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''ESG Marketing Meets Sports Journalism: Media Framing and Public Perception of Corporate Responsibility in Athletic Sponsorships''

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Abstract: *This study investigates the role of journalistic media framing in shaping public perceptions of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) sponsorships within the domain of sport. Integrating theoretical perspectives from framing theory, corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication,* *and brand authenticity, the research develops and empirically tests a conceptual model that links media narratives to perceived authenticity, brand trust, sponsorship evaluation, and overall brand attitude. Based on a cross-sectional survey of 345 respondents,* *the data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to evaluate both the measurement and structural components of the model. The results demonstrate that positively framed ESG sponsorships significantly enhance perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.61$) and directly increase brand trust ($\beta = 0.32$). In turn, brand trust positively affects both sponsorship evaluation ($\beta = 0.58$) and brand attitude ($\beta = 0.68$). The proposed model accounts for substantial variance across key constructs, with R^2 values ranging from 0.46 to 0.62, indicating strong explanatory power. The study makes a theoretical contribution by bridging fragmented research streams across strategic marketing, media studies, and CSR in sport, offering a unified framework for understanding how journalistic mediation influences stakeholder interpretations of corporate responsibility. It positions media framing not as a neutral conduit, but as an active co-constructor of brand legitimacy and ethical perception. From a managerial standpoint, the findings offer actionable implications for brand communicators and media strategists operating in high-visibility sectors. The study advocates for the development of coherent, transparent, and context-sensitive communication strategies that align organizational ESG narratives with journalistic discourse, in order to maximize trust, engagement, and reputational value in an increasingly value-driven consumer landscape.*

Keywords: media framing, strategic marketing, ESG communication, sports sponsorship, journalistic narratives brand authenticity, structural equation modeling (SEM), stakeholder perception

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the incorporation of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles into corporate strategy has transitioned from a peripheral consideration to a central element of organizational identity, particularly within high-visibility sectors such as sports. As global stakeholders, including investors, regulators, consumers, and media entities, intensify their scrutiny of corporate responsibility, sports organizations and their sponsors are increasingly compelled to exhibit authentic commitments to sustainability, ethical governance, and social impact (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Walker & Kent, 2009).

The sports industry, characterized by its expansive reach, emotive influence, and global media exposure, offers a unique platform for ESG communication. Initiatives such as carbon-neutral sporting events, inclusive sponsorship campaigns, athlete activism, and governance transparency are not only becoming more prevalent but also strategically significant (Trendafilova et al., 2021). Sponsors, in particular, are leveraging ESG-aligned initiatives to signal corporate values, cultivate brand loyalty, and differentiate themselves in increasingly saturated and skeptical markets (Kim et al., 2020).

However, the mere implementation of ESG strategies is no longer sufficient. The manner in which these initiatives are framed, communicated, and interpreted by the public, especially through journalistic channels, plays a critical role in shaping their perceived legitimacy and effectiveness (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Du et al., 2010). In the context of athletic sponsorships, where brand messages intersect with fan identity, collective values, and cultural narratives, the strategic alignment of ESG principles with media representation is of paramount importance. Recent empirical studies underscore the impact of ESG participation on consumer behavior. For instance, Chou et al. (2024) found that fans' perceptions of sponsor participation in ESG activities significantly enhance their attitudes toward the sponsor and sponsor image, which in turn positively influence electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and purchase intentions. This highlights the importance of authentic ESG engagement in fostering favorable consumer responses.

Moreover, the proliferation of ESG-driven reporting is transforming the media landscape, expanding the scope of sports narratives to include environmental, social, and governance dimensions. This shift prompts readers to critically evaluate aspects such as carbon footprints, ethical considerations, and labor conditions associated with sporting events (Hums et al., 2023). Such media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and holding organizations accountable for their ESG commitments. Nevertheless, skepticism about ESG activities remains high, with over half of professionals viewing ESG as "just marketing" (Kim et al., 2025). This underscores the necessity for organizations to ensure that their ESG initiatives are not only genuine but also effectively communicated to avoid perceptions of greenwashing and to build trust with stakeholders.

In conclusion, understanding the dynamics between ESG marketing, sports journalism, and public perception is essential for both scholars and practitioners. It opens pathways for evaluating how sustainable values are translated from corporate agendas to public discourse, and how this translation affects consumer trust, brand evaluation, and broader societal impact.

The Role of Journalism in Framing ESG Initiatives in Sports Sponsorship

Journalism plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception of corporate initiatives, particularly those related to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles (Hoang, 2008). As an influential actor in constructing social reality, the journalistic field not only reports on organizational behaviors but also frames them through selective emphasis, thematic context, and interpretive angles (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Within this framework, media narratives serve as powerful intermediaries between ESG strategies and stakeholder interpretations, often amplifying, distorting, or neutralizing the intended messages.

In the context of sports, where coverage extends beyond athletic performance to encompass business ethics, athlete conduct, fan culture, and brand associations, journalistic media exert a multidimensional influence. News stories about corporate sponsors' environmental initiatives, social causes, or governance failures can significantly alter the perceived authenticity and impact of those efforts (Naraine & Parent, 2016). Moreover, the framing of ESG-related sponsorships, whether as genuine efforts, public relations maneuvers, or greenwashing tactics, can affect audience trust and shape broader attitudes toward corporate responsibility (Furlow, 2010). Notably, sports journalism has evolved into a hybrid domain that incorporates elements of entertainment, advocacy, and critical commentary. This hybridization amplifies its potential to influence public discourse on corporate ethics and sustainability. As such, the media do not merely reflect corporate ESG communication but actively participate in its reconstruction, offering frames that can reinforce or undermine the moral positioning of brands engaged in athletic sponsorships.

By investigating how journalistic coverage frames ESG efforts in the realm of sports sponsorship, scholars can better understand the interplay between media discourse and public evaluation of corporate responsibility. This becomes especially salient in an era marked by heightened consumer skepticism, polarized audiences, and the growing expectation that companies go beyond compliance to embrace values-driven practices.

Athletic sponsorships have historically served as a potent vehicle for corporate branding, offering companies access to emotionally engaged audiences, enhanced visibility, and association with aspirational values such as excellence, teamwork, and perseverance. In recent years, however, the strategic use of sports sponsorship has evolved beyond commercial promotion to encompass broader goals related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) agendas (Walraven, Bijmolt, & Koning, 2014; Meenaghan, 2013).

