Kenya Paralympics movement to foster endorsement opportunities. Addressing these gaps can promote inclusivity, enhance athlete well-being, and strengthen competitive performance.

Keywords: Para Athletes, Endorsements, Performance, Athletic Expertise, Sportsmanship, Competitive Style, Rivalry

Introduction

Para Athletics has become a prominent platform for athletes with disabilities, offering opportunities to showcase talent, compete internationally, and inspire others. It is recognized as the largest sport within the Paralympic movement, with global championships and Paralympic Games providing visibility and pathways for athletes to achieve excellence (International Paralympic Committee, 2026). In Kenya, the sport has grown steadily, with athletes breaking barriers despite persistent challenges such as limited resources, training facilities, and support systems (Njororai, 2016; Beldame et al., 2023; Peake & Davies, 2024).

Endorsements play a vital role in athlete success. They provide financial support (Ochieng, 2010), enhance visibility, and open doors to better training and competition opportunities. Yet little is known about how endorsements specifically affect Para Athletes' performance in Kenya. Prior studies highlight structural gaps in para-sport development, including limited camps and clubs (Kipkemboi & Otuya, 2019) and fragmented sponsorship opportunities (Kiptembur, Ng'ang'a & Makomere, 2024; Romanelli, Kjærstad & Moustakas, 2026). Competitive event structures also shape para-athlete outcomes, underscoring the need for systemic reform in governance and support (Kiptembur, Ng'ang'a & Otuya, 2025; Beermann & Hallmann, 2024). More broadly, inclusive athlete development models emphasize resilient governance and marketing structures as essential for linking para and able-bodied athletics in Kenya's changing economy (Kiptembur, 2026; Golmohammadi et al., 2025).

Globally, endorsements are closely tied to athlete brand image. The Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) identifies athletic expertise, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry as core dimensions of athlete performance and marketability (Arai, Ko & Kaplanidou, 2013; Arai, Ko & Ross, 2014). Studies of athlete branding show how both on-field attributes and off-field narratives contribute to credibility and sponsor appeal (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Simak, 2023). Endorsements also extend beyond commercial products to social causes, where athlete credibility is often grounded in competitive achievements and behavior (Biz & Schubert, 2024).

Recent work highlights challenges faced by underrepresented groups, such as Muslim female athletes, in building their brands due to cultural and social barriers (Basabain et al., 2021; Hasaan, Berndt & Fişne, 2024). Athlete managers emphasize authenticity, relatable stories, and social media presence as essential for monetizing athlete brands and securing sponsorships (Taniyev, Mayer & Gordon, 2022). Sponsorship dynamics in low-media-coverage sports further demonstrate how performance, personality, and athlete-driven outreach shape endorsement opportunities (Romanelli, Kjærstad & Moustakas, 2026). These insights reinforce the importance of examining endorsements not only as financial support but also as mechanisms that shape athlete identity, visibility, and inclusivity.

This study asks: How do group and individual endorsements affect the performance of Para Athletes in Kenya, particularly in terms of athletic expertise, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry (Beermann & Hallmann, 2024)? To answer this, the research explores athletes' perceptions of endorsement availability and influence (Macková et al., 2024). It examines links between endorsements and athletic expertise, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry, while also identifying barriers to securing support. The study concludes with recommendations to improve access to endorsements, highlighting the vital role endorsements can play in enhancing athlete performance and well-being.

Literature Review

Endorsements are widely recognized as vital to athletic success. They provide financial support, recognition, and opportunities for storytelling (Njororai, 2016). In both Para Athletics and able-bodied sports, endorsements elevate visibility and acknowledgment for athletes who often struggle to achieve prominence comparable to their peers (Dehghansai et al., 2020; Beldame et al., 2023). Notable examples, such as Marlou van Rhijn's Nike partnership, show how individual deals can amplify the recognition of Para sports globally (Nike, n.d.), while also enabling athletes to advocate for inclusivity and disability awareness (Kamberidou et al., 2019).

Despite these benefits, sponsorships for Para Athletes in Kenya remain minimal. Athletes report little or no interaction with sponsors, pointing to structural weaknesses in leadership and governance (Kiptembur, Ng'ang'a & Makomere, 2024; Romanelli, Kjærstad & Moustakas, 2026). This absence undermines performance dimensions such as athletic expertise and competitive style, reinforcing the need for targeted endorsement strategies.

