

Chasing Extraordinary Experiences

A qualitative analysis of triathletes' identity construction through
middle- and long-distance triathlons

by

Annemarie Hamfler

Alina Ziegler

May 2026

Master's Programme in International Marketing and Brand
Management

Word Count: 22189

Abstract

Title: Chasing Extraordinary Experiences – A qualitative analysis of triathletes’ identity construction through middle- and long-distance triathlons

Course: BUSN39 – Degree Project in Global Marketing – Master Level

Programme: International Marketing and Brand Management

Authors: Annemarie Hamfler and Alina Ziegler

Supervisor: Carys Egan-Wyer

Research Purpose: This study examines how middle- and long-distance triathletes use the symbolic consumption of extraordinary endurance experiences to construct and communicate their identity across the full consumption journey.

Theoretical Framework: The theoretical framework of symbolic consumption by Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) is used to analyse how triathletes’ use the symbolic consumption of extraordinary experiences to construct their identity.

Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative research approach. To answer the research question, ten semi-structured interviews with triathletes have been conducted. Data was analysed using a flexible application of the template analysis by King and Brooks (2017).

Findings/Conclusion: The identity construction through extraordinary endurance experiences is an ongoing process rather than a one-time transformation. Symbolic meanings evolve as athletes progress from beginner to experienced, with functional consumption outweighing brand symbolism in equipment and event choice. The finish line, atmosphere and race objects emerge as powerful symbolic identity markers bridging internal self-validation and external social recognition.

Contribution: This study contributes to CCT literature by integrating extraordinary experience research with symbolic consumption, demonstrating that identity construction in triathlon extends beyond the singular race event and covers the full extraordinary experience journey.

Keywords: Extraordinary Experience, Identity Construction, Symbolic Consumption, Middle- and Long-Distance Triathlon, Ironman, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), Qualitative Research

Acknowledgements

To stay on the topic of endurance sports, we are now at the finish line of our master's programme, and we want to take some time to thank everyone who supported us from the sideline.

Firstly, we would like to thank Carys Egan-Wyer for supervising our thesis and for her support and guidance throughout the entire research process. Her valuable ideas and constructive feedback helped us stay on course and reach the finish line before the cut-off time. We greatly appreciate her continuous encouragement.

Secondly, we would like to thank our interview participants for their time, openness and valuable contributions about their personal triathlon journey. Their willingness to share their experiences and perspectives provided the foundation for this research and led to insightful findings presented in this thesis.

Thirdly, we would like to thank our family and friends for their support and words of encouragement when things got tough.

Lastly, we would like to thank Lund University and all our professors in the master's programme *International Marketing and Brand Management* for providing us with an insightful programme that paves the way for a hopefully promising career.

31st of May 2026, Lund, Sweden



Annemarie Hamfler



Alina Ziegler

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Topic Relevance	2
1.2	Purpose and Research Question	3
1.3	Outline of the Thesis	4
2	Literature Review.....	5
2.1	Experiences	5
2.2	Extraordinary Experiences	6
2.2.1	Endurance Sports and Triathlon	8
2.2.2	Extraordinary Experiences in Endurance Sports.....	9
2.3	Consumer Identity Construction	10
2.3.1	Identity Construction as a concept	10
2.3.2	Identity Construction in Endurance Sports	12
2.4	Experiential and Emotional Dimensions of Endurance Sports	14
2.5	Chapter Summary.....	15
3	Symbolic Consumption as Theoretical Framework.....	17
3.1	Conceptualizing Symbolic Consumption.....	17
3.2	Extending Symbolic Consumption to Experiences.....	19
3.3	Symbolic Consumption as a Mechanism of Identity Construction.....	19
4	Methodology	21
4.1	Research Approach	21
4.2	Research Design.....	22
4.3	Research Method.....	23
4.3.1	Data Collection Method	23
4.3.2	Interview Guide.....	25
4.3.3	Sampling Technique.....	27
4.4	Data Analysis	28
4.5	Evaluating Quality Criteria	29
4.5.1	Credibility.....	29
4.5.2	Transferability	30
4.5.3	Dependability	30
4.5.4	Confirmability	31
4.6	Limitations	31
4.7	Research Ethics	32

5	Findings and Analysis	34
5.1	Extraordinary Experiences as Lifestyle.....	34
5.1.1	Centrality of Triathlon.....	34
5.1.2	Obstacles as a Source of Strength	36
5.2	Symbolic Consumption in Equipment and Event Choice	37
5.2.1	Equipment as Tool for Extraordinary Accomplishments.....	37
5.2.2	Social Influence and Appearance as Identity Drivers	38
5.2.3	Functionality as Main Driver in Branded Events.....	40
5.2.4	Ironman Hawaii as Ultimate Symbolic Achievement.....	42
5.3	Race Experiences as Symbolic Identity Markers	43
5.3.1	Emotional Meaning of the Finish Line	44
5.3.2	Atmosphere and Spectator Support as Performance Enhancers	45
5.3.3	Symbolic Meaning of Race Objects.....	47
5.4	Symbolic Consumption Across Experience Levels	49
5.4.1	Beginners Seek Validation Through Extreme Challenges.....	50
5.4.2	Experienced Athletes are More Intrinsically Driven.....	51
5.5	Internal Validation and External Recognition Through Triathlon	52
5.5.1	Triathlon as Proof of Mental Strength and Capability	53
5.5.2	Perceived Social Recognition and Role Model Status	54
6	Discussion	56
6.1	Research Findings	56
6.1.1	Extraordinary Experiences as Lifestyle.....	56
6.1.2	Symbolic Consumption in Equipment and Event Choice	57
6.1.3	Race Experiences as Symbolic Identity Markers	57
6.1.4	Symbolic Consumption Across Experience Levels	58
6.1.5	Internal Validation and External Recognition Through Triathlon	58
6.2	Theoretical Implications.....	59
6.2.1	Extraordinary Experiences	59
6.2.2	Identity Construction.....	60
6.2.3	Symbolic Consumption	62
6.3	Managerial Implications.....	63
7	Conclusion and Future Research.....	66
7.1	Conclusion.....	66
7.2	Limitations and Future Research.....	68

List of Tables

Table 1: Overview of Interview Participants	24
---	----

List of Figures

Figure 1: Visualisation of the Concept of Self-Symbolism and Social-Symbolism (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998, p.138)	18
---	----

Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CCT	Consumer Culture Theory
E.g.	Exempli Gratia, For Example
Km	Kilometre
M-Dot	The official Ironman Logo
70.3	Ironman 70.3 (middle-distance triathlon: 1.9 km swim, 90 km bike, 21.1 km run)

1 Introduction

Excitement and nervousness combined with an indescribable atmosphere. You are waiting on the starting line, just a few minutes left until the race starts. You know that over the next twelve hours you will be pushed to your limits and will have to perform your best in the swim, bike, and run. You are waiting alongside all the other athletes in your age group, and you wish each other good luck. Some of them may be well prepared for the race, others may be less confident, but all of you are aiming for the same finish line. Ten seconds left until you run into the water for the first discipline. After approximately 90 minutes you come out of the water and run into the first transition zone. You know that you have already completed the first discipline – only two more to go. You hop on your bike and set off on the 180 km bike ride. You are focused but a little nervous as nothing must go wrong on the bike. After finishing the second discipline you are mentally preparing for the last one: running the marathon. During the entire race there are ups and downs, and you spend a lot of time with your own thoughts. However, you have incredible support from your family, as well as from random strangers cheering you on from the sidelines, creating a motivational atmosphere. No matter how tough the race was, after a little more than 12 hours, the finish line is in sight. You run across the black-and-red carpet with the Ironman logo. When finally crossing the finish line, you hear the words: “You are an Ironman!”. You are completely exhausted but fulfilled. Friends and family welcome you behind the finish line. This whole experience has changed you. You have spent several months preparing for this race; every day was organised around triathlon. A short while after the race, that structure you built falls apart, and you might already think about signing up for the next race. ¹

Such experiences illustrate a broader phenomenon that has attracted increasing attention within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Consumers actively use extraordinary experiences to construct and communicate their identities. Rather than just consuming products or services for

¹ Note: The scenario has been reconstructed through interview findings, stories from other people, and from what we have seen on e.g., YouTube or Instagram.

their functional benefits, individuals often engage with experiences that carry symbolic meaning and follow them to express a desired version of themselves (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Endurance sport events therefore may be understood not only as athletic competitions but also as symbolic resources through which identities are created and negotiated.

Triathlon is uniformly defined as a multidisciplinary endurance event that combines swimming, cycling and running (Knechtle et al. 2015; Lamont & Kennelly, 2012; Myburgh & Kruger, 2022a). Triathletes can compete in different distances which vary from sprint, Olympic to ultra-distance (Myburgh & Kruger, 2022a; Myburgh Marx et al. 2014). Since a full Ironman (long-distance triathlon) has been repeatedly cited as the longest and most demanding format (Çetin, 2019; Myburgh Marx et al. 2014), this paper focuses on middle- and long-distance triathlons as extraordinary experiences and therefore does not consider the other distances.

Middle-distance triathlon includes a swim of up to 2.9 km, up to 90 km bike ride and a run of up to 21 km (Deutsche Triathlon Union e.V., 2026). Events exceeding middle distance specifications are classified as long-distance triathlons and may comprise a swim of up to 4 km, a bike ride of up to 200 km and a run of up to 42.2 km (Deutsche Triathlon Union e.V., 2026). While the distances in non-branded events may vary, Ironman events follow a fixed format, consisting of a 3.8 km swim, a 180 km bike ride, and a 42.2 km run for the full distance Ironman, and exactly half of this distance for the Ironman 70.3 (Bowerman, 2026; Ironman Group, 2025a).

1.1 Topic Relevance

Prinz (2019) already discovered growth in triathlon races and triathlon finishers in the 2015/2016 season. The participation in both, long- and short-distance triathlons, has risen by 15 to 20 percent per year (Prinz, 2019). Especially in well-known races such as Challenge Roth, the number of participants is growing (TEAMCHALLENGE GmbH, 2024), as well as in Ironman races, where the number of first-time participants has increased by 10 percent compared to the previous year (Ironman Group, 2025b). The visible increase can in large parts be attributed to younger and female participants (Ironman Group, 2025b). Due to the growing numbers of amateur triathletes and the participation in triathlon events, the sport plays an important role in the market.

Despite the rising numbers in triathlon participation, there is relatively little research that examines the symbolic and identity-related dimensions of participation. Existing literature deals with e.g., ideal nutrition that enables athletes to improve their performances (Miguel-Ortega et al. 2025) or explores how athletes physically manage participation in triathlon (Atkinson, 2008). Previous research into endurance sports has, for example, examined what motivates athletes to participate in endurance sport events (Lamont & Kennelly, 2012).

For this study, middle- and long-distance triathlon is defined as a highly demanding endurance sport, which may go beyond just physical activity. Therefore, this study defines middle- and long-distance triathlon as an *extraordinary endurance experience*. The literature on extraordinary experiences is broad and deals with events like river rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993), religious pilgrimages (Husemann et al. 2016) or climbing Mount Everest (Tumbat & Belk, 2011).

Within this research, we are focusing on triathletes' identity construction. Previous research has explored identity construction within CCT research from different angles (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986; Schouten, 1991). In endurance sport, identity construction has been examined especially in long-distance running (e.g., Shipway, 2010). Scussel et al. (2023) and Rundio et al. (2020) have further researched the impact of extraordinary experiences on identity construction. Additionally, symbolic consumption is closely intertwined with identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

While prior studies have explored motivations, participation experiences, and identity processes in endurance sport, little is known about how athletes utilise extraordinary endurance experiences to construct their identity.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

Since previous literature has not combined extraordinary experiences and symbolic consumption with identity construction, the purpose of this paper is to link those three aspects together and examine them in the context of endurance sports. Therefore, we will examine how triathletes utilize the symbolic consumption of extraordinary endurance experiences, encompassing not only the race event itself but also the extensive training process embedded into everyday life, to construct and maintain their identities. This leads to the research question:

How do middle- and long-distance triathletes use extraordinary experiences to construct their identity?

To answer the research question extraordinary experiences are explored through the theoretical lens of symbolic consumption.

