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Corporate narratives in Olympic and Paralympic sponsorship: hybridity in the Milan-Cortina 2026 winter games

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Abstract

Purpose – The article looks at how sponsors of the Milan-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games communicate their sponsorship approaches. The analysis is focused on the manner in which sponsors inscribe sustainability, innovation and community interaction into their stories and considers the extent to which these narratives instantiate the new logics of image transfer, institutional legitimacy, capability signalling and commercial platforming.

Design/methodology/approach – The research is a latent content analysis that is underpinned by a corpus of official press releases and corporate reports issued by Milan-Cortina 2026's business partners, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with sponsorship managers. A coding structure was used to capture thematic categories based on previous sponsorship theory. The analysis was taken in an interpretive direction to examine how sponsorship logics were framed, with particular focus on the representation of sustainability, innovation, inclusivity and Paralympic participation.

Findings – The findings indicate that sponsorship strategy in Milan-Cortina 2026 has diverse strategies. Image transfer remains central but is always supplemented with legitimacy building through environmental and social responsibility, and capability shown through innovation and technology showcases and commercial activation on consumer and business-to-business routes. Press releases of the Paralympic Games indicate the ways in which diversity and inclusion narratives are leveraged to advance legitimacy and brand differentiation positioning. However, authenticity threats in sustainability communication exist alongside over-alignment with institutional narratives. The research demands integrated strategies able to balance reputational, business and social objectives.

Originality/value – The article contributes to sponsorship research, offering one of the first integrated analyses of partner communications during the 2026 Winter Games. The research takes theoretical discussions one step further to connect sponsorship logics with real corporate communications behaviour, demonstrating how hybridity characterises contemporary Olympic sponsorship. For professionals, the study points out three significant implications: sponsorship must be addressed as a multi-dimensional platform; the narrative of sustainability and inclusion must be authentic in lessening reputational risk and the Paralympics present an under-recognised but compelling ground for identity formation and long-term differentiation of brands.

Keywords Sponsorship strategies, Olympic and Paralympic games, Corporate communication, Mega-events, Strategic hybridity

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Sponsorship has become the key financial and communicative resource in Olympic and Paralympic Games organisation (Rutter *et al.*, 2020; Müller *et al.*, 2021), since apart from being a mechanism that provides the necessary financial support, it provides corporate actors with a global platform through which to project their identities, align themselves with global values and reach out to heterogeneous consumer markets (Horne, 2017). Past research has examined sponsorship as a tool of image transfer (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999), a source of brand value (Cornwell, 2019) and as a vehicle through which businesses are able to achieve differentiation in highly competitive markets (Olson, 2010). In parallel, another generation of scholarship has established sponsorship's function as a legitimacy-seeking mechanism,

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particularly when firms are increasingly in the limelight concerning environmental, social and governance (ESG) performance (Walzel *et al.*, 2018).

There remains a rich literature despite two critical gaps. First, comparatively little is known about the way sponsors articulate their strategy via formal communications throughout the Olympic and Paralympic cycle. While much has been focused on consumer opinion and market ramifications (Kim *et al.*, 2021; Liu and Qi, 2025), no systematic examination of the meaning of press releases and other corporate reports through which sponsors describe their engagement has been conducted. Second, sponsorship of Paralympic Games and their incorporation into broader corporate communication are significantly under-explored. As literature ever more acknowledges the importance of diversity, accessibility and inclusion, Paralympic sponsorship remains a marginal sport management research theme. Closing these gaps is crucial to supporting further theory development and to informing managerial response in a time of authenticity and transparency.

The Milan-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games provide a timely and relevant case study. They are the first Italian Games since Turin 2006 and occur as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International Paralympic Committee have made sustainability, digital innovation and social responsibility core to their long-term agendas (IOC, 2014, 2021). The Milan-Cortina Organising Committee has promoted the event as an environmental leadership and legacy-inclusive model, thus offering sponsors a platform upon which to bring their brand into association with powerful global stories (Milan-Cortina 2026 Foundation, 2023). Analysing the sponsorship communication of Milan-Cortina 2026, this research contributes to our understanding of how corporate sponsors frame their involvement in terms of sustainability innovation and community engagement and how such narratives stand for broader theoretical sponsorship logics.

The paper aimed to answer the following questions: How do Milan-Cortina 2026 sponsors justify their approaches? How are narratives of sustainability, innovation and community engagement evoked? And how do these narratives illustrate the interlaced logics of image transfer, institutional legitimacy, capability demonstration and commercial platforming? In responding to these questions, the study attempts to refine the conceptual understanding of sponsorship logics and to discover altered communicative practices of corporate partners in mega-sport events.

The stimulus for the research lies in the increasingly recognised truth that sponsorship of mega sporting events and indeed the Olympic and Paralympic Games, is being radically redefined. Traditional sponsorship strategies, all too frequently expressed in terms of visibility and image transfer, are now no longer sufficient in addressing the subtle needs of stakeholders, ranging from consumers to policy-makers. Increasingly, sponsors have to demonstrate that they are able to make meaningful contributions towards sustainability, innovation and social engagement (Parent *et al.*, 2017). Reflective of a wider trend in mega-event governance is the fact that IOC and local organising committees increasingly emphasise corporate partners' contribution to driving the agenda of sustainability and constructing enduring social legacies (IOC, 2025).