Group endorsements also enhance visibility by uniting teams under shared sponsorships, amplifying collective resilience and spotlighting diverse athlete stories (Meyers et al., 2023). Events such as the 2021 Tokyo Paralympics, where Paralympian medallists received recognition equivalent to Olympians, underscore their motivational potential (Upworthy, 2021). Yet in Kenya, group endorsement structures remain underdeveloped, with para-athletes facing limited exposure to organized competitions that restrict opportunities for collective sponsorships and recognition (Kiptembur, Ng'ang'a & Otuya, 2025; Beermann & Hallmann, 2024).

The Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) identifies athletic expertise, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry as core dimensions of athlete performance and marketability (Arai, Ko & Kaplanidou, 2013; Arai, Ko & Ross, 2014). Studies show that both on-field attributes and off-field narratives contribute to sponsor appeal (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Simak, 2023). Endorsements tied to social causes further highlight the importance of credibility and authenticity, with athlete achievements and competitive behavior serving as primary sources of trust (Biz & Schubert, 2024).

Complementary frameworks expand this understanding. Hasaan et al. (2018) propose a broader conceptual model of athlete branding, identifying antecedents such as media, impression management, and social agents. Hasaan, Biscaia & Ross (2019) extend this by mapping the athlete brand life cycle, while Panthen et al. (2024) introduce a typology of athlete brands shaped by social media and sponsorship relationships. Golmohammadi et al. (2025) highlight the evolution of athlete branding research, and Hasaan & Fişne (2021) emphasize authenticity as a multidimensional process across on-field, off-field, and marketing activities.

Challenges in athlete branding remain significant, particularly for underrepresented groups. Muslim female athletes face cultural and social obstacles that limit their ability to leverage appearance-based branding strategies (Hasaan, Berndt & Fişne, 2024; Basabain et al., 2021). Simak (2023) adds that authenticity and feminist narratives can reshape athlete branding, as seen in professional wrestling, where athletes leverage personal identity to build credibility.

Gender and identity also influence branding. Johnson et al. (2023) show how elite female athletes balance dual identities of motherhood and athleticism in their self-presentation, challenging stereotypes about performance and family roles. Apparel co-branding further complicates athlete branding, with Williams & Pedersen (2023) demonstrating that partnerships with high-awareness manufacturers enhance perceptions of merchandise quality. Crisis contexts also disrupt branding, as Bredikhina et al. (2022) reveal how athletes adapted their personal brand management during COVID-19, leveraging digital channels to remain relevant.

Athlete managers emphasize authenticity, relatable stories, and social media presence as essential for monetizing athlete brands and securing sponsorships (Taniyev, Mayer & Gordon, 2022). Sponsorship dynamics in low-media-coverage sports show how performance, personality, and athlete-driven outreach shape endorsement opportunities (Romanelli, Kjærstad & Moustakas, 2026). Legal and contractual aspects also play a role, with high-performance athletes needing to navigate endorsement contracts and rights management to sustain long-term careers (Sotiriadou, Yang & Yao, 2026). Kenyan para-athletes face similar structural challenges, as camps and clubs critical for talent development are largely absent (Kipkemboi & Otuya, 2019).

In Kenya, endorsements have transformed the visibility of athletes such as Eliud Kipchoge (Nike), Henry Kirwa (Safaricom), and Collins Injera (Tusker), shifting public perceptions of sports and disability (Safaricom PLC, 2016; Kenya Rugby, 2016). Yet Para Athletes remain underrepresented in endorsement deals. Empirical studies highlight systemic gaps: sponsorships are minimal (Kiptembur et al., 2024), competitive events are limited (Kiptembur et al., 2025), and camps/clubs are largely absent (Kipkemboi & Otuya, 2019). More broadly, inclusive athlete development models propose harmonizing para and able-bodied systems to ensure equitable sponsorship and training opportunities (Kiptembur, 2026; Golmohammadi et al., 2025). Sports entrepreneurship research further shows how endorsements can intersect with nutrition and branding strategies, demonstrating their potential to drive both performance and industry growth (Kiptembur & Wafula, 2026; Williams & Pedersen, 2023).