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis contains seven main chapters, consisting of different subchapters. The first chapter provides a short introduction about triathlon and its background. It further highlights the relevance of the topic by examining the current state of literature, the purpose of the research and the research question. In the second chapter existing literature is reviewed, based on three different literature streams: extraordinary experiences, identity construction, and experiential and emotional dimensions of endurance sports. The third chapter further explains the concept of symbolic consumption by Elliott and Wattanasuwan, (1998) as the theoretical framework of this paper. In the fourth chapter the methodological approach, including research approach, research design, and research method is described. Further, it illustrates how the data has been analysed and what evaluation criteria has been considered. The limitations of the methodological approach are explained in further detail, as is the approach to research ethics. Chapter five includes findings and analysis. By analysing the data, five subthemes have been explored, which have been examined through the lens of symbolic consumption. The findings are summarised and discussed in chapter six. Additionally, theoretical and managerial implications have been derived. The final chapter, the conclusion, includes a summary of the thesis, limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future research.

2 Literature Review

The following sections examine the literature on extraordinary experiences in more detail, with a specific focus on endurance sports and middle- and long-distance triathlon. The review then shifts to the role of consumer identity construction in the context of extraordinary experiences, as they are not only lived but also interpreted and integrated into the individuals' sense of self. Finally, the concept of symbolic consumption is examined in the context of endurance sports.

2.1 Experiences

The concept of experience has long existed across disciplines such as philosophy and sociology (Carù & Cova, 2003). However, it was only introduced into marketing and consumer research with the seminal work of Holbrook and Hirschman in 1982. This marked a shift from a purely utilitarian view of consumption toward a more experiential perspective (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Following Carù and Cova (2003), this study adopts a consumer behaviour perspective on experience, defining it as a subjective and transformative episode which is shaped by individual immersion and meaning-making. This contrasts with the managerial view of marketing which conceptualises experiences as staged and inherently memorable offerings (Carù & Cova, 2003). Given the focus on endurance sports as a lived and embodied phenomenon, the subjective perspective is more appropriate for capturing the complexity of identity construction through extraordinary experiences.

Importantly, experiences engage consumers holistically, meaning that physical, emotional, cognitive and social dimensions are often characterised by a high degree of immersion (Carù & Cova, 2003).

Building on this, not all consumption experiences are of relevance for this study. Instead, extraordinary experiences will be the focus.

2.2 Extraordinary Experiences

This chapter reviews prior research on extraordinary experiences as examined within the context of CCT. It synthesises how the experiences have been conceptualised in relation to consumer meaning-making and identity construction. By situating extraordinary experiences within the broader CCT discourse, the chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for understanding their relevance in contemporary consumption contexts.

Extraordinary experiences have been widely conceptualised in consumer and sociological research as intense, memorable and transformative events that stand in clear contrast to everyday life (Arnould & Price, 1993; Carù & Cova, 2003). Across the literature such experiences are characterised by high levels of emotional intensity, intrinsic enjoyment and a pronounced sense of newness (Arnould & Price, 1993; Rundio et al. 2020). These experiences are often framed as “once in a lifetime” events that enable individuals to step outside their daily routines and engage with life in a more profound and reflective manner (Arnould & Price, 1993; Goolaup & Nunkoo, 2023, p.401). More recent contributions reinforce this view by emphasising their uniqueness and meaning-rich nature, highlighting their ability to detach individuals from everyday constraints and create highly significant consumption moments that stand apart from ordinary experiences (Lindberg & Østergaard, 2015; Scussel et al. 2023). Overall, consumers tend to have vague expectations about the extraordinary experience (Arnould & Price, 1993), as they often count as unrehearsed and spontaneous (Abrahams, 1986 cited in Arnould & Price, 1993). The difference of extraordinary experiences and everyday life lies in this spontaneity (Arnould & Price, 1993). Furthermore, the sense that extraordinary experiences are indescribable makes consumers hesitate to adjust to those experiences or prepare for them (Arnould & Price, 1993).

A central mechanism underlying extraordinary experiences is the state of deep immersion and total absorption, often described as “flow” (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al. 1993). In such states, individuals experience a merging of action and awareness, accompanied by heightened emotional intensity and a temporary loss of self-consciousness (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al. 1993; Lindberg & Østergaard, 2015; Scussel et al. 2023). This immersion quality is critical, as it enables consumers to move beyond passive participation and become fully engaged in the experience itself (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al. 1993; Lindberg & Østergaard, 2015).

Additionally, interpersonal interactions count as a relevant aspect of extraordinary experiences (Abrahams, 1986 cited in Arnould & Price, 1993). However, Tumbat and Belk (2011) describe a different phenomenon after analysing the behaviour of Mount Everest climbers. They have found that participants were more focused on their individual goals and rather self-centred than following the “ideal of *communitas*” (Tumbat & Belk, 2011, p.58).

In the context of wild water rafting participants described their extraordinary experience as a life-changing, magical moment (Arnould & Price, 1993). Overall, one outstanding moment overshadows all the negative experiences and leads to a positive evaluation of the entire experience (Arnould & Price, 1993). Arnould and Price (1993) found that extraordinary experiences are closely linked to self-renewal or self-discovery as well as personal growth. However, re-entering everyday life after an extraordinary experience can be difficult for consumers, and by the end, participants often start wondering what event is coming up next (Arnould & Price, 1993).

The conceptual foundation of extraordinary experiences is closely linked to the experiential view of consumption introduced by Holbrook and Hirschman in 1982 (Lindberg & Østergaard, 2015). Their work shifted the focus of consumer research from purely utilitarian perspectives toward the emotional, symbolic and hedonic dimensions of consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). From this perspective, consumption is not merely goal-oriented but also driven by feelings, fantasies and fun, with consumers actively constructing meanings and identities through their experiences (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). As argued by Thompson (1997) these experiential meanings are embedded within a broader narration of self-identity, highlighting the role of consumption in identity construction.

Building on this foundation, research has emphasised the transformative potential of extraordinary experiences. Schouten et al. (2007) introduces the term “transcendent customer experiences”, describing them as peak experiences that are characterised by elements of flow and capable of inducing shifts in attitudes, beliefs and self-perceptions. Similarly, Kozinets (2002) highlights the ritualistic dimension of extraordinary experiences, framing them as opportunities for consumers to temporarily escape the planned and ordinary aspects of everyday consumption.

