

Chasing Sub60

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The Making of an Experience-Based Brand Community

H Y R O X

Maya-Marie Köhn & Paige Culver

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Master's Program in Managing People, Knowledge and Change

Word Count: 24883 words



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Abstract

Title	Chasing Sub60 - The Making of an Experience-Based Brand Community
Course	BUSN49 - Degree Project in Managing People, Knowledge and Change Lund University, School of Economics and Management,
Authors	Paige Culver, Maya-Marie Köhn
Supervisor	Dan Kärreman, Lund University, Sweden
Purpose	The purpose of this study is to extend knowledge of how belonging forms in brand communities by investigating how an experience-based brand community cultivates belonging in the absence of a tangible product. This involves examining what substitutes for the product as the community's shared anchor, how this substitute is produced and sustained across multiple sites, how the anchor's relationship to the organizing firm evolves over time, and what structural vulnerabilities arise when belonging is organized around a shared experience rather than a shared object.
Methodology	An abductive approach has been used to study a single organization, HYROX. We assume the ontological position of constructivism, drawing upon the interpretivist tradition informed by symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy. Data was collected from nine semi-structured interviews with participants in various community roles, including athletes, employees, affiliate gym owners, and a spectator. These were complemented by participant observations at two race events and one volunteering shift, as well as secondary audio-visual sources, including a podcast interview with the HYROX founder.
Theoretical Perspective	Our primary framework for evaluating community formation is based on foundational brand community theory, particularly the three markers of brand community identified by Muñoz and O'Guinn (2001), and the customer-centric model of McAlexander et al. (2002). We complement this with the literature on engineered belonging, particularly the work of Fournier and Lee (2009), as well as the literature on the experience economy, specifically Cova and Cova's (2002) concept of linking value. This allows us to consider the organizational and experiential dimensions of the case.
Conclusion	Although experience-based brand communities appear to be structured differently to product-based ones, the findings suggest that they operate through recognizably similar mechanisms via a substitute anchor. In the context of HYROX, this anchor is collective suffering and achievement. This anchor fulfils the same structural functions as a product, such as producing consciousness of kind, establishing rituals and traditions, and fostering a sense of moral responsibility, but it operates across two sites simultaneously: the race event and the affiliate gym. Crucially, over time, the anchor decouples from the organization and migrates into the community, making belonging more self-sustaining than the organizational role would suggest. However, this simultaneously exposes the event site to structural vulnerabilities, such as atmosphere degradation, meaning drift, and an inclusivity gap, that product-based theory does not account for.
Key Words	experience-based brand communities, belonging, collective suffering, personal achievement, anchor decoupling, brand community, experiential consumption, linking value

Acknowledgments

We would first like to thank our supervisor, Dan Kärreman, for being exactly the kind of guide this thesis needed. He had a rare ability to give honest, sharp feedback without ever making us spiral - calm when we needed calm and direct when we needed direction. His support made the difficult parts feel manageable and the whole process felt less like a high-stakes academic exercise and more like a Sunday morning stroll. We are genuinely grateful.

We would also like to thank our examiner, Stephan Schaefer, for his engagement with this project.

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this research. You gave us your time, stories and your honest perspectives on something you clearly care about.

And finally - each other. We met last year, started going to the gym together and somewhere along the way decided that one HYROX was not enough and signed up for two. Somewhere between the sled pushes and the ski ergs, we also accidentally wrote a master's thesis. Knowing that if we can do 100 burpees, 100 lunges and 100 wallballs in a row, we can also keep each other sane under what we will generously call moderate stress in comparison to a HYROX and we got to spend the better part of a year fully immersed in a world that genuinely fascinated us. It was, unexpectedly, a lot of fun!

To each other: thank you for not quitting. Look, we finished ... in 1:24!!



We hope you enjoy reading this thesis.

Sincerely,
Maya-Marie Köhn and Paige Culver

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1 Introduction

At some point, our Instagram feeds changed. Instead of the usual stream of gym selfies and Strava routes, it was suddenly full of something different: finisher photographs and ‘How I ran my Sub60’ tutorials. Thousands of them, all with the same black and yellow backdrop, all showing people in a state of complete exhaustion, all wearing the same look of ‘I am dying but I love every minute of it’. Apart from that, we did not know what HYROX really meant. We signed up anyway. Seven months later, standing at the start line in Copenhagen, we understood why we had. What struck us during those months of training was not the physical challenge of it, though that was real enough. It was how quickly the experience absorbed us entirely. When people asked what sport we were doing, the answer was: we are training for a HYROX. We found ourselves talking about burpees, lunges, and wall balls, hearing us say things like “If I can do a 100 burpees, I can pass this exam”. The community felt immense, and it had a pull that was difficult to explain. Who willingly does 100 meters of lunges, followed by 100 wall balls in a row? Nobody, it seems, at least not in our immediate surroundings. Yet we kept going, because we knew, we weren’t the only ones.

That question “Why does something this painful generate such loyalty?”, is the one this study sets out to answer. But to frame it properly, it is first worth noting that the HYROX phenomenon does not exist in isolation. It is part of a broader shift in how people spend their time and money.

In the past decades there has been a sustained turn away from material consumption toward the consumption of experiences. Research has established repeatedly that people derive more lasting happiness from experiences than from possessions. Experiences are more open to positive reinterpretation over time, less prone to unfavorable comparisons and more likely to foster meaningful social relationships (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Van Boven, 2005). Where material goods tend to recede into the background through habituation, experiences live on in the memories people revisit and the stories they tell (Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012). They become, in a meaningful sense, part of who people are. As Carter & Gilovich (2012) noted, we are the sum of our experiences, not the sum of our possessions.

This shift in consumer preference has been accompanied by a parallel growth in mass participant sporting events. Events ranging from 5k runs to ultra-marathons have increased dramatically in popularity, attracting participants across a wide spectrum of skill levels and age

groups (Buning & Walker, 2016). These events are modified and modernized continuously to lower the threshold for entry and maximize their reach (Malchrowicz-Moško et al., 2020). Their appeal is not purely athletic. Research on endurance sport participation identifies mental health improvement and social affiliation as the most prominent motivational factors, ahead of competition and performance outcomes (Popov et al., 2019). People participate in demanding physical events not only to test themselves but to belong to something, to connect with others who share the experience and to find in that shared effort something the rest of daily life does not easily provide. Sport, for many, provides a valued social identity and a sense of community connection that extends well beyond the event itself (Jones, 2017).

Problematicization

These two trends - the growth of experiential consumption and the rise of mass participant sport - converges in formats like HYROX. What makes HYROX distinctive is that it is not simply a sporting event, like a 5k run. It is also a brand, a global community, and a commercial ecosystem. The organization positions itself explicitly around the tagline “A Sport for Everybody”, a deliberate strategic choice designed to distinguish it from more technically demanding fitness formats and to lower the threshold for participation. Alongside this inclusivity claim, community is not an incidental byproduct of the race format but one of the organization’s most explicitly stated strategic priorities, with HYROX describing community as central to its identity and core driver of its global growth (Fürste, 2025). Participation does not begin and end at the finish line. It extends into months of training, social media identity and the rituals that surround the race. Understanding how belonging forms around such an offering requires a theoretical framework that the existing literature has not yet developed.

The study of so-called ‘brand communities’ has a rich and well-established history. Since Muñoz and O’Guinn (2001) first defined brand communities as specialized social structures organized around shared admiration of a brand, the field has produced detailed accounts of how belonging forms, how identity consolidates and how loyalty is generated through community participation. These studies have documented the mechanics of consciousness of kind, rituals, and moral responsibility across a wide range of consumer contexts (Muñoz & O’Guinn, 2001). What they share is a foundational assumption that the brand community forms around a product, which acts as stable, tangible anchors around which identity, rituals and a sense of shared membership can organize. Members own the object and then join the community but could continue owning it without ever engaging with other members. The product exists

independently of the social world that forms around it (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002).

We found that a format like HYROX does not fit this model. The brand is constituted entirely by a shared participatory experience. It is temporary by nature and embodied in the moment. In HYROX, participation is not what follows consumption, it is consumption. And without the community the experience simply does not work. Whether the mechanisms of belonging documented in brand community research still apply when the shared object is replaced by a shared experience is a question the literature has, to our knowledge, not yet asked.

The experience-based fitness and events industry is growing, with mass participant sporting events expanding both in number and in commercial scale globally (Buning & Walker, 2016; Malchrowicz-Moško et al., 2020). Organizations competing in this space are increasingly making community a central plank of their strategy, as HYROX exemplifies. Yet despite this strategic importance, there is almost no academic research that tells these organizations how experience-based brand communities actually work, how belonging is cultivated, what sustains it between events, where it is vulnerable and what the firm's role genuinely is versus what the community builds for itself.

Taking HYROX as an experience-based brand community in which there is no tangible product and no object of ownership, the study explores the following research question:

How do experience-based brand communities cultivate belonging in the absence of a tangible product?

To answer this, the study will focus on exploring what substitutes for the product as the anchor around which identity, rituals and consciousness of kind organize. Secondly, it looks at what the role of the organization is in cultivating belonging, and whether this differs when the experience is not peripheral to the community but constitutive of it. By examining how belonging is cultivated in HYROX, it aims to generate insights that are relevant not only for HYROX as an organization, but for any experience-based brand that seeks to build community through shared physical experience rather than a tangible product. The findings have both theoretical value, extending brand community frameworks beyond product-based contexts, and practical value, providing an evidence-based foundation for a fast-growing industry.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis proceeds in six chapters. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical foundation across three bodies of literature: brand community theory, engineered belonging and the experience economy. Chapter 3 introduces HYROX as the empirical case. Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach grounded in interpretivism and drawing on semi-structured interviews, participant observation and secondary audio sources. Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings, moving from the most visible and performative dimensions of the HYROX experience toward the structures that sustain belonging between race events. Chapter 6 develops the discussion and Chapter 7 concludes with theoretical contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research.

2 Literature Review

The literature review develops in three sections, addressing brand community theory, the organizational logic of managing such communities and engineering belonging and the experience economy. Together, they establish the theoretical foundation from which this study departs and build the conceptual vocabulary through which the empirical findings are later interpreted.

2.1 Brand Communities

The study of brand communities starts with Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) definition: "A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community that is based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (p.412). Their definition notes three markers that distinguish brand communities from other forms of social grouping: a shared consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions and a sense of moral responsibility. Consciousness of kind refers to an intrinsic connection toward members of the community and a collective sense of difference towards people outside of that community. Rituals and traditions serve to maintain the community's history and culture, and moral responsibility means that members feel an obligation to the community as a whole and to individual members (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Muñiz and O'Guinn's model was extended by McAlexander et al. (2002). Researching the Jeep brand community, they challenged the view that it was not enough to only consider the customer-customer and customer-brand relationship. Rather than putting the brand at the center, they proposed a customer-centric model in which the community consists of a network of four relationships: customer - product (Jeep owners developing a personal bond with their vehicle through shared off-road experiences); customer - brand (owners pride in Jeeps heritage and identity); customer - company (Camp Jeep events that allow owners to meet Jeep engineers and experience the company as caring); customer - fellow customers (friendships and sense of kinship between strangers).

They showed that Jeep's success lies not in the product alone but in the experience of owning and consuming it. By deliberately creating events and programs that brought customers together, Jeep strengthened all four relationships and deepened the community integration. A

key empirical contribution here was the ‘brandfest’, which is defined as a temporary geographic concentration of a normally scattered community that provided unusually rich social context, accelerated interpersonal bond formation and increased integration within the community, especially among members who were less integrated before. For McAlexander et al. (2002) they are crucial to the development of a brand community. The community-integrated customers behave differently. Since they serve as brand missionaries, they are more forgiving of product failures, less likely to switch brands and have greater emotional investment in the company's success (Berry, 1995). McAlexander et al. (2002) introduced three additional context-dependent markers to the ones suggested by Muñoz and O'Guinn (2001), that allow for a finer analysis of community. The first is geographic concentration, referring to the degree to which community members are physically present or dispersed. The second is social context, capturing the richness of interactions within the community. The third is temporality, which concerns whether a community is stable and enduring over time or temporary and periodic, circulating around specific events. McAlexander et al. (2002) treated these not as fixed categories but as dynamic, arguing marketers can actively shift a community's position on each dimension.

Building on these foundations, the literature has developed a more detailed understanding of why members participate in the community and how they identify with it, which will be addressed in the following section.

2.1.1 Why Brand Communities Matter to People

To understand why brand communities generate such loyalty and advocacy, we first needed to understand why community membership matters to people on a psychological level. The basic psychological mechanisms behind brand communities are rooted in social identity theory. Tajfel and Turner (1979) discovered that individuals derive a substantial portion of their self-concept from the groups they belong to. This is also known as one's social identity, which is primarily formed by the emotion of belonging to a community (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Specifically, a shared identity is formed through self-stereotyping, whereby individuals recognize similarities with other members who share a characteristic. In the context of brand communities, this means that membership is not only about accessing a social resource, but also about who one understands oneself to be. A sense of community membership enhances engagement within the community and increases emotional commitment to the group, thereby increasing willingness to invest effort in it (Nohutlu et al., 2023; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-

Schröder, 2008). Wider literature on community further establishes that communities are formed on the basis of commonalities among individuals, based on shared interests, experiences, or identities, that create feelings of belonging, commitment, and solidarity (Matarranz et al., 2024; Woo et al., 2023; Nohutlu et al., 2023). At the heart of this collective identity is a shared sense of 'we-ness', anchored in shared attributes and experiences, and always defined in relation to those outside the group. It is through this collective sense of 'we-ness' that community members come to understand themselves not only as individuals who share an interest, but also as part of something larger than themselves (Snow, 2001).

While Social Identity Theory explains why people are drawn to communities, belonging describes how that membership feels. It can be understood as an internal emotional state that emerges when a person perceives themselves to be valued by others, and it is observable through behavior (Matarranz et al., 2024). It is an active process, not a passive state. People orient themselves towards others, connect with their concerns, seek social acceptance and validation, and work to build relationships (Bryer, 2019). A sense of belonging emerges through an individual's interaction with their situation, as well as through the interplay of social values, personalities, beliefs, norms, culture, traditions, and shared expectations (Stride et al., 2025). The desire to belong and gain social acceptance is associated with positive human transformations, such as expressing wider-reaching aspirations, experiencing increased energy and enthusiasm, and behaving in more unifying ways (Bryer, 2019) that enhance social relationships and provide an emotional outlet (Stride et al., 2025).

Further literature helps to explain why this pull towards community is so persistent. McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed that a sense of community is based on elements such as membership, influence, reinforcement of oneself as part of the group and a shared emotional connection. Together, these elements demonstrate that community formation is not transactional. Rather, being part of a group satisfies the fundamental need for safety, belonging and identity. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis reinforces this idea, proposing that humans have a basic drive to form and maintain interpersonal relationships, a need that can be met through participation in brand communities. A strong connection to the brand can also precede and contribute to community membership, drawing people towards others who share their enthusiasm. This can be driven by synergistic consumption experiences or the symbolic value that a brand carries in the outside world. An example of this is Nike's iconic status (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008; Algesheimer et al., 2005). When

customers share the same interests in the same space, the place becomes an anchor for belonging, providing an opportunity where people can gather with others who understand and relate to their passion (Woo et al., 2023).

These frameworks establish that brand communities are structures within which fundamental psychological needs for identity and belonging can be met. Belonging strengthens identification, leading to loyalty, advocacy, and co-creation that make brand communities valuable. The following section explores how belonging develops from a psychological outcome into an organizational strategy.

2.2 Engineered Belonging: Community as Organizational Strategy

For organizations, a sense of community and belonging among members has been linked to greater levels of engagement, retention, loyalty, productivity, and well-being (Achievers Workforce Institute, 2021; Stride, 2025). The most explicit articulation of community as an organizational strategy can be found in Fournier and Lee's (2009) research on brand community management. They argue that firms can actively design a community by focusing on webs of relationships rather than transactional brand–consumer bonds and considering the entire ecosystem of connections that give the community its density and durability when building its architecture. Yoshida et al. (2015) provide some evidence for this, emphasizing the importance of feeling connected to other consumers in sports brand communities and finding that a fan's attachment to other spectators was the strongest predictor of continued attendance. Katz et al. (2018) further refined this finding through a social network analysis of sports fans, confirming that a fan's personal network was a significant predictor of attendance. However, for an organization, this architectural work also involves what the brand stands for, the values it projects, and the kind of community it invites people into.

This demonstrates that a sense of belonging emerges from mutual recognition, shared history, and perceived reciprocity among participants (McMillan & Chavis 1986). This also means that it cannot be produced by any organization alone. However, organizations can create the conditions and occasions within which belonging is likely to arise, thus enabling the community to emerge. A clear example of this design logic in practice is the 'brandfest' concept introduced by McAlexander et al. (2002). By engineering the temporary geographical concentration of otherwise dispersed participants, a firm creates the context in which social bonds can form,

rather than producing those bonds directly. This is the architect's logic applied to community building: the firm designs the structure for the creation of belonging.

To understand why community investment pays off, we need to examine the mechanisms that connect it to member behavior. For example, social exchange theory holds that individuals evaluate what they give and receive from an organization, and they are more likely to engage proactively when they perceive the exchange as positive (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Bouraoui et al., 2019). A defining feature of this exchange is reciprocity: giving benefits in return for those received (Molm et al., 2007; Klein, 2025). Gouldner (1960) proposed that receiving benefits creates an internal obligation to give back through effort, advocacy, and loyalty. This is also connected to commitment, the psychological bond reflecting dedication and responsibility (Klein et al., 2012; Klein, 2025). Belonging is the emotional precondition, while commitment is the behavioral outcome. When commitment is strong, it manifests as proactive behaviors (Meyer et al., 2002), which are contributions that make a community self-sustaining and strategically valuable.

Evidence suggests that consumers' sense of community with brands is a more effective predictor of loyalty than satisfaction (Drengner et al., 2012) or financial incentives (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). As demonstrated by Schau et al. (2009), individuals can actively contribute to the community to which they feel a sense of belonging. They identified specific community engagement practices that lead to increasing involvement with the brand. These include 'stalking' (defining one's participation), 'milestoning' (marking brand experiences), 'badging' (creating signifiers of those milestones) and 'documenting' (constructing a personal narrative from those experiences). Repurchasing also provides a tangible indication of the strength and depth of the relationship between consumers and brands, highlighting the strategic importance of creating and sustaining a sense of belonging. When brands make consumers feel part of something bigger, they are not just selling a product, but creating an experience and an emotional connection (Matarranz, 2024). Belonging is therefore a strategic mechanism as well as a psychological outcome of community membership. The stronger the sense of belonging, the more deeply a member identifies with the community and the brand.

2.2.1 Mechanisms of Engineered Belonging

Engineered belonging operates through intentional design choices that shape how individuals participate in, feel within, and relate to brand communities. Rather than producing belonging

directly, these mechanisms work by creating the structural conditions under which belonging becomes more likely to emerge.