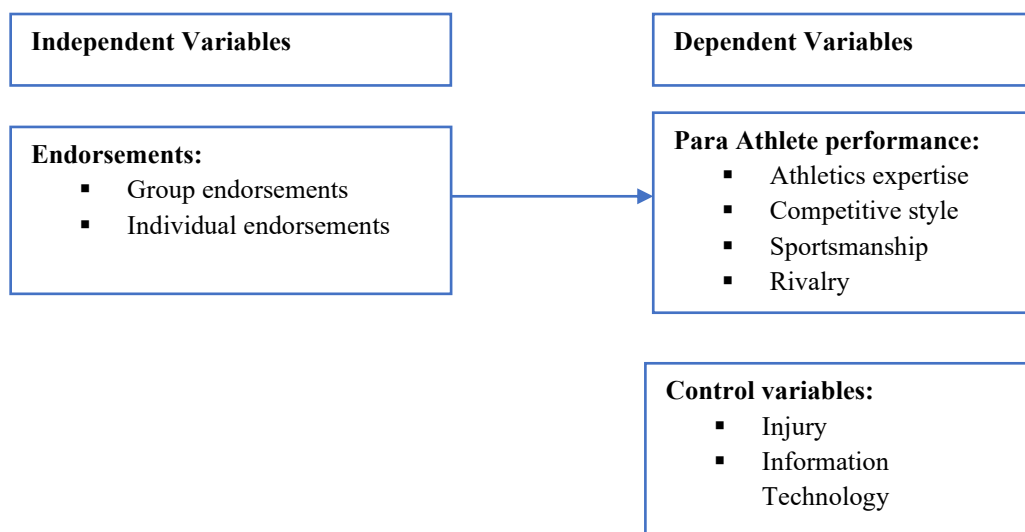


Figure 1: Figure Conceptual Framework
 Source: Adopted and modified from Arai, Ko and Ross (2014)

Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory case study design to investigate the experiences and perspectives of Para Athletes regarding endorsements. A qualitative approach was chosen to allow for in-depth exploration of complex phenomena and to capture individual narratives in context (Patton, 2002). The research was guided by the Straussian approach to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which provided a structured framework for data collection, coding, and theory development. Grounded theory is particularly suited to contexts where little prior research exists, as it enables theory to emerge directly from participants' lived experiences.

Grounded theory requires researchers to begin without forcing preconceived problems onto the data. As Glaser (2020) cautions, "thought-up" problems often yield little, whereas authentic problems must emerge from the data itself. This study therefore began with broad guiding questions and allowed categories to develop iteratively. Grounded theory has rehabilitated the role of theory generation in social science, countering the dominance of purely quantitative approaches (Mey & Mruck, 2011).

The study ultimately included twenty Para Athletes from Kenya, a number reached through theoretical sampling and confirmed at the point of saturation. Recruitment began with athletes affiliated with the National Paralympic Committee of Kenya, consistent with grounded theory practice of beginning with accessible, information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). Initial participants were selected to ensure diversity across gender, age, disability type, and sport discipline, reflecting recommendations that sampling should capture variation to strengthen category development (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Goulding, 2002).

As categories began to emerge in early interviews, subsequent participants were deliberately chosen to deepen and expand those categories. For example, when endorsement challenges among visually impaired athletes surfaced, additional athletes from this group were recruited to test and refine the category. This operationalization of theoretical sampling aligns with Glaser and Strauss's (2017) definition of sampling as a process of jointly collecting, coding, and analyzing data while deciding what to collect next based on theoretical relevance. It also reflects Draucker et al. (2007), who emphasize iterative adjustment of recruitment in response to emerging findings, and Truschkat et al. (2011), who highlight the interwoven nature of sampling and analysis in grounded theory.