Finally, immersion alone is not sufficient for an experience to be considered extraordinary (Lindberg & Østergaard, 2015). As argued by Lindberg and Østergaard (2015, p.251),

consumers must actively participate as “engaged agents” who co-create the experience and undergo a certain degree of personal transformation. This perspective underscores that extraordinary experiences are not passively consumed but actively constructed by the consumer, requiring both psychological involvement and interpretive engagement on the part of the consumer.

Höpner et al. (2022) examined the value of extraordinary experiences with the focus on festival experience and discovered three primary dimensions for value constructions: First, they explored the hedonistic dimension, which is linked to emotions, such as joy, happiness, or extasy. Those emotions can sometimes be difficult to describe and therefore acquire magical attributes (Höpner et al. 2022). Secondly, the social/collective dimension describes the interactions with others and the feeling of togetherness (Höpner et al. 2022). The final dimension is the visual appeal and atmosphere dimension, including moments associated with a certain atmosphere (Höpner et al., 2022).

2.2.1 Endurance Sports and Triathlon

Endurance sports have been defined across various research papers (Myburgh & Kruger, 2022a, 2022b). They have consistently been portrayed as activities that demand a high physical effort combined with a substantial mental effort (Atkinson, 2008 cited in Myburgh & Kruger, 2022a). Endurance sports require dedication, sustained involvement and extensive training and financial investments over a long time (Myburgh & Kruger, 2022a, 2022b). Myburgh and Kruger (2022b) describe endurance sports events as an exercise that may last at least six hours and include running, swimming, cycling and triathlon, while others focus on the extended periods of continuous activity that generate significant physical and psychological stress (Atkinson, 2008 cited in Myburgh & Kruger, 2022a). Participants are therefore engaged in “serious leisure” (Myburgh & Kruger, 2022a, p.213) and integrate the sport into their lifestyle and identity (Lamont & Kennelly, 2012).

Triathlon is categorized as an endurance sports event, often referred to as “ultra-distance” when talking about Ironman-type events (Myburgh Marx et al. 2014). Research describes triathlon as a “lifespan sport” (Myburgh et al. 2014b, p.3) which reflects participants’ active involvement into later adulthood, reaching their peak performance at a slightly higher age than endurance athletes in single disciplines (Myburgh et al. 2014b). Triathletes are in general seen as highly

motivated, intrinsically driven individuals who challenge personal achievement and self-identification through the sport (Çetin, 2019; Myburgh et al. 2014a).

2.2.2 Extraordinary Experiences in Endurance Sports

While CCT has examined extraordinary experiences such as river rafting, skydiving or festivals (Arnould & Price, 1993; Celsi et al. 1993; Höpner et al. 2022), there is limited research that explicitly focuses on endurance sports as extraordinary experience, especially triathlon. To address this gap, this study draws on literature from endurance running and cycling which share key structural and experiential characteristics with triathlon, particularly in terms of goal orientation and embodied experience.

Within this body of research, endurance running is frequently conceptualized as a form of extraordinary experience. Egan-Wyer (2019) highlights that endurance running, which triathlon is a part of, is often portrayed as a source of escape and enjoyment. However, on the other hand it can also be seen as a space of strict self-discipline for individuals (Egan-Wyer, 2019). This perspective aligns with earlier work by Varley (2011), who argues that the pursuit of extraordinary experiences in the endurance context is closely linked to a desire for escape and adventures. Similar interpretations can be found across related studies, which position escape as a central motivation driver on extraordinary consumption experiences (Costas & Kärreman, 2016; Scott et al. 2017). Escape can further be linked to the concept of alienation (Kozinets, 2001). In this context, alienation refers to a personal state characterised by feelings of disconnection from other individuals, social institutions, or even “one’s natural state of being” (Cova, 2021, p.63). This perspective is reflected in Belk and Costa’s (1998) study on the mountain men myth, in which participants expressed the feeling of not fitting into mainstream society and sought experiences associated with power, transcendence, passion, and freedom. Building on this, Cova et al., (2018, p.450) and Cova (2021, p.62) identify five reoccurring themes of escape that are used within CCT literature: nature and wilderness, spectacular built environments, celebrations and festivals, subcultural gatherings, and extreme leisure activities.

Existing literature draws on Turner’s (1969, 1973 cited in Tumbat & Belk, 2011) dichotomy between structure and antistructure (e.g., Tumbat & Belk, 2011; Husemann et al., 2016). While structure describes the social order, in which status and roles shape society (Turner, 1959, 1973, 1974 cited in Tumbat & Belk, 2011) antistructure is defined as the opposite of structure,

consisting of characteristics such as sacredness, *communitas*, and liminality (Turner, 1959, 1973, 1974 cited in Tumbat & Belk, 2011). While structure is part of everyday life, antistructure happens outside of everyday life (Turner, 1959, 1973, 1974 cited in Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Husemann et al. (2016, p.3362) further developed anastructure as category between structure and anti-structure, describing it as “conflict-laden transient category”.

The paradox of athletes suffering during sports is a topic that has been explored in some literature. However, the aspect of putting oneself in pain is rather less studied within the context of consumer research (Scott et al. 2017). As stated by Scott et al. (2017), pain plays a relevant role in terms of consumer experiences and is crucial to experiences like obstacle runs. However, on the other hand, consumers often use consumption to avoid pain and discomfort (Schouten, 1991). Cova (2021) examined how pain in extraordinary experiences is used to escape the own self. He claims that “pain contributes to extraordinary experiences by obliterating the reflexivity of the self” (Cova, 2021, p.67). Nevertheless, pain can also help consumers to understand themselves and their limits better during an extraordinary experience (Cova, 2021).

2.3 Consumer Identity Construction

The following chapter introduces identity construction as a concept, describing identity from a psychological and sociological perspective, before reviewing literature on identity construction in CCT research. In addition, the existing literature on identity construction in endurance sports, some of which is also linked to extraordinary experiences, is reviewed.

2.3.1 Identity Construction as a concept

The concept of identity can be regarded as an entire process regulating and governing socio-cognitive strategies that are used for constructing, maintaining or reconstructing the feeling of an individual’s identity (Berzonsky, 2011). This definition is based on a psychological point of view.