The first mechanism we want to address is the design and facilitation of 'Shared Practices'. Schau et al. (2009) identify a range of brand community practices, such as rituals, collective storytelling and collaborative problem-solving, which reinforce community cohesion, as well as a sense of shared identity and belonging. These practices are key to cultivating a sense of community, as they can be deliberately cultivated by the firm to encourage participants to strengthen their group identity through engagement. A second mechanism concerns the design of emotional and sensory atmospheres. Kotler (1973) established that the designed physical environment is more than a neutral backdrop. It is an affect creating medium that shapes how an individual feels and behaves through its sensory qualities of sounds, color and spatial arrangement and texture. The atmosphere of a place directly arouses an emotional state that neither the product nor the service alone can produce. Building on this, Hill et al. (2022) extend the argument to include the social dimension, demonstrating that when a designed environment successfully aligns the emotions and attention of a group, the collective affective responses of individuals produce a shared atmosphere that fosters a sense of connection between strangers and something larger than themselves. A final mechanism involves the deliberate organization of events and formats that facilitate interaction between participants, a concept captured by the term 'brandfest', as defined by McAlexander et al. (2002). It also applies to any program designed to encourage proximity and interaction among community members. Woo (2025) distinguishes between programmed participation, where the firm plans events that require direct customer interaction, and proactive participation, where customers initiate social activity themselves. The firm's task is to design conditions that encourage participants to move along this spectrum from passive encounters to active co-creation without imposing so much structure that the social experience feels managed rather than genuine.

Taken together, these three mechanisms demonstrate that the firm is the architect of the social context, rather than the creator of the social experience itself. Rather than delivering belonging to a passive recipient, each mechanism creates the structural conditions, shared activity and affective atmosphere within which participants can actively co-produce a sense of belonging.

2.2.2 Limitations of Engineering

Antonsich (2010) argues that belonging should be understood as a process of becoming rather than a fixed state of being. For organizations, this means that communities cannot be established

once and then left to their own devices. A sense of belonging must be actively maintained, and this becomes progressively more difficult as an organization grows. One consequence of organizational growth could be the erosion of community depth. As organizations grow, the infrastructure required to manage a large community tends to develop faster than the cultural and relational foundations that give a community its depth and coherence. Algesheimer et al. (2005) demonstrate that, within larger communities, individuals tend to identify more with the community than with specific individuals. This weakens the interpersonal bonds that provide a genuine sense of belonging. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) established that the shared consciousness that once defined membership becomes harder to sustain when the community expands beyond the social scale at which genuine recognition is possible. Stride et al. (2025) identifies four elements that foster a sense of belonging within a community: feeling seen, feeling valued, feeling heard and feeling known. These components are naturally harder to maintain as communities grow. Members may remain participants in name only while their sense of belonging gradually fades. Excessive management can also have negative consequences. Algesheimer et al. (2005) and Goh et al. (2013) found that excessive firm involvement can undermine loyalty and the communal experience is called into question. Finally, Beverland (2005) argues that brand authenticity is constructed through a “sincere story” built around tradition, craftsmanship, heritage, and quality, while downplaying overt commercialism. Extending this, Beverland (2008) argues that authenticity is not an objective brand quality, but something consumers interpret through symbolic cues related to tradition, continuity, and sincerity. While the article does not explicitly focus on rapid growth, it suggests that authenticity can become vulnerable when brands appear overly commercialized, mass-produced, or disconnected from the traditions they claim to represent. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2013) demonstrate that consumption communities rely on members to maintain shared norms and meanings, particularly when organizations fail to adequately support them.

2.3 The Experience Economy and Experiential Consumption

People are increasingly spending their resources on experiences rather than possessions. They derive greater and more lasting happiness, stronger social bonds, and a greater sense of self from experiences than from possessions (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Van Boven, 2005; Carter & Gilovich, 2012). As experiential consumption grows, so does the commercial logic of building brands around shared physical experiences rather than objects. This section examines the additional insights that the literature on the experience economy offers beyond the product-

based brand community literature. It explains how experiences create value through active participation rather than passive consumption and how this participation produces social bonds.

2.3.1 Experience as a Distinct Economic Offering

Pine and Gilmore (1999) introduced the argument that experiences constitute a fourth and qualitatively distinct economic offering, beyond commodities, goods, and services. According to the authors, 'an experience happens when a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event' (p. 98). These experiences are designed for consumers to actively participate in memorable events, and are inherently personal, existing only within individuals who have engaged with them emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Schmitt (1999) built on this framework by emphasizing the subjective and relational dimensions of experiences, and by distinguishing five strategic experiential modules: sense, feel, think, act, and relate. His emphasis on the 'relate' module is directly relevant here, as it draws attention to experiences that connect individuals to a wider social and cultural context, producing identity through reference to an idealized community. For Schmitt, experiential design involves engineering the conditions under which social belonging is experienced and demonstrated. This is one of the first instances in experience economy literature where community emerges as something more than an incidental outcome. It is identified as a design objective.

2.3.2 The Co-Creation of Experiential Value

A significant limitation of the work of both Pine and Gilmore (1999) and Schmitt (1999) is that their frameworks are fundamentally focused on the supply side. The firm stages, designs and delivers the experience, which is then received by the participant. However, Prahalad and Ramswamy (2004) challenge this assumption, arguing that value increasingly emerges from the interaction between firm and consumer rather than being embedded solely in the offering itself. Their concept of the experience environment reimagines the firm not as the author of value, but as the architect of a context in which value is negotiated and co-produced. This shift relocates agency from the producer to the network of participants. It also implies that the experiential value of any individual partly depends on the quality of their interactions with other participants, rather than solely on what the firm has staged. Cova and Cova (2002) build on this and draw on the sociology of neo-tribes, which are small, fluid groupings organized around shared passions and practices. They argue that the most significant value produced through consumption is not use value or hedonic value, but 'linking value', the capacity of a product,

event, or experience to facilitate the formation, expression, and maintenance of social bonds. This challenges the logic of experiential marketing, as it locates value not in the experience itself, but in the social bonds that it enables.

Taken together, the experience economy literature shows that value is created not only through enjoyment but also through participation, interaction, and social connections. However, it gives limited attention to long-term community formation, belonging, and how organizations manage communities built around shared experiences rather than products.

2.4 What the Literature has not yet Asked

The three bodies of literature reviewed above - brand community theory, engineered belonging, and the experience economy - each offer valuable insights into the formation of brand communities and the role of consumption in fostering a sense of belonging. Taken together, however, they still leave a significant theoretical gap.

From Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) to McAlexander et al. (2002) and subsequent identification literature, research into brand communities has produced a rich framework for understanding how belonging forms, consolidates and sustains itself around brands. These studies demonstrate how rituals, shared identity and moral responsibility generate strong attachments and loyalties. However, this framework has been developed almost exclusively through product-based cases, such as motorcycles, cars and computers. In all these cases, the product exists independently of the community itself and functions as a stable, tangible anchor around which identity, rituals and belonging can organize. While consumers may join the community because of the product, the product does not depend on the community in order to exist.

The literature on engineered belonging builds on this understanding by demonstrating that organizations can actively cultivate conditions that make belonging more likely. By fostering shared practices, cultivating emotional atmospheres, and structuring social interactions, firms can design environments that encourage interaction, identification and participation. However, this literature largely assumes the existence of a stable organizational or product-based reference point around which the community forms. While the organization designs the social environment, the underlying anchor of belonging remains relatively fixed.

Meanwhile, the literature on the experience economy provides a sophisticated account of how experiences create value. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that experiences can produce collective meaning and forms of social connection, and these frameworks offer valuable vocabulary for understanding how experiences foster connections and meanings. However, these frameworks were not developed with brand communities in mind, let alone communities organized around shared experiences rather than shared products. The focus is on how experiences create social bonds, rather than on what happens when the experience itself becomes the basis for community membership. In such contexts, the experience is not just something that temporarily brings people together. Instead, participation becomes the main way belonging is created within a broader community. However, these frameworks say little about how belonging is sustained between experiences or how firms actively build communities.

This raises several questions. If the product is absent and the brand only offers an experience, do the mechanisms of belonging identified in product-based brand communities still apply? What substitutes for the product as the anchor around which rituals, consciousness of kind and a sense of belonging organize? If such an anchor emerges, where does it exist: within the organization, within the event itself or within the participant community? How does this influence the role of the organization in fostering a sense of belonging?

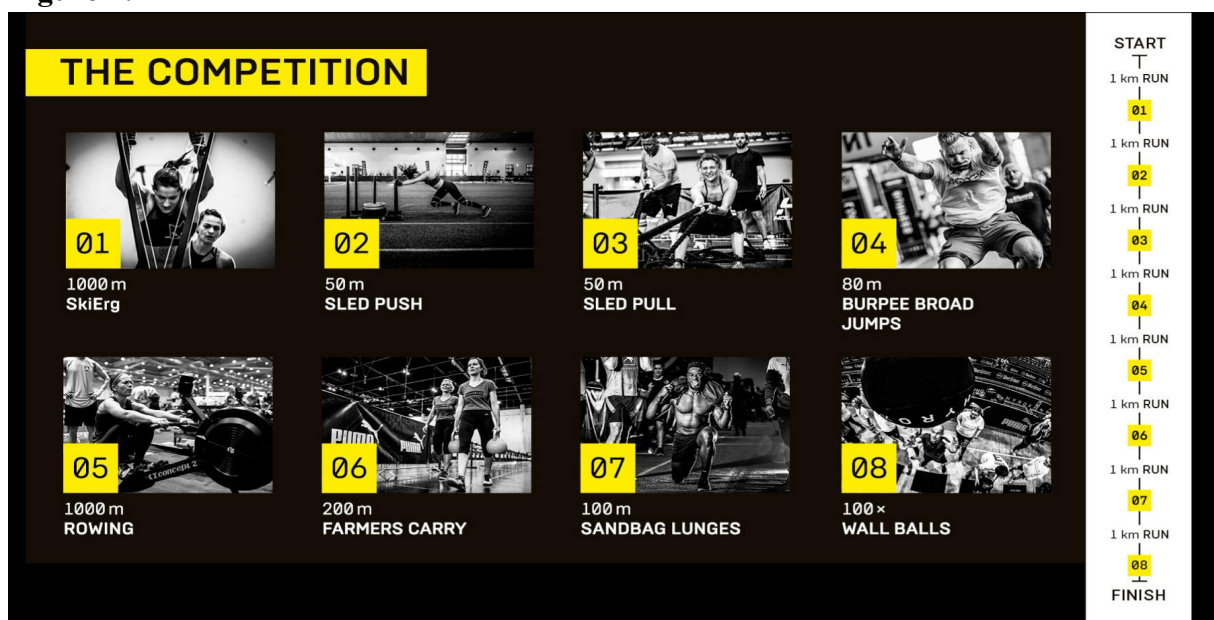
Taking HYROX, as an experience-based brand community with no tangible product or object of ownership, as an example, this study attempts to answer the following question:

How do experience-based brand communities cultivate belonging in the absence of a tangible product?

3 HYROX 101: The Race, the Format, the Case

Founded in Hamburg, Germany, in 2017 by Olympic field hockey champion Moritz Fürste and Christian Toetzke, HYROX is a global indoor fitness competition that turns everyday gym training into a standardized and accessible sport. The format is simple and consistent worldwide (Figure 1): eight rounds of a one-kilometer run, each followed by a functional exercise - ski erg, sled push, sled pull, burpees, rowing, farmer's carries, lunges and wall balls - totaling eight kilometers of running and eight exercises (HYROX, n.d.).

Figure 1: HYROX Stations



Source: (HYROX, n.d.)

The brand's taglines, 'The World Series of Fitness Racing' and 'A Sport for Everybody', reflect a deliberate strategy to distinguish HYROX from more technical formats such as CrossFit. With no complex movements, qualification barriers or strict time limits, anyone can participate and join its global community. Starting with 600 athletes at its first event in 2017, HYROX grew to hold 83 events in 2025, attracting over 550,000 competitors. In 2024, Time magazine included it in its list of the worlds 100 most innovative companies (HYROX365, n.d.).

3.1 HYROX as an Experience-Based Brand Community

In order to understand why HYROX is a valuable case for this study, it is necessary to establish the type of community it represents and how it differs from the categories that have already been covered in the literature. HYROX is not just a fitness competition. It is a year-round participatory ecosystem in which the race is the most concentrated expression of a community

that is sustained continuously through training groups, affiliate gyms, digital platforms, and shared preparation. Unlike most brand communities in the existing literature, it does not form around a product, but around a shared experience. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) and McAlexander et al. (2002) built their foundational frameworks on communities organized around objects that consumers own - such as motorcycles, cars, and computers - which exist independently of the social world around them. In HYROX, however, there is no such object, nor any passive consumption or spectatorship that exists independently of participation. The brand is constituted entirely by the participatory experience it delivers.

Unlike most participatory sporting events, such as marathons and triathlons, which bring people together for the event before they go their separate ways, HYROX is a global brand that owns and controls the entire event format. The sense of belonging is not confined to a single event. Affiliate gyms run dedicated classes, coaches obtain official certification and athletes train together year-round in preparation for the next race. Community membership is embedded in participants' everyday fitness lives, not just their race calendars. Furthermore, the community differs from sports fan communities and fandom research, which focus on spectatorship and identification with teams, clubs, or athletes (Bauer et al., 2008). In HYROX, every participant is the performer themselves. There is no team to support and no athlete to watch (yet) in the traditional sense. This alters the mechanisms through which a sense of belonging and identification emerge, reflecting the gap identified by Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) in their note on the limited research on communities organized around shared experience rather than spectatorship.

The most comparable literature comes from branded fitness communities, particularly CrossFit. CrossFit and HYROX both generate strong identities through shared physical challenges and have been associated with a sense of intense belonging and loyalty (Powers & Greenwell, 2017; Sarpong, 2018; Morawietz et al., 2022). CrossFit research has examined community formation, identity, the intensity of practice, and the tensions between inclusion and exclusion (Sarpong, 2018; Whiteman-Sandland et al., 2018; Woolf & Lawrence, 2017; Makos, 2024; Dessart & Bressolles, 2023; Schrijnder, 2021). However, important structural differences remain between the two contexts. CrossFit is organized around a decentralized training culture centered on daily gym attendance, constantly varied workouts, and a long-term lifestyle commitment. The local 'box' functions as the main site of community life (Sarpong, 2018; Powers & Greenwell, 2017). The broader CrossFit brand exists more loosely across independently operating gyms and competitions that vary substantially in format and importance. Participation also involves

relatively high technical and financial barriers in the form of complex movements and costly affiliate memberships, which automatically lead to a very limited sense of belonging. By contrast, HYROX is built around a highly standardized global race format, with the central brand maintaining far greater control over the experience. The competition itself plays a much more prominent role in community life, with athletes from different countries preparing for the same event structure, performance standards, and symbolic achievement markers. The movements require comparatively little technical skill and can be practiced anywhere, meaning participation is less dependent on local affiliate infrastructure. While CrossFit community identity is primarily embedded in everyday training culture and local gym membership, HYROX community identity is more strongly organized around preparation for and participation in the brand event itself. These structural differences suggest that HYROX operates through a different relationship between the brand, training, and belonging than that described in existing CrossFit literature.

Together, these distinctions establish HYROX as a theoretically robust enough case to engage with existing frameworks, while also being different enough to generate new insights. As it is not adequately described by product-based community theory, fan community theory or existing branded fitness research, it is well suited to the exploratory qualitative approach adopted here.

4 Methodology

The following chapter outlines our methodology. It begins with our philosophical assumptions and qualitative research design, then moves on to our data collection and analysis processes and concludes with a reflection on delimitations.

4.1 Philosophical Grounding and Research Approach

We acknowledge that our philosophical stance fundamentally influences our approach to the research question, the interpretation of findings, and the construction of knowledge. This study is grounded in interpretivism within the post-positivist tradition (Prasad, 2018). According to interpretivism, social reality is not fixed or objective, but continuously constructed through human experiences, interactions, and interpretations (Bell et al., 2022). Rather than seeking universal truths, interpretivism aims to understand how individuals make sense of their social world through subjective meanings and lived experiences. Ontologically, interpretivism rejects the idea of a single, objective reality and instead assumes that there are multiple, socially constructed realities. Epistemologically, knowledge is constituted through lived experience rather than being discovered objectively (Sandberg, 2005). This differs from qualitative positivism, which Prasad and Prasad (2002) describe as using qualitative methods within positivist assumptions that treat reality as objective and measurable. We do not view brand communities as stable entities with fixed boundaries, but rather as socially constructed worlds that are shaped by the meanings that participants assign to their experiences. In this sense, the meaning of HYROX and belonging to it is produced through how individuals interpret their participation.

Within the broader interpretivist tradition, this research draws on symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy. Rooted in Mead and developed by Blumer (1969, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), symbolic interactionism argues that people act towards objects, practices, and communities based on their perceived meanings, which emerge through social interaction. Meaning is therefore relational and continuously negotiated, rather than inherent. This perspective is particularly relevant for brand communities, where meaning is actively constructed through participation, rituals, and interaction. Within these communities, the brand becomes a symbol and a shared reference point around which individuals organize. In the context of HYROX, this perspective helps us to understand how participants make sense of the

brand, how these meanings develop through interaction with the organization and other members, and how a sense of belonging emerges and is sustained over time. Dramaturgy, introduced by Goffman (1959, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), builds on symbolic interactionism, focusing on the performative dimensions of social life. It views social interaction as a performance in which individuals and organizations manage impressions and construct identities through staged behavior. The distinction between front-stage behavior (what is publicly performed) and back-stage behavior (what remains concealed) is particularly relevant, since participation in a brand community is inherently performative. Members do not simply consume a brand. They embody it, speak its language, and display their affiliation to the outside world. In HYROX, this is particularly visible during events, where athletes perform identities, the organization stages the atmosphere, and participants collectively enact community values. Dramaturgy therefore provides a useful lens through which to examine how belonging is expressed and experienced in practice.

In line with this philosophical foundation, this study employs a qualitative, abductive research design. As Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) explain, qualitative research allows us to investigate social phenomena in contexts where quantitative approaches cannot provide the necessary depth of understanding. As our research question focuses on experiences of community belonging, a qualitative approach enables us to explore the significance that participants attribute to their involvement in HYROX more thoroughly. The study also follows an abductive logic involving continuous movement between theory and empirical material (Bryman, 2016). Rather than testing predefined hypotheses deductively or generating theory purely inductively, we iteratively moved between existing literature on brand communities, belonging, and experience, and the insights emerging from our data. Starting from an initial observation about HYROX, we explored different theoretical explanations while remaining open to unexpected findings, rather than forcing data into fixed categories (Saunders et al., 2009). As Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) argued, this approach avoids positioning research as merely filling a gap in existing literature, favoring instead a more dialogical relationship between theory and data. This enabled us to pay close attention to the nuances and tensions that emerged in the field, in line with the approach advocated by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007).

4.2 Data Collection

This section outlines the data collection process. Semi-structured interviews were used as the main source of empirical data, which was then supplemented by secondary and observational data to enhance the analysis. The limitations of the data collection process are discussed at the end of the chapter.

4.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary data for this study consists of semi-structured interviews conducted with various participants from the HYROX community. To capture a variety of perspectives, we interviewed employees of the organization, athletes, affiliate gym owners, and spectators. In total, nine interviews were conducted (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of Data Collection

Type of Data	Role
Interviewee 1	Lucas, HYROX Employee
Interviewee 2	David, HYROX Employee
Interviewee 3	Nina, Athlete: Semi-Serious
Interviewee 4	Marco, Athlete: Casual
Interviewee 5	Sophie, Athlete: Adaptive, Serious
Interviewee 6	Ben, Athlete: Adaptive, Serious
Interviewee 7	Sarah, Spectator
Interviewee 8	Felix, Affiliate Gym Owner of “Ironbase”
Interviewee 9	Max, Affiliate Gym Owner of “Ironbase”
Secondary Data, Podcast Interview	Moritz Fürste, Founder of HYROX at The Business of Sport Podcast
Observation	Participation HYROX Copenhagen, Women's Open Solo, 15.03.2026

Observation	Volunteering as Judges at Wall Balls Station, HYROX Cologne, 17.04.2026, 8 hours
Observation	Participation HYROX Cologne, Women Doubles Pro, 18.04.2026

Source: Own representation

Participants were recruited through a combination of personal networks, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Although some individuals declined to participate, the final sample offered a variety of valuable insights.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they align with the interpretivist aim of understanding how participants interpret their social world through their eyes (Prasad, 2018; Saunders et al., 2009). Unlike fully standardized interviews, they allow flexibility in question order, enabling follow-up questions and allowing unanticipated themes to emerge (King, 2004; Bell et al., 2022). This created more open, two-way conversations, allowing participants to elaborate on experiences they considered meaningful. We therefore developed three interview guides, one for athletes, one for employees, and one for gym owners (Appendices E, F and G). The open-ended nature of the questions encouraged free and, where possible, unbiased responses (Saunders et al., 2009).