The Milan-Cortina 2026 case is particularly pertinent in that the event appears as a laboratory of experimentation for the reforms implemented through Agenda 2020 and Olympic Agenda 2020 + 5 that prioritise legacy, sustainability and inclusivity of stakeholders as the essence of the Olympic model (IOC, 2021). In comparison to previous Winter Games, the Italian edition has incorporated ESG values into its partnership strategy, making use of corporate involvement as a way of indicating responsibility and legitimacy (Milano Cortina 2026 Foundation, 2023). In this respect, Milan-Cortina 2026 sponsorship offers an empirical setting in which to explore how image transfer, legitimacy building, capability signalling and commercialisation dynamics interact in practice.

During the research, the dual Olympic-Paralympic sponsorship emerges as a particularly significant and underexplored strategy, through which sponsors are able to align legitimacy-building social narratives with capability demonstration and brand differentiation. Therefore, analysing how corporate partners simultaneously engage with Olympic and Paralympic platforms at Milan-Cortina 2026, the research advances understanding of sponsorship as a hybrid governance mechanism shaping social meaning in mega-sport events.

After this section, the literature review synthesises current knowledge on sport-event sponsorship, combining resource-based, institutional and stakeholder perspectives. Particular focus is placed on the evolution of multi-tier partnership schemes at recent Olympic Games and on early attempts to explore sponsorship as a vehicle for shared-value creation. The method chapter explains why a qualitative approach has been chosen to investigate the Milan-Cortina partners. The heart of the article is the findings chapter where the evidence is presented. The Discussion connects the empirical findings to the theory, describing how different configurations of resources and institutional logics shape sponsorship strategies in ways. The Conclusion summarises the article’s key contributions, acknowledges its limitations and identifies areas for future research.

Literature review

Sponsorship evolved from a relatively straightforward transactional agreement to a complex and multidimensional strategic practice (Chavanat and Desbordes, 2014). Early conceptualisations concentrated on its role in generating brand awareness and positive image transfer, often investigated within frameworks of associative conditioning and congruence (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Meenaghan, 2013). Researchers slowly began to focus on sponsorship as an integrated marketing communication function, in coordination with advertising, public relations and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Cornwell, 2019; Olson, 2010). The result has been to shift away from viewing sponsorship in terms of mere brand exposure to viewing it as only one component of an organisation’s overall communication and legitimacy strategy (Humphreys and Latour, 2013).

This evolution is particularly evident in the context of mega-sport events such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Research has demonstrated that such events provide sponsors with unique opportunities to engage with global audiences, be linked with universality and excellence values and communicate corporate competencies (Kim *et al.*, 2021). The challenge for sponsors, therefore, is to buy visibility and to develop messaging that resonates with audiences and aligns with the expectations of society (Tapaninaho and Heikkinen, 2022).

From the earliest attempts at commercial engagement with the Olympic Games to the current sophisticated programmes, sponsorship has increased in scope, complexity and strategic importance (Elisabeth *et al.*, 2024). In the Olympics, the introduction of the The Olympic Partner (TOP) program in 1985 was a watershed, creating a structured, exclusive partnership program that changed the commercial face of the Games (IOC, 2021). Sponsorship has become a vital way of enabling organisers to finance mounting financial strain, whilst offering brands unprecedented opportunities for association with the Olympic values of excellence, friendship and respect (Russo *et al.*, 2024). The saliency of sponsorship calls for a more discerning appreciation of its evolving strategic forms, especially as societal pressures on corporate players intensify (Demir and Söderman, 2015).

The strategic thinking in Olympic sponsorship has also been diversified along the above evolution. The traditional models, centred on brand exposure and consumer coverage, have been progressively supplanted by newer frameworks such as emotional branding, CSR and experiential marketing (Papadimitriou and Dounis, 2008; Giannoulakis *et al.*, 2008). Modern sponsors seek to forge deeper emotional connections with audiences, leveraging the symbolic capital of the Olympics to craft narratives of perseverance, unity and excellence (Ellis *et al.*, 2019; Mutz *et al.*, 2023). The emphasis is now on long-term brand building over short-term sales metrics, with sponsors investing heavily in multi-platform storytelling, digital engagement and socially meaningful initiatives (Pires *et al.*, 2020). In particular, strategic alignment with the ideology of the Olympics and with the specific legacy aspirations of the host city has become one of the main drivers of sponsorship effectiveness (Turner, 2006; Biscaia et Rocha, 2018). Those companies capable of actually matching their corporate agendas with the social, environmental and economic visions articulated by event organisers are more likely to see sustainable brand equity returns.

In responding to this difficulty, the literature has identified several alternative logics of sponsorship. The first theoretical logic guiding sponsorship is image transfer, which draws on associative learning theory and the concept of classical conditioning (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005; Olson and Thjømøe, 2011). It is the contention of this perspective that brand equity can be established as an event's positive associations – such as prestige, excitement or national pride (Pitts and Slattery, 2004) – are transferred to the sponsoring brand via repetitive exposure and congruent communication (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Speed and Thompson, 2000). When audiences perceive a natural connection between event and sponsor, image transfer occurs more successfully, boosting recall, attitude and purchase intention (Kim *et al.*, 2021). It is especially salient in sport sponsorship, where endorsements by athletes, symbolic alignment with values like excellence or perseverance and the affective intensity of fandom amplify associative effects (Cornwell, 2025). However, researchers have noted that the process is not mechanistic: low congruence or over-commercialisation can harm credibility and attenuate the associative link (Olson, 2010).

