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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Pre–post changes in awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, and sport commitment among high school student-athletes

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ABSTRACT

This study examined pre–post changes in awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, and sport commitment among Costa Rican high school student-athletes during a one-month period of sponsor support surrounding an interscholastic competition. Participants were 89 student-athletes from two high schools (52 males and 37 females; mean age = 15.36 years, *SD* = 1.30). Support included apparel and sports equipment, sponsor participation in competition-related ceremonies, and visits by company personnel to team practices. Questionnaires were administered at the beginning of the support period and immediately after the competition. Paired-samples *t*-tests showed higher post-test scores for awareness of sponsor support, $t(88) = 9.03$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.96$; athletic identity, $t(87) = 4.58$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.49$; and sport commitment, $t(88) = 4.99$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.53$. The largest standardized difference was observed for awareness of sponsor support. These findings document concurrent changes in sponsor-related awareness and sport-related psychological perceptions during the support and competition period. The one-group pretest–posttest design, short observation period, and context-specific awareness measure prevent causal attribution to sponsor support and limit generalizability.

Keywords: physical education; adolescents; physical activity; interscholastic competition; sponsorship.

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INTRODUCTION

Participation in organized sport during adolescence has been associated with physical activity in adulthood and a range of psychological and social outcomes (Bengtsson et al., 2025; Tammelin et al., 2003). Although the strength of causal evidence varies across outcomes, school-based sport provides a structured setting in which adolescents can be physically active and develop sport-related self-perceptions.

A central construct for understanding continued involvement in sport is sport commitment. Sport commitment has been defined as "a psychological state representing the desire or resolve to continue sport participation" (Scanlan et al., 1993a, p. 6). Previous studies have associated stronger commitment with more frequent participation and stronger intentions to remain involved in sport (Casper et al., 2007; Jeon & Ridinger, 2009). Its relevance also extends to adolescents' psychological experiences. For instance, sport commitment was negatively associated with fear of failure, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization among adolescent handball players (González-Hernández et al., 2021). Collectively, these findings indicate that sport commitment is relevant to continued participation as well as to adolescents' broader psychological functioning in sport.

Athletic identity is another construct relevant to adolescents' sport-related self-perceptions. Athletic identity refers to "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role, within the framework of a multidimensional self-concept" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). A systematic review identified athletic identity as a salient yet comparatively underexamined construct in youth athlete populations (Edison et al., 2021). More recent research involving upper secondary school student-athletes has also shown that athletic identification is closely connected with motivation in the athletic domain (Niehues et al., 2025). Athletic identity may therefore reflect how strongly adolescents incorporate participation in sport into their broader sense of self.

Research in sport psychology has shown that support within athletes' immediate social environments is associated with enjoyment, motivation, commitment, and burnout-related outcomes (DeFreese & Smith, 2013; Torregrosa et al., 2011). Contemporary developmental perspectives further identify self-perceptions, peer belonging, and social support as important psychosocial processes through which organized sport may relate to young people's development (Wade et al., 2026). These perspectives suggest that experiences embedded within the sport environment may become psychologically meaningful when they involve recognition, support, or social connection. However, most of this literature has focused on support provided by coaches, teammates, family members, or other individuals close to the athlete. Less attention has been given to support provided by an external commercial organization.

Sport sponsorship is generally understood as financial or in-kind assistance provided by a commercial organization in exchange for opportunities to pursue organizational objectives (Meenaghan, 1983). Sponsorship research has traditionally examined sponsor awareness, attitudes toward sponsors, and purchase intentions, particularly among fans and spectators (Biscaia et al., 2013; Meenaghan, 2001; Schlesinger & Güngerich, 2011). Recent research has begun to extend this focus to sport participants. Koronios et al. (2022) showed that participants' involvement, sponsorship beliefs, event satisfaction, sponsor image, attitudes toward sponsors, and behavioural intentions form part of an interconnected sponsorship process in participant-based sport. Even in the context of junior sport sponsorship, the perspectives examined have not necessarily been those of the young athletes themselves. For instance, Vance et al. (2023) examined Australian parents and coaches as guardians, focusing on their moral judgments of sponsorship and sponsor goodwill. Young athletes' own psychological responses to directly experienced sponsor support therefore remain less well understood.