All interviews were conducted online over four weeks and lasted approximately 40 minutes each. They began with a clarification of anonymity and data protection, followed by an introduction to the research project. With participants' permission, interviews were recorded to allow us to engage in the conversation while supporting the analytical process with follow-up questions and preliminary interpretation (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Kvale, 2007). Conducting interviews online also enabled efficient data collection across multiple countries within a limited timeframe (Gray et al., 2020).

4.2.2 Observations

To gain a deeper insight into the lived experiences within the HYROX community, we supplemented interviews with participant observations. This approach allowed us to experience the community's emotional atmosphere and social dynamics first-hand, as well as hearing how participants described it (Saunders et al., 2009). This was particularly valuable for capturing situational nuances that interviews alone could not fully convey. Although observation is less

common in business and management research, it provided important contextual depth and complemented our broader interpretivist and symbolic interactionist perspective. Observing interactions in real settings helped us to better understand how identities and meanings are constructed within the community.

Following the concept of the 'complete participant' by Gill and Johnson (2002, cited in Saunders et al., 2009), we immersed ourselves in the HYROX community in two ways. First, we volunteered at a HYROX event, temporarily becoming part of the organization, and observing internal coordination, employee interactions, and the role of volunteers in sustaining the community. Secondly, we participated as athletes in HYROX events in Copenhagen and Cologne in 2026, which allowed us to experience the perspective of participants first-hand. To structure the observational material, we followed Delbridge and Kirkpatrick's (1994, cited in Saunders et al., 2009) distinction between primary observational data and experiential data. Primary observation data captured factual descriptions of events, conversations, and sequences of action, while experiential data documented our perceptions, emotions, and reflections throughout the process. This approach aligns with Robson's (2002, cited in Saunders et al., 2009) concept of descriptive observation, which focuses on settings, participants, activities, interactions, and emotional dynamics in order to create a narrative account of the observed reality.

4.2.3 Secondary Data

In addition to the primary data collected through interviews and the observations, this study draws on secondary data in the form of documentary audio-visual sources. As Robson (2002, cited in Saunders et al., 2009) notes, documentary secondary data encompasses not only written materials but also non-written sources such as voice and video recordings and films, which can be analyzed qualitatively and used to support findings alongside primary data (Bryman, 1989, cited in Saunders et al., 2009). As direct access to HYROX founders was not possible, we used an interview with founder Moritz Fürste from *The Business of Sport Podcast* as a substitute, providing insights into HYROX's vision, strategy, and community development.

4.3 Data Analysis

We analyzed our empirical material using Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2018) framework of sorting, reducing, and arguing. This framework provides a structured approach to making sense

of qualitative data. Given the diversity of our material, this framework was particularly useful for managing the complexity of the data.

The process began with transcription and familiarization. Interviews and secondary audio-visual material were transcribed using Microsoft Teams and Klang, while observational material was documented through field notes written immediately after each session. We then repeatedly reviewed the material to deepen our familiarity with it and to identify emerging patterns (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Initially working individually, we noted keywords and grouped relevant quotes before comparing and discussing our observations to develop shared analytical categories.

Our analysis focused on how participants experience connection and belonging within the HYROX community. Throughout the process, codes and categories were continuously refined as new patterns emerged. During the reduction phase, we narrowed the material down to the categories that were most relevant for analysis and selected the quotes that best illustrated our findings, distinguishing between primary and supporting quotes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This resulted in the final overview of categories presented in Appendix D. We also applied analytical bracketing (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), paying attention not only to what the participants said, but also to how they expressed it. This proved especially valuable given our grounding in symbolic interactionism, where meaning is shaped through interaction and expression.

Finally, when presenting our findings, we used excerpt-commentary units, as developed by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Each unit consists of four elements: an analytical point stating the claim being made; an orientation contextualizing the excerpt for the reader; the excerpt itself; and an analytical comment drawing out its significance in relation to the broader argument. This method enables us to maintain a clear argumentative thread throughout our analysis while keeping our empirical material at its core. Overall, our analysis was neither purely deductive nor inductive. Being guided by symbolic interactionism in our analysis, we remained open to themes that emerged directly from the data. This included several findings that were not anticipated by existing literature. This reflects the iterative and combined nature of qualitative analysis described by Yin (2003, cited in Saunders et al., 2009).

4.4 Delimitations

It is important to note that the boundaries of this study were deliberately chosen to reflect the interpretivist orientation of the research. In the absence of an established, research-based definition of experience-based brand communities in existing literature, this study adapts the foundational brand community definition by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), substituting the product as the central organizing element with a shared experience. Further, the study is limited to a single case. HYROX was not selected because it is representative of all experience-based brand communities, but because it is theoretically fruitful. It is large enough to be meaningful and diverse enough in its participant base to generate significant variation. It is also different enough from existing studied contexts to generate new theoretical insights into how belonging is constructed within an experience-based brand community. Rather than prioritizing comparative breadth across multiple cases, we deliberately opted for analytical depth and contextual richness within one setting. Additionally, the study focuses specifically on participants' lived experiences of the community, rather than the organization's internal strategy or decision-making processes. Our primary empirical interest lies in how participants interpret, experience, and construct a sense of belonging within HYROX. This reflects our broader interpretivist position, which seeks to understand subjective meaning-making rather than establishing objective organizational truths (Prasad, 2018). This is also the reason why we opted for a diverse range of participants, rather than just employees from the company. Finally, although HYROX has a substantial online presence across platforms such as Instagram and Strava, including highly visible social practices surrounding training content and finisher photos, these mediated dimensions have not been examined systematically. While the thesis touches on this, it does not study it systematically. Instead, we chose to focus on the embodied and co-present dimensions of community formation, particularly the lived experiences that emerge through training, events, and direct interaction. Although social media clearly shapes community life, including it fully would have exceeded the methodological scope of a single thesis.

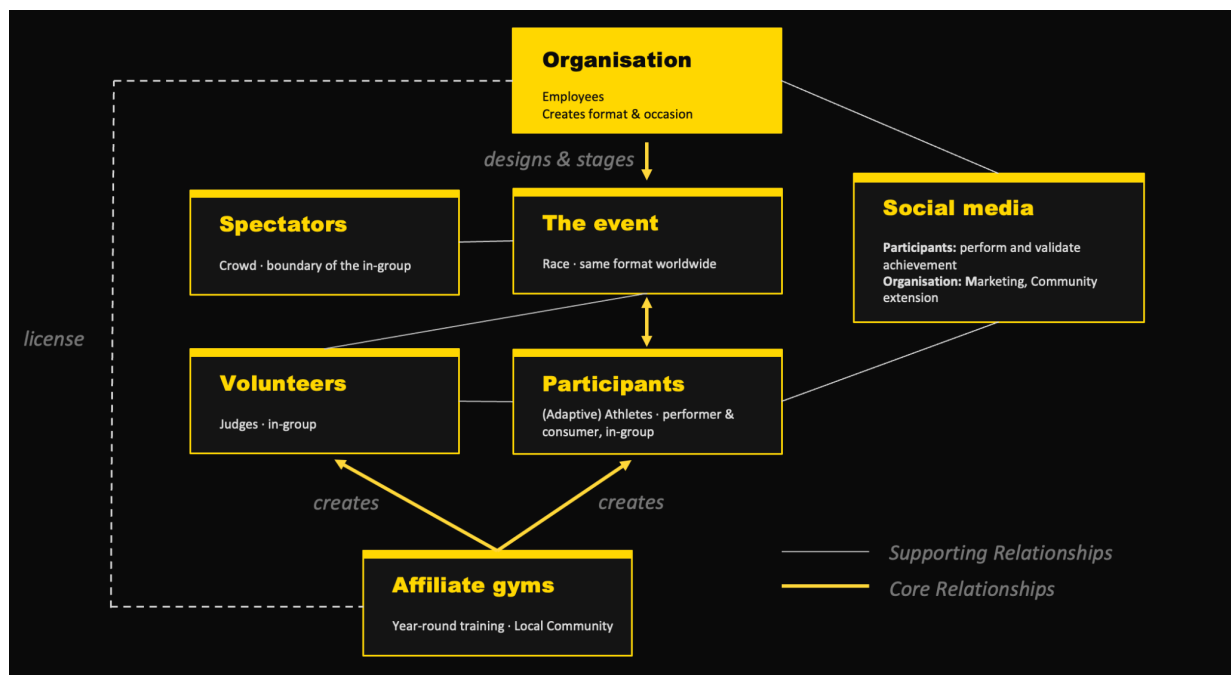
Throughout the research process, we reflected continuously on how our identities, assumptions, and prior experiences influenced the collection and interpretation of data (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In line with interpretivist epistemology, we acknowledge that the findings of this study are shaped by the subjective interpretations of participants and researchers alike. Therefore, the aim of this study was not to achieve positivist objectivity or broad statistical generalizability, but rather to gain an in-depth

understanding of a complex social phenomenon within a particular organizational context. Consequently, the findings should be understood as context-dependent rather than universally generalizable. In line with interpretive traditions, this study did not seek to establish an objective truth about experience-based brand communities, rather, it examined how individuals assign meaning to belonging within HYROX. Although the study is based on a single case, it may nevertheless provide valuable context-dependent knowledge and transferable insights that can inform future research on similar communities (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

5 Analysis

The following chapter presents our analysis of the empirical findings. Before moving into the analysis, Figure 2 provides an overview of the key actors and relationships that structure the HYROX community to help the reader find their way around. At the top is the organization that designs and stages the race. Participants act as both performers and consumers, forming bonds year-round through training at affiliate gyms, and competing in front of spectators on race day. Volunteers, many of whom are participants themselves, function as judges at the event. Social media extends the community, used simultaneously by the organization and independently by participants. Social media extends the community, used simultaneously by the organization and independently by participants.

Figure 2: The HYROX Community Structure



Source: Own representation

Taking a dramaturgical perspective, our analysis moves from the most visible and performative aspects of the HYROX experience, to the less visible underlying structures. This allows us to show how each component contributes to the creation of belonging within an experience-based brand community. First, we examine the frontstage of the community: the HYROX race event itself, where belonging is performed and enacted most intensely. Then, we move to the backstage areas to examine the less visible spaces and practices, looking at how individuals construct and sustain their identity in relation to HYROX, and then broadening the analytical lens to examine the tensions that emerge as the organization grows and changes.

5.1 The Stage: The Event as a ‘Brandfest’

The doors open and the noise hits you first.

The space feels dense, almost heavy, as if the energy is already waiting to pull you in. Before you fully register what you are seeing, you feel it. The bass of the music hits you. Hundreds of people already inside, already watching, already part of something that started without you. The space is vast and loud and relentless, screens blazing across every surface, bodies covered in sweat, faces caught somewhere between pain and focus. You know, watching them, that you are minutes away from being one of them.

You move through check-in in a kind of trance. The warm-up area absorbs you. Everyone around you is already in motion, stretching, shaking out their hands, staring at nothing. The music is so loud it becomes a physical thing, pressing against you from all directions. There is no outside of this anymore. No moment to step back and observe. You are already inside it.

Then the tunnel. Thirty bodies compressed into a narrow corridor, shoulder to shoulder. Nobody speaks. The breathing is audible. In front of you, a screen shows what is about to come. Not as information, but as a reminder. This is what you trained for. This is what you chose. The stations you have rehearsed in the dark at five in the morning. Sixty to ninety minutes of heart rate above 180. No rest. No exit except the finish line, and the only thought left is that the only way out is through.

The lights strobe. The countdown begins.

Three.

Two.

One.

The crowd erupts and you are already running. Welcome to the pain cave.

The HYROX race event is the most visible and concentrated expression of the brand community and functions as a ‘brandfest’, a temporary, place-based gathering that creates room for community integration. Matching our observations, participants in the interviews consistently describe the race not simply as a competition, but as an intense, shared experience in which strangers become connected through what they are going through together. The event space is loud, crowded, and intense. Everywhere is music, cheering spectators, volunteers and athletes

moving through the same sequence of stations, which creates a continuous flow of interaction and energy. Entering the venue, participants step into an environment that feels distinctly different from everyday training. It feels like a staged performance instead of a conventional sporting event. The organization has invested heavily in this theatrical logic, which the founder of HYROX articulates:

“We want to set up a \$200,000 event that looks like a \$2 million event, so we're really focused on the branding style ... it's the black and yellow and white these are the colors that we use very pure very holistic the people that get in there they we want them to feel like they are Olympic athletes” (Fürste, Founder)

The color palette of the design, the production values, the ceremonies, are all instruments of impression management. The firm is investing in a physical scenery in which the actors step when they perform on the course. Stepping onto that stage, the regular gym-goer does not simply compete in a race. They perform their new role: the HYROX athlete. What is interesting is that the stage is built for everyone. The average participant is not a professional athlete but a regular, fitness-oriented person training around work and the demands of daily life. The ordinary gym-goers are temporarily dissolved and replaced by the HYROX athlete, which is a new group identity, collectively performed and collectively felt, that the event itself brings into existence. For ninety minutes, the ordinary self is suspended, and the person who trains alone at five in the morning becomes, briefly, a star.

5.1.1 Witnessed Suffering: The Crowd and Atmosphere

This elevated sense of self does not exist in isolation. It is sustained by the crowd around you, from being seen, cheered, and carried forward by people who are going through the same thing. Athletes Nina and Marco describe what this feels like from the inside:

“It's crazy because there's so much people just coming and cheering and it's full and loud and the atmosphere is like exploding and they're pushing you forward” (Nina, Athlete)

“Like I enjoy being in that atmosphere where like you have like 400 people, 500 people watching you and like cheering you on and like competing, trying to get the best time” (Marco, athlete)

Ben, a competitive adaptive HYROX athlete, makes this further visible, describing what the race feels like when the environment is absent in Chicago, where there were only athletes present and no spectators, due to too expensive ticket prices:

“I preferred it with people ... Racing without anyone cheering me was very strange” (Ben, Athlete)

This shows that the staging of the event actively shapes the quality of the experience itself. Ben’s discomfort when racing alone revealed that the audience is a constitutive part of the experience. The people there, the community, is not simply present at the event but actively produces the atmosphere and the event's meaning through its presence. Athlete Nina further confirms this:

“I needed the crowd's energy to push myself through. Chicago was one of the worst races I had even though it was the World Championship - it was empty” (Nina, Athlete)

The World Championship experience was diminished because the crowd was absent due to the high cost of spectator tickets. Even though everything else was the same and every design choice was identical to those of other events, the collective energy produced by the community seems to be a decisive factor in making the experience what it is. The community must be present to give the event meaning.

5.1.2 Suffering is Fun

We believe that the elevated atmosphere and cheering crowd do not fully explain why participants leave a HYROX event feeling connected to people they have never met before. As David, a HYROX employee, puts it: *“HYROX is a very intensive challenge, you know, whether you're competing at a very high level or competing as a novice. It is a lot on the body and the mind.”* Sharing the experience of this physical exertion and pushing through exhaustion together seems to create a social bond, and the designed environment facilitates this. Ben captures what the race actually feels like from the inside:

“It’s like an hour and a half, two hours of just putting yourself in a deep hole. Just slogging through it as fast as you can. It’ll be painful. You probably won’t enjoy it for the first time, but as soon as you finish, you’ll be looking at another race ... it’s just a brilliant experience” (Ben, Athlete)

The fact that an experience described as a 'deep hole' immediately generates the desire to repeat it highlights the mechanism at the heart of this community. The suffering is not an incidental

part of the appeal; it is the appeal itself. Everyone in the room pays the same price for it. It is this shared cost that creates a bond. The physical reality of that cost is not abstract. Nina describes a race in Spain:

"I was crying during running and after the burpees I was like, fuck all this. I wanted to quit, but then I was like, no, you paid this much, now go the hell on" (Nina, Athlete)

All the money spent, all the travel undertaken, all the months of training, it all comes down to a single moment of internal reckoning on the course. And yet she kept going. This is what every participant in that room is experiencing simultaneously, each in their own way and at their own pace.

However, this relational bond is not limited to the athletes, it also appears to extend to people who are not competing in the event. Through observation and interviews, we found that most of the event's judges are volunteers who receive HYROX merchandise or a free entry ticket to a HYROX race in exchange for their work. Nina described her experience of volunteering at a race, where she judged the sandbag lunges station:

"I was judging at the sandbag lunge stations. And it was so fun. I was pushing them. I was cheering them ... My legs were really tired. My voice was gone because I was like, okay, you can do this. Come just two more steps and then you can have a little bit of rest ... So, like this the whole time, I was very supportive" (Nina, Athlete)

Nina was cheering on strangers. Yet the physical effort she witnessed was enough to make her feel compelled to share, if only temporarily, in what that athlete was experiencing. This is the mechanism in its purest form: there is no shared history, no prior relationship, and no brand loyalty, it is simply seeing someone suffer the same thing you have and having the instinct to respond. Nina describes a race in which exhaustion became unbearable:

"Running felt so heavy. You couldn't breathe. I was at the finish, and I was so dizzy. I can't remember how long I was laying on the stage because I really just needed to calm down my mind and get some air" (Nina, Athlete)

It is this shared knowledge that enables athletes to cross the finish line, and it is this that gives the judge's encouragement and the spectator's cheering their significance, even when the athlete cannot consciously register them. Nina and Ben express this dependence directly:

"I'm so alone with my thoughts and my inner struggles and all the pain. And please take it away for me by applauding and cheering and telling me, hey, you're doing good. Because it's hard to tell yourself while you're running" (Nina, Athlete)

"It was just head noise for an hour and 10 minutes" (Ben, Athlete)

At this point, the athlete cannot motivate themselves. It has to come from outside. The crowd supplies it, exactly because its members have been in the same position. The community formed at the event is built on this mutual recognition of the shared physical cost experienced by people who may never have met and may never meet again. Although the judges work behind the scenes, they are still an important part of the community and influence the athletes' experience.

We experienced this dynamic first-hand. As participating athletes, we found the encouragement from volunteers and strangers had a lasting impact, remaining memorable even after the race. Later, as judges, we instinctively felt the same urge to support exhausted athletes and share their experience. Rather than placing people outside the community, roles as judging and volunteering draw them further into it.

But what happens when someone witnesses suffering without having experienced it themselves? This section has traced the mechanism by which collective suffering produces social bonds through the mutual recognition of shared physical costs. However, this requires having experienced the situation first-hand. As the only non-participant in the dataset, Sarah reveals what this boundary looks like from the outside. With no experience of HYROX or personal investment in the competition, she attended as a spectator to support two athletes she knew. Even without knowing what membership entailed, she could recognize these as signals of membership:

"I did notice people's bracelets and stuff ... and I was like, 'Oh, that's a HYROX thing'" (Sarah, Spectator)

Although Sarah could see the stage, she could not interpret the performance. She was precise about why: *'You don't know until you've stepped into that world a little bit.'* While the in-group is visible from the outside, its internal logic remains inaccessible until you have experienced it first-hand. Although Sarah had not shared the physical cost, she could see its traces on those who had. The finisher's bracelet and the patch (Appendix C) bearing the name of the city where the race was completed are not just mementos, they are signals that can be noticed from the outside, but which are meaningful only to those who know what was required to earn them.