The second explanation, institutional legitimacy, relies on neo-institutional theory, which positions organisations as situated in broader social environments that define expectations of appropriate conduct (Suchman, 1995; Deephouse and Carter, 2005). Sponsorship, by this reasoning, is a means of expressing moral alignment with values in society, for example, for sustainability, inclusion and diversity (Walzel *et al.*, 2018). By their affiliation with the Olympic Games – a highly legitimised, value-laden institution – brands can acquire what Suchman describes as a social licence to operate (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008). This process is ever more evident in the context of contemporary sport, where CSR and ESG agendas are now ingrained in sponsorship rhetoric (O'Really and Nadeau, 2006; Kandpal *et al.*, 2024). For instance, sponsors employ sustainability messaging in order to present themselves as responsible corporate citizens and diversity and inclusion campaigns, particularly around the Paralympic Games, are legitimacy-enhancing mechanisms (Parent *et al.*, 2017). The neo-institutional view thus reframes sponsorship as a mode of moral positioning as much as marketing (Gillett and Tennent, 2022).

A third theoretical justification is capability demonstration based on resource-based theory (Barney, 1991) and signalling theory (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). Under this perspective, firms sponsor mega-events to promote distinctive competencies – technological, organisational or human – that underpin their competitive advantage (Wernerfelt, 1984). Sponsorship provides a stage where firms are able to signal quality and innovation to stakeholders, reducing information asymmetries about their internal capabilities (Spence, 1973; Rogers, 2003). For example, technology companies use the Olympics to pilot digital infrastructures, while transport or utilities companies use sponsorship as a demonstration of large-scale operational reliability (Kim *et al.*, 2021; Leopkey and Parent, 2012). The capability argument links sponsorship to strategic resource management, showing how mega-event exposure can be translated into reputation for innovation and excellence over the long term (Cornwell, 2019).

Finally, commercial platforming is representative of the marketing and relational function of sponsorship, grounded in relationship marketing and network theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Farrelly and Quester, 2005). Sponsorship here is viewed as a strategic platform for business development (Chadwick and Thwaites, 2005). Mega-events such as the Olympics provide exposure to global audiences and exclusive hospitality environments in which business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) engagement can take place (Chanavat and Desbordes, 2014). Relationship marketing theory concentrates on developing mutual value through trust, commitment and long-term alliances, principles that are coming to define Olympic sponsorship arrangements (Farrelly and Quester, 2005). The advent of digital integration has further extended commercial logic, allowing sponsors to blend physical activations with e-commerce, data capture and personalised experiences (Trischler and Trischler, 2022).

The four logics illuminate sponsorship's multi-dimensionality, comprising symbolic, institutional, resource-based and commercial imperatives that together shape the ways in which brands create, communicate and sustain value. While each of these logics has been studied individually, contemporary research requires a more integrated understanding of sponsorship (Cornwell, 2019, 2025). Complexity in sponsorship agreements routinely introduces overlapping strategies that mix image transfer with legitimacy-seeking or capability demonstration with commercial activation (Wood and Meng, 2021). For example, organisations are able to simultaneously support environmental sustainability and demonstrate innovation using sustainable technologies for an event (Hoff and Leopkey, 2025). These hybrid methods attest to the need for a conceptual basis that can cover a number of objectives and comprehend sponsorship as being symbolic and resource-based (Bourbilleres, 2025).

Hybrid sponsorship can first be understood as a meta-framework emerging from institutional pluralism. Organisations participating in mega-events confront the coexistence of market, civic, normative and technological logics, each prescribing different forms of value creation and legitimacy (Besharov and Smith, 2014; Greenwood *et al*., 2011). Market logics highlight commercial return, civic logics prioritise social benefit and community engagement, normative logics reflect alignment with the Olympic values and technological logics drive innovation-led collaborations. The plurality requires sponsors to continuously arbitrate between logics rather than conform to a single dominant rationale.

Second, hybrid sponsorship can be theorised as a governance system through which organisations actively integrate, negotiate and stabilise multiple logics. Research on institutional complexity shows that organisations frequently engage in strategies such as selective coupling, compartmentalisation, and blending to accommodate divergent expectations (Pache and Santos, 2010, 2013; Kraatz and Block, 2008). In the context of Olympic and Paralympic sponsorship, firms must align commercial goals with commitments to sustainability, accessibility and community legacy, while simultaneously responding to technological imperatives such as digital fan engagement, data-driven activation and innovation narratives. This governance perspective highlights the strategic agency of sponsors as they craft coherent positions within a multifaceted institutional landscape.

Third, hybrid sponsorship can be interpreted as a strategic response to the layered expectations of the contemporary mega-event ecosystem. Rather than treating hybridisation as a by-product of complexity, this perspective emphasises the intentional sequencing, layering and bundling of logics (Lawrence *et al*., 2013). Sequencing refers to the temporal prioritisation of different logics across the sponsorship lifecycle, for instance, highlighting innovation during the lead-up to the Games and social legacy during the post-event phase.

Viewing sponsorship through this hybrid lens offers a more theoretical foundation for understanding the strategies and behaviours of firms operating within mega-events. It shifts the analysis from descriptive accounts of partnership activities to an examination of the institutional structures and organisational capacities required to reconcile competing logics. In doing so, it positions sponsorship as a form of institutional governance, characterised by the orchestration of heterogeneous expectations and the mobilisation of multiple value frames. This conceptualisation is particularly relevant for the Olympic and Paralympic context, where the intersection between commercial imperatives and societal values is especially pronounced and increasingly subject to public scrutiny.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative research design aimed at understanding how corporate partners construct, communicate and make sense of their sponsorship engagement with the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research questions, the analysis relies on theoretically informed, purposive sampling rather than statistical representativeness. The dataset combines corporate press releases, sustainability reports and semi-structured interviews, allowing for a multi-layered examination of sponsorship logics as they are articulated across institutional and organisational levels.