Brands increasingly leverage athletic sponsorships to communicate their commitment to environmental sustainability, social justice, and ethical governance. Examples range from partnerships with carbon-neutral sporting events and campaigns promoting gender equality in athletics to the sponsorship of inclusive community-based sports initiatives. This shift reflects not only changing corporate priorities but also shifting stakeholder expectations: consumers and media audiences now demand more than entertainment, they expect accountability, transparency, and alignment with values they deem important (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Sheth, 2020).

Importantly, athletic sponsorships provide a high-stakes context in which brand messaging is both amplified and scrutinized. The visibility and cultural relevance of sports make them an ideal but also risky platform for ESG messaging. A mismatch between corporate actions and the values projected through sponsorship can result in skepticism, reputational backlash, or accusations of greenwashing and purpose-washing (Du et al., 2010; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). Conversely, well-aligned and credibly framed ESG messages can enhance brand trust, loyalty, and legitimacy. Given this dual potential, understanding how ESG messaging within sports sponsorships is received by the public and how journalistic media influence this process, of critical importance. It brings to light the complex dynamics between corporate intention, media framing, and public interpretation within the high-exposure ecosystem of contemporary sport.

The manner in which journalistic media frame information significantly influences public understanding, evaluation, and emotional responses to corporate initiatives, particularly those embedded within symbolically rich domains such as sports. Framing Theory posits that media outlets do not merely disseminate neutral facts; instead, they actively construct meaning by emphasizing specific aspects of reality while omitting others, thereby shaping audience perceptions and interpretations (Entman, 1993). These frames guide audiences in determining the importance of issues, interpreting events, and forming moral judgments (Scheufele, 1999).

In the context of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) marketing within sports sponsorships, media framing choices, such as highlighting corporate authenticity, stakeholder engagement, environmental metrics, or social equity can profoundly affect public perceptions regarding the legitimacy and sincerity of a brand's efforts. Positive framing can enhance perceptions of credibility, trustworthiness, and brand purpose, whereas negative or skeptical framing may erode public confidence and foster perceptions of opportunism or performative responsibility (Lock & Seele, 2017; Vázquez et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the impact of framing is not uniform across all audiences; it is contingent upon individual predispositions, prior attitudes toward the sponsoring brand, and the perceived objectivity or tone of the media source. This interaction between journalistic narratives and audience psychology underscores the media's role as a powerful mediator in communicating ESG values (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

In the realm of sports, where fandom, identity, and emotion are deeply intertwined, these framing dynamics become even more influential. The symbolic power of sports amplifies both the potential benefits and risks associated with ESG communication. Therefore, analyzing how journalistic media frame ESG-related sponsorships provides valuable insights into the social construction, negotiation, and evaluation of corporate responsibility by diverse publics.

Despite the growing body of research on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) communication and corporate social responsibility (CSR), limited scholarly attention has been paid to the interplay between journalistic media and ESG marketing strategies within the high-impact arena of sports sponsorships. Existing studies tend to examine either the effectiveness of ESG branding efforts in consumer markets (Du et al., 2010; Fatma, Rahman, & Khan, 2015) or the influence of media framing in shaping public discourse around corporate ethics (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Lock & Seele, 2017). However, these streams of literature remain largely disconnected, particularly in the context of sports journalism, which presents a unique fusion of cultural relevance, emotional investment, and brand visibility. Furthermore, while the sports industry increasingly serves as a platform for communicating ESG values, little is known about how these values are mediated,

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amplified, or contested through journalistic narratives. The potential discrepancy between a brand's intended ESG message and the version that reaches the public via media framing remains an underexplored yet crucial issue, especially in an era of heightened skepticism toward corporate motives and intensifying demands for transparency and authenticity (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011).

This study addresses this theoretical and empirical gap by investigating how ESG-focused sponsorships are framed by journalistic media and how such framing influences public perceptions of corporate responsibility in the context of sports. By integrating concepts from strategic marketing, media studies, and CSR communication, the study proposes an interdisciplinary framework that captures the dynamic relationship between corporate intention, media representation, and audience interpretation.

The core contribution of this research lies in its effort to:

- Bridge the divide between ESG marketing and media framing theory.
- Introduce sports journalism as a critical and under-theorized actor in ESG communication.
- Offer empirical insights into the reputational and perceptual consequences of journalistic mediation in sponsorship contexts.
- Advance a more holistic understanding of how corporate responsibility is socially constructed and negotiated in high-visibility, emotionally charged domains.

By doing so, the study not only expands the academic discourse on ESG communication but also provides actionable implications for brands, media professionals, and sports organizations seeking to navigate the complex terrain of values-based sponsorship in the public eye.

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the ways in which Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) marketing strategies, embedded within athletic sponsorships are framed by journalistic media, and how such framing influences public perceptions of corporate responsibility. By focusing on the intersection of brand communication, media discourse, and audience interpretation in the emotionally charged and symbolically potent context of sports, the study aims to uncover the discursive mechanisms through which media narratives affect the credibility, effectiveness, and legitimacy of ESG efforts.

Framing Theory, as articulated by Entman (1993), provides the theoretical underpinning for this inquiry. It posits that media do not merely convey information neutrally but actively construct meaning by highlighting certain aspects of reality. This framing process significantly impacts what audiences consider salient, how they evaluate moral or ethical dimensions, and which elements are emphasized or omitted (Scheufele, 1999). Within the realm of sports, these framing practices are particularly powerful due to the emotional investment and symbolic significance that fans attribute to teams, events, and sponsors.
Specifically, this research is structured around three focal aims:

To identify the dominant frames used by journalistic media in reporting ESG-related sponsorship activities in sports. Prior work by Chong and Druckman (2007) demonstrates that media frames can influence public interpretation by activating pre-existing cognitive schemas. This study builds on their insights by contextualizing framing within sport-media narratives.

To examine audience perception of ESG messaging, particularly in terms of authenticity, trustworthiness, and perceived social value. Research by Fatma, Rahman, and Khan (2015) indicates that CSR and ESG communications, when perceived as credible, enhance trust and corporate reputation. Similarly, Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill (2006) show that the congruence between corporate behavior and CSR messaging affects consumer attitudes and behaviors.