5.2 I am a “HYBRID ROCKSTAR”

To understand how a sense of belonging develops and persists, it is necessary to consider how participants relate to the community through both participation and identity. The way in which people see themselves in relation to HYROX shapes the nature and durability of the sense of belonging they experience. At HYROX, identity is performed. Participants use the event as a stage on which to present a version of themselves, constructing it through their training, clothing and the moments they choose to share publicly. The event provides a space in which these performances can be made visible to an audience of fellow athletes, social media followers and the race-floor crowd. It provides a structured occasion upon which individuals bring prior self-projects, unresolved identity questions, and desires for transformation. The interviews reveal that the identity of a 'HYROX athlete' is not a label applied after completing the race. Rather, it is a role that begins to be rehearsed at the moment of commitment, is performed publicly and is sometimes relinquished when it can no longer be sustained. However, as the following sections demonstrate, the on-stage performance of athletic identity is only part of the story. A sense of belonging often takes root behind the scenes, in spaces and relationships that the race itself does not produce.

5.2.1 HYROX as a Gateway: How People Found Their Way in

None of the interviewees took part in HYROX just because they wanted to. Behind each entry point, there was something that already needed a place. The stage offered more than just a race, it provided a structure through which pre-existing needs could be expressed and, culturally and socially, validated. This is important for understanding how a sense of belonging forms within an experience-based brand community. The sense of belonging that emerged was not produced by the event alone. It was co-produced by what participants brought with them and the occasion that the event provided. HYROX did not create the needs that drove people towards it. It provided a way for those needs to manifest as belonging.

Nina's account adds a backstage dimension that makes the relationship between personal investment and community belonging more explicit:

“I had a good reason to dive that deep into HYROX ... because when I started running again, my boyfriend from that time broke up with me. So, I was compensating all this heartbroken stuff with sport, all in. I wasn't having a day off in like 3 months. A broken heart is the best machine for sport and to go into competition and to be really good at it” (Nina, Athlete)

HYROX provided a socially valued form, via athletic achievement, competitive success, and visible commitment, through which a private emotional experience could be channeled and expressed. Nina also notes that when the backstage situation changed, when she was *'back to myself'*, no longer heartbroken, with a broader social life, her investment in the HYROX identity naturally reduced. The vehicle had served its purpose and her relationship to the community had shifted.

Max arrived through professional obligation. His personal rule is that he will only coach something he has done himself, which meant competing became a condition of credibility rather than personal goal:

"When I compete, I want to be good in what I do, because ... my mindset says this represents how I coach the classes" (Max, Gym-Owner)

The investment was externally motivated at first but the belonging it produced was real and the front stage performance of a credible coach and an identity as HYROX athlete then became one and the same.

Sophie is the clearest example of the gateway logic in the dataset. As a former Paralympian, she took part in HYROX because she was looking for a new challenge and saw the event as an opportunity to show other people with disabilities what they could achieve. She had already formed her backstage motivation before she stepped onto the stage:

"That's kind of the biggest reason why I keep doing it ... trying to develop a little bit of a platform to reach more people with disabilities" (Sophie, Athlete)

HYROX did not create her mission. However, it provided the platform through which it could be pursued and made visible.

The pattern is the same across these cases. HYROX took something that already existed and gave it a form through which a sense of belonging could develop. HYROX provided the stage, and the extent to which belonging could initially take root was determined by the prior investment.

5.2.2 How Belonging Exceeds Competitive Identity

Although athlete identity and community belonging often occur alongside each other in the data, participants consistently distinguish between being a HYROX athlete, a role associated with training, competition, and personal identity, and being part of the HYROX community, which is experienced more broadly and loosely, and often independently of athletic performance.

The competitive identity can emerge even before a single race has been completed. Felix, a gym owner and former tennis player, describes the moment he changed his Instagram bio from 'tennis player' to 'official HYROX athlete', not after finishing his first race, but when he decided to enter one:

“I think it started also when I was training for HYROX ... when my first decision was to do one race” (Felix, Gym-Owner)

The commitment served as a public declaration. The moment the decision was made, the identity was claimed and the performance of being a HYROX athlete began. It also marked the start of months of training at his gym. This demonstrates that the competitive identity is not awarded by the organization or earned through results, but rather, it is self-assigned, publicly rehearsed, and anchored in ongoing training and preparation rather than in the race itself.

At the other end of the investment spectrum, Marco competed but refused to be labelled as a HYROX athlete when asked if he would consider himself one:

“To be honest ... yes and no. I do, but at the same time, like, I don't really care. As bad as that sounds, it's just another competition and like that I've completed. It was like one day, three hours, we did it, we move on in life” (Marco, Athlete)

Although he experienced the community for a day, the competitive identity never took hold. This suggests that, without the ongoing investment in training, relationships and shared preparation that surrounds it, the race alone produces only a surface-level connection. Without the communal infrastructure beneath it, the competitive identity does not take root. While a single event can grant access to the stage, it cannot produce the sense of belonging that is built through repeated shared experiences.

Nina's experience lies somewhere between these two extremes, clearly demonstrating how competitive and community-based identities can diverge simultaneously. After competing intensively for eighteen months, winning every race, and training up to eighteen hours per week, she describes how her competitive identity shifted as her focus changed because she stopped embodying the role:

"I was a HYROX athlete for sure because this is what I was training for. It was my identity for 1½ years. No questions asked. Right now, I would more say I'm a hybrid athlete. I'm not doing a lot of HYROX workouts right now. I haven't planned to go to many competitions next year" (Nina, Athlete)

Yet she has not left the community. She continues to train and teach HYROX classes, and she and a friend are planning to take part in a double race in Berlin, complete with matching costumes. The costumes are not a display of competitive identity. They are a display of collective identity. Rather than signaling 'I am competing for time', they signal 'we are here together to have fun'. While her competitive identity has faded, her collective identity has persisted.

This separation is also evident at gym level. Max describes how most of the members at his gym do not compete yet are still part of the community in every meaningful sense:

"The majority doesn't compete. So, the majority does the HYROX classes, but they say, okay, I'm doing this for the community itself, I'm doing that for the workout for myself. I'm not doing it for the competition in the end. But on the other hand, you have a lot of people that say, okay, I want to do the competition as well. And there's a difference in the mindset in how they train" (Max, Gym-Owner)

Max's distinction is not between committed and casual members, but between two different approaches to the same stage. Those who compete embody one version of the HYROX identity. Those who train together, support each other during sessions, and develop social bonds through the shared physical environment are performing another version. Max also notes that new members sometimes join specifically because they are new to the city and are looking to make connections. The sport provides the opportunity, but it is the community that attracts them. Their sense of belonging is genuine, and it does not depend on ever having stood on a starting line.

Accessing the backstage of community belonging does not require the front-stage performance of athletic identity. The mechanism of collective suffering reaches further than competitive identity. Max's non-competing gym members access it through training sessions and Nina accesses it through social participation, even after her competitive identity has faded. Marco's case highlights the limitations of the race itself: he stood on the starting line, crossed the finish line, and left. The event did not generate a sense of belonging because the backstage infrastructure of repeated shared experiences, training relationships, and mutual investment was absent. This highlights something that was touched upon in the previous section and is made explicit here. While the initial HYROX competition provided a stage through which pre-existing needs could take shape and belonging could begin to take root, belonging does not seem to endure if it is only produced on race day. It is produced in the training sessions and social bonds surrounding the race.

5.3 The Gym as the actual community engine

The preceding section establishes how belonging is formed, however, it does not address how belonging is sustained. An experience-based brand community that only fosters a sense of belonging during concentrated, periodic events faces a structural problem: members would disperse between events, leaving nothing to keep them engaged until the next one. This section examines how belonging is sustained in experience-based brand communities.

The race is the frontstage: a concentrated moment of public performance where identity is displayed and witnessed. We found that the affiliate gym is the backstage. It is where the performance is rehearsed, and where the social bonds that give the race its meaning are formed. It is also where the community attributed to HYROX is produced by independent operators that the brand neither audits nor supports. While the preceding sections established that collective suffering is the mechanism through which belonging is formed, this section demonstrates that the same applies to the gym. The difference is that, unlike the race, it operates continuously, week after week.

5.3.1 Collective Suffering in the Gym

Section 5.1.2 identified collective suffering as the social mechanism at the race event, describing it as a shared physical experience that fosters connections between individuals who may never have met before and may never meet again. The same mechanism operates within

affiliate gyms, albeit in a lower-intensity, more frequent and more relational form. Gym owner Felix describes what happens in a HYROX class:

“It's like one big class and they are pushing each other. They are supportive and very friendly. It's not like they are just for themselves and do their thing because HYROX is really tough, and I think also very mental, mental game. And for me as a sportsman, it always pushed me if somebody's cheering for me on the sideline or like pushing me to my limits and the feeling is crazy. If you're doing the HYROX in the center and you're running and like dying inside, it's crazy how far other people can push you to your limits or beyond ... when you're getting ready and like laying down on the ground and so exhausted, but you have a smile on your face because you know, it was a good session” (Felix, Gym-Owner)

The dynamic that Felix describes is structurally similar to that experienced by athletes during a race. It involves people pushing each other beyond what they could achieve alone, with the collective suffering producing social bonds and the shared exhaustion becoming a source of connection rather than isolation. While the content is the same, the classes are weekly, the faces are more familiar, and the suffering accumulates across sessions. Felix further adds:

“It's like every time I'm starting the class, everybody knows what's coming now. They're looking at the whiteboard and seeing 100 burpees and like, I don't know, 2 minutes running and they are like enjoying this, because they know in ½ and hour, or like in one hour, they're like on the ground and done for the day, so it's nice to see they want to, like, push the limits and get motivated ... because it's such a high performance that you have to deliver” (Felix, Gym-Owner)

Members arrive knowing what is coming, yet they still show up. The suffering is anticipated, shared, and chosen repeatedly. This creates a sense of community, because belonging is created not only through the event itself, but also by repeatedly showing up for the same experience alongside the same people. While the pain cave at the gym might be less spectacular than the race, it is more continuous, which turns acquaintances into a community.

5.3.2 The License Without the Relationship

Max describes the relationship between his gym Ironbase and HYROX with blunt precision: they sold the license and nothing else. There are no quality checks to ensure that the gym runs HYROX classes, no standards for how these classes should be structured, no coaching

requirements beyond an optional license that can be purchased separately, no site visits, and no ongoing contact except for early-access event tickets for the DACH region:

“In the beginning, it was more from HYROX than from us. They brought the name, they brought the competition. But the rest is, I think, more up to the gyms. The gyms play a major part in the success of HYROX. Because we push the communities, because we offer the workouts” (Max, Gym-Owner)

Felix corroborates this, describing the affiliation as a payment for access to the name rather than a cooperative relationship. In practice, the quality of community produced by a HYROX affiliate gym, and whether it produces any community at all, depends entirely on the gym's individual philosophy, coaches, and culture. Ironbase has built something great: full classes, social runs, group travel to events, nutrition workshops, technique classes, and team workouts for coaches who train together. However, another gym buying the same license for revenue purposes could offer none of these things, and HYROX cannot distinguish between the two.

David, the HYROX Academy Education Manager, openly acknowledges this. When asked about quality control for affiliate gyms, he describes his ambition for this to become a reality, rather than it being a current practice. He would like to see team members visit gyms, observe classes, and provide feedback, but this is not yet possible. This discrepancy between the organization's aspirations for quality and its current operational capacity to ensure them is exactly the authenticity gap that several interviewees describe experiencing from the inside.

5.3.3 What the Gym Actually Does

While HYROX provides a format and a calendar, the gym offers a place to feel part of a community every day. Max describes the Ironbase community as something that begins not with an event, but with an ordinary fitness class. From there, it grows, with members pushing each other through partner workouts in classes and joining social runs with the wider city running community. There are also events with goody bags, followed by socializing, as well as collaborations with local brands that use HYROX as an opportunity to hold community events unrelated to competition. People join for the community, not the sport. When a woman who had recently moved to Cologne came to an Ironbase event and signed up for HYROX classes, she told Max that she had done so because she was new to the city and needed a contact point.

This environment prepares people for the race and, more importantly, fosters the social bonds that make the race worthwhile. Felix describes the role of the gym in the wider HYROX ecosystem:

“The gyms have the role to build the athletes and to get the athletes to the HYROX races to be race ready ... The gyms have the main focus to bring the community to the races while they are having the community bonding in their gyms ... So, it's like a road to the main event” (Felix, Gym-Owner)

The metaphor of the road to the main event is fitting. The race is the destination, but belonging is actually produced by the journey, the months of training, the class relationships, the group travel and the collective preparation. When 150–200 Ironbase athletes gathered in Frankfurt for a HYROX event, they brought with them the social bonds formed during those Saturday morning sessions and midweek classes. The race brought them together in the same physical space, providing an opportunity to publicly express their shared training experience.

Ben's experience at his gym in Manchester mirrors the same pattern from the athlete's perspective. He says that the gym is the highlight of his day, rather than the races or the competition. It is the daily training environment where he has built his social world. He and his team go to events together, travelling to Dublin, Glasgow, Cologne, and Berlin. Although the travel is organized around the race, it extends the gym community into new cities and contexts, giving the community its depth:

“So, the best part of my day is going to training. I love it. I'm not doing anything this week ... but I'm already looking forward to going back and seeing all the guys in there. We're already talking about what races we're booking next and me and my doubles partner, we've already started looking at next season... Like I say, it's something to look forward to and train for, Yeah, it's the highlight of my day” (Ben, Athlete)

What Ben describes is not a training environment, it is a social world that just so happens to involve training. The gym itself did not change when he discovered HYROX, what changed was the relational fabric around it that changed. There are people to look forward to seeing, races to plan together and training sessions to suffer through. The race gives the gym its direction, and the gym gives the race its community. Together, they demonstrate that belonging to the experience-based HYROX brand community is cultivated through repeated exposure to shared hardship, which occurs more frequently at the gym.

5.4 Everyone is Welcome (Terms Apply)

HYROX positions itself as a sport for everyone. This is the organization's most prominent public commitment, and many interviewees initially found this claim credible. Ben provided the following explanation:

"No, I'd agree with that. I think they bang on, that it is for everyone. I think that the main selling point is there's not a lot of skill required to do a HYROX compared to the likes of CrossFit. And I think 99% of the population could do a HYROX. It might take three hours, but they'd be able to get through it. You know, there's no skill required in pushing a sled. Obviously, you can get faster with technique, but for the most part, anyone could do it, and especially in the adaptives now" (Ben, Athlete)

However, the data suggests that this commitment has come under increasing strain as the organization has grown. The following four patterns demonstrate how the organization's own choices are testing the promise of universal belonging.

5.4.1 The Shifting Standard for Meaningful Participation

The first sign of strain is evident in the definition of what it now means to complete a HYROX race. As the community has grown, the standard of what constitutes meaningful participation appears to have shifted. Max describes the shift he has observed in Cologne:

"What we saw or see in Cologne for example, or with the people that compete, you always talk about Sub60, so the times that you've run in a HYROX. And everyone defined the race by the time that you ran in the end and not by the competition itself. For us, we say ...if you complete that ... you do that simply, it's something that you work for, something that's special, and then you run a 62 instead of a 60, then people are quite sad about the result in the end and not happy that they finished the HYROX. So that was a shift in that ... that just changes the entire atmosphere of the event" (Max, Gym owner)

Max's observation highlights a change in the community's shared standards as defined by the organization. Finishing a HYROX event, which requires significant physical effort, has quietly shifted from being seen as an achievement to being seen as the minimum expectation within the community. What was once a goal has now become the minimum requirement. Instead of celebrating finishing in 62 minutes, participants now feel disappointed about the two minutes they lost.

One could argue that this shift is simply what happens when any competitive community grows. After all, hierarchies and performance pressure are inevitable in competitive sports. However, the data suggests that the organization is not merely a passive bystander in this process. The screens inside the venue do not show ordinary participants. Instead, they show the most physically impressive athletes performing at their peak in slow motion. The visual language of the event conveys what a HYROX athlete is expected to look like. Sophie, an adaptive HYROX athlete and brand ambassador, says:

“And I think it’s the presence, also like how you sell your presence in social media. And I do think they generally tend to sell their presence like sex sells ... if you’ve got the fit and the thin people with the like skinny tops or the shirtless men and stuff like this, like sex sells anyways” (Sophie, Athlete)

Sophie’s observation links the organization’s content choices directly to the performance pressure that Max describes. The organization promotes an elite image, making ordinary gym-goers feel like extraordinary athletes. Everyone who participates is a star, everyone is a serious athlete, and everyone belongs to something exceptional. However, when every visual representation of HYROX participation shows fast, lean, elite bodies, the implicit message seems to shift from 'you could be this' to 'this is what belonging here looks like'. While the ordinary finisher is not excluded, they are mostly absent from the picture, and the baseline of what counts as meaningful participation shifts accordingly. While the organization does not force anyone to feel inadequate about a 62-minute finish, the environment seems to create room for that feeling to arise.

5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions

The Elite 15 are the fastest athletes in each division at a HYROX race. The organization has developed dedicated race formats and live broadcasting around them, presenting this as an aspirational feature for participants and a steppingstone towards Olympic recognition. Employee Lucas describes how this came about:

“But I think what for us made the game changer is the new like live broadcasting for Elite 15. That is what brings you the feeling of that it’s really a commercial sport and that people can follow it from home ... I remember the first time that we’ve done like this format in Glasgow last year, one year ago, where we built like this stadium where you can track like all the Elite 15 races from the stands, and everything is happening in front of you. And that’s something incredible. It’s amazing. And I think that’s the format that we want to bring on next levels, like

Olympic Games in general, where people can rally be engaged to what's happening on the race" (Lucas, employee).