The selection of press releases was guided by theoretical sampling principles, privileging materials that explicitly addressed partnership announcements, activation campaigns, sustainability initiatives and technological innovation. These documents were chosen because they function as strategic artefacts through which organisations construct and disseminate their preferred sponsorship narratives. Similarly, the twelve semi-structured interviews with sponsorship managers, communication directors and marketing executives were selected based on their direct involvement with the Milan–Cortina partnership and their capacity to offer informed reflections on strategic objectives, decision-making processes and the perceived value of the Olympic and Paralympic platforms.

The primary dataset consists of official press releases and official company reports published by the Milan-Cortina 2026 Organising Committee and by its 31 corporate sponsors, across four sponsorship tiers, between January 2021 and April 2025. Throughout the analysis, we considered the Premium Partners, the Partners, the Sponsors and the Official Supporters who decided to sponsor the Olympic Games for Milan-Cortina 2026. The IOC's Worldwide Partners and the Official Hospitality Provider were therefore excluded (Appendix 1).

The corpus includes press releases on announcements of partnership agreements, activation campaign news and sustainability, innovation or community involvement statements. Whenever possible, corporate annual reports and sustainability reports were also considered for a further contextualisation of the sponsorship strategies. All the documents were published in Italian and translated into English (Appendix 2).

Twelve interviews were conducted with sponsorship managers, communications directors, partner organisation marketing executives between August and October 2025. Interviews were conducted via video or phone calls, lasted 45–60 min, were audio-recorded and were transcribed verbatim in Italian, then translated into English. They explored strategic objectives, decision-making processes, resource allocation and their opinions about the Olympic platform (Appendix 3).

A two-stage qualitative content analysis was conducted using NVivo (Krippendorff, 2013). The first stage employed an inductive approach, during which the researcher coded a common subset of documents and interviews. Initial codes were discussed and the coding structure refined through iterative consensus-building. This process facilitated the development of a shared interpretive frame and enhanced the reliability and coherence of the coding scheme. Because the research focuses on interpretive meaning-making, a latent content analysis was adopted to identify underlying assumptions, value frames and strategic orientations embedded within the texts, rather than restricting the analysis to surface-level terminology (Bengtsson, 2019). The second stage involved the application and further refinement of the coding structure across the full dataset (Neuendorf, 2017). Codes were organised into nodes reflecting four thematic clusters – image transfer, legitimacy building, capability signalling and commercial platforming – along with cross-cutting dimensions such as inclusivity and sustainability. Appendix 4 summarises the coding scheme, including nodes, subcodes and illustrative insights.

Recognising that corporate press releases are purposive and promotional in nature, they were treated as strategic framing devices that reveal how organisations seek to shape their public positioning. To mitigate the inherent bias of these sources, interview data and corporate sustainability reports were used for triangulation. Interviews provided contextual depth, enabling us to compare publicly communicated narratives with practitioners' internal interpretations of sponsorship strategy. In this way, primary data was collected through interviews with the key players who, as Yin (2018) states, are case study main data source.

Findings

The results illustrate the multi-dimensional nature of sponsorship strategies in the context of a mega-sporting event, with sponsors building active narratives that integrate identityconstruction, legitimacy, technological expertise and commercial activation. Each logic is associated with a distinct strategic direction and aligns with mechanisms already investigated in sponsorship studies (Cornwell, 2008; Gwinner, 1997; Walliser, 2003).

Sponsorships logics

Image transfer was most apparent amongst consumer brands in sectors such as fashion, cosmetics, food and beverage and luxury goods, where corporations framed their association with the Games in terms of heritage, creativity and excellence, with values of elegance, performance and lifestyle appeal being promoted. One press release stated: *"By sponsoring the Games, we continue to dress champions who embody dedication and sacrifice, values that are at one with our philosophy of function and aesthetics."* Another stated: *"Our sponsorship is based on the belief that sport is not just contest, but a process of development and self-expression, in keeping with our vision of identity and style."* This type of positioning resonates with current theories of conditioning and congruence, where sponsors try to utilise the affective associations of sport to strengthen their brand image (Speed and Thompson, 2000).

Institutional legitimacy was the dominant logic among the energy firms, banks, transport operators and major retailers. Their press releases routinely mentioned commitments to sustainability, carbon emissions reduction, social inclusion and accessibility. One energy provider explicitly declared: *"We support the Olympic and Paralympic Games because sport is a tool for growth, integration and well-being, values that align with our daily efforts to regenerate the potential of every resource and accelerate decarbonisation."* A retailer similarly stressed: *"Our initiatives confirm our vocation to serve communities and territories, sustaining culture, education and sport as a way of reinforcing social cohesion."* These narratives align with neo-institutional perspectives (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), which suggest that corporations engage in sponsorship to enhance visibility and to secure a social licence to operate.

Display of ability was central to sponsors from the technology, infrastructure and sports equipment categories. Companies focused on digital platforms, for example, fitness technology and snowmaking systems advertised their ability to deliver innovation, performance and reliability. A tech firm emphasised: *"Our gaming-native platform renders connectivity at the Games not only fast, but secure and sustainable, built from the ground up to deliver an exceptional user experience."* A sport equipment manufacturer said: *"Our partnership is a way of bringing innovation to the heart of competition to enable every athlete to train and compete at their best."* These reports draw on signalling theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly *et al*., 2011), whereby sponsorship is a reputational signal of competence in delivering innovative solutions.