To investigate the (mis)alignment between brand-intended ESG messages and the mediated interpretations received by the public. Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010) argue that the effectiveness of CSR communication depends heavily on how messages are framed and interpreted, while Morsing and Schultz (2006) emphasize the strategic dilemma faced by companies in managing stakeholder expectations through transparent yet persuasive communication.

By bridging these three dimensions, strategic communication, media framing, and public reception, this study contributes to an integrated understanding of how ESG initiatives are socially constructed in high-visibility environments. It further positions sports journalism as a critical yet under-theorized actor in the ESG communication landscape, capable of both enhancing and undermining corporate legitimacy (Lock & Seele, 2017).

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis integrating Framing Theory, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and ESG Communication, and Perceived Corporate Authenticity and Trust. Collectively, these streams facilitate a systemic understanding of how journalistic media shape the reception and perceived legitimacy of ESG-oriented brand messaging within sports sponsorships.

Framing Theory: Media as Meaning-Making Agents

Framing theory constitutes the central epistemological foundation for analyzing media influence. As articulated by Entman (1993), framing involves the selection and salience amplification of specific elements of a perceived reality, thereby structuring interpretive schemas through which audiences assess issues, actors, and motives. In journalistic practice, these frames are operationalized through lexical choices, thematic organization, and narrative emphasis, effectively guiding public cognition and emotion (Scheufele, 1999; Chong & Druckman, 2007).

In the context of ESG-related sponsorships, frames may signal strategic intent (e.g., value alignment), normative responsibility (e.g., social impact), or reputational risk (e.g., greenwashing). Such framing operates as a heuristic filter that facilitates rapid evaluative judgments without the need for intensive cognitive processing (Kim & Cameron, 2011). Given the emotionally charged and symbolically potent nature of sports, these frames are particularly influential in shaping audience perceptions of corporate sincerity, purpose, and legitimacy.

CSR and ESG Communication Through Sports Sponsorship

Corporate sponsorship has evolved into a highly visible and symbolically rich communication channel for disseminating ESG values. Unlike conventional advertising, sponsorship enables brands to integrate with emotionally resonant cultural narratives, such as athletic achievement, community identity, and collective ethics, thereby functioning as a platform for implicit value signaling (Meenaghan, 2013; Sheth, 2020).

Recent literature underscores the strategic utility of CSR in sponsorship settings, where brand associations are shaped not merely by exposure but by contextual congruence with ethical or social imperatives (Walraven et al., 2014; Walker & Kent, 2009). However, what remains underexplored is the mediating role of journalistic discourse in reconfiguring, or even distorting, the brand's intended ESG narrative. This study posits that media framing serves as a critical intermediary in the transmission and transformation of corporate ESG communication, with reputational consequences contingent upon this process of narrative (re)mediation.

Public Perception: Dimensions of Authenticity, Trust, and Legitimacy

Public perception of ESG sponsorships is profoundly influenced by two interdependent constructs: perceived authenticity and trust. Authenticity reflects the degree to which corporate actions are seen as congruent with stated values and institutional identity (Alhouti et al., 2016). Trust, meanwhile, encapsulates stakeholders' confidence in a brand's integrity, benevolence, and competence (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

When ESG initiatives are perceived as substantively integrated with corporate ethos, rather than as superficial or opportunistic, they elicit more favorable evaluative judgments (Yoon et al., 2006). This congruence is particularly salient in the sports context, where fans' affective investment amplifies both the rewards of credible engagement and the reputational risks of perceived hypocrisy. Journalistic frames that foreground consistency, long-term commitment, or community benefit enhance perceived sincerity, whereas frames emphasizing contradiction, self-promotion, or ethical ambivalence may catalyze reputational erosion.

Hypothesis Development

H1. Positive Journalistic Framing of ESG Sponsorships Positively Influences Perceived Authenticity

Framing Theory posits that media do not act as passive conduits of information but rather as active agents in constructing social reality by emphasizing specific facets of an event, issue, or actor while omitting others (Entman, 1993). This selective presentation influences how audiences interpret organizational behavior and assign evaluative meaning, particularly in contexts charged with ethical implications such as Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) communications.

In the realm of sports sponsorships, journalistic narratives that frame corporate ESG initiatives in a favorable light, highlighting long-term commitment, societal impact, and consistency with organizational values can enhance perceptions of brand authenticity (Lock & Seele, 2017). Authenticity, in this context, refers to the extent to which stakeholders perceive a company's ESG actions as congruent with its core identity and values, rather than as externally imposed or strategically opportunistic (Alhouti et al., 2016).

Empirical studies further corroborate that positively valenced ESG and CSR narratives increase perceived sincerity and trustworthiness. For instance, Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) demonstrate that message congruence between a firm's stated ethical stance and its visible actions contributes significantly to consumers' belief in the genuineness of its motives. Conversely, when media coverage is skeptical, emphasizing inconsistencies, self-promotion, or superficiality, audiences are more likely to perceive such efforts as inauthentic or disingenuous. Therefore, it is theorized that media frames which emphasize positive attributes of ESG sponsorships (e.g., purpose-driven intent, stakeholder engagement, transparency, long-term societal contribution) will be positively associated with enhanced perceptions of authenticity toward the sponsoring brand. Based on the above, we assumed that:

Hypothesis H1: *Positive journalistic framing of ESG sponsorships will be positively associated with consumers' perceived authenticity of the sponsoring brand.*

H2. Perceived Authenticity Positively Influences Brand Trust

Perceived authenticity is increasingly recognized as a central antecedent to stakeholder trust in the domains of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) communication (Morhart et al., 2015; Schallehn et al., 2014). Authenticity, in this context, is defined as the perception that a company's actions are consistent with its professed values, purpose, and identity, rather than being driven solely by instrumental or promotional motives (Napoli et al., 2014).