Lucas frames the Olympic ambition in terms of ensuring that the competition is accessible to all:

"So, I think Olympics, it's not just about obviously the community or business or whatever but it goes far away of this. It's just to give the chance to everybody in the world to dream, to compete and to challenge yourself against other people. It doesn't matter from where you come, your religion, you ... I mean, I think that's the beautiful thing in sports and Olympics, it's the biggest. So, I think all sports should wish to become Olympics" (Lucas, employee)

Another HYROX employee, David, frames the Olympic aspiration in terms of creating higher visibility and legitimacy for the sport:

"If we are substantiating the, the rate of participation both in junior level, youth level, as well as age group, as well as senior levels, as well as elite level, what we're creating is more than just a corporate event. It's more than just a, a global movement. It is a substantiated sport. This is a sport now" (David, employee)

For participants like Ben, the Olympic direction is also welcomed as a way of elevating how the sport is perceived from the outside:

"I think it'd be great for the sport because you'd see some serious athletes and it'd be good to showcase that on the world stage. And I think at that point it'd be taken a lot more serious than what it currently is" (Ben, athletes)

The Olympic ambition is framed in different but complementary ways across these accounts: as a universal ideal, as institutional legitimacy, and as external recognition. What connects these approaches is the idea that achieving Olympic status would confirm that HYROX is a legitimate sport. The Elite 15 are central to this ambition, as they are the athletes who bring it to life. Watching the fastest athletes compete on the same course fosters a sense of connection between elite and everyday participation. Gym owner Felix describes how participants respond to this:

"Yeah, it can be like demotivating for some people, but also like motivating for other people that they want to see like, okay, how can, how far can I push this time or my performances" (Felix, Gym-Owner)

At the same time, the strategic focus on the Elite 15 and Olympic aspirations is visible not only in organizational choices, but also within the community. Felix and Max observe a dynamic at play that can be summarized as follows:

“Yeah, I think the gap between the Elite 15 and like I think normal people, when I can say it like this, is getting bigger and bigger because the training is getting more specific for HYROX and the opportunities or the like the tactics of how to train for HYROX is getting more precisely and more detailed. Um, so I think it’s quite like not a really good thing that the Elite 15 is setting up the bar more higher and higher and higher. And you see yourself like on a plateau and seeing the limit, just getting like 45 minutes for a double pro or something. It’s crazy” (Felix, Gym-Owner)

“It used to be a race for the community, and now it’s more also a race for the Elite 15, for the good people, for people that race for a sport that’s an Olympic sport. So, a different direction than what they started with” (Max, Gym-Owner)

This growing gap highlights a deeper tension within HYROX. It seems to be between its origins as an inclusive, community-driven event that welcomes everybody and its growing emphasis on becoming an established elite sport. Nina adds:

“There are two different phases of the sports. The one side is also the Elite ... I have a friend of mine who’s in the Elite 15 and she struggles a lot. Every race she’s doing in the Elite race is her worst and if she’s doing just a fun race, she’s like 3 minutes faster ... yeah, she can’t deal with the pressure. So, I think toxic is kind of the right word if you’re on this side of the HYROX world. If you’re on the other side and doing it for fun and having fun costumes maybe [it isn’t]” (Nina, Athlete)

Nina distinguishes between two cultures that now coexist within the same event: a competitive culture centered on times, comparisons and pressure, and a participatory culture centered on fun and social experiences. However, the data suggests that even those on the participatory side are beginning to feel the shift. Sophie has started to notice this shift as well:

“The one thing that’s starting to bother me is, do you guys know when you’re kids and you’re in like PE class? ... kind of like all of the cool athletic kids and stuff like them kind of being like jerks. And I feel like HYROX is kind of starting to take this turn ... the fit and thin and like super defined [athletes] in their tiny things [outfits] they’re taking it way too far ... to seriously, I think ... the support of the community is kind of like falling” (Sophie, athlete)

While Nina describes the pressure experienced at elite level, Sophie talks about a change in the social atmosphere that is eroding the supportive culture on which the community was built. And this change is not only perceived from within. Sarah, the only participant in this study to have attended a HYROX event solely as a spectator, describes her first impression upon entering the venue:

“I don’t know, it just felt more like it was, like, a gym, more like a gym bro event ... But yeah, I definitely, like, when I walked in ‘cause I’m not, like a gym person, I walked in and I immediately was like, oh, like, this is a gym place. For me that felt more intimidating than welcoming” (Sarah, spectator)

Sarah had no prior knowledge of HYROX or its performance culture. She entered the space, assessed the situation, and felt excluded even before anyone had spoken to her. In this case, the community that HYROX had promised to build around the idea of universal inclusion actually conveyed a very different message.

5.4.3 The Adaptive Athletes

While the shift away from 'sport for everyone' is most evident in competitive culture and external atmospheres, data indicates that it is most keenly felt by those to whom the promise was explicitly made: adaptive athletes. Sophie, the adaptive HYROX athlete and brand ambassador, describes her experience at a Championship event in London, where temporary structures built inside the venue blocked elevator access. This left a large part of the arena unreachable for wheelchair users, affecting not only adaptive athletes, but also spectators in wheelchairs:

“I was like... where's the elevator? And they had no idea. And then they realized that they had actually accidentally built the elevators into the racecourse ... when I finished racing they had to take me outside and in my race clothes and everything... because obviously my bag with my jacket and everything was upstairs. So, they ended up having to take me outside and had to go around the building to another entrance to go up an elevator to go get my bag, like to get my jacket and stuff like this. And it was so cold” (Sophie, Athlete)

Sophie describes what that felt like:

“They’re pushing so much for HYROX to be Olympic and for HYROX to like, like in London, they’re doing this like night neon party and stuff like that. They’re trying to be so cool and new and trendy and like really hook people in and stuff like this.

And I think they're forgetting about the point of like being for everybody ... Because sometimes it feels like even in London, it felt like we [the adaptives] were like a burden almost like, okay, we're here, but kind of like they almost kind of wish we weren't" (Sophie, Athlete)

Sophie's use of the word 'burden' captures the experience of being formally included yet practically deprioritized. While the adaptive category does exist, it seems as though the logistical and emotional investment required to make it meaningful is not always present. This is the gap between frontstage commitment and backstage reality. While the organization publicly celebrates inclusion, the operational reality tells adaptive athletes that they are an afterthought. This was made visible in the most public way possible at the London race podium ceremony, when the organizers forgot to order the flags that function as medals for the winners of the races (Appendix C):

"They had forgot to order the flags for the adaptive athletes ... So, they gave us a flag for men 70 plus (division) and then they took the flag away from us while we were still on like the podium, like on the stage in front of all of the people. And they were taking the flag away then then like giving it to the next person. And they literally used one flag for all, yeah, it was awful." (Sophie, Athlete)

The podium is the event's most frontstage moment, as it is the athlete's time to receive public recognition. What Sophie describes is a backstage operational failure that left the athletes feeling embarrassed and disrespected. Having the flag taken from her hands while she was standing on the podium in front of the entire venue, before the ceremony was complete, communicated that adaptive athletes are a lower priority within the organization. This issue extended beyond the individual event when, mid-season, the organization released a revised adaptive rulebook for the 2025/26 season after a significant number of athletes had already competed under the old rules. Sophie describes the consequences:

"And then at some point they released after the season had started the adaptive rule book ... And then it got like a ton of outrage because it means a ton of athletes have already competed under the old rule book. And now athletes that are going to be competing in like, so to say, like the second half of the season are going to be competing under the new rule book ... Like I run right now a 40-to-45-minute time off the current rule book. And with the new rule book ... I'm hoping I finish in like an hour and 30 minutes ... Yeah, so it's not bad that they're doing it, but ... because with adaptive, it's not a podium place gets worlds, like a world spot. It's the top three on the adaptive list for the entire world, which means that if you have the top

three that competed under the old rule book and they have like 40 minutes times, it's just not fair at that point" (Sophie, Athlete)

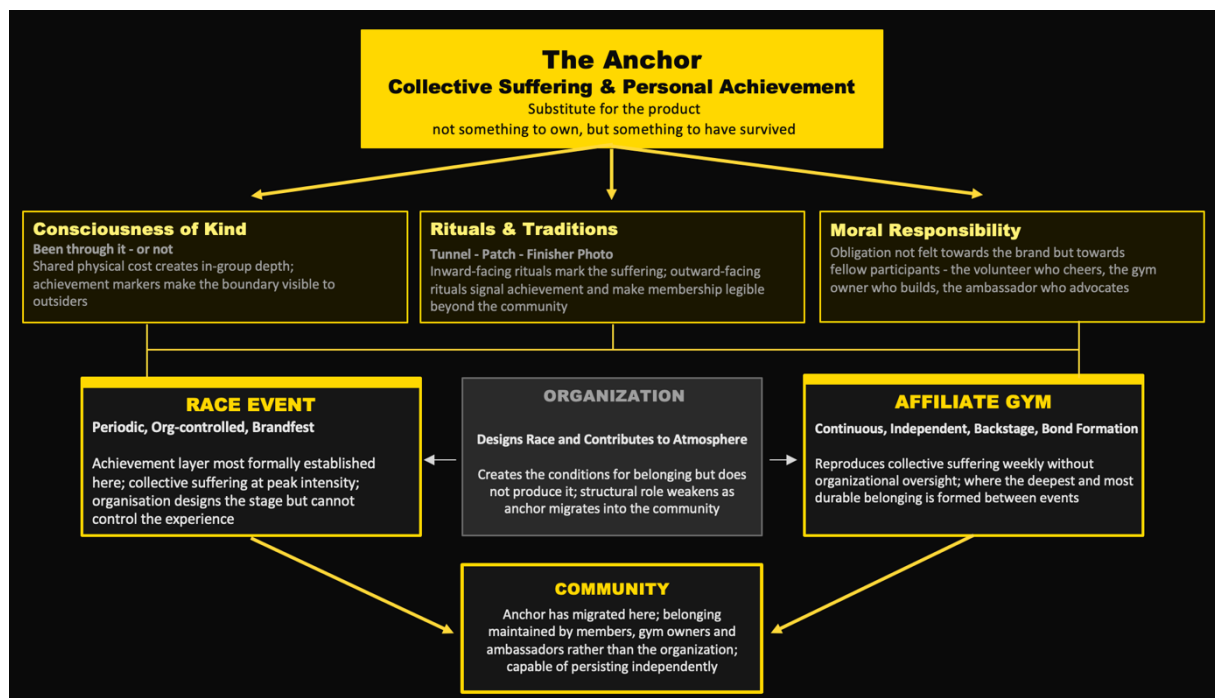
The timing of the release of the rulebook sent the message that the rule changes for “regular” athletes were communicated before the start of the season, creating equal conditions for all athletes. However, for adaptive athletes, the change arrived mid-season, after competitive results had already been recorded under a different standard. Whether this was an administrative oversight or not, the effect was that fairness in the adaptive category was treated as a lower operational priority than in the mainstream categories. For Sophie, this added to a pattern in which the adaptive category is added to the program without being fully thought through or honored properly.

Overall, this section showed that the promise of belonging to everyone, and the structural choices made to grow the sport are pulling in different directions, with participants experiencing the gap between them and feeling left behind.

6 Discussion

This study aimed to understand how experience-based brand communities foster a sense of belonging in the absence of a tangible product. Brand community literature, based on case studies such as Harley-Davidson motorcycles, Apple computers and Jeep automobiles, has traditionally assumed that a product serves as a stable anchor around which identity, rituals and a sense of belonging can be formed (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002). However, HYROX has no such object. Our findings suggest that a substitute anchor emerges through the shared race experience and surrounding culture. Rather than ownership, it is collective suffering and personal achievement that serve as the anchor, something not possessed, but experienced and overcome together.

Figure 3: How Belonging is Cultivated at HYROX



Source: Own representation

As illustrated in Figure 3, this anchor operates through two stages: the race event and the affiliate gym. Together, these stages produce the three markers that constitute brand community: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. The mechanisms through which belonging is formed resemble product-based communities more than the predicted theoretical gap. The difference lies not in how belonging forms, but in where the anchor ends up living. Although belonging is claimed by the organization, it is built by others, resulting in a self-sustaining community capable of outlasting the brand that created it.

The following discussion is organized into three sections. First, it considers whether shared physical experience fulfils the same structural functions as a product. Second, it explores what genuinely distinguishes an experience-based anchor. Third, it examines the structural vulnerabilities this creates.

6.1 The Substitute Anchor

According to foundational brand community theory, the product is the anchor around which consciousness of kind, rituals and identity organize, marking membership and giving the community continuity between gatherings. This makes belonging legible to insiders and outsiders alike. Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) three markers were observed in all product-centered communities. McAlexander et al. (2002) extend their theory, demonstrating that the product simultaneously establishes relationships between customers, the brand, the company, and other customers. The product performs three functions simultaneously. First, it provides an occasion for gathering. Second, it establishes a persistent identity between gatherings. Third, it makes membership legible to outsiders. However, this study initially assumed that community mechanisms would differ in the absence of such a stable reference point, since an experience is temporary and embodied, seemingly dissolving the moment the event ends. However, this section argues otherwise. In HYROX, the anchor operates through two interlocking mechanisms: collective suffering and personal achievement. Together they do the structural work the product does in foundational brand community theory. Collective suffering is the internal mechanism, it produces the depth of the in-group bond that is accessible to only those who have shared it. Personal achievement is the embodiment of collective suffering as an external mechanism, it makes membership visible and persistent, legible to both those inside the community and those outside it. This section argues the claim by working through each foundational marker of brand community defined by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001).

6.1.1 Consciousness of Kind

In product brand communities, a sense of belonging is produced by shared ownership of an object. You either own a Harley or you do not. In HYROX, consciousness of kind is produced through two mechanisms. The first is collective suffering, which we also refer to as 'the pain cave' and faces inward. The race is where this suffering is most concentrated and visible to the public. Ben describes the experience from the inside how the race amounts to putting yourself

in a deep hole for two hours yet immediately afterwards you are already looking for the next race. This suffering is not an additional element of the experience, it is the experience itself. Because every athlete on the course experiences it simultaneously, the suffering is shared immediately and visibly. This creates a collective identity, a shared sense of 'we-ness' that develops through experiences which outsiders do not understand. This makes individuals part of something larger (Snow, 2001). This also aligns with the idea that communities are formed based on commonalities among individuals, created through shared experiences and identities that foster feelings of belonging, solidarity, and emotional commitment to the group (Matarranz, 2024; Woo et al., 2023; Nohutlu, 2023; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). However, the consciousness of kind that collective suffering produces is closed to outsiders. Sarah attending as a spectator could identify signals of membership but could not decode what they communicated. The display of effort was visible, but its internal meaning was not. Suffering is the in-group language. The language that is visible to the out-group is personal achievement, such as the finisher photo, the Velcro patch and high fives at the end of a workout. This is the second mechanism, a visible marker that can be read by anyone. This is structurally analogous to what the product does. It makes the in-group visible from the outside (Muñiz & O'Guinn 2001).

Taken together these two mechanisms do the work of the product. Suffering produces the depth of the in-group bond. Achievement produces the surface legibility that makes membership visible and persistent.

The same dual mechanism operates in affiliate gyms. Collective suffering is reproduced weekly, and achievement accumulates through complete workouts, improving time and earned patches. Felix describes HYROX class participants as people who know they will be suffering by the end, and who encourage each other to reach limits they would not reach alone. The in-group has this sense of suffering. The out-group recognizes the achievement of completing the race or workout. The local gym community forms around this, the same way they form around the event. People show up knowing what is coming, and they show up together because suffering is easier, more meaningful and more enjoyable when shared with others. Additionally, although Max's gym members never compete, they still consider themselves part of the community because they share the same training sessions and the same social bonds forged through shared suffering. For non-competing members the achievement layer may be thinner, and their belonging might be less visible to outsiders. Still, this finding is important because it shows that someone who has never competed in HYROX could share a sense of community with someone

who has competed eleven times, as they have both experienced the same suffering and achievement in workouts and pushed through the same suffering. The gym independently reproduces this mechanism, meaning the community can sustain itself between races rather than dispersing after each one. This fulfils the task of establishing a sense of belonging between events (McAlexander et al., 2002).

This reveals that consciousness of kind in HYROX does not depend solely on the race. Rather, it is produced wherever collective suffering and achievement mechanisms are reproduced. Suffering provides the depth, achievement provides the visibility. This mirrors the mechanisms described in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), whereby a shared identity is formed through self-stereotyping. Individuals recognize similarities with others who share a characteristic, in this case the physical experience of collective suffering, which generates an intrinsic sense of connection towards fellow members and a collective sense of difference towards those outside the group. The distinction between in-group and out-group is not based on a product one owns, but on a physical experience one has either been through or not. This is how an experience-based brand community cultivates consciousness of kind, by replacing the product with a shared experience sufficiently intense and exclusive to provide an occasion for gathering (McAlexander et al., 2002) and to produce the same in-group distinction (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In HYROX, that experience is collective suffering and achievement. In other contexts, it may take a different form, but the structural logic remains the same.

6.1.2 Rituals and Traditions

According to Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), in product brand communities, rituals form around the object and maintain the community's history, mark membership, and create a shared culture that distinguishes members from non-members. In HYROX, rituals revolve around both collective suffering and personal achievement. Some face inward, deepening in-group recognition. Others face outward, making membership legible beyond the community. They operate across multiple layers: the event itself, the material objects that extend it into everyday life, and the local community practices that perpetuate it between races.

At the event level, several designed rituals mark the race as a concentrated community occasion. The tunnel entry, with its packed bodies, smoke machines and countdown, is a repeated ceremony that prepares athletes collectively for what is to come. It is a suffering layer ritual experienced only by those who pass through it, fully legible only to those who know what comes next. The finish line serves as its counterpart. It is a public moment of confirmation that

the effort was real, and its achievement is documented in the form of the finisher photograph, which features the same black and yellow backdrop for each athlete at every event worldwide. This visual uniformity transforms a personal achievement into a legible community signal by making the finisher photo recognizable as a HYROX finisher photo. As Schau et al. (2009) describe, documenting and badging are not just expressive practices, they actively construct the shared identity narrative of the community. The finisher photograph is HYROX's version of this practice. It also connects to the achievement layer and faces outwards, so it can be seen by anyone, even those who have never participated. The Wall Ball Challenge, which involves completing 100 unbroken wall balls and receiving a yellow flag as a reward, is a ritual that spans both layers. Visible to the crowd as a mark of exceptional performance, its full depth is readable only by those who know what it costs. As Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) describe that the yellow flag functions as a marker of meaningful participation, reinforcing the community's shared values. In HYROX, this value is the willingness to endure the full extent of the 'pain cave' without compromise.

Membership extends beyond the event itself and is marked and sustained through a series of material rituals that bring the collective suffering anchor into everyday spaces. The Velcro patch system (Appendix C) awards a unique patch for each race completed, which accumulate over time to create a visible record of participation - or achievements of completion. Like a Harley parked in a driveway, these patches communicate the same message: this person belongs and has earned their place. The co-branded apparel further extends this, making membership legible to anyone who can read the visual code. Even as a spectator with no prior knowledge of HYROX, Sarah could identify the in-group before anyone had spoken to her, recognizing the wristbands, matching outfits and Puma kit as signals of membership. This is exactly what a product anchor does in conventional brand communities: it makes the in-group visible from the outside. These are signals of achievement. They make the community visible from the outside. However, they cannot communicate the internal significance of earning them. It is the suffering layer that gives these rituals their depth for insiders.

Finally, rituals also emerge within local gym communities independently of any organizational design. For example, at Ironbase, travelling to race events together is a practice that has developed organically within this particular gym community. The same is true of Ben's gym in the UK, whose members also travelled together to race events, with the travel itself producing the social bonds. These are not practices designed by the organization. Rather, they are rituals that the community has built around a shared anchor, using the race as a pretext, as Cova and

Cova (2002) would describe it, around which shared practices accumulate over time. This highlights that in HYROX, rituals are not solely the product of organizational design. They also emerge from the community itself, confirming the depth of belonging that the anchor produces and anticipating the decoupling argument to be developed in the following section.

Taken together, these ritual layers fulfil the same function as rituals do in product-based communities. They maintain the community's history, signify belonging and foster a shared culture. Although the main focus has shifted from an object to an experience, the structural function remains unchanged. They also demonstrate that, in the case of HYROX, the organization makes use of tangible items to enhance the sense of belonging and reinforce the in-group/out-group dynamic (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

6.1.3 Moral Responsibility

In product communities, moral responsibility is felt as an obligation towards fellow brand members and the community's norms. In HYROX, however, this obligation is felt towards fellow participants. As outlined in Section 5.1, the social bond formed at a HYROX event stems from mutual recognition of shared physical exertion. Nina's experience of judging at the lunges station and cheering on strangers until her voice gave out exemplifies this well. Seeing the effort that people were making was enough to make her feel obliged to support someone she had never met and would likely never meet again. This aligns with the findings of Nohutlu et al. (2023) and Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder (2008), who discovered that individuals with a strong sense of belonging are more willing to invest effort in the community. However, this obligation is not to the brand, but to the other members of the community who are sharing the experience. Despite Sophie's deep frustration with the organization's treatment of adaptive athletes, Sophie remains engaged with HYROX and continues to fulfil her ambassadorial duties. She is motivated not by loyalty to HYROX, but by her obligation to the adaptive community and her desire to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in functional fitness. The organization has publicly claimed to support this but has not delivered consistently. Max and Felix build community infrastructure that the brand neither requires nor monitors. They are driven by their own vision of what the community should be. This is the operating norm of moral responsibility under conditions of organizational failure, as described by Thomas et al. (2013). In HYROX, moral responsibility attaches to co-sufferers rather than co-product owners, but the structural function is identical.