Commercial platforming existed in sponsors from sectors such as ticketing and mobility services, where the sponsorship was directly tied to building consumer-facing offerings. One provider stated: *"Our platform will allow fans to purchase innovative experiences, packaging tickets, travel and hospitality in a combined and seamless way."* Another highlighted: *"This agreement allows us to reach millions of consumers by creating new offers embodying the Olympic and Paralympic values while providing tangible benefits."* The approach is consistent with relationship marketing theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Farrelly and Quester, 2005), whereby sponsorship is employed as an integrated brand promotion tool with the objective of deriving both B2B and B2C engagement. Interviews confirmed that image transfer was a strategic aim. Several managers emphasised that their brand's alignment with Olympic values was designed to enhance emotional engagement and long-term brand equity. One respondent explained that *"being visible alongside the Games is not just a matter of reach but a matter of the values we borrow,"* emphasising how sponsorship operates as a process of symbolic capital.

Some press releases were constructed around narratives of social responsibility and sustainability, with commitments to maintain ESG standards, promises of carbon offsetting and diversity and inclusivity statements being particularly prevalent. Interviews reinforced this interpretation, as managers discussed their involvement in the Games as an opportunity to demonstrate responsibility and to gain legitimacy in the eyes of regulators, consumers and employees. As one expressed it, *"Our sponsorship allows us to show we are part of the solution, not part of the problem."* The rhetoric of institutional legitimacy was therefore a way of securing a social licence to operate, in accordance with neo-institutional reasoning. A further obvious pattern was the use of the Games as a shop window for technological prowess and organisational know-how.

Interviewers regularly mentioned pilot schemes, maiden product installations, or infrastructure donations, framing the Games as an experimentation ground for new solutions. Interview findings indicated that demonstration of capability was perceived as an important prerequisite for B2B visibility. Some managers also highlighted that the Games were in their own way a "*stress-test environment*" in that by performing in front of the whole world, credibility in other regions could be gained.

Interviews also reflected the use of the Games as a platform for commercial engagement. Activities included e-commerce integrations and promotional campaigns designed to deliver consumer engagement were widely described as part of a broad customer journey, linking Olympic visibility through to measurable transactions. Managers reported that sponsorship eased the cultivation of business relationships and the entertainment of key clients, mostly portrayed as "*once-in-a-lifetime*" opportunities that could not otherwise be replicated.

A specific pattern concerns the deliberate creation of hybrid configurations that combine distinct logics to achieve multiple strategic objectives. Energy and mobility firms, in particular, blended technological capability narratives with social-value claims to offset reputational vulnerabilities. Press releases routinely framed technological innovation as part of a broader environmental commitment, as in the statement that a new mobility solution "*will reduce emissions for the Games while supporting long-term community transition to sustainable transport*." Interviewees explicitly articulated the purpose of such hybrids. One executive noted: "*Technology alone looks self-serving. When we show how it benefits communities, it becomes part of a bigger narrative*." These hybrid forms were carefully constructed frames designed to manage societal expectations and commercial pressures simultaneously.

Lifecycle and industry

An interesting insight concerns the way firms sequence different logics across the sponsorship lifecycle. Several technology and telecommunications partners tended to open their communications with capability-based messages, framing the sponsorship as an opportunity to showcase specialised technical expertise. One manager explained that "*our first step was demonstrating why we are necessary to the Games, innovation gets you invited into the conversation*," highlighting how capability signalling functions as an early anchor point. Once technological contributions were communicated, these firms progressively shifted towards discourses of legitimacy and social contribution. Press releases issued in the months following the initial partnership announcement increasingly stressed inclusion and accessibility, with one noting that the company's digital platform would "*enable a more inclusive Games experience for all users, particularly those with mobility or sensory impairments*." This progression illustrates how firms move from demonstrating competence to establishing moral and social alignment with Olympic values. By contrast, financial services, insurance and public-service providers tended to invert this sequencing. Their early communications foregrounded legitimacy claims that positioned the partnership as an extension of corporate values, highlighting responsible citizenship, community engagement and alignment with the event's sustainability commitments. Only later they introduce commercial activations, hospitality programmes or digital customer-engagement initiatives. As one communications director remarked, "*In our sector, credibility is everything, only when we show why we belong to this event can we speak of products or services*."

Sectoral variation further shaped how and why certain logics were combined. Technology firms placed importance on capability demonstration, often pairing it with inclusion-oriented themes, especially in relation to Paralympic initiatives. Energy companies centred their strategies on legitimacy and ecological stewardship, integrating capability logics only when these reinforced sustainability claims. Financial services focused on social inclusion and community well-being, blending them with loyalty programmes and customer-engagement campaigns. Retail and lifestyle brands relied heavily on image transfer, linking the aesthetic or symbolic dimensions of the Games to experiential activations and athlete collaborations. The distinctions illustrate how hybridisation is embedded in the organisational field: each sector draws on different combinations of logics because it faces different forms of public scrutiny, commercial opportunity and institutional pressure.

Paralympics

Some press releases highlight disability inclusion storytelling campaigns, emphasising the visibility of Paralympic athletes and inspirational narratives, indicating how corporate partners used Paralympic sponsorship to support brand legitimacy, express innovation and convey authenticity. One of the initial recurring themes was the long-term continuity of partnerships with the Paralympic movement. An energy sector sponsor remarked: *"Our commitment to the Paralympic Games is not limited to Milan–Cortina 2026 but goes back decades. This continuity testifies to our belief that sport, in all its forms, should be accessible to everyone."* The second theme was the role of technology as an inclusion enabler, with sponsors framing their products and services as critical enablers for adaptive sport. *"With our breakthrough prosthetics and mobility solutions, we wish to help athletes shatter barriers. The Paralympic Games are the perfect stage to demonstrate how technology can transform lives"*, a medical technology sponsor affirmed. Sponsors were also engaging in narratives of athlete empowerment, bringing to the fore Paralympians as embodiments of determination and diversity. In a press release by a consumer goods sponsor we can read: *"Paralympic athletes are the very best example of resilience and bravery. Their stories inspire millions and embody the spirit of our company's commitment to inclusion."* Finally, some sponsors positioned Paralympic partnerships as a stage for legitimacy and social licence, alongside environmental sustainability initiatives. The transport and mobility sponsor highlighted: *"In associating with the Paralympic Games, we are reconfirming our role in creating an increasingly inclusive future for society."*