When stakeholders perceive ESG initiatives as genuinely reflective of an organization's ethical and strategic commitments, they are more inclined to attribute positive moral characteristics such as integrity, transparency, and reliability to the brand (Alexander, 2020). This alignment fosters trust, a relational construct grounded in the belief that the brand acts with benevolence and credibility, especially under conditions of uncertainty or scrutiny. The significance of authenticity is further magnified in high-stakes symbolic environments such as sports sponsorships. The emotional intensity and identity alignment typical of fan-brand relationships mean that any perceived incongruence between brand messaging and corporate behavior is likely to trigger skepticism or moral dissonance (Alhouti et al., 2016). Conversely, when authenticity is present, trust in the sponsoring brand is strengthened, leading to more favorable evaluations, increased loyalty, and reputational resilience. Accordingly, authenticity is posited as a critical precursor to brand trust in the context of ESG sponsorships within sport. Based on the above, we assumed that:

Hypothesis H2: *Perceived authenticity of ESG sponsorships will be positively associated with trust in the sponsoring brand.*

H3. Brand Trust Positively Influences Evaluation of the Sponsorship

Trust functions as a foundational evaluative heuristic within consumer-brand relationships and plays a critical role in shaping stakeholder responses to corporate initiatives, particularly in the context of values-based marketing strategies such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) communications. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) conceptualize brand trust as the willingness of consumers to rely on a brand's ability to fulfill its promises, grounded in perceptions of competence, reliability, and ethical intent. When trust is established, consumers are predisposed to interpret brand activities, such as sponsorship engagements, not only as credible but also as inherently well-intentioned and socially meaningful (Iglesias et al., 2019). This trust-based lens fosters a cognitive bias toward favorable judgment, reducing resistance and skepticism while enhancing the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy of the brand's actions.

In the specific domain of athletic sponsorships, Speed and Thompson (2000) demonstrate that trust significantly moderates audience evaluations of sponsorship relevance, appropriateness, and perceived sincerity. A trusted brand benefits from what might be termed "interpretive generosity," wherein its sponsorship activities are viewed through a benevolent frame, thereby strengthening positive attitudes and reputational equity. Given that ESG-driven sponsorships often involve complex messaging and intangible societal benefits, audience trust becomes especially salient in ensuring that these efforts are viewed as authentic and valuable, rather than performative or opportunistic. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis H3: *Brand trust will be positively associated with audience evaluation of the ESG-focused sponsorship.*

H4. Positive Journalistic Framing Directly Enhances Brand Trust

Beyond its role in shaping perceptions of authenticity, journalistic media framing exerts a direct and independent influence on stakeholder trust toward corporate actors. Framing theory suggests that the way information is presented, particularly in terms of tone, emphasis, and thematic structuring can evoke affective responses that shape audience judgments even prior to substantive message evaluation (Entman, 1993; Chong & Druckman, 2007). In this regard, media serve not only as conveyors of ESG information but also as critical architects of brand credibility and legitimacy. Positive media coverage, characterized by frames emphasizing consistency, societal contribution, ethical alignment, and transparency, tends to foster higher levels of perceived trustworthiness (Kim & Cameron, 2011; Vázquez et al., 2019). Such coverage implicitly endorses the brand's intentions, reinforcing consumer beliefs in the reliability and moral integrity of the organization. Importantly, these effects can materialize irrespective of the brand's actual ESG performance, due to the interpretive authority and perceived objectivity of journalistic sources (Lock & Seele, 2017).

This is especially consequential in media-saturated consumer environments, where third-party narratives often serve as primary sources of information. Journalistic framing thus acts as a powerful informational shortcut, or cognitive heuristic, shaping trust-based assessments in ways that bypass direct engagement with corporate content. Consequently, the tone and structure of media reporting become key variables in determining whether ESG sponsorships are received with trust or skepticism.

Hypothesis H4: *Positive framing of ESG sponsorships by journalistic media will be positively associated with trust in the sponsoring brand.*

H5. Evaluation of the Sponsorship Positively Influences Overall Brand Attitude

Consumer evaluation of sponsorship initiatives operates as a critical intermediary mechanism influencing broader brand attitudes. In the context of ESG-driven sponsorships, favorable assessments, grounded in perceptions of authenticity, relevance, and social impact are likely to foster positive affective and cognitive responses toward the sponsoring brand (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Meenaghan, 2013). Attitude toward the brand is conceptualized as a composite evaluative judgment encompassing affective affinity, perceived brand credibility, and behavioral intentions (e.g., willingness to support or purchase). Particularly within values-based marketing frameworks such as ESG communication, consumer attitudes are significantly shaped by the degree to which the brand's actions align with personal and societal values (Du et al., 2010). When sponsorships are evaluated positively, due to trustworthy framing and perceived sincerity they serve to reinforce favorable brand schemas and deepen consumer-brand identification.

Moreover, empirical findings suggest that positive sponsorship evaluations can extend beyond the specific campaign to influence global brand perceptions, enhancing the organization's moral legitimacy, stakeholder alignment, and market reputation (Groza et al., 2011; Sheth, 2020). This transfer effect underscores the strategic importance of effectively executed and well-communicated sponsorships in bolstering overall brand equity.

Hypothesis H5: *Audience evaluation of the ESG sponsorship will be positively associated with overall brand attitude.*