The final sample comprised both male and female athletes, aged from late teens to over fifty. Disability types represented included visual impairment, physical impairment, cerebral palsy, and amputee athletes. Sport disciplines covered track events, field events, and team sports. This demographic breakdown ensured that endorsement experiences were captured across a broad spectrum of Para sport contexts, consistent with Morse and Clark's (2019) emphasis on diversity in theoretical sampling.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)	18 - 30	8	40%
Age (years)	31 - 40	8	40%
Age (years)	41 - 50	4	20%
Age (years)	Over 50	0	0%
Marital status	Married	11	56%

Marital status	Single, never married	9	44%
Education level	Primary education	10	50%
Education level	Secondary education	6	30%
Education level	College education	3	15%
Education level	No schooling	1	5%

The process continued until theoretical saturation was reached. After the twentieth interview, analysis showed that new data only reinforced existing categories without adding novel insights. This point of saturation confirmed analytic completeness, consistent with Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Aldiabat and Le Navenec (2018), who stress that saturation is achieved when categories are fully developed and no new properties emerge.

Data was collected through structured and unstructured interviews lasting 60 - 90 minutes. Structured interviews ensured consistency across participants, while unstructured interviews allowed athletes to narrate their experiences freely. Interviews were conducted in both English and Swahili, with participants encouraged to switch languages when needed to enhance self-expression. This bilingual approach ensured accuracy and inclusivity (Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022; Rolland, 2023). The interview guide was adapted iteratively to reflect emerging categories, ensuring semantic and cultural equivalence (Schiaffino, 2023).

Analysis followed the Straussian grounded theory coding paradigm. In the first stage, open coding was used to break down transcripts into discrete concepts, allowing the identification of initial categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This was followed by axial coding, in which related codes were regrouped into broader categories, highlighting relationships among data points and clarifying how different dimensions of the athletes' experiences were connected (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Finally, selective coding was employed to refine and integrate the categories into core themes, producing a coherent explanatory framework of endorsement experiences among Para Athletes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

This progression ensured that the emergent theory was firmly grounded in participant narratives rather than imposed by the researcher. Theoretical sensitivity was cultivated through engagement with existing literature and professional experience (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Bryant, 2017). The analysis was paced carefully, with sampling and coding timed to align with the development of categories (Gibson & Hartman, 2014). Later stages of coding drew on diagrams, maps, and memoing to refine categories and integrate them into coherent theory (Bryant, 2017). Finally, the study acknowledged its constructivist stance, recognizing that researcher involvement shaped data collection and analysis, and theoretical frameworks were used transparently to guide interpretation (Mitchell, 2014).

Credibility was enhanced through member checking, allowing participants to review and validate interpretations (Vella, 2024; de Loyola González-Salgado et al., 2022). Recursive, dialogic member checking approaches further strengthened validity by involving participants in multiple stages of reflection and negotiation (Brear, 2018). These processes ensured both transactional validity (accuracy and agreement) and transformational validity (empowerment and equitable researcher - participant relationships). Rigor was safeguarded by following best practices in qualitative evaluation research, minimizing bias and ensuring transparency (Ranganathan & Wadhwa, 2019).

Findings

The interviews revealed a significant absence of endorsement opportunities within Para Athletics in Kenya. Across all twenty participants, there was a unanimous sentiment that endorsements were missing from their sporting experiences.

Respondent 10 admired global figures such as Eliud Kipchoge and Nike branding but emphasized: “*Bado. Niliwatch Eliud Kipchoge. Si ata sisi tunapendanga Nike... Endorsement sijaona*” (“Not yet. I watched Eliud Kipchoge. We love Nike... Endorsement, I have not seen”). Similarly, Respondent 13 observed: “*Kwa Paralympic hakuna mtu hata mmoja. Haiko*” (“At the Paralympic, there is not a single person. Nothing”), while Respondent 4 added: “*Endorsement haijawi fanyika... Labda sasa kitu yenye nawezasema nimewahi ona tu ni Soya Award ya Safaricom*” (“Endorsement has not yet been done... Maybe now the only thing I can say I’ve ever seen is the Safaricom Soya Award”). Other participants, such as Respondent 9 and Respondent 3, explicitly acknowledged the absence of endorsements, with Respondent 9 stating simply: “*Bado*” (“Not yet”) and Respondent 3 agreeing: “*Hakuna*” (“Nothing”). These responses highlight how Para Athletes feel invisible compared to able-bodied peers, reinforcing systemic exclusion from endorsement structures.