Taken together, in HYROX, collective suffering fosters a sense of in-group community, signals achievement to the out-group, establishes rituals and traditions, and cultivates a sense of moral responsibility among members. These processes are structurally similar to those documented in foundational literature on product communities. However, the anchor is different. The work it does is the same. It has also been revealed that the anchor operates across two sites simultaneously - the race event and the affiliate gym - and that it is the interplay between these two sites that gives the community its depth and continuity rather than either site alone. The next question is what this difference means for the relationship between the anchor and the organization that created it.

6.2 The Difference: The Anchor Decouples From the Organization

The previous section demonstrated that, in HYROX, the three characteristics of a brand community operate through collective suffering and achievements rather than a tangible product, but that these mechanisms are still structurally analogous to product-based brand communities. This section now addresses the question of what distinguishes experience-based brand communities from its product-based counterparts.

6.2.1 How the Shared Experience Moves From the Brand Into the Community

In product-based communities, the organization retains a permanent role simply by manufacturing the shared reference point and the anchor that fosters a sense of belonging remains permanently tied to the brand. McAlexander et al. (2002) demonstrate that all four community relationships within the Jeep community are centered on the product itself. Membership is continuously marked by the product, and the organization remains structurally central as long as it controls the object. According to McAlexander et al. (2002), removing the product would result in the loss of the architecture that facilitates the formation of relational bonds within the community. Based on this, one could assume that, as long as the organization controls the event - and thus the potential occurrence for the anchor - it will remain at the heart of the community's identity and play a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging.

However, HYROX paints a different picture. The organization created an occasion for collective suffering and achievement through the race event. But, in line with the findings of Fournier and Lee (2009), it could only provide the framework within which a sense of belonging could develop. It did not generate that sense of belonging itself. This appears to be produced by

the participants and based on our findings, this does not only happen at the event itself, but largely elsewhere.

The affiliate gym layer has adopted and reproduced the mechanisms of the anchor entirely independently of the organization's involvement. Schau et al. (2009) identify shared practices as the mechanisms through which brand community identity is produced and reinforced. In the case of HYROX, these practices are largely generated by the gym layer, without the firm's involvement or awareness, which fits Schau et al.'s (2009) findings that member-driven practices are often responsible for the majority of value creation within brand communities. In HYROX, this dynamic is built into the affiliate gym relationship model. Max describes the relationship between Ironbase and HYROX as a monthly licensing fee only, with no quality standards, coaching requirements, site visits or ongoing contact. Whether a gym produces a genuine community depends entirely on its own philosophy. HYROX cannot distinguish between a gym that fosters an engaging community and one that has merely paid for the name. In the absence of organizational involvement and standards, the local gym community perpetuates the mechanism of collective suffering through its own infrastructure, developing a community of which the organization remains largely unaware of how or whether this is happening.

6.2.2 What Decoupling Means: The Community Could Sustain Itself

The concept of anchor migration does not suggest that collective suffering and achievement is now confined to the gym. Rather, the shared experience is distributed across two sites - the race event and the training community - where the anchor is activated at different intensities and frequencies.

The race event is where the anchor is most concentrated and arguably most intense. The scattered community physically converges, recognizes itself, and develops a sense of community that McAlexander et al. (2002) associated with 'brandfest'. It is also where the achievement layer is most formally established. The patch is earned, the time is set, and the finisher photos are taken. It is exclusively at the race that participants receive tangible markers of achievement. The social design of the event enhances the experience through atmosphere, crowd, and their mission of letting everyone feel like an elite athlete. The Chicago world championship is the clearest demonstration of the power the atmosphere holds. For example, Ben had his worst experience of the community when he raced in Chicago without an audience. This shows that the race event continues to affect the community and sense of belonging even after the decoupling.

However, Antonsich (2010) argues that belonging should be understood as a process of becoming rather than a fixed state of being, a process that requires continuous relational maintenance rather than a one-time act of joining. This implies that an organization cannot simply establish the conditions for belonging and then disengage, because if the relational work ceases, a sense of belonging may diminish. McMillan and Chavis (1986) complement this idea by stating that a sense of community must be actively co-produced by participants, rather than simply being provided by an organization. Together, these two frameworks describe an ideal in which the organization maintains its investment while members contribute, resulting in the genuine co-production of belonging over time. However, the practical implication of anchor migration is that the HYROX community is more self-sustaining than its organizational structure suggests and that HYROX has distanced itself from actively creating a sense of belonging. Instead, it relies on creating the races or focusing on the Elite 15, while continuing to benefit from the community that its members sustain. The community largely persists because participants, gym owners, and ambassadors have taken on most of the relational maintenance work.

Sophie's story is the perfect example of this. After retiring from her sport, the two-time Paralympian discovered HYROX and attempted to establish a community centered on adaptive functional fitness. She has expressed doubts about renewing her ambassador role for the organization, primarily due to its management of the adaptive division. Examples of this include the absence of podium flags in London, mid-season rulebook changes and logistical failures at the World Championships, as explained in section 5.4.3. Nevertheless, she continues to compete, coach and advocate for the sport. We came to understand that she does not do so because of HYROX, but because she feels a sense of belonging towards her own community in the gym and broader platform. She does not feel valued, seen or heard by HYROX itself, which diminishes her feeling of belonging to the brand (Matarranz et al., 2024; Stride et al., 2025). But she uses HYROX's mission to be a sport for everyone to build a platform, to strengthen her own gym community and provide a role model to other adaptive athletes. HYROX provided the anchor that enabled her to include and represent people with disabilities, but she can now continue to do this independently of HYROX.

Nina's story offers a different perspective on the same dynamic. Having stepped back from competitive HYROX, she has shifted her identity from 'HYROX athlete' to 'hybrid athlete',

retaining her sense of belonging by remaining part of her gym community. Nina and Sophie show that the training community is where the social bonds that give the race its meaning are formed and sustained between events. Collective suffering does not require the race. The gym independently reproduces this mechanism, meaning community membership does not depend on competitive participation. This is also why many gym members who never compete still consider themselves part of the community. They are bound together by suffering through HYROX workouts together, an achievement only they understand properly. This lends weight to Schau et al.'s (2009) argument that member practices are the primary vehicle of value creation in brand communities. Value creation is most concentrated and autonomous at the gym layer, and the data also suggests that the deepest and most valuable sense of belonging is produced here. This does not occur at events controlled by the organization, but in the everyday relational infrastructure built by members themselves, which gives the experience its meaning (Cova and Cova, 2002).

The gym element was no coincidence. HYROX designed the affiliate license model deliberately to function as local contact points, through which new participants could discover the sport, train for the race and register for the event. In that sense, the organization created the conditions for a second architecture. What the organization probably did not anticipate, and what the data suggests, is the sense of belonging that this architecture would produce independently. Fournier and Lee (2009) establish that the firm's task is to create the conditions under which a community can emerge, rather than managing the community itself. Our findings suggest that, in experience-based contexts, these conditions can be so thoroughly adopted by the community that the ongoing structural role of the organization becomes uncertain. The organization created the anchor mechanism, which the community has since internalized and used to strengthen their social bonds. Cova and Cova (2002) describe this as the 'linking value' that contributes to facilitating the formation and maintenance of social bonds. This value has transferred from the race event to the community itself. The event is no longer the primary vehicle of social connection. The social world built around it has become self-sustaining enough to provide that connection independently. This means that the organization's hold on the community becomes structurally weaker, even as the community itself grows stronger.

The argument in this section leads to a finding that confirms and extends the predictions of the literature. In HYROX, this ongoing work on belonging based on Antonsich (2010) and McMillan and Chavis (1986) is taking place, but it is almost entirely the responsibility of the

gym layer, the ambassadors and the members themselves. In product-based communities, the organization retains structural centrality by default because it is tied to the brand through ownership. In experience-based communities, however, this structural guarantee appears to not necessarily exist. The anchor can migrate, and in HYROX it has done so. In practice, this means that the organization could potentially lose the architect's position that product-based firms hold by default. Whether the organization then remains necessary for the community is a question that the given data is not equipped to answer. However, the data suggests that this may depend on how actively the organization participates in cultivating a sense of belonging. Simply creating the race as an event appears to be insufficient in the case of HYROX.

6.3 Vulnerabilities of the Experience-Based Community Model

Decoupling means that the organization controls only one of the sites, while the gym culture is shaped entirely by independent actors. This creates an asymmetry because belonging has migrated into the community, with the race event becoming the primary lever through which the organization's influence can reach it. In the case of HYROX in particular, the firm does not appear to actively exert control within the community itself. Unlike product-based communities, where commercial decisions affect the brand relationship but not members' access to the shared reference point, experience-based communities depend on experiences produced under organizational control. Commercial decisions therefore simultaneously shape the conditions through which belonging is formed. As Beverland (2005) argues, brand authenticity becomes especially fragile during periods of rapid expansion, as commercial growth pressures the consistency and credibility of the brand's values. This makes experience-based brand communities vulnerable to structural issues that we will discuss below.

The first example of a vulnerability concerns the atmosphere as a constitutive element of the experience. Kotler (1973) established that the designed physical environment is not a neutral backdrop, but rather a medium that creates affect. Hill et al. (2022) extend this concept to the social dimension, demonstrating that when a designed environment successfully aligns the emotions and attention of a group, individual affective responses combine to produce a shared atmosphere. This atmosphere fosters a sense of connection among strangers, making them feel part of something larger than themselves. At the HYROX Chicago World Championship, expensive spectator tickets resulted in a nearly empty arena. Although athletes were present and racing, the crowd that normally amplifies the experience was absent. A commercial decision

regarding ticket pricing removed the social architecture that enables the event to function as a community occasion that can create a strong sense of belonging.

The second vulnerability that we want to address concerns the shifting nature of community meaning. In product communities, organizations control what the product is, but not what it means. Meaning is socially constructed around the product, and this process largely escapes the organization's control. In experience-based communities, however, the organization controls the event, which is where meaning is actively produced. Design choices, atmospheres, visual identities, and programming decisions all influence what the shared experience conveys to its participants. While this gives the organization more direct influence over community meaning than in the product-based model, it also means that design choices made for commercial or strategic purposes can quietly alter what the experience signals about belonging in ways that the organization may not intend or be able to track fully. As illustrated in Section 5.4, the community's shared vocabulary has shifted from celebrating completion to measuring time. Sub60 now functions as an unstated benchmark for meaningful participation. The meaning of "suffering through the course" has changed. The meaning of owning a finisher patch has also changed. Although ordinary finishers are not explicitly excluded, the organization's content choices and event design have created conditions that can encourage self-exclusion. This has narrowed the group of people who feel that the shared experience belongs to them, and this outcome was not intentionally pursued. This is a vulnerability that product-based communities do not face in the same way: the product does not change when community standards shift around it.

The third pattern is the inclusivity gap. In a product community, inclusion appears to be a binary issue: either someone can access the product, or they cannot. In an experience-based community, however, claims about inclusion are tested through the experience itself. Every design decision is experienced directly by participants, meaning the difference between the organization's promises and its actual provision is felt immediately. According to Beverland (2005; 2008), authenticity is constructed through symbolic cues of sincerity. These cues become vulnerable when an organization appears to prioritize commercial expansion over its publicly stated values. When an organization such as HYROX builds its identity around the promise that its sport is for everyone, that promise acts as an authenticity anchor, so operational failures that contradict it undermine the credibility of their identity itself.

This commitment explicitly extends to adaptive athletes. However, the operational reality is one of underinvestment. Section 5.4.3 details how the adaptive category was incorporated into the program without the necessary infrastructure to render it meaningful. To us this showed a complete disregard for the value of athletes and their lived experiences, while simultaneously being held up as proof of the organization's inclusivity. Sophie occupies a unique position in this study. As an adaptive athlete who participates in HYROX, she is the athlete that the organization uses to demonstrate that the sport is accessible to all. Yet she is the one who is considerably left behind. According to Matarranz et al. (2024), belonging is an internal emotional state that emerges when a person perceives themselves to be valued by others. Stride et al. (2025) further identify four elements that foster this sense of belonging within a community: feeling seen, feeling valued, feeling heard and feeling known. However, Sophie's experience reflects neither being valued nor feeling seen or heard by HYROX as an organization. Although she is visible to the organization - cited, photographed, and appointed as an ambassador - she is not genuinely seen. She has raised concerns about infrastructure, the fairness of the rulebook and creating more adaptive coaching opportunities, but nothing has been done. She was told that this was not a priority right now. She is present on stage, but not supported backstage. Thomas et al. (2013) demonstrated that, when organizations fail to sustain the shared norms and meanings that hold a community together, the responsibility falls to the community's members themselves. In the context of HYROX, Sophie bears almost the entire moral responsibility, but her motivation to uphold it is also dwindling.

In each case, organizational decisions determine the conditions under which the shared experience is created, and it is the community that absorbs the consequences. We argue that this dynamic is not unique to HYROX but is instead characteristic of experience-based brand communities more broadly. Although events are powerful sites for generating a sense of belonging, they remain governed by commercial logic. Unlike product-based communities, where the shared object persists relatively independently of organizational operations, experience-based communities depend on experiences that organizations must continuously create, standardize, and expand. This creates an inherent tension between what belonging requires and what commercial growth demands.

7 Conclusion

This study set out to understand how experience-based brand communities cultivate belonging in the absence of a tangible product. To explore this question, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a range of participants connected to the HYROX community, complemented by secondary audio-visual sources including a podcast interview with the HYROX founder, as well as participant observations at two race events and one volunteering shift. The empirical findings were analyzed against the brand community, engineered belonging and experience economy literatures and developed into a discussion of both what HYROX shares with product-based communities and what is distinctive about the experience-based model. The following chapter outlines our main empirical findings and theoretical contributions, reflects on the limitations of the study, and suggests directions for future research.

7.1 Empirical Findings and Research Contribution

This study asked how experience-based brand communities cultivate belonging in the absence of a tangible product. The brand community literature, built almost entirely on product-based cases, has assumed that belonging forms around a stable shared object that members own. The product exists independently of the community, anchors identity and makes membership legible to outsiders. Without such an object, the theoretical expectation was that community mechanisms would work differently.

The first finding of this study is that experience-based brand communities do not require a product, as they develop an alternative anchor. In the context of HYROX, this substitute anchor is collective suffering and personal achievement. Together they produce consciousness of kind, an in-group distinction that people build not around ownership but around shared physical experience. This consciousness of kind anchors rituals and traditions, from tunnel entry and the finisher photograph to the Velcro patch system and the events gym communities have built around the race. It also generates a sense of moral responsibility, which is not felt as an obligation to the brand, but rather as an obligation to fellow sufferers - the volunteer who cheers until their voice gives out, the gym owner who builds community infrastructure, and the adaptive athlete who takes on the role of ambassador. All three of the markers of brand community identified by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) within their research on product-based communities are present. However, the framework has never been tested in a context where no

such object exists. This extends the brand community framework to experience-based contexts, demonstrating that these foundational markers are applicable beyond product-based cases, and that a sufficiently intense and collective shared experience can structurally substitute for the product. This finding is consistent with Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) argument that value is co-produced through interaction among participants rather than being inherent in the offering itself. It also aligns with Cova and Cova's (2002) concept of linking value, whereby the experience serves as a basis for forming and maintaining social bonds. In HYROX, it is specifically the collective suffering and achievement mechanisms that provides this pretext: participants gather around what they have endured together rather than an object, and it is this shared endurance that produces the bonds from which a sense of belonging emerges. This substitution implies that the mechanisms of belonging documented in brand community research over two decades are not dependent on product ownership, but on the structural role of the anchor. In this case, this role was fulfilled equally well by a shared physical experience.

The second finding relates to the genuine differences in the experience-based model. The anchor does not remain solely with the organization. In product-based communities, the organization retains a permanent structural role simply by manufacturing the shared reference point. The community cannot exist without the product, which is controlled by the brand. Fournier and Lee (2009) made the distinction between designing a community and designing for a community. They argued that firms act as architects of social conditions rather than as creators of the social experience itself. However, their framework assumes that the firm retains a stable structural role as long as it continues to design those conditions. In the case of HYROX, the organization created the mechanism through the race event. However, it has since been adopted and reproduced independently by the affiliate gym layer, outside of the organization's involvement, knowledge, or quality control. This migration, which we term the 'decoupling of the anchor' in this study, is one of our most significant findings. It means that the community has become more self-sustaining than the organizational role would suggest. This finding takes the architect-not-author logic of Fournier and Lee (2009) in a new direction. In experience-based contexts, the conditions created by the firm can be so thoroughly adopted by the community that the firm's ongoing structural role becomes uncertain. Previous frameworks do not theorize this dynamic, which has no equivalent in the product-based model where the organization remains structurally central for as long as it controls the object.

This two-site distribution also addresses the question of how the community is sustained during events. McAlexander et al. (2002) demonstrated that 'brandfests' accelerate community

integration, but they assumed that the product anchored membership during the periods between events. Without a product, the literature would predict that a sense of belonging would disperse once the event has ended. However, as the affiliate gym layer reproduces the anchor mechanism continuously and independently of the organization, the community does not disperse between events because it never solely concentrates on the event in the first place. The race event might remain the site where the achievement is most formally established, but the suffering is reproduced continuously at a local level week after week.

The last finding concerns the structural vulnerabilities of the HYROX organizational model. As belonging shifts from the organization to the community, events become the primary means through which the organization's commercial decisions can influence community conditions. In product communities, the organization's commercial decisions ensure that members still have access to the shared reference point. In experience-based communities, decisions about the event simultaneously determine the conditions through which belonging is formed. Therefore, the organization has more influence over community meaning than in a product-based model. However, this also creates a structural vulnerability, meaning that choices made for commercial or strategic reasons can degrade the collective conditions that make the experience meaningful, limit its audience or highlight the discrepancy between the brand's public promises and operational delivery. We believe that organizations that control the experience but not the community it produces may eventually face this tension in some form.

Taken together, our findings make four contributions to brand community literature. First, we demonstrate that the foundational markers of brand community can be applied to an experience-based context through a substitute anchor. This extends the framework beyond product-based cases for the first time. Secondly, we introduce the concept of potential anchor decoupling as a structural feature of experience-based brand communities, which distinguishes them from the product-based model. Based on this, we identified the dual distribution of the shared experience as a mechanism through which belonging is sustained in the absence of a product. Thirdly, we identify a set of structural vulnerabilities that are specific to experience-based communities, which arise from the fact that a very powerful site of belonging production is also a site that is strongly exposed to commercial logic. Overall, these findings suggest that experience-based brand communities operate through recognizably similar mechanisms, despite operating under structural conditions that produce different dynamics of resilience, control, and vulnerability.

7.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry practical implications for HYROX and more broadly for any experience-based brand seeking to cultivate community through shared experience rather than a tangible product, from which they can gain positive benefits.

Support the Real Community Engines

One important practical insight that this study provides is that organizations must protect the conditions that allow communities to form. The affiliate gym layer fosters a strong and enduring sense of belonging within the ecosystem largely without organizational oversight. Gyms run classes, organize group travel to events and recruit new members who could become loyal race participants. None of this is required by the license agreement and it is not visible to HYROX HQ. Rather than managing this more tightly, the practical implication is to support it more deliberately, for example by introducing quality standards as part of the license agreement and formally recognizing the gym as a community engine rather than a passive license holder. David explicitly states that he wants to improve gym quality assurance. While the direction is right, the implication is to accelerate it given that HYROX is already nearly 10 years old. More broadly, for any experience-based brand, belonging is very likely to be produced at the local community level. Organizations that invest in supporting these local structures may be able to build more resilient communities than those that focus everything on their flagship events.