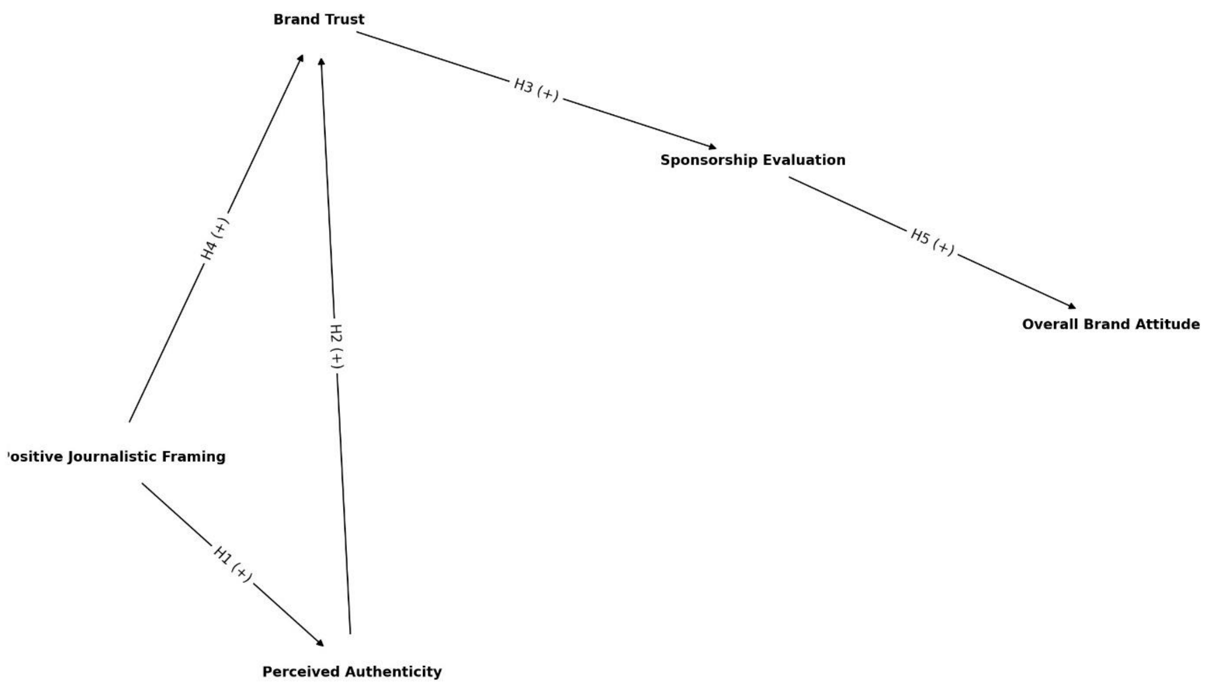

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Hypothesized Relationships in ESG Sponsorship Context. This conceptual model illustrates the hypothesized relationships among key constructs in the framing and reception of ESG-focused sports sponsorships. Drawing from Framing Theory, CSR/ESG communication literature, and trust-based consumer behavior models, the framework posits five positive associations: (H1) Positive journalistic framing enhances perceived authenticity, (H2) perceived authenticity increases brand trust, (H3) brand trust improves audience evaluation of the sponsorship, (H4) positive framing directly influences brand trust and (H5) favorable sponsorship evaluation strengthens overall brand attitude. All hypothesized relationships are assumed to be positive and are depicted with directed paths.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate the relationships between journalistic media framing of ESG sponsorships and public perceptions related to authenticity, brand trust, sponsorship evaluation, and overall brand attitude in the context of sports marketing. The primary objective is to test the proposed conceptual model and assess the direction and strength of hypothesized relationships between latent constructs.

To this end, the study utilizes Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) as the core analytical technique. SEM is particularly suited for this research due to its ability to examine complex, multivariate relationships among theoretical constructs while accounting for measurement error (Byrne, 2016). The method facilitates simultaneous analysis of both the measurement model (validity and reliability of scales) and the structural model (causal paths among variables), making it appropriate for theory testing and model evaluation. A structured questionnaire was developed, incorporating validated multi-item scales for each construct. Data were collected through an online survey distributed to a sample of respondents with exposure to sports-related media content, allowing for the evaluation of their responses to ESG messaging as mediated by journalistic narratives. This design enables the empirical assessment of how media framing influences stakeholder perception in the field of sports marketing and corporate responsibility, offering insights for both academic theory and practical communication strategies.

A total of 345 respondents participated in the study through an online self-administered questionnaire. Participants were recruited using a non-probability convenience sampling technique, with the survey distributed via social media platforms, online forums related to sports, and university mailing lists. The inclusion criteria required participants to be over 18 years of age and have at least some exposure to sports media coverage, ensuring familiarity with brand-related sponsorship content.

The sample was composed of a diverse demographic in terms of age, gender, and educational background, reflecting a broad cross-section of media consumers. Although not fully representative of the general population, the sample size exceeded the recommended minimum thresholds for structural equation modeling (Hair et al., 2022), ensuring adequate statistical power for model estimation and hypothesis testing. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all responses were screened for completeness and consistency prior to analysis. After data cleaning, the final dataset comprised 345 valid responses, which were subsequently analyzed using SEM techniques via software.

Measurement Instrument and Operationalization of Constructs

To empirically examine the hypothesized relationships depicted in the proposed conceptual model, a structured self-administered questionnaire was developed. The instrument was constructed using validated, multi-item scales from established literature across marketing, communication, and CSR/ESG research domains. All constructs were operationalized using reflective measurement models and assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"), unless otherwise specified.

Prior to full-scale deployment, the instrument underwent a pretesting phase with a pilot sample (n = 46) to assess clarity, semantic equivalence, and face validity. Necessary linguistic and contextual refinements were made to ensure construct relevance in the domain of ESG-focused sports sponsorship.

Positive Journalistic Framing

The construct of Positive Journalistic Framing captures the perceived tone, thematic emphasis, and narrative positioning employed by media outlets in reporting ESG sponsorships. The measurement was adapted from framing evaluation scales previously utilized in CSR and strategic communication studies (Kim & Cameron, 2011; Vázquez et al., 2019). Four items were used to assess the degree to which journalistic narratives conveyed authenticity, impact, and long-term ESG engagement. Example items include:

- "The article portrayed the brand's ESG efforts in a responsible and impactful way."
- "The message emphasized long-term commitment to social and environmental issues."
- "The journalistic coverage suggested a sincere corporate commitment to ESG values."
- "The reporting framed the sponsorship as part of the brand's ethical vision."

Perceived Authenticity

Perceived Authenticity reflects the degree to which participants believe the sponsoring brand's ESG communication is genuine, value-driven, and aligned with its organizational identity. The construct was operationalized using four items adapted from Alhouti et al. (2016) and Morhart et al. (2015). Items were tailored to the ESG sponsorship context, measuring brand sincerity, congruence, and perceived truthfulness. Sample items included:

- "The brand's ESG efforts reflect its true values."
- "This initiative seems consistent with the brand's identity."
- "The ESG sponsorship appears to be motivated by genuine concern, not marketing tactics."
- "There is consistency between the brand's ESG claims and its actions."

Brand Trust

Brand Trust was conceptualized as the belief that the sponsoring brand is ethically responsible, reliable in its ESG commitments, and trustworthy in its intentions. A four-item scale was adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Iglesias et al. (2019), reflecting both affective and cognitive trust dimensions. Representative items include:

- "I trust this brand to act in a socially responsible manner."
- "This brand delivers on its ESG promises."
- "I believe this brand behaves with integrity in ESG-related matters."
- "The brand is honest in the way it presents its ESG efforts."