Despite this absence, athletes consistently articulated how endorsements *could* shape their performance across four critical dimensions:

Athletic expertise was imagined as the most immediate benefit. Athletes believed endorsements would provide financial resources to improve training quality, coaching, and facilities. Respondent 9 explained: “*Itaimprove... utapata at least kitu, pesa ya kufanya mazoezi*” (“It will improve... you will get at least something, money to train”), while Respondent 10 added: “*Itanisaidia vizuri sana. Nichangamke atanifanye bidii sana*” (“It will help me very well. Be active and work hard”). Respondent 6 reinforced this by noting: “*Itanisaidia kwa vile kwa performance nitaongeza bidii. Huwezi kutupa kampuni*” (“It will help me with performance, I will increase the effort. You can’t ignore Company”). Endorsements were perceived as enablers of expertise, allowing athletes to access better preparation and legitimacy through corporate recognition.

Competitive style was also linked to endorsements. Athletes emphasized that sponsorship would motivate them to compete with greater confidence and intensity. Respondent 3 expressed: “*Nitakimbia kabisa. Wengine watafuata*” (“I will run to the maximum. Others will follow”), while Respondent 4 envisioned: “*Utakuwa kama nyota sasa. Itakuwa ukitaka uking’aa*” (“You will be like a star now. You will want to shine”). Respondent 13 added: “*Nitafanya training kwa bidii sana... Performance itakuwa juu. Pili sitaileta down because lazima ushinde katika hiyo tatu bora bronze, silver ama gold*” (“I will do the training very hard... Performance will be high. Second, I won’t let it down because you must win in the top three bronze, silver or gold”). Endorsements were imagined as catalysts for courage, medal-level determination, and a more assertive competitive style.

Sportsmanship was another anticipated outcome. Athletes connected endorsements to discipline, responsibility, and professionalism. Respondent 4 explained: “*Unajua sasa hautakuwa ukilala. Because you are a brand of the company... Everything will be ok*” (“You know now you won’t be sleeping. Because you are a brand of the company... Everything will be ok”). Athletes anticipated that being recognized as a brand would encourage accountability and role-model behavior, strengthening sportsmanship.

Finally, endorsements were perceived as potential drivers of rivalry. Athletes acknowledged that sponsorships could intensify competition by inspiring peers to strive for similar recognition. Respondent 3 noted: “*Wengine watafuata. Watasema kumbe wanapata gari*” (“Others will follow. They will say they are getting a car”). Endorsements were seen as tangible incentives that could heighten rivalry, motivating athletes collectively to higher levels of performance.

Taken together, these perceptions demonstrate that while endorsements are currently absent, Para Athletes in Kenya envision them as transformative mechanisms that could enhance expertise, shape competitive style, strengthen sportsmanship, and intensify rivalry.

Table 2: Summary of Findings

Dimension/Category	Supporting Quotes	Emergent Theme
Athletic expertise	R9: “<i>Itaimprove... utapata at least kitu, pesa ya kufanya mazoezi</i>” - “It will improve... you will get at least something, money to train” R10: “<i>Itanisaidia vizuri sana. Nichangamke atanifanye bidii sana</i>” - “It will help me very well. Be active and work hard” R6: “<i>Itanisaidia kwa vile kwa performance nitaongeza bidii. Huwezi kutupa kampuni</i>” - “It will help me with performance; I will increase the effort. You can’t ignore Company”	Endorsements are imagined as enablers of expertise, providing resources for training, skill development, and legitimacy.
Competitive style	R3: “<i>Nitakimbia kabisa. Wengine watafuata</i>” - “I will run to the maximum. Others will follow” R4: “<i>Utakuwa kama nyota sasa. Itakuwaukitaka uking’aa</i>” - “You will be like a star now. You will want to shine” R13: “<i>Nitafanya training kwa bidii sana... Performance itakuwa juu. Pili sitaleta down because lazima ushinde katika hiyo tatu bora bronze, silver ama gold</i>” - “I will do the training very hard... Performance will be high. Second, I won’t let it down because you must win in the top three bronze, silver or gold”	Endorsements anticipated to boost confidence, courage, and medal-level determination, shaping a more assertive competitive style.
Sportsmanship	R4: “<i>Unajua sasa hautakuwa ukilala. Because you are a brand of the company...</i>” - “You know now you won’t be sleeping. Because you are a brand of the company...” R4: “<i>Utakuwa kama nyota sasa. Itakuwa ukitaka uking’aa. Hiyo kampuni itakuwa itakusponsor. Everything will be ok.</i>” - “You will be like a star now. You will want to shine. That company will be your sponsor. Everything will be ok.”	Endorsements linked to discipline and professionalism, encouraging athletes to act as role models.