Sponsor support in school-based sport may differ from sponsorship encountered primarily through signage, advertising, or media exposure. In the context of this study, participants experienced sponsor support directly through apparel, equipment, practices, games, ceremonies, and contact with company personnel. From a theoretical perspective, direct sponsor involvement could make the sponsor's contribution more noticeable to young athletes. Such involvement could also convey that their sport activities are recognized and valued by an organization outside their immediate team or school environment. Such experiences could be relevant to awareness of the sponsor's involvement as well as to adolescents' sport-related self-perceptions. Athletic identity reflects the extent to which participants see themselves in the athlete role, whereas sport commitment reflects their desire and resolve to continue participation. Examining these constructs together allows changes in awareness of sponsor support to be considered alongside changes in athletes' sport-related self-perceptions.

Accordingly, this study examined pre–post changes in awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, and sport commitment among Costa Rican high school student-athletes participating in a sponsor-supported interscholastic competition. Given the one-group design, the study was intended to document temporal changes within a real-world sponsorship setting rather than to estimate causal sponsorship effects. It was hypothesized that scores on all three measures would be higher at post-test than at pre-test.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

The sample comprised 89 Costa Rican high school student-athletes from two high schools, including 52 males and 37 females. All participants competed in school-based basketball or soccer. Their mean age was 15.36 years (*SD* = 1.30). On average, participants had 7.27 years of sport experience (*SD* = 3.28), participated in their sport 3.14 days per week (*SD* = 1.49), and spent 2.11 hours per day participating in sport (*SD* = 0.88).

Measures

The questionnaire consisted of three measures: awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, and sport commitment. An overview of the study measures is presented in Table 1. A total of 18 items were administered. For each measure, item scores were summed to create a total score, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the corresponding construct. Internal consistency reliability was evaluated for each measure at both time points.

Awareness of sponsor support

In this study, awareness of sponsor support refers to participants' recognition of specific tangible and interpersonal forms of sponsor involvement in their sport activities, rather than conventional sponsor recall or brand recognition. Prior to item development, the research team consulted with the sponsoring company and the participating schools to confirm the specific forms of sponsor support that participants would experience during the competition period. Based on this information, five context-specific items were developed to reflect sponsor activities relevant to the study setting. The items addressed the provision of apparel and equipment, support for practices and games, attendance by company personnel, and involvement in competition-related activities. Example items were "The sponsor has provided support for our practices and games" and "Some employees of the sponsor have come to watch our training or games." Participants rated each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and item scores were summed. Higher total scores indicated greater awareness of the sponsor's involvement.

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Athletic identity

Athletic identity was measured using the seven-item version of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). This self-report measure assesses the extent to which individuals identify with the athlete role within their self-concept. In this study, athletic identity was included as an indicator of how strongly participants saw themselves as athletes. Example items included "I consider myself an athlete" and "Sport is the most important part of my life." Responses were made on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Sport commitment

Sport commitment was measured using the six-item sport commitment measure developed for the youth-sport domain (Scanlan et al., 1993b). The measure assesses participants' desire or resolve to continue sport participation. Example items were "How dedicated are you to playing in [participant's sport]?" and "Do you want to keep playing in [participant's sport]?" Responses were provided on five-point item-specific response scales, with higher scores indicating stronger sport commitment.

Table 1. Overview of the study measures.

Measure	Source	No. of items	Response format	Example item
Awareness of sponsor support	Context-specific measure developed for this study	5	5-point Likert-type scale	"The sponsor has provided support for our practices and games."
Athletic identity	Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001)	7	7-point Likert-type scale	"I consider myself an athlete."
Sport commitment	Sport commitment measure (Scanlan et al., 1993b)	6	5-point response scale	"Do you want to keep playing in [basketball/soccer]?"