The origins of identity came from psychology and go back to the middle of the twentieth century (Erikson, 1968 cited in Rokka & Ulver, 2023). Later, the concept was used by sociology in a different manner (Rokka & Ulver, 2023). Therefore, according to Rokka & Ulver (2023),

identity can be seen through a psychological or sociological lens. In psychology identity counts as an innate trait, whereas it tends to be viewed more as something contextual or relational in sociology (Rokka & Ulver, 2023).

In CCT identity is not regarded as innate trait, but as something that is built socially through interpersonal interactions within a particular cultural context (Rokka & Ulver, 2023), therefore expressions like “identity projects” and “identity work” are used (Rokka & Ulver, 2023, p.19). Mick and Buhl (1992, p.318) use the term “life projects” to describe them as a state of constant motion, shaped by changes in the environment which influence a person’s own fulfilment or development.

CCT research on identity drew on the metaphor of the “core self” assuming that resources and goals are structured by people to create coherent lives (Rokka & Ulver, 2023, p.19). Humans, unlike other living beings, can examine, question, and judge themselves which can lead to identifying lacks, resulting into attempts of self-improvement (Schouten, 1991). Feeling the sense of being incomplete can lead to the consumption of goods and services to create a desired self (Schouten, 1991).

In line with Rokka and Ulver (2023, p.19) mentioning expressions like “identity projects” in CCT research, Thompson (2013, p.210) elaborates that the self can be seen as “symbolic project”. The individual needs to construct that project with symbolic goods that fit to their understanding of self-identity (Thompson, 2013). Thereby, the individual can freely create their desired version of the self (Thompson, 2013). This can for example be influenced by role models, historical context, or the individuals’ surroundings, as well as symbols shown in media or during social interactions (Markus & Nurius, 1986). According to Markus and Nurius (1986, p.954) people aim to become their “possible selves” which ideally corresponds to the best version of their self e.g., the successful one. However, “possible selves” can also be unwanted ones, e.g. a self that is depressed (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

In terms of the creation of a desirable self, van Gennep (1960 cited in Schouten, 1991) defines three phases that usually occur during important passages in life. The first stage he describes is separation in which a person distances themselves from a certain social status or a specific role. The second stage defined by him is the transition process, including the adaption and changes to fit into a new role. Thirdly, incorporation, the integration of the new role into the self occurs (van Gennep, 1960 cited in Schouten, 1991).

Giddens (1991, p.80) describes the self as a “reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible”. This reflexivity is defined as continuous and omnipresent (Giddens, 1991). The self represents a journey of development from the past towards the expected future, and it can struggle to remain true to itself (Giddens, 1991). However, the realisation of an authentic self, also described as “personal integrity”, arises by the integration of life experiences with the narrative of one’s own personal development (Giddens, 1991, p.85)

2.3.2 Identity Construction in Endurance Sports

Identity within the sport industry has been analysed from various perspectives, for example by examining social aspects. Underwood et al. (2001) examined the role of social identity regarding to the brand building process and therefore focused on the sports industry, as it usually counts as an industry with high levels of involvement and commitment.

The focus of research shifted from exploring the relationship between different variables (e.g., career maturity or athletic retirement) and athletic identity, to the impact of sociocultural factors (Ronkainen et al. 2016). Characteristics that encourage social identity within sports environments are history and tradition, the role of the physical facility, rituals, and group experiences (Underwood et al. 2001). However, it is necessary to see the “multidimensionality of the person who is an athlete” since there are several aspects of cultural identity that are linked to athletes’ performance and experience in sports (Ronkainen et al. 2016, p.135).

There is additional research explicitly on extraordinary experiences, and how they affect identity construction, or, as Scussel et al. (2023) and Rundio et al. (2020) describe it, transformation. While Rundio et al.’s (2020) research is rooted in a sport managerial background, the concept of extraordinary experience is a phenomenon which is often used in CCT.

Scussel et al. (2023) explored extraordinary experiences in the context of marathon running through interviews, observation, and netnography. Their findings show three different processes of self-transformation through extraordinary experiences used by consumers: the physical, mental, and discursive transformation process. These three processes are interdependent and require consumers to integrate their “routine and the extraordinary experience before, during, and after the extraordinary experience itself” (Scussel et al. 2023, p.1203).

In terms of physical transformation, running can be seen as “a daily escape” and a physical activity which helps to develop a new body image (Scussel et al. 2023, p.1203). During the training process, training becomes just as important as the race itself (Scussel et al. 2023). Besides the physical transformation, the mental transformation process plays another important role and can be shown by respondents’ positive changes of their self-image. After feeling dissatisfied about their bodies, they developed a positive mindset which not only contributed to a more positive self-image but made them seek out and enjoy new challenges (Scussel et al. 2023). Scussel et al. (2023) have also found that consumers started thinking of themselves as “marathoners”, which goes hand in hand with their mindset shift, and further adapted their routines and lifestyle in order to reach their goals. Finally, the discursive transformation process marks the possible change of attitudes, values, and perceptions of the “marathoners” (Scussel et al. 2023). Scussel et al.’s (2023, p.1203) findings revealed that the transformation is made possible by the “transformational escape”, that links consumers’ everyday routines with extraordinary experiences in which the processes of transformation can develop.

Rundio et al. (2020) studied the “Texas 4000”, a bike ride consisting of more than 4000 miles from Texas to Alaska to support cancer research, as an extraordinary sports experience. The study explored how this experience influenced personal transformation, and how changes in life can be initiated by sports. Their findings show that extraordinary sport experiences can create long-term personal transformations, which include changes of behaviours and attitudes.

In contrast to regular leisure activities, extraordinary experiences drive personal changes even more forward (Rundio et al. 2020). It has further been highlighted that the social aspect within the extraordinary experiences has a critical impact on the experience itself, and participants describe a positive feeling of escape from their routines and responsibilities during the extraordinary experience (Rundio et al. 2020). The transformation happens when participants are disconnected from their daily life and forced to experience new perspectives (Rundio et al. 2020).

According to Rundio et al. (2020, pp.714-715) “the physical challenge, the disconnectedness from everyday life, the opportunity to meet and learn new perspectives, and the community-building associated with the experience”, are the most relevant aspects for personal transformation. To identify a transformation, it is essential to take the participants’ motivations into account (Rundio et al. 2020).