Walk the Talk

The Sub60 drift documented in section 5.4 raises a strategic question: does HYROX want to be a sport for everybody, or an elite sport that happens to allow everybody to participate? Both are legitimate choices, but we believe they require different community architectures. The current situation, claiming the former while structurally building the latter, is producing a gap that participants feel. The organization is not a passive bystander, and when the visual identity narrows to lean, high-performing bodies chasing fast times, the implicit message shifts from "you could be this" to "this is what belonging here looks like", which might cause ordinary finishers to self-exclude. The community is already showing signs of resistance, such as wearing matching outfits or taking dance breaks between stations. The organization has the tools to support this, for example by deliberately including the full range of participation in its content, visual identity, and event atmosphere. The Elite 15 and the Olympic aspirations are legitimate and inspirational goals that the community largely welcomes. What matters is that the organization is honest about its direction and designs occasions that bring the Elite and open

groups together, rather than pulling them apart. HYROX's cruise ship concept, in which everyday athletes train alongside Elites, is exactly the kind of initiative that productively navigates this tension.

Co-Create With the Community, Don't Just Claim It

For us, Sophie's case is the clearest example of a practical failure in the data. As Paralympian and HYROX ambassador, she describes feeling like a burden at the organization's own Championship due to missing flags, blocked elevators and a mid-season rulebook change that undermined competitive fairness for the adaptive category. These are not minor oversights. We see them as the difference between inclusion and instrumentalization. If an organization publicly celebrates a group's participation, it must design its operations around them before inviting them in. Sophie continues to compete, not because of HYROX, but despite it. She absorbs the operational cost of a promise that the organization has not consistently delivered on, all in an effort to inspire other people with disabilities to become adaptive athletes. The broader implication is to maintain closer and more genuine contact with the community. The organization should involve different perspectives in their strategic decision-making. In HYROX's case, they should collaborate closely with adaptive athletes, engage with gym owners in discussions about standards, and listen to the concerns of dissatisfied members, not just amplifying the voices of those who are satisfied. The community always knows things that the organization does not, and the two could benefit from each other.

HYROX has created something truly remarkable. It has created a global community that is not sustained by a product, but by shared physical effort and the social world that forms around it. In our opinion, the organization now faces a challenge: the growth that brought in the numbers was partly driven by trends and novelty, but trends subside. What remains when this happens is the community itself. Communities that survive are those whose members feel genuinely seen and served, not merely invited in. The practical challenge now is to shift organizational attention from acquisition to stewardship by investing in the depth of what already exists, rather than only in the breadth of what is yet to come.

7.3 Limitations

As with any study, this research is subject to a number of limitations that must be acknowledged transparently. The most significant structural limitation is that this is a single-case study

conducted independently of HYROX. While the case itself is substantial, the sample size was small. Notably, we were unable to secure interviews with marketing personnel and other relevant organizational stakeholders, and our sample of employees remained small. Therefore, our knowledge of HYROX's marketing strategy and community-building from an internal communications perspective is primarily based on our observations rather than direct testimony. Studies of this kind can lack the external validity and generalizability associated with broader comparative approaches, and their strictness may be questioned (Takahashi & Araujo, 2019).

More broadly, the sample size is small, and the sample is not statistically representative. This means that the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population of HYROX participants or brand communities (Bell et al., 2022; Saunders et al., 2009). However, generalization was never the aim of this study. Instead, the aim was to gain a deep and broad understanding of the case by deliberately seeking perspectives from different participant types rather than seeking representativeness across cases. Furthermore, as the construction of identity within fitness-based brand communities is a relatively understudied area, particularly within the sports sector, our findings provide new, context-specific knowledge in a field in which the majority of academic attention has thus far been focused on CrossFit. As Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, knowledge of this kind, which depends on context, has its own intellectual value. While it may not be generalizable in a statistical sense, it may be useful when transferred to, or compared with, findings from similar organizational contexts.

Another limitation is the potential for positive bias. Most of the people we interviewed were already involved in the HYROX community, either as participants or as organizers or facilitators of the event. Since we mainly recruited via Instagram and LinkedIn, we only reached individuals who considered their experience or connection with HYROX significant enough to share online. Consequently, those with more ambivalent or negative relationships with HYROX were harder to reach and less likely to agree to be interviewed. This self-selection effect may have produced an image of the community that is skewed towards engagement and enthusiasm. Additionally, as Silverman (2007, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) notes, interviews are conversations, and what is said is always a reaction to what has been said before. Therefore, he argues that it is not possible to derive reflections of reality outside of the interview context. We attempted to minimize potential influences by examining the order in which statements were made and the contexts that could have affected them. We hope that our observations provide

the necessary information with which to evaluate said context. While our observational data is valuable, it is limited in scope, as it only covers two events and one volunteering shift. It therefore cannot claim to represent the full range of community experience across different HYROX contexts.

It is worth addressing the limitations of the observation method directly. As we did not disclose our identities as researchers, there is some ethical ambiguity regarding informed consent. As Delbridge and Kirkpatrick (1994, cited in Saunders et al., 2009) point out, observer bias poses the greatest threat to the reliability of participant observation precisely because researchers cannot fully detach themselves from the social world they are studying. Our own enthusiasm for HYROX - we were training for and participating in events before this research began - meant that our observations were inevitably influenced by our previous emotional involvement. More broadly, in terms of reliability, it is worth noting that non-standardized qualitative research of this kind is not intended to be replicated in exactly the same way, since its value lies in the flexibility and depth it offers, rather than in producing identical results under identical conditions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, cited in Saunders et al., 2009).

7.4 Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several avenues for future research. Firstly, future research should aim to develop and validate a formal definition of experience-based brand communities. This should be achieved by drawing on empirical data from a variety of experience-based contexts, in order to determine whether this concept constitutes a distinct category from product-based brand communities. Further, it is important to examine whether the substitute anchor framework extends beyond competitive fitness. While this study focused on a community rooted in collective physical suffering and personal achievements, other experience-based brand communities may be organized around shared emotional intensity, risk, or creativity. Comparative research across different contexts could establish whether the structural logic of anchor substitution is generalizable or specific to communities that engage in physically demanding activities. Another important area to explore is the decoupling process over time. As this study focuses on HYROX at a specific stage in its development, longitudinal research could investigate whether decoupling is reversible, and whether organizations can reclaim the anchor once it has shifted into the community. Such research could also examine how community resilience changes as founding members age and the original conditions of

formation fade. This study cannot determine whether a community can ultimately outlast the brand that created it. Future research could also investigate community identity more directly. The findings suggest that athletic identity and community belonging are separable: some members remain after their competitive identity fades, while others belong without ever competing. Research on how experience-based brand communities negotiate collective identity under internal diversification would contribute to both the brand community and social identity literatures. The role of social media is another promising area for research. Although only briefly mentioned here, social media functions as both a mechanism for community building and a source of performance pressure. As it has contributed substantially to HYROX's organic growth and shaped norms around meaningful performance, future studies could examine its role more systematically. Two additional gaps are particularly noteworthy. Firstly, the non-competing member remains under-explored. Many HYROX gym members never participate in races yet still identify strongly with the community, challenging brand community literature that closely links participation and membership. Research could explore how these members construct a sense of belonging, and whether the absence of formal recognition affects their long-term commitment. Secondly, marginalized members may act as a stress test for community inclusion. Sophie's case suggests that members who remain engaged despite organizational neglect perform invisible maintenance work that sustains the community's inclusive identity. Therefore, research on adaptive and marginalized participants could deepen our understanding of moral responsibility and inclusion under operational pressure. Finally, future research could learn as much from failed communities as from successful ones. This study examined HYROX during a period of extraordinary growth. Studying communities that failed to sustain a sense of belonging after the initial trend faded could clarify whether resilience depends on successful anchor decoupling or more specific contextual factors.

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Appendices

Appendix A: HYROX Stations (HYROX, n.d.)

SkiErg – 1000m

The first HYROX workout station is 1000m on the Ski Erg. This erg predominantly targets the arm, shoulder & core muscles, however when done efficiently, it also involves muscles in the lower body – making the SkiErg a full body workout.

Sled Push – 50m

The second workout station is 50m of Sled Push. This is one station you do not want to come unprepared for... so make sure you try it out at least once before your race and invest in some grippy shoes! This movement targets the lower body muscles, including the entire posterior chain, core & anterior thigh muscles in particular.

Sled Pull – 50m

Get ready to use your glutes, back, biceps & the entire trunk during workout station three.

Burpee Broad Jumps - 80m

Born in 1939, the fourth workout station is a full body workout that is both loved and hated at the same time. Trying these for the first time may feel hard, but many of our regular athletes now consider this station to be one of their favorites!

Rowing – 1000m

Station number five is the second ergometer in this fitness race. 1000m of rowing marks the beginning of the second half of your HYROX race.

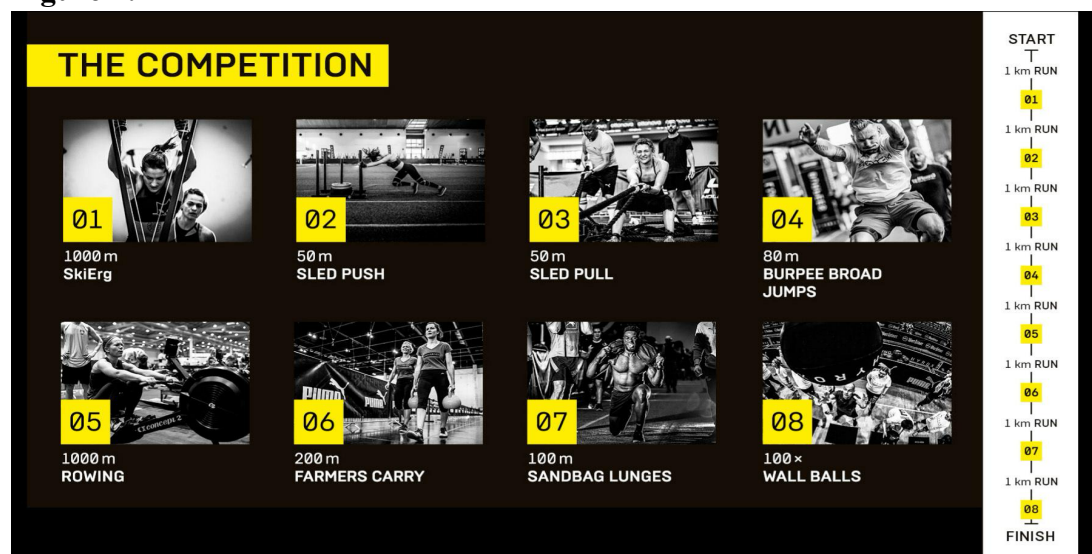
Farmers Carry – 200m

For 200m of Farmers Carry, engagement of your upper back muscles, core & grip strength is required. This workout station is easy to practice on your weekly shop...

Sandbag Lunges - 100m

10, 20 or 30 kilograms on your back whilst lunging? Welcome to workout station number seven. Primarily targets the thigh and glute muscles, this one is a burner...

Figure 1: HYROX Stations



Source: (HYROX, n.d.)

Appendix B: HYROX Divisions

Single Open

This is the standard HYROX race, designed to be challenging yet achievable for all fitness levels. Women and men compete with different weights.

Single Pro

This division is for more experienced racers who are comfortable with heavier weights and a more intense workout. Women and men compete with different weights.

Doubles (Open, Pro, Mixed Gender)

In this division, two athletes compete together, running together but splitting the workout stations as they choose. As in the singles races, the weights for open and pro, as well as genders differ. In the mixed race, the women have to compete on the men's weight.

Relay

This division allows teams of four to divide the race, with each member completing 2km of running and two workout stations.

Adaptives (13 different divisions)

- (a) Lower Limb Impairment
- (b) Upper Limb Impairment
- (c) Short Stature Impairment
- (d) Visual Impairment
- (e) Deaf/Hard of Hearing
- (f) Neurological Impairment, broken down into Neurological Major and Neurological Minor
- (g) Seated Impairment, broken down into Seated with Hip Function (SWHF), Seated Without Hip Function (SWOHF) and Seated Without Core Function (SWOC)

Figure 4: Weights Based on Divisions

WORKOUT	WOMEN	PRO WOMEN	MEN	PRO MEN	DOUBLES WOMEN	DOUBLES MEN	DOUBLES MIXED
SkiErg 1000 m	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sled Push* 50 m	102 kg	152 kg	152 kg	202 kg	102 kg	152 kg	152 kg
Sled Pull* 50 m	78 kg	103 kg	103 kg	153 kg	78 kg	103 kg	103 kg
Burpee Broad Jump 80 m	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rowing 1000 m	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Farmers Carry 200 m	2 x 16 kg	2 x 24 kg	2 x 24 kg	2 x 32 kg	2 x 16 kg	2 x 24 kg	2 x 24 kg
Sandbag Lunges 100 m	10 kg	20 kg	20 kg	30 kg	10 kg	20 kg	20 kg
Wall Balls 100x	100 reps 4 kg	100 reps 6 kg	100 reps 6 kg	100 reps 9 kg	75 reps 4 kg	100 reps 6 kg	100 reps 6 kg

Source: (HYROX, n.d.)

Appendix C: Velcro Patch and Finisher Photograph

Figure 5: HYROX Patch for Participation and Wristband



Source: Own representation

Figure 6: HYROX Podium Flags for Division Winners



Source: (Allenby, 2024)

Appendix D: Analysis Coding

Table 2: Analysis Coding

	Sub-section	Category	Interviewee	Role	Key Quote	Analytical Point
5.1	5.1 The Stage: The Event as a 'Brandfest'	Event & Staging	Fürste	Founder	"We want to set up a \$200,000 event that looks like a \$2 million event so we're really focused on the branding style ... it's the black and yellow and white these are the colors that we use very pure very holistic the people that get in there they we want them to feel like they are Olympic athletes"	Organization stages the event to dissolve the ordinary self - everyone briefly becomes a star
5.1	5.1.1 Witnessed Suffering: The Crowd and Atmosphere	Atmosphere & Crowd	Nina	Athlete	"It's crazy because there's so much people just coming and cheering and it's full and loud and the atmosphere is like exploding and they're pushing you forward."	Crowd actively produces the event's meaning - is constitutive of the experience, not just present
5.1	5.1.1 Witnessed Suffering: The Crowd and Atmosphere	Atmosphere & Crowd	Marco	Athlete	"Like I enjoy being in that atmosphere where like you have like 400 people, 500 people watching you and like cheering you on and like competing, trying to get the best time."	Being seen and cheered sustains the elevated sense of self the event produces
5.1	5.1.1 Witnessed Suffering: The Crowd and Atmosphere	Atmosphere & Crowd	Ben	Athlete (Adaptive)	"I preferred it with people ... Racing without anyone cheering me was very strange"	Absent crowd (Chicago) degrades the suffering layer despite achievement layer remaining intact
5.1	5.1.1 Witnessed Suffering: The Crowd and Atmosphere	Atmosphere & Crowd	Nina	Athlete	"I needed the crowd's energy to push myself through. Chicago was one of the worst races I had even though it was the World Championship - it was empty"	A commercial ticketing decision directly degraded the core community experience, cheering crucial for experience
5.1	5.1.2 Suffering is Fun	Collective Suffering	David	Employee	"HYROX is a very intensive challenge, you know, whether you're competing at a very high level or competing as a novice. It is a lot on the body and the mind."	Intensity is universal across participation levels; the stage is built for everyone
5.1	5.1.2 Suffering is Fun	Collective Suffering	Ben	Athlete (Adaptive)	"It's like an hour and a half, two hours of just putting yourself	Suffering is the appeal, not a side effect - the shared cost of everyone

					in a deep hole. Just slogging through it as fast as you can. It'll be painful. You probably won't enjoy it for the first time, but as soon as you finish, you'll be looking at another race ... it's just a brilliant experience"	suffering through the same experience creates the bond
5.1	5.1.2 Suffering is Fun	Collective Suffering	Nina	Athlete	"I was crying during running and after the burpees I was like, fuck all this. I wanted to quit, but then I was like, no, you paid this much, now go the hell on."	Pushing through, fighting way out of the pain cave
5.1	5.1.2 Suffering is Fun	Moral Responsibility	Nina	Athlete (Volunteer role in this case)	"I was judging at the sandbag lunge stations. And it was so fun. I was pushing them. I was cheering them ... My legs were really tired. My voice was gone because I was like, okay, you can do this. Come just two more steps and then you can have a little bit of rest ... So like this the whole time, I was very supportive"	Witnessing suffering triggers moral obligation even between strangers - no prior relationship needed, judges as backstage operators that contribute to the community
5.1	5.1.2 Suffering is Fun	Collective Suffering	Nina	Athlete	"Running felt so heavy. You couldn't breathe. I was at the finish and I was so dizzy. I can't remember how long I was laying on the stage because I really just needed to calm down my mind and get some air."	Pushing through, fighting way out of the pain cave
5.1	5.1.2 Suffering is Fun	Collective Suffering	Nina	Athlete	"I'm so alone with my thoughts and my inner struggles and all the pain. And please take it away for me by applauding and cheering and telling me, hey, you're doing good. Because it's hard to tell yourself while you're running."	External motivation required; crowd supplies it because its members have been in the same position
5.1	5.1.2 Suffering is Fun	Collective Suffering	Ben	Athlete (Adaptive)	"It was just head noise for an hour and 10 minutes."	Pushing through, fighting way out of the pain cave
5.1	5.1.2 Suffering is Fun	Collective Suffering	Maya & Paige	Volunteer Judges, Wall Balls	Watching the athletes move through the final stations, visibly exhausted, we felt an instinct to encourage and support them, to	Being a judge or volunteer does not place you outside the community. It pulls you in.