Note. Item scores were summed to create total scores, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the corresponding construct.

Procedures

This study was conducted in relation to a school-based interscholastic competition that received support for approximately one month from a local sports equipment manufacturer in Costa Rica. The support included T-shirts and sports equipment for training and competition, visits by company personnel to team practices, and the sponsor's participation in the opening and closing ceremonies. These activities occurred throughout the preparation and competition period, exposing participants to the sponsor in practice, competition, and ceremonial settings.

The competition was held on September 10 and 12, 2018. The female soccer and basketball competitions were held on September 10, whereas the male competitions were held on September 12. The questionnaire was administered twice: first at the beginning of the support period in early August 2018, and again immediately after the completion of the games in September 2018. Both surveys were administered by members of the research team.

The questionnaire was administered in English. The participating schools provided bilingual education in English and Spanish, with English regularly used as a language of instruction. The original English-language versions of the measures were therefore used without translation or back-translation. Although participants were accustomed to receiving instruction in English, their individual English proficiency and the cultural appropriateness of the measures for Costa Rican adolescents were not formally assessed. Potential differences in language comprehension or cultural interpretation should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the National Institute of Fitness and Sports in Kanoya, Japan. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki applicable at the time of data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants' parents or legal guardians, and the participants provided assent before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously.

Analysis

Exploratory factor analyses using principal axis factoring were conducted separately for the pre-test and post-test data to examine the dimensionality of the five-item awareness of sponsor support measure. The suitability of the data for factor analysis was assessed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Factor retention was guided by eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and inspection of the scree plots.

Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for all three measures at pre-test and post-test. Pre–post differences were examined using paired-samples *t*-tests. Effect sizes were expressed as Cohen's d_z, and values of 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 were interpreted as small, medium, and large, respectively (Cohen, 1988). Ninety-five percent confidence intervals were calculated for the mean pre–post differences. All tests were two-tailed, and statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 30.0.

RESULTS

Exploratory factor analyses provided preliminary support for a unidimensional structure of the five-item awareness of sponsor support measure at both assessment points. At pre-test, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value was .871, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(10) = 365.019$, $p < .001$. A single factor was extracted, accounting for 72.75% of the variance, with factor loadings ranging from .670 to .910. At post-test, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value was .862, and Bartlett's test was also significant, $\chi^2(10) = 259.071$, $p < .001$. A single factor accounted for 63.38% of the variance, with factor loadings ranging from .616 to .934. The scree plots were also consistent with a one-factor solution at both assessment points.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, internal consistency, and pre-post comparisons.

Measure	Pre-test *M* (*SD*)	Post-test *M* (*SD*)	Pre-test α	Post-test α	*t*	*p*	d_z	95% CI
Awareness of sponsor support (*n* = 89)	10.80 (6.29)	17.13 (5.92)	.923	.892	9.03	< .001	0.96	[4.94, 7.73]
Athletic identity (*n* = 88)	36.52 (7.81)	40.80 (6.15)	.835	.822	4.58	< .001	0.49	[2.42, 6.13]
Sport commitment (*n* = 89)	25.79 (4.08)	27.79 (2.63)	.871	.808	4.99	< .001	0.53	[1.20, 2.80]

Note. For athletic identity, analyses were based on 88 paired observations because one response was missing at post-test. Confidence intervals (CIs) are reported for the mean pre–post difference (post-test minus pre-test). Effect sizes are reported as Cohen's d_z for paired-samples comparisons.

Descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliability coefficients for awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, and sport commitment at pre-test and post-test are presented in Table 2. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .923 and .892 for awareness of sponsor support, .835 and .822 for athletic identity, and .871 and .808 for sport commitment at pre-test and post-test, respectively. One participant had a missing item response for athletic identity at post-test. The pre–post comparison for this measure therefore used 88 complete pairs.