2.4 Experiential and Emotional Dimensions of Endurance Sports

Symbolic consumption research has moved beyond the idea that consumption is only about functional utility. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, p.132) argue that consumption also includes experiential, emotional, symbolic and aesthetic dimensions, meaning that consumers do not only seek rational benefits but also “fantasies, feelings and fun”. This is important for endurance sports because triathlon participation cannot be explained only through performance or health benefits. Instead, it can also be understood as an emotionally charged experience that involves pleasure, suffering, imagination and personal meaning. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) further highlight leisure activities as a particularly relevant context for symbolic and emotional consumption because they are rich in subjective meanings.

Building on this, Dimanche and Samdahl (1994, p.121) conceptualized leisure itself as symbolic consumption. They argue that leisure activities carry “sign value”, meaning that they communicate something about the individual to both the self and others. In their model, leisure choices are connected to personal identity, social identity, self-expression and satisfaction (Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994). This provides an important theoretical foundation for studying triathlon, because endurance sports can be seen as a leisure activity through which athletes express discipline, commitment, resilience and belonging.

Ohl and Taks (2007) further argue that sporting goods help athletes present themselves socially. Wearing and using sporting goods in public can express a connection to sports culture and reinforce social bonds among athletes (Ohl & Taks, 2007). This shows that symbolic consumption is not only about buying products but also about using, displaying, discussing, maintaining and remembering them. However, their study focuses broadly on sport students and sporting goods and not specifically on endurance athletes or triathletes.

Luna-Cortés (2017) extends symbolic consumption to experiences and digital self-presentation. The study shows that when consumers perceive congruence between an experience and their identity, they perceive higher experience value, greater satisfaction, stronger revisit intention and use social networks more intensively to materialize and communicate their experiences. This article therefore supports the idea that symbolic consumption is not limited to physical products but can also include experiences and their digital communication.

All in all, these studies show that symbolic consumption has been researched in relation to experiential consumption, leisure, sporting goods and digital self-presentation. However, existing research still leaves an important gap. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) provide a broad experiential theory of consumption, but not a sport-specific identity analysis. Dimanche and Samdahl (1994) conceptualize leisure as symbolic consumption, but do not empirically study endurance sports. Ohl and Taks (2007) examine sporting goods and identity but focus on sport students and material culture rather than extraordinary endurance experiences. Luna-Cortés (2017) studied symbolic consumption of experiences and social media, but in tourism rather than sports.

2.5 Chapter Summary

Existing research on extraordinary experiences has primarily focused on the experience itself, defining them as single event or one-time experience (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993). Whilst the transformational character of extraordinary experiences is sometimes discussed (e.g., Rundio et al. 2020), the preparations preceding the extraordinary experience remains largely overlooked. Similarly, symbolic consumption research has predominantly focused on single experiences or isolated material objects rather than the full consumption journey surrounding an extraordinary event (Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

While existing studies have examined how sporting events transform athletes' identities, they have focused primarily on running and cycling as single disciplines and treated identity construction as a psychological process, neglecting the role of symbolic consumption, especially the meanings athletes attach to products, brands or experiences, in mediating that transformation (e.g., Rundio et al. 2020; Scussel et al. 2023).

To conclude, neither literature stream has looked at how symbolic meanings evolve dynamically as triathletes develop from beginners to experienced athletes, suggesting that identity construction through extraordinary experiences is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Therefore, it remains unclear how middle- and long-distance triathletes combine physical experiences, material objects (e.g., equipment, medals) and social recognition to construct and develop their identity across the full journey of the extraordinary endurance experiences, including race preparation, participation and post-race meaning-making.

The following research paper addresses this gap by combining extraordinary endurance experiences with symbolic consumption and identity construction focussing on middle- and long-distance triathlon as a less explored endurance sport.

3 Symbolic Consumption as Theoretical Framework

This chapter will provide the theoretical framework which is used as a lens to examine the identity construction of middle- and long-distance triathletes through the participation in an extraordinary endurance experience. The concept of symbolic consumption will serve as a key theoretical perspective to explain how individuals use brands and the consumption of extraordinary experiences to construct, express and negotiate their identities within the context of triathlon.

3.1 Conceptualizing Symbolic Consumption

Symbolic consumption refers to the process by which consumers use products, brands and experiences not only for their functional utility but also for the meaning that they carry and communicate (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1984). In contrast to the purely utilitarian perspective, consumption is deeply embedded in symbolic systems that allow individuals to express who they are or how they want to be (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Symbolic consumption can be divided into two key dimensions: (1) the social meaning of consumption objects, and (2) the role of these meanings in identity construction (Luna-Cortés, 2017). Consumers therefore engage with brands and products as symbolic resources, using them to construct their identity to themselves and their social identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

While we develop a self-identity, we also develop a social-identity in parallel that validates our self-identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) call this *Self-Symbolism* and *Social-Symbolism* and describe it as follows:

Self-Symbolism presents the inward function which is fed by personal experiences with brands and the narratives they support. It is shaped by *mediated experiences* and *lived experiences*. *Mediated experiences* refer to mass-communication and the opportunity to engage in experiences that lie outside the spatial and temporal boundaries of everyday life. *Lived experiences* describe routines, everyday activities and interactions that are perceived as immediate and taken for granted, in contrast to extraordinary experiences that lie outside the boundaries of our daily life.

Social-Symbolism is the outward function which is shaped by shared meanings that circulate in culture and are reinforced through discourse converge. Consumers use the meaning of brands and advertising to construct their social world and collective social identity. During this, the symbolic meanings of brands emerge and become socially shared through interactions among consumers and not only through the exposure to advertisements. This can be done through discursive elaboration (Thompson, 1990 cited in Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) in terms of describing, discussion or debating advertisements. Therefore, the symbolic meanings become concretised and integrated into the individual's broader identity narrative. Figure 1 serves as a visualisation of the concept described by Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998).