In the press releases, sponsors consistently described the Paralympic Games as a platform that allows them to engage with narratives of resilience, diversity and human potential. Several communications positioned Paralympic sport as an emblem of social progress and as a vehicle for articulating corporate values in a more human-centred manner. One press release stated that the partnership "*celebrates the determination and talent of athletes who redefine the boundaries of possibility every day*," presenting Paralympic involvement as a moral and emotional extension of the organisation's broader brand identity. Another sponsor framed its role in terms of societal responsibility, noting that "*supporting the Paralympic Movement is part of our long-term commitment to building environments in which every individual can thrive*."

A second set of communications associated Paralympic sponsorship with corporate ESG objectives, particularly in relation to social sustainability and inclusive design. In these texts, the Paralympics were presented as a catalyst for organisational learning and internal transformation. As one release noted, "*the Paralympic Games challenge us to design products, services and cultures that are accessible by default*," directly linking the partnership to ongoing corporate initiatives in diversity, equity and inclusion. Another communication highlighted the integration of accessibility standards within product development processes, describing the event as "*an inspiration to accelerate inclusive innovation across all our business units*."

The interviews further reinforced these distinctions. Several managers stressed that the Paralympic partnership carries a symbolic weight that goes beyond traditional branding objectives. One executive remarked that "*the Paralympics tell a different story, one that is less about performance excellence and more about social purpose*," highlighting the unique emotional and ethical resonance of the Paralympic platform. Another interviewee explained that Paralympic sponsorship "*opens conversations inside the company that the Olympic partnership alone does not, particularly around accessibility, workplace inclusion and universal design.*" These insights suggest that, internally as well as externally, Paralympic sponsorship generates organisational reflection that extends beyond conventional marketing considerations.

Discussion

The research has tried to conceptualise Olympic and Paralympic sponsorship as a dynamic system of interacting logics, rather than a set of discrete strategic options (Boykoff, 2017), creating a hybrid sponsorship governance model (Figure 1).

Institutional legitimacy functions as the foundational logic in the model: given the heightened public scrutiny surrounding mega-events, particularly in relation to sustainability, inclusion and public accountability, sponsors typically begin by establishing moral and social credibility (Cook *et al.*, 2021). Building upon this base, image transfer operates as a symbolic amplification mechanism: through association with Olympic and Paralympic values brands seek to reinforce or reposition their identities (Grohs *et al.*, 2020). Capability demonstration represents the model's instrumental and performative dimension. Sponsors use the Games as a live testing ground to signal operational competence, innovation and reliability: demonstrated competence reinforces legitimacy claims, while legitimacy provides the moral framing that renders capability demonstrations meaningful beyond technical performance (Kim *et al.*, 2021). Commercial platforming occupies the outward-facing and monetisation-oriented dimension of the model. Rather than being the endpoint of sponsorship strategy, commercial activation is shown to be contingent on the successful orchestration of the other logics.

At the centre of the model lies hybridisation, conceptualised as an active form of institutional work (Grabski-Walls and Ambos, 2024). Sponsors continuously adjust the relative salience of each logic in response to contextual triggers such as public controversy, technological milestones, regulatory developments or Paralympic activations. Hybrid strategies emerge because firms strategically orchestrate complementarities among them, therefore the research advances sponsorship theory reconceptualising hybridity as a form of strategic orchestration through which firms actively integrate and manage competing logics within the Olympic context. The contribution of the paper lies in shifting the analytical lens from coexistence to coordination. A traditional perspectives of hybridity tend to portray

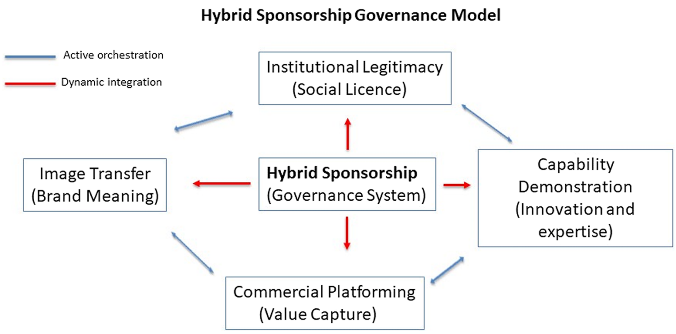

Figure 1. Sponsorship hybridity: from overlap to orchestration. Source: Author's elaboration

sponsorship strategies as static alignments, where different objectives overlap without clear prioritisation or interaction (Pache and Santos, 2013). In contrast, findings demonstrate that sponsors engage in what we term strategic hybridity: an active process of aligning, sequencing and bundling multiple logics in response to simultaneous institutional, market and technological pressures (Connelly *et al*., 2024).

Empirically, the Milan-Cortina case shows that hybridity emerges as a governance mechanism through which firms navigate institutional complexity, therefore the research extends existing sponsorship frameworks and connects them to broader organisational scholarship on institutional pluralism and hybrid organising. In this sense, hybrid sponsorship is conceptualised as a strategic response that enables firms to reconcile competing expectations from the IOC, public institutions, consumers and internal corporate stakeholders. The Olympic sponsorship operates as a complex strategic system in which hybridity is actively managed to secure legitimacy, demonstrate value and sustain long-term partnerships in an increasingly scrutinised mega-event environment.