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Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine pre–post differences in the three variables. Awareness of sponsor support increased significantly from pre-test (M = 10.80, SD = 6.29) to post-test (M = 17.13, SD = 5.92), $t(88) = 9.03$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.96$, 95% CI [4.94, 7.73]. Athletic identity also increased significantly from pre-test (M = 36.52, SD = 7.81) to post-test (M = 40.80, SD = 6.15), $t(87) = 4.58$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.49$, 95% CI [2.42, 6.13]. Sport commitment increased significantly from pre-test (M = 25.79, SD = 4.08) to post-test (M = 27.79, SD = 2.63), $t(88) = 4.99$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.53$, 95% CI [1.20, 2.80].

Among the three variables, the largest standardized pre–post difference was observed for awareness of sponsor support ($d_z = 0.96$). The corresponding effect sizes for athletic identity and sport commitment were 0.49 and 0.53, respectively.

DISCUSSION

This study examined pre–post changes in awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, and sport commitment during an approximately one-month support period surrounding an interscholastic competition. Scores were higher at post-test for all three variables. The largest standardized difference was observed for awareness of sponsor support, whereas the corresponding effect sizes for athletic identity and sport commitment were 0.49 and 0.53. These results document changes that occurred during the support and competition period. However, given the absence of a comparison group, the observed changes cannot be attributed specifically to sponsor support. The observed changes may reflect a combination of competition participation, regular practice, team interactions, developmental changes over time, repeated questionnaire exposure, and other experiences occurring during the same period.

The largest change was observed in awareness of sponsor support. Conventional sponsor-awareness research in participant and grassroots-event settings has typically assessed sponsor recall and recognition. These studies have examined factors such as participant identification and online engagement (Eagleman & Krohn, 2012), as well as signage location, sponsorship activation, and familiarity with the event (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006). The measure differed from these conventional approaches by assessing participants' recognition of the sponsor's concrete support activities rather than conventional sponsor recall or recognition. In the support context, participants repeatedly encountered the sponsor through apparel, equipment, practices, games, ceremonies, and visits by company personnel. The higher post-test scores suggest greater self-reported awareness of the sponsor's support activities during the study period. Although the exploratory factor analyses provided preliminary support for a one-factor structure, broader construct validity remains to be established.

Athletic identity also increased from pre-test to post-test. Athletic identity can be especially salient during adolescence, when the athlete role may form an important part of young people's developing self-concept (Edison et al., 2021). Research involving upper secondary school student-athletes has further shown that athletic identity is closely related to motivation within the sport domain (Niehues et al., 2025). The increase in athletic identity was observed during a period in which participants engaged in regular team practices and competition, interacted with teammates, and were exposed to sponsor-related activities. Because these experiences occurred concurrently and no comparison group was included, the study design cannot determine the extent to which each factor contributed to the observed increase in athletic identity. Future controlled studies could examine whether direct sponsor involvement contributes independently to changes in athlete-role salience.

Sport commitment showed a moderate pre–post increase. Recent research has also shown that sport commitment is meaningfully related to emotional and motivational functioning among adolescent athletes (González-Hernández et al., 2021). The increase in sport commitment was observed during a period in which participants engaged in regular practices and games, interacted with teammates, experienced competitive outcomes, and were exposed to sponsor-related activities. This study cannot separate the contribution of sponsor involvement from those of the other concurrent experiences. Future studies incorporating comparison groups or experimentally varying sponsor involvement are needed to determine whether sponsor support is independently associated with changes in sport commitment.