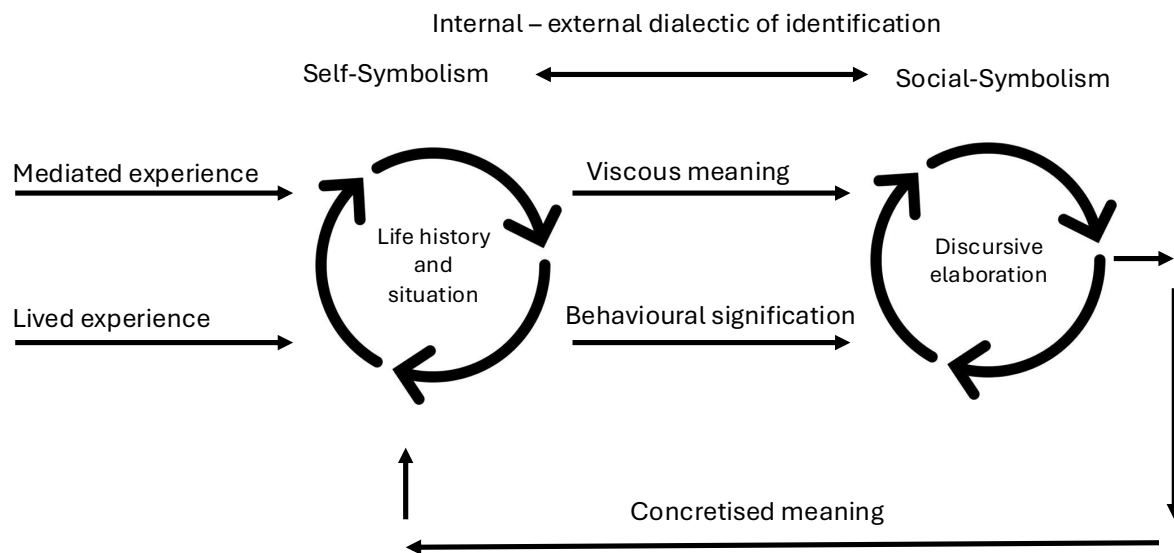


Figure 1: Visualisation of the Concept of Self-Symbolism and Social-Symbolism (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998, p.138)

The dual function of the concept highlights that consumption today is not merely an economic act but rather a meaning-making process that is embedded in our culture.

In summary, symbolic consumption is the process by which consumers acquire and use products, services or experiences not merely for their functional utility but for the meaning that they represent about who they are, what they value and how they want to be seen by others (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). In this view, brands, possessions and even everyday practices become symbolic resources that individuals draw upon to construct, express and reaffirm their identities (Belk, 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

3.2 Extending Symbolic Consumption to Experiences

While earlier research focused on tangible goods (Belk, 1988), more recent literature shows that symbolic consumption also applies to experiences (Luna-Cortés, 2017). Experiences can carry symbolic meanings when they reinforce or express identity and are purchased based on hedonic, esthetical or emotional fulfilment (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Luna-Cortés, 2017).

Experiences often have an even greater symbolic potential because they are emotionally intense, personally meaningful and socially visible (e.g., through storytelling or social media postings) (Luna-Cortés, 2017). Consumers actively seek experiences that align with their identity, and when they do, the perceived value of the experience increases (Luna-Cortés, 2017). Furthermore, individuals often try to materialise and communicate these experiences, for example by sharing them with others, reinforcing their identity claims (Luna-Cortés, 2017).

3.3 Symbolic Consumption as a Mechanism of Identity Construction

Today's consumers have an identity that is under constant construction (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). The fast-changing environment we live in causes a constant commodification of our identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). When looking at the self from a postmodern perspective, it is not a fixed entity handed down by society, it is rather a "symbolic project that the individual actively constructs" (Thompson, 2013, p.210). It is a narrative that we weave from available symbolic materials (e.g., certain brands), constantly re-interpret and negotiate (Thompson, 2013). The self we create is based on the socio-cultural context we are

situated in and on what symbols or images we are confronted with in life (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Symbolic consumption contributes to identity construction in several ways:

- Consumption allows individuals to express personal values, aspirations and social propositions, products and brands act as communicative tools through which individuals signal identity both internally and externally (Luna-Cortés, 2017).
- Possessions and consumption practices can become part of the extended self, as individuals invest time, effort, and emotional energy into them (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). This investment strengthens the connection between consumption and identity.
- Individuals construct identity through narratives linking experiences over time. Symbolic resources help structure these narratives, making consumption a way to create meaning and coherence in one's life story.
- Identity is not built in isolation; it needs social recognition and validation. Within a social context, the meanings attached to consumption are negotiated, creating a dynamic interplay between personal and social identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Overall, symbolic consumption allows individuals to construct, maintain and communicate multiple identities, making it a key mechanism in contemporary identity formation.

4 Methodology²

This chapter illustrates and argues the research approach, research design, and research method which is used for this study. Furthermore, the approach for data analysis and the quality criteria which was applied are explained. Finally, limitations and ethical considerations are discussed.

4.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a relativist ontological position which assumes that reality is not singular and objective but multiple and socially constructed (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). From this perspective, identity is not understood as a fixed or stable entity, but rather as something that is continuously constructed and reconstructed through individuals' experiences, social interactions and interpretations. In the context of middle- and long-distance triathlon, identity is therefore seen as an evolving process shaped by participation in extraordinary endurance experiences and the meaning individuals attach to them.

The philosophical foundation of this study is based on a social constructionist view. This view assumes that “reality is not objective and exterior but is socially constructed and is given meaning by people in their daily interactions with others” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.78). Applying this lens, symbolic consumption is understood as a process through which individuals use symbols, such as participation in events like the Ironman, to construct and express identity. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of how triathletes interpret their participation in extraordinary endurance events and how they use symbolic consumption practices to construct, maintain and communicate their identities outwards.

² Some of this content is taken from Hamfler & Ziegler (2026), BUSR33 Mock Study

4.2 Research Design

This thesis follows an interpretivist research perspective which seeks to understand how individuals construct and interpret meaning within their social world rather than testing objective causal relationships. In line with this perspective, the aim of this research is to explore how triathletes subjectively construct and interpret their identity through symbolic consumption in the context of extraordinary endurance experiences such as middle- and long-distance triathlons.

The focus of the analysis lies on meaning-making processes, specifically how triathletes interpret their participation in endurance events, how they assign symbolic value to these experiences and how these meanings contribute to the construction and expression of their identity. Particular attention is given to how symbolic elements such as completing an Ironman, engaging with specific brands, or adopting certain practices are used to communicate and negotiate identity. Furthermore, this study examines how these processes may differ between triathlon beginners and experienced athletes, acknowledging that prior experience may influence how symbolic meanings are constructed and internalized.