					briefly share their experience.	
5.1	5.1.2 Suffering is Fun	In-group / Out-group	Sarah	Spectator	"I did notice people's bracelets and stuff ... and I was like, 'Oh, that's a HYROX thing'" / 'You don't know until you've stepped into that world a little bit.'	Achievement markers visible to outsiders; meaning readable only to insiders, suffering is the in-group language
5.2	5.2.1 HYROX as a Gateway: How People Found Their Way In	Gateway Logic	Nina	Athlete	"I had a good reason to dive that deep into HYROX ... because when I started running again, my boyfriend from that time broke up with me. So I was compensating all this heartbroken stuff with sport, all in. I wasn't having a day off in like 3 months. A broken heart is the best machine for sport and to go into competition and to be really good at it."	HYROX channels pre-existing needs into a socially validated form; belonging co-produced by what participants bring
5.2	5.2.1 HYROX as a Gateway: How People Found Their Way In	Gateway Logic	Max	Gym Owner	"When I compete, I want to be good in what I do, because ... my mindset says this represents how I coach the classes."	External motivation produces real belonging, frontstage performance of coach and HYROX athlete become one
5.2	5.2.1 HYROX as a Gateway: How People Found Their Way In	Gateway Logic	Sophie	Athlete (Adaptive) / Ambassador	"That's kind of the biggest reason why I keep doing it ... trying to develop a little bit of a platform to reach more people with disabilities"	HYROX provides stage for a pre-formed mission, the organization did not create it, only made it visible
5.2	5.2.2 How Belonging Exceeds Competitive Identity	Competitive Identity	Felix	Gym Owner	"I think it started also when I was training for HYROX ... when my first decision was to do one race."	Identity is self-assigned at commitment, not awarded at the finish line
5.2	5.2.2 How Belonging Exceeds Competitive Identity	Competitive Identity	Marco	Athlete	"To be honest ... yes and no. I do, but at the same time, like, I don't really care. As bad as that sounds, it's just another competition and like that I've completed. It was like one day, three hours, we did it, we move on in life."	Race alone without backstage infrastructure = surface-level connection only
5.2	5.2.2 How Belonging Exceeds Competitive Identity	Competitive Identity	Nina	Athlete	"I was a HYROX athlete for sure, because this is what I was training for. It was my identity for 1½ years. No questions asked. Right now I would	Competitive identity fades: collective identity persists - community membership outlasts competitive participation

					more say I'm a hybrid athlete. I'm not doing a lot of HYROX workouts right now. I haven't planned to go to many competitions next year."	
5.2	5.2.2 How Belonging Exceeds Competitive Identity	Collective vs Competitive	Max	Gym Owner	"The majority doesn't compete. So the majority does the HYROX classes, but they say, okay, I'm doing this for the community itself, I'm doing that for the workout for myself. I'm not doing it for the competition in the end. But on the other hand, you have a lot of people that say, okay, I want to do the competition as well. And there's a difference in the mindset in how they train."	Community membership is separable from race participation, belonging does not require the starting line
5.3	5.3.1 Collective Suffering in the Gym	Suffering in Training	Felix	Gym Owner	"It's like one big class and they are pushing each other. They are supportive and very friendly. It's not like they are just for themselves and do their thing because HYROX is really tough, and I think also very mental, mental game. And for me as a sportsman, it always pushed me if somebody's cheering for me on the sideline or like pushing me to my limits and the feeling is crazy. If you're doing the HYROX in the center and you're running and like dying inside, it's crazy how far other people can push you to your limits or beyond ... when you're getting ready and like laying down on the ground and so exhausted, but you have a smile on your face because you know, it was a good session"	Same suffering mechanism as the race, but lower intensity, higher frequency; shared exhaustion becomes connection
5.3	5.3.1 Collective Suffering in the Gym	Suffering in Training	Felix	Gym Owner	"It's like every time I'm starting the class, everybody knows what's coming now. They're looking at the whiteboard and	Anticipated shared suffering, chosen repeatedly, turns acquaintances into community

					seeing 100 burpees and like, I don't know, 2 minutes running and they are like enjoying this, because they know in ½ and hour, or like in one hour, they're like on the ground and done for for the day, so it's nice to see they want to, like, push the limits and get motivated ... because it's such a high performance that you have to deliver"	
5.3	5.3.2 The Licence Without the Relationship	Anchor Decoupling	Max	Gym Owner	"In the beginning, it was more from HYROX than from us. They brought the name, they brought the competition. But the rest is, I think, more up to the gyms. The gyms play a major part in the success of HYROX. Because we push the communities, because we offer the workouts."	Community produced independently, HYROX cannot distinguish an active gym from one that never runs a class
5.3	5.3.2 The Licence Without the Relationship	Anchor Decoupling	David	Employee	On gym quality assurance: would like to see team members visit gyms and provide feedback, but this is not yet possible	Organizational aspiration vs operational capacity gap confirms anchor decoupling, the community largely runs itself
5.3	5.3.3 What the Gym Actually Does	Community Production	Felix	Gym Owner	"The gyms have the role to build the athletes and to get the athletes to the HYROX races to be race ready. The gyms have the main focus to bring the community to the races while they are having the community bonding in their gyms. So it's like a road to the main event."	Race is the destination; belonging is produced on the journey, meaning in training, group travel and collective preparation
5.3	5.3.3 What the Gym Actually Does	Community Production	Ben	Athlete (Adaptive)	"So the best part of my day is going to training. I love it. I'm not doing anything this week ... but I'm already looking forward to going back and seeing all the guys in there. We're already talking about what races we're booking next and me and my	Gym Community, rituals, training together

					doubles partner, we've already started looking at next season... Like I say, it's something to look forward to and train for, Yeah, it's the highlight of my day.”	
5.4	5.4 Everyone is Welcome (Terms Apply)	HYROX: The Sport for Everyone	Ben	Athlete (Adaptive)	“No, I'd agree with that. I think they bang on, that it is for everyone. I think that the main selling point is there's not a lot of skill required to do a HYROX compared to the likes of CrossFit. And I think 99% of the population could do a HYROX. It might take three hours, but they'd be able to get through it. You know, there's no skill required in pushing a sled. Obviously, you can get faster with technique, but for the most part, anyone could do it, and especially in the adaptives now.”	HYROX has low entry barriers, everyone can do it, so everyone could potentially be part of the community
5.4	5.4.1 The Shifting Standard for Meaningful Participation	Meaning Drift	Max	Gym Owner	“What we saw or see in Cologne for example, or with the people that compete, you always talk about Sub60, so the times that you've run in a HYROX. And everyone defined the race by the time that you ran in the end and not by the competition itself. For us, we say ...if you complete that ... you do that simply, it's something that you work for, something that's special, and then you run a 62 instead of a 60, then people are quite sad about the result in the end and not happy that they finished the HYROX. So that was a shift in that ... that just changes the entire atmosphere of the event”	Finishing has shifted from achievement to minimum expectation, the meaning of the achievement layer has changed
5.4	5.4.1 The Shifting Standard for Meaningful Participation	Meaning Drift	Sophie	Athlete (Adaptive) / Ambassador	“And I think it's the presence, also like how you sell your presence in social media. And I do think	Organizational content choices quietly narrow who the achievement layer signals belonging to

					they generally tend to sell their presence like sex sells ... if you've got the fit and the thin people with the like skinny tops or the shirtless men and stuff like this, like sex sells anyways."	
5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Elite Focus & Olympic Ambitions	Lucas	Employee	"But I think what for us made the game changer is the new like live broadcasting for Elite 15. That is what brings you the feeling of that it's really a commercial sport and that people can follow it from home [...] I remember the first time that we've done like this format in Glasgow last year, one year ago, where we built like this stadium where you can track like all the Elite 15 races from the stands and everything is happening in front of you. And that's something incredible. It's amazing. And I think that's the format that we want to bring on next levels, like Olympic Games in general, where people can rally be engaged to what's happening on the race"	Elite Focus & Olympic Ambitions, focus on making it "A real Sport"
5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Elite Focus & Olympic Ambitions	Lucas	Employee	"So, I think Olympics, it's not just about obviously the community or business or whatever but it goes far away of this. It's just to give the chance to everybody in the world to dream, to compete and to challenge yourself against other people. It doesn't matter from where you come, your religion, you ... I mean, I think that's the beautiful thing in sports and Olympics, it's the biggest. So I think all sports should wish to become Olympics"	Organization frames Elite focus as universally aspirational, but it changes who the event is visibly for

5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Elite Focus & Olympic Ambitions	David	Employee	“... if we are substantiating the, the rate of participation both in junior level, youth level, as well as age group, as well as senior levels, as well as Elite level, what we’re creating is more than just a corporate event. It’s more than just a, a global movement. It is a substantiated sport. This is a sport now”	Establishing HYROX as a Sport
5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Elite Focus & Olympic Ambitions	Ben	Athlete (Adaptive)	“I think it’d be great for the sport because you’d see some serious athletes and it’d be good to showcase that on the world stage. And I think at that point it’d be taken a lot more serious than what it currently is.”	Elite Focus & Olympic Ambitions for Credibility
5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Elite Focus & Olympic Ambitions	Felix	Gym Owner	“Yeah, it can be like demotivating for some people, but also like motivating for other people that they want to see like, okay, how can, how far can I push this time or my performances ...”	Negative Consequences for “The Normal Athlete”
5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Elite Focus & Olympic Ambitions, Erosion of Culture	Felix	Gym Owner	“Yeah, I think the gap between the Elite 15 and like I think normal people, when I can say it like this, is getting bigger and bigger because the training is getting more specific for HYROX and the opportunities or the like the tactics of how to train for HYROX is getting more precisely and more detailed. Um, so I think it’s quite like not a really good thing that the Elite 15 is setting up the bar more higher and higher and higher. And you see yourself like on a plateau and seeing the limit, just getting like 45 minutes for a double pro or something. It’s crazy. And yeah, it can be like demotivating for some people”	Negative Consequences for “The Normal Athlete”, Standard gets shifted, Standards are rising

5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Elite Focus & Olympic Ambitions, Erosion of Culture	Max	Gym Owner	“It used to be a race for the community, and now it’s more also a race for the Elite 15, for the good people, for people that race for a sport that’s an Olympic sport. So a different direction than what they started with.”	Negative Consequences for “The Normal Athlete”, Standard gets shifted, Standards are rising
5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Erosion of Culture	Nina	Athlete	“There are two different phases of the sports. The one side is also the Elite ... I have a friend of mine who’s in the Elite 15 and she struggles a lot. Every race she’s doing in the Elite race is her worst and if she’s doing just a fun race, she’s like 3 minutes faster ... yeah, she can’t deal with the pressure. So I think toxic is kind of the right word if you’re on this side of the HYROX world. If you’re on the other side and doing it for fun and having fun costumes maybe [it isn’t]”	Two cultures now coexist within the same event: competitive pressure vs participatory fun
5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Erosion of Culture	Sophie	Athlete (Adaptive) / Ambassador	“The one thing that’s starting to bother me is, do you guys know when you’re kids and you’re in like PE class? ... kind of like all of the cool athletic kids and stuff like them kind of being like jerks. And I feel like HYROX is kind of starting to take this turn ... the fit and thin and like super defined [athletes] in their tiny things [outfits] they’re taking it way too far ... to seriously, I think ... the support of the community is kind of like falling.”	Cultural shift eroding the moral responsibility and supportive atmosphere on which community was built
5.4	5.4.2 The Elite 15 and the Olympic Ambitions	Erosion of Culture	Sarah	Spectator	“I don’t know, it just felt more like it was, like, a gym- more like a gym bro event [...] But yeah, I definitely, like, when I walked in ‘cause I’m not, like a gym person, I walked in and I immediately was like, oh, like, this	Outsider perception confirms inclusivity gap, the space itself communicated exclusion before anyone spoke

					is a gym place. For me that felt more intimidating than welcoming”	
5.4	5.4.3 The Adaptive Athletes	Inclusion vs Instrumentalisation	Sophie	Athlete (Adaptive) / Ambassador	“I was like, okay, well, where's in the elevator? And they had no idea. And then they realised that they had actually accidentally built the elevators into the race course ... when I finished racing they had to take me outside and in my race clothes and everything like this, because obviously my bag with my jacket and everything was upstairs. So they ended up having to take me outside and had to go around the building to another entrance to go up an elevator to go get my bag, like to get my jacket and stuff like this. And it was so cold”	Formal inclusion without operational investment, being visible to the organization is not the same as being genuinely seen
5.4	5.4.3 The Adaptive Athletes	Inclusion vs Instrumentalisation	Sophie	Athlete (Adaptive) / Ambassador	“They're pushing so much for HYROX to be Olympic and for HYROX to like, like in London, they're doing this like night neon party and stuff like that. They're trying to be so cool and new and trendy and like really hook people in an stuff like this. And I think they're forgetting about the point of like being for everybody ... Because sometimes it feels like even in London, it felt like we [the adaptives] were like a burden almost like, okay, we're here, but kind of like they almost kind of wish we weren't.”	Formal inclusion without operational investment, being visible to the organization is not the same as being genuinely seen
5.4	5.4.3 The Adaptive Athletes	Inclusion vs Instrumentalisation	Sophie	Athlete (Adaptive) / Ambassador	“They had forgot to order the flags for the adaptive athletes ... So they gave us a flag for men 70 plus (division) and then they took the flag away from us while we were still on like the podium, like on	Backstage operational failure exposed on the most frontstage moment, podium as ultimate achievement signal

					the stage in front of all of the people. And they were taking the flag away then then like giving it to the next person. And they literally used one flag for all, yeah, it was awful.”	
5.4	5.4.3 The Adaptive Athletes	Inclusion vs Instrumentalisation	Sophie	Athlete (Adaptive) / Ambassador	“And then at some point they released after the season had started the adaptive rule book ... And then it got like a ton of outrage because it means a ton of athletes have already competed under the old rule book. And now athletes that are going to be competing in like, so to say, like the second half of the season are going to be competing under the new rule book [...] Like I run right now a 40-to-45-minute time off the current rule book. And with the new rule book ... I’m hoping I finish in like an hour and 30 minutes [...] Yeah, so it’s not bad that they’re doing it, but [...] because with adaptive, it’s not a podium place gets worlds, like a world spot. It’s the top three on the adaptive list for the entire world, which means that if you have the top three that competed under the old rule book and they have like 40 minutes times, it’s just not fair at that point”	Fairness treated as lower operational priority in adaptive vs mainstream, mid-season change signals who counts

Source: Own representation

Appendix E: Interview Guide Athletes

Introduction to give respondent: *"We are conducting research on how people experience fitness communities, specifically around HYROX. This interview is about your personal experience as a participant - what it means to you, how it fits into your life and how you relate to the people around you in the HYROX world. There are no right or wrong answers. The interview will take approximately 45–60 minutes. Please note you are able to withdraw your answers at any time"*

Opening: Background and Entry

- Can you tell me a little about yourself and how you got into HYROX?
- What were you doing fitness-wise before HYROX, and how does it compare?
- How long have you been competing, and how often do you participate in events?
- How did you feel about your time? Did it make or break your experience?

Identity and Meaning

- How would you describe what HYROX is to someone who has never heard of it?
- Do you think of yourself as an athlete because of HYROX, or did you already have that identity before?
- Has being part of HYROX changed how you see yourself or how you spend your time?
- How central is HYROX to your daily life - does it shape your routine, your social life, your sense of who you are?

Experience of Belonging

- How would you describe the atmosphere at a HYROX event?
- Do you feel a sense of connection to other participants - people you may never have met before?
- How does the HYROX community compare to other sports or fitness communities you have been part of?
- Is there a feeling of being part of something bigger than just a race? How would you describe that?
- Have you ever felt like HYROX was more than just exercise or competition - something closer to a lifestyle or an identity?

Relationship to the Organization

- Do you think much about HYROX as a company - the people running it, the business behind it?
- Do you feel that the sense of community around HYROX is something the organization created, or something that participants built themselves?

- Are there things HYROX does - events, communication, the format itself - that make you feel like you belong to something?
- Has HYROX ever felt commercially driven in a way that sat uncomfortably with you, or does the community side feel genuine?

Extending the Community

- Do you do anything outside of competing that relates to HYROX - training others, visiting affiliate gyms, promoting it to friends?
 - If so, what motivates that - is it something the organization encourages, or something you feel personally driven to do?
- Have you ever introduced someone new to HYROX? What did that feel like?

Closing

- If you had to describe what HYROX gives you that other fitness activities do not, what would you say?
- Is there anything about your experience that you think is hard to capture from the outside?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix F: Interview Guide Employees

Introduction to give respondent: *"We are conducting research on how organizations build communities around fitness brands. This interview focuses on your experience working at HYROX and how you think about the community surrounding it. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. Please note you are able to withdraw your answers at any time."*

Opening: Role and Background

- Can you tell me a little about your role at HYROX and how long you have been with the organization?
- How did you come to work at HYROX - what drew you to it?
- How would you describe HYROX to someone who has never heard of it?

Organizational Identity and Community Design

- How does HYROX talk internally about the community around it - is that something you actively work to build, or does it happen on its own?
- Are there specific strategies or initiatives aimed at creating a sense of belonging among participants?
- What does the organization think about the difference between HYROX as a business and HYROX as a community?
- Is there a particular kind of identity or set of values that HYROX wants participants to associate with the brand? How is that communicated? - what are the values you try to foster in the company and the broader eco system?
- What does the organization think about the language used around HYROX - for example, calling it a sport rather than a fitness event?

Engineering Belonging Across the Ecosystem

- HYROX involves a wide range of people - athletes, volunteers, affiliate gyms, coaches. How does the organization think about building community across all of these different groups?
- Are there things the organization does specifically to make participants feel like they belong to something larger than a single race or gym?
- How much of what makes HYROX feel like a community comes from the organization's design, and how much do you think comes from participants themselves?
- Have you ever seen the community take on a life of its own in ways that surprised you or went beyond what the organization intended? - negative direction?

Commercial Logic and Community

- HYROX is a commercial company, but it also positions itself around community and identity. How do those two things sit together from your perspective working here?
- Are there ever tensions between the business side and the community side of what HYROX does?
- Do you think participants are aware of the commercial dimension, or does the community feeling tend to take over?
- Do you know the founder? - what did you learn from him/ Is he just talk, or does he mean what he says?

Closing

- Is there anything about how HYROX builds its community that you think is underappreciated or misunderstood from the outside?
- Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered?

Appendix G: Interview Guide Gym Owners

Introduction to give respondent: *"We are conducting research on how people experience and shape the HYROX community, with a particular focus on gym owners who are affiliated with HYROX. We are interested in how HYROX fits into your business, your community, and your personal perspective on fitness and belonging. There are no right or wrong answers. The interview will take approximately 45–60 minutes. Please note you are able to withdraw your answers at any time"*

Opening: Background and Entry

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your gym?
- How would you describe your gym - its philosophy, community, and focus?
- How did you first come across HYROX?
- What made you decide to affiliate your gym with HYROX?
- How long have you been part of the HYROX ecosystem?
- How would you explain HYROX to someone who has never heard of it?

Motivation and Business Integration

- What motivated you to bring HYROX into your gym?
 - You weren't a HYROX gym before, did something change?
 - How do you choose your coaches? Their HYROX backgrounds?
 - How did HYROX change their business plan?
- How does HYROX fit into your overall business model?
- Has HYROX changed anything about how you run your gym - for example programming, classes, or member engagement?
- What do you think HYROX offers your members that other fitness formats do not?
- Do you see HYROX more as a training system, a sport, a brand, or something else?

Community and Belonging

- How has HYROX influenced the community within your gym?
- Do you see differences between members who engage with HYROX and those who do not?
 - Difference between people who do HYROX courses and who do competitions?
- Does HYROX create a stronger sense of identity or belonging among your members?
- Do your members feel part of a larger HYROX community beyond your gym?
- How would you describe the atmosphere around HYROX training and events from your perspective as a gym owner?

Relationship to the HYROX Organization

- How would you describe your relationship with HYROX as an organization?
- Do you feel supported as an affiliate - in terms of communication, resources, or visibility?
- Do you feel like a partner in building the HYROX community, or more like a customer of the brand?
- How much guidance does HYROX give versus how much freedom you have to shape HYROX within your gym?
- Do you think HYROX actively shapes the community, or does it emerge more from gyms and participants?

Commercial Logic and Tensions

- HYROX is a commercial brand, and you are running a business as well - how do these two aspects interact in your experience?
- Has affiliating with HYROX had a noticeable impact on your business - for example in terms of member growth, retention, or revenue?
- Are there any tensions between maintaining an authentic community in your gym and engaging with a global fitness brand?
- Has HYROX ever felt overly commercial or restrictive in a way that affected your gym?
- How do your members perceive HYROX - more as a community, a competition, or a product?

Extending the HYROX Ecosystem

- Do you actively promote HYROX to your members or outside your gym?
- Have you encouraged members to compete, volunteer, or become more involved?
- What motivates you to invest time and energy into HYROX beyond your immediate business needs?
- Do you collaborate with other HYROX gyms or coaches?
- Do you feel part of a broader network of HYROX affiliates?

Comparison and Positioning

- How would you compare HYROX to other fitness ecosystems or competitions (e.g., CrossFit, Ironman, traditional gyms)?
- What makes HYROX distinct from these alternatives from your perspective as a gym owner?
- Do you think HYROX is building something fundamentally different, or is it similar to existing models?

Closing

- What does being a HYROX affiliate gym owner mean to you personally?
- Is there anything about the gym-owner perspective that you think is overlooked or misunderstood?
- Is there anything you would like to add?