The participant-based nature of this study distinguishes it from much of the sponsorship literature. Rather than encountering the sponsor only through media, signage, or symbolic association, participants experienced support within their own training and competition environment. Broader sponsorship research has increasingly considered relational and multi-stakeholder perspectives. Morgan et al. (2020) emphasized relational processes in sport sponsorship management. Daigo and Filo (2022) examined value co-creation through non-monetary contributions and stakeholder participation. These perspectives emphasize stakeholders' experiences and relationships rather than sponsorship exposure alone. From this perspective, young athletes can be viewed as stakeholders in the sponsorship experience rather than solely as targets of sponsor visibility. One recent study of junior sport sponsorship examined parents and coaches as guardians rather than young athletes themselves, focusing on their moral judgments of sponsorship and sponsor goodwill (Vance et al., 2023). The present study adds evidence from young athletes' own reports of awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, and sport commitment.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the absence of a comparison group prevents the observed changes from being attributed specifically to sponsor support. The competition itself, repeated practice, interactions with teammates and coaches, maturation, and repeated questionnaire administration may also have influenced the results. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as temporal changes observed during a sponsor-supported competition period rather than as evidence of sponsorship effects. Second, the observation period was limited to approximately one month, and the post-test was administered immediately after the competition. This study therefore captures only short-term pre–post changes and provides no evidence regarding whether these changes persisted after the competition period. Future studies should include follow-up assessments several weeks or months later to examine the stability of changes in awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, and sport commitment over time. Third, awareness of sponsor support was assessed using a context-specific original measure. Although internal consistency was satisfactory and the exploratory factor analyses provided preliminary support for a unidimensional structure at both assessment points, formal content validation, temporal stability, and broader construct validity remain to be established. Fourth, all outcomes were based on self-report and may have been affected by social desirability or demand characteristics. Finally, the sample was limited to two Costa Rican high schools and two sports, which restricts generalization to other populations and sponsorship settings.

From a practical perspective, visible and direct forms of sponsor involvement warrant further investigation in school sport. For schools and youth sport organizations, sponsorship arrangements that connect sponsor contributions with athletes' day-to-day sport activities may provide a basis for more participant-centred sponsorship practices. For sponsoring companies, equipment provision, attendance at sport activities, and appropriate interpersonal contact represent activation strategies that could be compared with passive sponsorship visibility in future controlled studies. The findings do not establish that these strategies improve athletic identity or sport commitment.

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Future research should compare sponsored and non-sponsored groups, include follow-up assessments several weeks or months after the competition, and compare different forms of sponsor support or activation across sports. Larger-sample studies using multivariate or structural modelling approaches should also examine whether changes in awareness of sponsor support are associated with changes in athletic identity or sport commitment. Such studies could examine potential mediating processes, including perceived support or motivation, and determine whether changes in sport-related psychological perceptions predict subsequent sport participation.

CONCLUSION

This study documented higher post-test scores for awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, and sport commitment among Costa Rican high school student-athletes during an approximately one-month support period surrounding an interscholastic competition. The observed increases indicate that awareness of sponsor support and sport-related psychological perceptions changed over the study period in a real-world sport setting.

However, the one-group pretest–posttest design does not allow the increases in awareness of sponsor support, athletic identity, or sport commitment to be attributed specifically to sponsor support. Competition participation, regular practice, team interactions, developmental changes over time, and repeated questionnaire exposure provide plausible alternative explanations for the observed score changes. The contribution of this study therefore lies in documenting changes in these perceptions among student-athletes in a sponsor-supported sport setting and identifying specific outcomes for future controlled investigation.

Future research should use comparison groups, follow-up assessments conducted several weeks or months after the competition, validated measures of awareness of sponsor support, and samples from different sports and cultural settings. Such designs would help determine whether the observed changes persist beyond the immediate competition period and whether sponsor involvement contributes independently to these changes.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors meet the criteria for authorship in accordance with established ethical guidelines. Contributions are specified according to the CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) as follows:

Conceptualisation: Kazuma Yanagita, Goichi Hagiwara. Methodology: Kazuma Yanagita, Goichi Hagiwara. Formal analysis: Kazuma Yanagita. Investigation: Goichi Hagiwara. Data curation: Kazuma Yanagita, Goichi Hagiwara. Writing – original draft: Kazuma Yanagita. Writing – review & editing: Goichi Hagiwara. Supervision: Goichi Hagiwara

All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no personal financial interests related to this study. The authors declare no personal financial interests related to this study. The sponsoring company provided in-kind support for the interscholastic competition, including T-shirts and sports equipment, and was consulted regarding the sponsor activities represented in the awareness measure. The company had no role in participant recruitment, data collection, data access, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, manuscript preparation, or publication decisions.

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