Sponsorship Evaluation

The construct of Sponsorship Evaluation captures the audience's attitudinal response to the ESG-focused sponsorship activity. A three-item scale was derived from Speed and Thompson (2000), emphasizing perceived appropriateness, alignment, and symbolic impact of the sponsorship. Items included:

- "I believe this sponsorship is appropriate and meaningful."
- "This ESG sponsorship improves my perception of the event and brand."

- "The brand's involvement in this sponsorship fits well with the values promoted by the sport."

Overall Brand Attitude

Overall Brand Attitude was operationalized as a composite of affective and cognitive evaluations toward the sponsoring brand, following exposure to its ESG messaging. The construct was measured using three items adapted from Meenaghan (2013) and Becker-Olsen et al. (2006), capturing general favorability and value congruence. Sample items included:

- "I have a favorable opinion of the brand."
- "This brand aligns with values I care about."
- "The brand leaves a positive impression on me after seeing its ESG sponsorship."

Internal consistency and construct reliability were evaluated using Cronbach's α and Composite Reliability (CR) during the analysis phase. Results are reported in the corresponding section of the paper.

Data Analysis Strategy

To rigorously examine the hypothesized relationships within the proposed conceptual model and evaluate the psychometric robustness of the measurement instrument, the study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), using software as the primary analytical tool. SEM was selected due to its superior capacity for handling complex multivariate models involving latent constructs, and for its ability to simultaneously estimate both measurement and structural submodels, thereby ensuring holistic model assessment (Hair et al., 2022).

The data analysis was conducted in two sequential phases, consistent with best practices for SEM applications (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988):

Measurement Model Evaluation

The first stage involved assessing the construct validity and reliability of all latent variables prior to hypothesis testing. The following criteria and statistical indices were applied to ensure measurement adequacy:

- **Internal Consistency Reliability**: Evaluated using both *Cronbach's α* and *Composite Reliability (CR)*. Threshold values ≥ 0.70 were deemed acceptable, following Nunnally (1978).
- **Convergent Validity**: Assessed through the *Average Variance Extracted (AVE)*, with a threshold of ≥ 0.50 indicating adequate construct convergence (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).
- **Discriminant Validity**:
- *Fornell–Larcker Criterion*: Ensuring that the square root of each construct's AVE exceeds its correlation with other constructs.
- *Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)*: Values below 0.85 were considered indicative of discriminant validity (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015).

Indicators with factor loadings < 0.60 were subject to removal unless theoretically justified, ensuring model parsimony without compromising conceptual integrity.

Structural Model Evaluation

The second phase involved testing the structural relationships between constructs to determine the empirical support for the proposed hypotheses. The evaluation was based on:

- **Standardized Path Coefficients (β)**: Estimated to assess the magnitude and direction of hypothesized effects.
- **Statistical Significance**: Tested via *bootstrapping* procedures (5,000 subsamples) with 95% confidence intervals; significance was determined at $p < .05$.
- **Explained Variance (R^2)**: Values of ≥ 0.25 were interpreted as moderate, and ≥ 0.50 as strong, per Cohen's (1988) guidelines.
- **Effect Sizes (f^2)**: Calculated to determine the practical impact of predictor constructs on endogenous variables.
- **Predictive Relevance (Q^2)**: Evaluated using *Stone–Geisser's Q^2* via blindfolding procedures to confirm model's out-of-sample predictive capability.
- **Multicollinearity Diagnostics**: *Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)* values were examined for all predictor variables, with thresholds < 3.3 indicating acceptable levels of collinearity (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006).

This analytical protocol enables a methodologically robust evaluation of the theoretical model, offering empirical insights into the mechanisms through which journalistic framing influences public perceptions of ESG-integrated sports sponsorships. The SEM approach provides not only statistical confirmation of hypothesized paths but also informs theory-building through the validation of construct interrelationships under real-world conditions.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Sample Profile
The final dataset consisted of 345 valid responses, collected through a structured questionnaire following data cleaning and exclusion of incomplete submissions. The sample was demographically diverse, yet generally representative of a media-literate audience likely to engage with ESG-related sponsorship content in journalistic contexts.

Gender distribution was balanced, with **49.3% identifying as female**, **47.8% as male**, and **2.9% identifying as non-binary or choosing not to disclose**. This distribution supports inclusive demographic representation, allowing for generalizable insights across gender identities.

Regarding **age**, the largest segment of respondents (**40.6%**) belonged to the **25–34 age cohort**, followed by the **18–24 group (29.0%)**, **35–44 (20.3%)**, and **45 years and above (10.1%)**. These figures reflect a predominantly younger demographic, consistent with prior research suggesting that younger adults are more attuned to CSR and ESG narratives in digital and social media environments (Sheth, 2020).

In terms of **educational attainment**, **55.1% of participants held a bachelor's degree**, **31.9% reported postgraduate-level education**, and **13.0% possessed a high school diploma or less**. This profile suggests a highly educated respondent base, which aligns with the characteristics of individuals who are both **media-engaged** and more likely to interpret and critique ESG framing within journalistic sources.

Collectively, the sample reflects a **demographically relevant and analytically appropriate population** for examining media framing effects, perceived authenticity, and brand trust in the context of ESG-oriented sports sponsorships.

Table 1. summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender: Male	165	47.8
Gender: Female	170	49.3
Gender: Other/Prefer not to say	10	2.9
Age: 18–24	100	29.0
Age: 25–34	140	40.6
Age: 35–44	70	20.3
Age: 45+	35	10.1
Education: High school or less	45	13.0
Education: Bachelor's degree	190	55.1
Education: Postgraduate degree	110	31.9

In addition to the demographic profile, descriptive statistics were calculated for all measured constructs. As shown in Table 2, all latent variables demonstrated acceptable levels of central tendency and dispersion. Mean scores ranged from **3.42 to 4.11**, indicating overall positive perceptions of the ESG sponsorships under consideration.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Key Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
Positive Framing	4	3.88	0.76
Perceived Authenticity	4	3.74	0.81
Brand Trust	4	3.65	0.79
Sponsorship Evaluation	3	3.59	0.83
Overall Brand Attitude	3	4.11	0.72

These descriptive results suggest that respondents generally responded positively to the ESG initiatives described, with particularly high scores observed in brand attitude. The moderate variation across constructs provides a suitable foundation for hypothesis testing through structural equation modeling in the subsequent analyses.