Rivalry	R3: “<i>Wengine watafuata. Watasema kumbe wanapata gari</i>” - “Others will follow. They will say they are getting a car” R13: “<i>Sana... Kwasababu nitaonekana na itanipa kuwa mjasiri... Performance itakuwa juu... lazima ushinde katika hiyo tatu bora bronze, silver ama gold.</i>” - “Very much... Because I will be seen and it will give me courage... Performance will be high... you must win in the top three bronze, silver or gold.”	Endorsements seen as incentives that could heighten rivalry, motivating athletes and peers to excel.
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Through open, axial, and selective coding, these categories were integrated into a core theory: endorsements are absent yet highly desired in Kenyan Para Athletics. While athletes have no lived experience of endorsement, they consistently articulated how such opportunities could enhance expertise, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry. Their introduction would simultaneously provide recognition, motivation, and financial support, highlighting a systemic gap in athlete support structures and the transformative potential of endorsements in empowering Para Athletes.

Discussion

The absence of endorsements in Kenyan Para Athletics emerged as a consistent theme across all interviews, underscoring the systemic invisibility of Para Athletes compared to their able-bodied peers. While none of the respondents reported direct experience with endorsements, they articulated clear expectations of how such opportunities could transform their sporting lives. These expectations resonate with the Athlete Brand Image framework (Arai, Ko & Ross, 2014), which identifies athletic expertise, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry as core dimensions of athlete identity shaped by sponsorship and visibility.

Endorsements were imagined as crucial enablers of athletic expertise. Athletes described how financial support would allow them to access better training, coaching, and facilities, thereby improving technical skills and preparation. This perception aligns with career development literature, which emphasizes structured support systems as essential for athlete progression (Stambulova et al., 2009). In the Kenyan context, the absence of endorsements represents a barrier to expertise, limiting Para Athletes’ ability to reach their full potential.

Beyond expertise, athletes also emphasized competitive style, imagining endorsements as catalysts for courage and medal-level determination. Respondents envisioned sponsorship as a source of confidence and ambition to achieve podium finishes. Such views reflect the motivational role of endorsements documented in athlete branding studies, where visibility and recognition enhance competitive drive (Arai, Ko & Ross, 2014). Without endorsements, Para Athletes lack external reinforcement that could inspire assertive and ambitious approaches to competition.

In addition to competitive drive, endorsements were also linked to sportsmanship, reinforcing discipline and professionalism. Athletes anticipated that becoming a brand would encourage accountability and role-model behavior. These finding echoes research showing that sponsorships reinforce athlete credibility and ethical conduct (Kamberidou et al., 2019; Biz & Schubert, 2024). In Kenya, endorsements could

strengthen respect within Para Athletics, but their absence leaves athletes without this external incentive to embody professionalism.

Athletes connected endorsements to rivalry, noting how sponsorships could intensify competition and motivate peers to excel. Respondents explained that endorsements would not only inspire individual effort but also create pressure to achieve podium finishes, thereby heightening collective competition. This expectation aligns with studies highlighting how endorsements amplify rivalry by linking performance to tangible benefits and visibility (Beermann & Hallmann, 2024). In the Kenyan setting, the lack of endorsements diminishes competitive energy, limiting both individual and collective performance potential.

Taken together, these insights demonstrate that endorsements are not merely financial mechanisms but multidimensional tools of empowerment. They have the potential to enhance expertise, shape competitive style, strengthen sportsmanship, and intensify rivalry. Addressing this gap requires systemic reforms in governance and leadership within the Kenya Paralympics movement (Kipkemboi et al., 2019; Kiptembur et al., 2024). Establishing structured endorsement systems would provide recognition, motivation, and financial support, thereby fostering inclusivity and excellence in Para Athletics.