Therefore the key contribution of the research lies in the reconceptualisation of hybridity. Rather than treating hybrid sponsorship as a residual category where multiple strategies simply coexist, the findings suggest that hybridity functions as a deliberate governance mechanism.

Legitimacy-oriented narratives tend to dominate in sectors exposed to environmental or social scrutiny, such as energy, transport and public services. In these cases, sustainability and community narratives function as a prerequisite for market engagement, enabling sponsors to secure a social licence before activating commercial initiatives. Conversely, technology-driven organisations prioritise capability signalling, using the Olympic platform as a demonstration site for innovation and operational expertise. However, the findings show that capability narratives rarely stand alone; they are most effective when embedded within legitimacy or inclusion discourses, particularly when aligned with Paralympic initiatives. This insight refines existing work on sponsorship fit and signalling by demonstrating that credibility increasingly depends on multi-dimensional framing rather than technical excellence alone (Meenaghan, 1991).

From a managerial perspective, the findings challenge the notion that sponsorship effectiveness can be maximised through a singular strategic focus (Slack and Parent, 2006). Instead, managers are encouraged to approach Olympic sponsorship as a modular architecture in which different logics can be combined and rebalanced across phases of the partnership. Hybridisation emerges as a means of enhancing authenticity, particularly when sustainability or inclusion claims are substantiated through demonstrable capabilities or long-term commitments. At the same time, the results caution against unreflective alignment with institutional narratives. Over-reliance on generic sustainability rhetoric, especially when unsupported by credible practices, risks reputational backlash and accusations of symbolic compliance (Walker and Kent, 2009). The study thus provides guidance on when legitimacy-building is strategically advantageous and when it must be complemented by tangible operational contributions.

The Paralympic dimension offers a further point of differentiation and contribution. The findings indicate that Paralympic sponsorship operates as a distinct legitimacy-enhancing domain. Paralympic partnerships allow sponsors to articulate inclusion, accessibility and social impact in ways that are perceived as more authentic and less commercially instrumental. When integrated strategically, Paralympic engagement reinforces the overall sponsorship architecture by anchoring capability and commercial logics within a morally resonant framework. This insight extends sponsorship research by highlighting the Paralympic Games as a site of value creation in their own right, rather than as a secondary or symbolic add-on to Olympic sponsorship (McCullough and Trail, 2022).

Importantly, the analysis also identified a different communicative tone in Paralympic-oriented material. While Olympic sponsorship discourse tends to rely on themes of innovation, performance and national pride, Paralympic communication exhibits a more narrative, personal, and often emotive style. Sponsors typically foreground athlete stories, highlighting journeys of adaptation and perseverance.

Misener and Darcy (2014) argue that Paralympic sponsorship is all too often underexploited, commonly treated as an afterthought rather than an inherent aspect of brand differentiation. The Milan-Cortina 2026 spectacle offers a chance to more substantially embed Paralympic partnerships as a stimulus for brand differentiation, emotional connection and innovation. Successful strategies could include co-branded activities with Paralympic stars, long-term relationships with bodies in disability sports, or integrating the technologies of accessibility in mainstream consumer products. Such embedment would help to increase the profile and esteem of Paralympic sports in the global sponsorship landscape. Hence, Milan-Cortina 2026 offers the potential to become the benchmark for the development of Olympic and Paralympic sponsorship, where the value of relationships increasingly depends on credibility, differentiation and inclusivity.

As for the potential pedagogical value of the research, the story of the Paralympics may be used in teaching contexts to demonstrate the ways in which sponsorship becomes a means of facilitated value-driven communication. Initiatives that feature stories of athlete resourcefulness and creativity afford real case material for studying brand identity, brand authenticity and social influence.

Conclusion

The finding reinforces contemporary discussions situate hybridity as constitutive of sponsorship rather than an analytical anomaly. In this way, it involves sponsorship more fully as a mode of communicating, as a form of legitimation, as the display of capacity building and within the relationship deal of commercial exchange. At a practical level the research underscores the need for managers to create sponsorships as multi-dimensional places. For sponsors this means moving beyond visibility measures and including symbolic alliance as well as authentic social engagement, tech demonstrations and commercial activations. It is also a warning against adopting sustainability or inclusivity storytelling as an overlay rather than doing anything, because such moves can backfire fast in a culture of heightened public scrutiny. Similarly, the research also posits sponsorship as a laboratory for experimenting and as a relational strategy to develop consumer and business networks.

An inherent limitation of this study exists. As helpful as the press releases are though, they only deliver one level of analysis and you would gain more if you had information at different levels in other social media activations or on-in advertising. Likewise, although in-depth interviews with gatekeepers were detailed and insightful, informant perspectives from constituents such as consumers or community organisations would add depth to the understanding of sponsorship influence. On the other hand, these limitations also serve as directions for future research to be pursued (the finding of sponsorship hybridity in different mega-events or the examination of hybridity over partnership lifespan), since sponsorship activation at Milan-Cortina 2026 is a new era where brands interact in mega-events as multilateral strategic systems on the whole.