Table 3:

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Positive Framing	0.89	0.91	0.72
Perceived Authenticity	0.91	0.93	0.76
Brand Trust	0.88	0.90	0.70
Sponsorship Evaluation	0.86	0.89	0.68
Overall Brand Attitude	0.90	0.92	0.75

All constructs demonstrated satisfactory levels of internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's α and Composite Reliability (CR) values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022). Furthermore, all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). These results confirm that the measurement items reliably capture the intended latent constructs, supporting the suitability of the data for subsequent structural model analysis.

Structural Model Results and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was assessed to empirically validate the hypothesized relationships among the latent constructs and to evaluate the overall explanatory power of the proposed conceptual framework. The analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with a bootstrapping procedure (5,000 resamples, 95% confidence interval) to estimate the statistical significance of the path coefficients (β). In addition, the proportion of variance explained in each endogenous construct was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2).

The model demonstrated moderate to strong explanatory power across all endogenous variables. Specifically, the latent construct *Perceived Authenticity* exhibited an R^2 value of **0.51**, indicating that approximately 51% of its variance was explained by Positive Journalistic Framing. *Brand Trust* achieved an R^2 of **0.62**, reflecting a high degree of explained variance driven by both Perceived Authenticity and Positive Framing. Similarly, *Sponsorship Evaluation* showed an R^2 value of **0.59**, suggesting substantial influence from Brand Trust. Lastly, *Overall Brand Attitude* was predicted with an R^2 of **0.46**, further validating the model's ability to account for a meaningful portion of attitudinal variance.

These R^2 values meet or exceed established thresholds for interpretive strength in SEM—where $R^2 \geq 0.25$ is typically regarded as moderate and $R^2 \geq 0.50$ as strong (Hair et al., 2022), thus confirming the model's predictive relevance and empirical robustness in explaining how media framing, perceived authenticity, and trust interact to shape audience evaluations and brand attitudes in the context of ESG-integrated sports sponsorship.

Table 4: Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	p-value	Result
H1	**Positive Framing → Perceived Authenticity**	0.61	< .001	Supported
H2	**Perceived Authenticity → Brand Trust**	0.49	< .001	Supported
H3	**Brand Trust → Sponsorship Evaluation**	0.58	< .001	Supported
H4	**Positive Framing → Brand Trust**	0.32	< .001	Supported
H5	**Sponsorship Evaluation → Brand Attitude**	0.68	< .001	Supported

All five hypotheses were statistically significant ($p < .001$), with **strong positive effects** observed across the proposed pathways. Notably, the strongest relationship was found between **sponsorship evaluation and overall brand attitude** ($\beta = 0.68$), indicating that favorable evaluations of ESG sponsorships are a key driver of brand-level outcomes. Furthermore, the significant direct effect of **journalistic framing on brand trust** (H4) suggests that media coverage can influence trust independently of perceived authenticity, highlighting the critical role of communication tone in shaping consumer response.

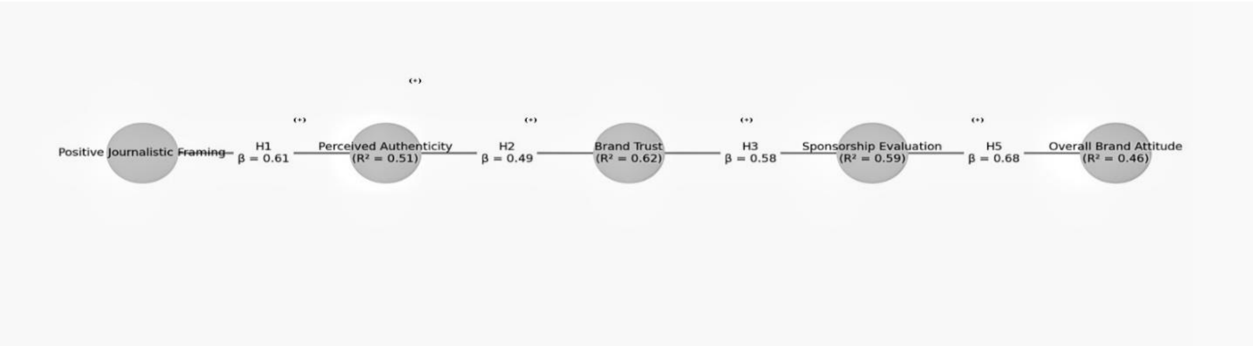

Figure 2. Structural Model with Standardized Path Coefficients and R^2 Values. The figure illustrates the structural equation model tested in the study, depicting hypothesized relationships (H1–H5) among the core constructs: Positive Journalistic Framing, Perceived Authenticity, Brand Trust, Sponsorship Evaluation, and Overall Brand Attitude. Standardized path coefficients (β) are shown along each directional path, and R^2 values are reported for all endogenous variables, indicating the proportion of explained variance. All relationships were found to be statistically significant ($p < .001$), supporting the proposed conceptual framework.

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DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Key Findings and Theoretical Contributions

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature at the intersection of ESG communication**,** media framing and sports marketing by empirically testing a conceptual model that links journalistic representations of ESG sponsorships to public evaluations of brand responsibility. The findings support all five hypothesized relationships, revealing a sequential pathway through which journalistic framing influences brand attitude via perceived authenticity, trust, and sponsorship evaluation.

Specifically, positive media framing significantly enhanced perceptions of authenticity (H1) and brand trust (H4)**,** aligning with prior research suggesting that framing effects shape stakeholder attribution processes (Entman, 1993; Lock & Seele, 2017). The significant impact of perceived authenticity on trust (H2) reinforces theoretical models of CSR and brand communication that highlight authenticity as a key precursor of stakeholder confidence (Alhouti et al., 2016; Morhart et al., 2015). This finding is particularly salient in the context of ESG, where audiences are increasingly vigilant against performative or opportunistic messaging.

Furthermore, trust was shown to strongly predict sponsorship evaluation (H3)**,** and in turn, positive evaluation of the ESG sponsorship led to favorable brand attitudes (H5)**.** These findings underscore the reputational value of well-perceived ESG initiatives**,** echoing previous insights from sponsorship and CSR literature (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Meenaghan, 2013). The cascading influence from media framing to brand attitude validates the model's theoretical logic and extends existing literature by integrating media studies with ESG branding frameworks**.**

By situating ESG communication within a media-framed, sponsorship-based setting, this research offers a theoretically novel and contextually specific contribution, bridging gaps between traditionally siloed fields: journalism, corporate responsibility, and sport-based marketing communication. The model also supports the notion that journalistic media act as co-constructors of brand meaning, especially when ESG narratives are embedded in culturally symbolic domains like sport.