Conclusion

This study examined the landscape of endorsements in Para Athletics in Kenya, revealing a striking absence of opportunities and support compared to able-bodied athletes. Through qualitative interviews with twenty Para Athletes, the findings highlighted not only the systemic exclusion from endorsement structures but also the athletes' clear perceptions of how endorsements could transform their sporting lives.

The absence of endorsements was consistently reported, leaving athletes without financial backing, visibility, or recognition. Yet, despite this gap, participants articulated how endorsements could enhance their performance across four dimensions. They envisioned endorsements as enablers of athletic expertise, providing resources for training and skill development; as catalysts for competitive style, inspiring confidence and medal-level determination; as reinforcements of sportsmanship, encouraging professionalism and accountability; and as drivers of rivalry, intensifying competition and motivating peers to excel. These anticipated effects resonate with the Athlete Brand Image framework and underscore the multidimensional role endorsements play in shaping athlete identity and performance.

The findings also expose a stark disparity between the visibility afforded to able-bodied athletes and the neglect experienced by Para Athletes. This imbalance perpetuates inequities in recognition and support, undermining the talent and dedication of athletes with disabilities. Addressing these disparities requires systemic reforms in governance and leadership within the Kenya Paralympics movement, alongside deliberate strategies to integrate Para Athletes into endorsement ecosystems.

By situating endorsements as mechanisms of empowerment rather than mere financial transactions, this study contributes to the broader discourse on inclusivity in sport. It emphasizes the urgent need for stakeholders - including sports federations, corporate sponsors, and policymakers - to recognize and support Para Athletes through equitable endorsement practices. Doing so would not only provide financial stability but also foster visibility, motivation, and role-modeling, ultimately inspiring future generations of athletes with disabilities.

The research underscores that endorsements, though absent, are highly desired and imagined as transformative by Para Athletes in Kenya. Their introduction would bridge systemic gaps, empower athletes across multiple dimensions of performance, and advance the agenda of inclusivity and equity in the sporting environment.

Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to address systemic gaps in endorsement opportunities for Para Athletes in Kenya. To foster a supportive and inclusive environment, strategies should be pursued that align with the broader dimensions of athlete performance - expertise, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry.

Endorsements tailored to Para Athletes should be prioritized by brands and sponsors. By highlighting the unique narratives and lived experiences of these athletes, companies can foster authentic connections with audiences while enhancing visibility and consumer engagement. Effective storytelling in endorsements not only elevates the athlete's profile but also provides financial resources that strengthen expertise through improved training, coaching, and facilities.

Alongside tailored endorsements, athlete development structures such as camps and competitive events are essential for preparing athletes to attract sponsors. These initiatives create pathways to endorsement opportunities and ensure that Para Athletes are equipped with the skills and readiness necessary to compete confidently. Investment in these areas enhances competitive style, motivating athletes to perform with greater determination and ambition.

Beyond development, governance reforms are critical to embed professionalism and accountability in Para Athletics. The leadership and organizational structures of entities such as the Kenya Paralympics require reorganization to prioritize Para Athletes. Strong governance can ensure endorsements are leveraged effectively to support careers, reinforcing sportsmanship by encouraging discipline, responsibility, and role-model behavior.

Finally, visibility through media and mentorship can inspire future generations and intensify healthy rivalry among athletes. Regular coverage of Para Athletes in mainstream and digital platforms can raise awareness, attract endorsements, and normalize inclusivity in sports. Mentorship programs connecting established athletes with newcomers provide guidance on training and navigating endorsement opportunities, fostering solidarity and motivating athletes to excel collectively.

Taken together, these recommendations emphasize a holistic but focused approach: tailored endorsements, athlete development structures, governance reforms, and visibility through media and mentorship. By implementing these strategies, stakeholders can significantly enhance the support and recognition of Para Athletes, ensuring they have equitable opportunities to thrive. Endorsements, when integrated into athlete performance, have the potential to empower athletes across expertise, competitive style, sportsmanship, and rivalry, thereby advancing equity and excellence in Kenyan Para Athletics.

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