(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Appendix 1
The Milan-Cortina 2026 Partners

Table A1. Partner of Milano-Cortina 2026. Updated: April 2025

Tier	Partner	HQ Country	Core industry
Premium Partner	Enel	Italy	Electricity and renewables
Premium Partner	Eni	Italy	Integrated energy
Premium Partner	Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane	Italy	Rail and multimodal mobility
Premium Partner	Leonardo	Italy	Aerospace, defence and secure comms
Premium Partner	Poste Italiane	Italy	Logistics and financial services
Premium Partner	Salomon	France	Outdoor apparel and equipment
Premium Partner	Stellantis	Netherlands/ Italy	Automotive (multi-brand)
Partner	A2A	Italy	Energy, water and waste
Partner	EA7 Emporio Armani	Italy	Sportswear fashion
Partner	Esselunga	Italy	Grocery retail
Partner	Fiera Milano	Italy	Exhibition and congress venues
Partner	Juniper Networks	USA	AI-native networking
Partner	Randstad	Netherlands	HR and staffing
Partner	TIM	Italy	Telecoms and cloud
Sponsor	FNM Group	Italy	Regional rail and bus
Sponsor	Consorzio Grana Padano	Italy	Protected designation of origin (PDO) cheese
Sponsor	Herbalife	USA	Nutrition and supplements
Sponsor	Intercom Dr Leitner (REALICE)	Italy	Ice and slope tech
Sponsor	ITA Airways	Italy	National airline
Sponsor	KIKO Milano	Italy	Cosmetics and beauty retail
Sponsor	Consorzio Prosecco DOC	Italy	Sparkling wine
Sponsor	Salesforce	USA	Customer relationship management (CRM), AI and data cloud
Sponsor	Technogym	Italy	Fitness equipment and digital
Sponsor	Valtellina Taste of Emotion	Italy	Regional food and wine collective
Official Supporter	Airweave	Japan	High-performance bedding
Official Supporter	Kässbohrer Italia (PistenBully)	Germany/Italy	Snow-grooming machinery
Official Supporter	Ottobock	Germany	Prosthetics and wheelchairs
Official Supporter	RGS Events	UK	FFandE and project management
Official Supporter	TechnoAlpin	Italy	Snow-making systems
Official Supporter	TicketOne (CTS Eventim)	Italy	Ticketing and e-commerce
Official Supporter	Versalis (Eni)	Italy	Chemicals and materials

Source: Author’s elaboration on data found on the website https://milanocortina2026.olympics.com/it/partners (accessed 2 May 2025)

Appendix 2
Data collection detail

Table A2. Data collection detail

Data source	Type of data	Quantity	Time frame
Milano Cortina 2026 Organising Committee website	Official partnership announcements press releases	38 documents	2021–2025
Corporate websites partner organisations	Press releases, CSR communications, activation campaigns	122 documents	2021–2025
Corporate annual reports	Financial and strategic information	18 reports	2022–2024
Sustainability/ESG reports	Environmental and social commitments	10 reports	2022–2024
Semi-structured interviews	Transcribed interview transcripts	12 transcripts	2025

Source: Author's elaboration

Appendix 3
Interviews' detail

Table A3. Interviews' detail

ID	Function/Role	Organisation type	Duration (min)
INT-01	Sponsorship Manager	Energy and Utilities	55
INT-02	Head of Corporate Communication	Financial Services	47
INT-03	Marketing Director	Transport and Mobility	58
INT-04	Sustainability and CSR Lead	Manufacturing	60
INT-05	Brand Partnership Manager	Apparel and Sportswear	52
INT-06	Communication Manager	Technology and Innovation	49
INT-07	Marketing and Sponsorship Director	Media and Broadcasting	56
INT-08	Public Affairs Officer	Public Institution Partner	60
INT-09	Chief Marketing Officer	Consumer Goods	50
INT-10	Sponsorship Activation Specialist	Food and Beverage	45
INT-11	Head of Brand Strategy	Transport Infrastructure	59
INT-12	Sustainability Partnerships Coordinator	Telecommunications	53

Source: Author's elaboration

Appendix 4
Coding scheme used

Table A4. Coding scheme used

Node	Subcodes	Indicators from press releases	Managerial insights (interview themes)
Image Transfer	Athlete endorsement; Event symbolism; Heritage and national identity; Emotional storytelling	References to Olympic/ Paralympic values, athletes as brand ambassadors, emphasis on pride, excellence, or courage; visual alignment with Olympic symbols	Managers highlight the emotional value of associating with Olympic ideals; image fit seen as essential for long-term equity
Institutional Legitimacy	Sustainability commitment; Social responsibility; Diversity and inclusion; Ethical alignment	Mentions of ESG goals, net-zero targets, community programs, diversity statements, or inclusive messaging	Managers describe legitimacy as a social licence to operate; sponsorship helps translate CSR commitments into visible action
Capability Demonstration	Technological innovation; Product integration; Service excellence; Operational competence	Highlighting green technologies, digital transformation, smart infrastructure, mobility systems, or energy solutions	Managers view sponsorship as a proof-of-concept arena; innovation shown through tangible applications at the Games
Commercial Platforming	Consumer engagement; Business-to-business networking; Hospitality and client relations; Sales activation	Mentions of promotional campaigns, customer experiences, or hospitality packages; focus on reach and engagement	Managers describe Olympic sponsorship as a catalyst for market expansion and B2B deal-making
Hybrid Strategies (Emergent)	Cross-logic integration; Purpose–profit balance; Innovation for inclusion; ESG-driven branding	Overlapping language combining sustainability, innovation, and community; examples of campaigns linking technology to social inclusion	Managers explicitly refer to integration as strategic differentiation; resources are jointly mobilised across departments
Paralympic Sponsorship Focus (Cross-cutting)	Disability representation; Inclusive innovation; Accessibility technology; Athlete advocacy	Focus on Paralympic athletes, accessibility, adaptive technologies, or inclusion as corporate value	Managers note Paralympics as an authentic space for DEI communication; strengthens brand empathy

Source: Author's elaboration

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