Managerial and Media Implications

The findings of this study offer several important implications for practitioners in the fields of brand management, strategic communication, and sports sponsorship, as well as for media professionals engaged in ESG reporting and editorial framing.

First, for brand managers and corporate communication strategists, the results highlight the critical importance of media framing in shaping consumer perceptions of ESG-related efforts. Even when an organization invests in meaningful sustainability or social impact initiatives, the journalistic portrayal of such efforts can amplify or undermine their perceived authenticity and effectiveness (Du et al., 2010; Vázquez et al., 2019). Therefore, brands must not only execute ESG initiatives with strategic clarity and ethical integrity but also engage in proactive media relations, ensuring that key narratives are communicated clearly, credibly, and with contextual relevance.

Second, the study reveals that authenticity and trust are central mediators in the ESG–attitude relationship. This suggests that firms should focus less on promotional tone and more on value alignment, transparency, and long-term consistency in their messaging (Morhart et al., 2015; Alhouti et al., 2016). In the specific context of sports sponsorship, aligning ESG initiatives with the cultural identity and values of the sport or team can enhance message resonance and reduce perceptions of opportunism.

From the media perspective, the findings underscore the power and responsibility of journalistic framing in co-shaping stakeholder perceptions of corporate responsibility. Sports journalists and editors should be mindful of how their coverage of ESG sponsorships can influence not only public opinion but also organizational reputations and stakeholder trust. Balanced reporting, contextual framing, and ethical scrutiny are essential for maintaining journalistic integrity while informing the public meaningfully (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Kim & Cameron, 2011). For event organizers and sponsorship platforms, the study also suggests that collaborative communication between brands and media outlets may improve the public reception of ESG-related campaigns. Coordinated framing strategies, without compromising journalistic autonomy can enhance message clarity and foster mutual value creation between sponsors, media, and audiences.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the present study provides theoretically grounded and empirically supported insights into the role of journalistic framing in shaping public responses to ESG-oriented sports sponsorships, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations also serve to highlight opportunities for further inquiry and model refinement.

First, the study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, which inherently constrains the ability to infer causal or temporal dynamics in the observed relationships. Although the use of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) permits the estimation of directional paths based on theory, future research employing longitudinal or experimental designs would offer more robust evidence of causality, particularly in the context of media framing effects and attitudinal evolution over time (Hair et al., 2022). Second, the reliance on self-reported perceptual measures may introduce susceptibility to common method variance (CMV), despite methodological precautions such as scale validation and item randomization. Future studies are encouraged to incorporate behavioral metrics, such as real-time content interaction, media consumption logs, or brand engagement behavior post-exposure, to complement attitudinal measures and enhance ecological validity.

Third, the use of a non-probabilistic, convenience sampling strategy, although adequate for exploratory SEM, limits the generalizability of findings across broader populations. To improve external validity, future research should adopt probability-based sampling or stratified designs, particularly when targeting demographically or psychographically distinct stakeholder groups (e.g., loyal sports fans, ESG-aware consumers, or media-skeptical audiences). Fourth, the study focused solely on positively valenced journalistic framing, thereby omitting comparative assessment across alternative frame types such as negative, neutral, or conflict-laden narratives. Future research should explore how variations in framing valence, narrative framing devices, and emotional tone influence stakeholder evaluations, and whether framing effects interact with media modality (e.g., traditional press vs. social media) or cultural cognition in global audiences.

Lastly, the scope of this investigation was confined to the sports sponsorship context, a domain known for its symbolic resonance, emotional salience, and public visibility. While sport provides a theoretically rich and empirically strategic field, future applications of the model should examine other high-impact domains, such as fashion, technology, or entertainment, to test boundary conditions and assess the domain-specific vs. universal applicability of ESG framing dynamics.

Addressing these limitations through multi-method designs, comparative frameworks, and broader sectoral applications will deepen scholarly understanding of how media framing mediates the relationship between corporate responsibility and public trust, advancing the evolving interface between strategic communication, journalism, and stakeholder theory.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the interplay between **journalistic framing** and public evaluations of **ESG-related sports sponsorships**, proposing a theoretically grounded and empirically validated structural model that links **media discourse** to **perceived authenticity**, **brand trust**, **sponsorship evaluation**, and **overall brand attitude**.

The findings underscore the critical role of media as co-constructors of corporate meaning**.** Journalistic narratives do not merely relay ESG initiatives. They mediate, reframe, and interpret them in ways that significantly affect stakeholder judgments. Specifically, positive framing was shown to enhance perceptions of authenticity and trust, which in turn positively influenced how sponsorships and, by extension, sponsoring brands were evaluated. These cascading effects confirm the transformative capacity of media discourse in shaping public perceptions of corporate responsibility within emotionally charged and symbolically dense domains such as sport. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the integration of framing theory, strategic ESG communication, and sports marketing scholarship**,** offering a novel, cross-disciplinary framework that elucidates how socially salient brand narratives are processed and evaluated at multiple psychological levels.

Practically, the implications are profound. For brand strategists and corporate communicators**,** the findings emphasize that narrative framing is not peripheral, it is instrumental**.** In an era marked by media skepticism**,** activist consumerism**,** and intensified calls for ethical accountability, the success of ESG messaging hinges not only on organizational actions, but also on the media environments through which such actions are interpreted. Aligning corporate intention with journalistic mediation emerges as a critical component of reputational risk management and stakeholder engagement strategy.

Looking ahead, the conceptual model articulated in this study offers a robust foundation for future research into the mediated construction of organizational legitimacy**.** As expectations for transparency, authenticity, and purpose continue to rise, the necessity of understanding how corporate credibility is built and sometimes eroded, through third-party discourse becomes ever more urgent.

Ultimately, this research advocates for a broader scholarly agenda: one that recognizes the relational ecosystem of brands, media, and publics as central to contemporary discourses on corporate responsibility, trust, and ethical alignment in an increasingly mediated and value-driven marketplace.

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