Rather than aiming to measure predefined relationships, this study seeks to generate an in-depth understanding of these subjective constructions and the underlying mechanism through which identity is formed and expressed. The interpretivist approach is therefore particularly suitable, as it allows the exploration of multiple realities and individual perspectives shaped by personal experience and social contexts.

To do this, an abductive approach is adopted. This approach allows to “connect an observation or instance to a theory by means of plausible interpretation” (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.440). In this study, an existing theoretical framework on symbolic consumption serves as sensitising concept that guides the analysis, while still allowing new patterns and insights to emerge from the data. To capture subjective constructions and instances in depth, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted. A further explanation of why this method was chosen to generate data and its advantages as well as disadvantages is described in chapter 4.3.1.

4.3 Research Method

This chapter presents the methodological framework of the study and justifies the chosen research design. It describes the use of semi-structured interviews as primary data collection method, outlines the systematic development of the interview guide, and explains the sampling strategy employed to recruit participants. By providing a transparent account of these methodological choices, the chapter demonstrates how the research design is aligned with the study's objectives of exploring identity construction thorough symbolic consumption in the context of long-distance triathlon.

4.3.1 Data Collection Method

This research used semi-structured interviews to deeply understand active middle- and long-distance triathletes and capture their consumption behaviour in terms of extraordinary experiences as well as how this influences their identity construction. Semi-structured interviews further allowed various insights in the participants' triathlon background.

Semi-structured interviews were used as they follow clear topics including predefined questions; whereas the design can be rather flexible and further allowed adaptation of questions (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This enabled a flexible conversation and at the same time assured that all relevant topics were addressed.

While the interview is structured to cover certain aspects of the research question it enables the contribution of new insights and interpretations (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Our study used this semi-structured approach to enable a natural conversation, making all participants feel comfortable and enabling them to answer all questions in depth, which provided us with a wide range of information.

As suggested by Bell et al. (2022) the conversations followed an interview guide, consisting of a series of questions, leaving room for the interviewee to respond (Appendix A).

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews (Bell et al. 2022) is one advantage and reason for choosing semi-structured interviews. The goal was to allow an open conversation in which all participants can ask questions enabling answers and explanations on a deeper level.

As suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2021) the interview questions had a customized and unique character and may have differed in each interview, while follow-up questions were used if necessary and considered helpful.

However, besides the advantages of semi-structured interviews there are some downsides e.g., a limited insight that interviewers get on actual behaviour and social interactions (Bell et al. 2022). Furthermore, interviews are less natural in comparison to observations, and hidden information may not be exposed (Bell et al. 2022). Nevertheless, being aware of these downsides, we assumed to get the most relevant insights through semi-structured interviews.

In total, ten interviews with a duration between approximately 45 to 90 minutes were conducted. After ten interviews saturation was reached, which could be identified by participants mentioning multiple similar aspects during the interviews (e.g., changes in everyday life, facing obstacles, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and how athletes described themselves and other people's perceptions on them).

The following table provides an overview of the collected interviews, with information about participants age, gender, country of origin, triathlon background, and whether they are doing middle- or full-distance triathlon.

Table 1: Overview of Interview Participants

Interview	Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Triathlon Background	Triathlon Distances
1	23	male	Germany	6 months	Full-Distance
2	25	female	Australia	10 years	Middle-Distance
3	38	male	Germany	6 - 7 months	Full-Distance
4	32	male	Germany	3 years	Middle-Distance
5	26	male	Switzerland	6 years	Middle-Distance Full-Distance
6	23	male	Germany	2 years	Middle-Distance
7	24	male	Germany	5 - 6 years	Middle-Distance
8	31	male	Germany	16 years	Middle-Distance Full-Distance
9	35	male	Germany	20 years	Middle-Distance Full-Distance
10	24	female	Germany	8 years	Middle-Distance

4.3.2 Interview Guide

To conduct the interviews, an interview guide was developed to ensure that all relevant themes related to the research question are systematically addressed (Appendix A). The guide served as a feasible framework to help structure the conversations, maintain focus on the key topics and prevent excessive deviation from the central research objectives, but it still allowed space for the participants to elaborate their perspectives.

The development of the semi-structured interview guide followed the systematic framework proposed by Kallio et al. (2016), which outlines five interrelated phases for ensuring methodological rigor. This framework was synthesized from ten methodological papers and helped create a guide that is transparent, purposeful and contributes to credibility, confirmability and dependability of this study (Kallio et al. 2016).

The following paragraphs will explain the five phases used to develop the interview guide.

The first step in the development of the guide was to assess the appropriateness of semi-structured interviews in relation to the research question (Kallio et al. 2016). A thorough examination of the phenomenon *extraordinary experiences* and what we want to explore within this context helped us decide whether to use semi-structured or structured interviews for this research. Since the interviewees were expected to express their opinions regarding their identity construction and their perceptions about the participation in triathlon, it was decided that semi-structured interviews would be the right tool to generate data for this research topic. More reasons for this decision have already been mentioned in chapter 4.3.1.

Secondly, according to Kallio et al. (2016), the interview guide must be grounded in a solid conceptual foundation utilizing previous knowledge. The aim of this step is to get an overarching understanding of the identity construction among middle- and long-distance triathletes. To get an overview of the research that has already been explored, we conducted an extensive literature review on extraordinary experiences, identity construction, and experiential and emotional dimensions of endurance sports (chapter 2). This helped us to see possible research gaps and create an interesting research topic that can contribute to already existing studies.

The third step in formulating the interview guide was the construction of a preliminary interview guide. The aim of this step was to develop a semi-structured interview instrument

through the operationalization of existing theoretical frameworks, ensuring a logical and coherent transition from conceptual knowledge to empirical inquiry (Kallio et al. 2016). This guide consists of the main themes and follow-up questions. The main themes cover the interviewees' participation in extraordinary experiences, particularly middle- and long-distance triathlon, questions about how they construct their identity and in what ways they use symbolic consumption as well as an opening and closing section. The guide also includes pre-planned follow-up questions to help clarify the main topics, keep the conversation fluent, clarify the participants' responses and encourage in-depth elaboration (Kallio et al. 2016).

The last step of the interview guide development was a field pre-test. Based on Kallio et al.'s (2016) recommendation, the preliminary interview guide was critically reviewed on clarity, logical progression and alignment with the research objectives to explore the identity construction of triathletes through extraordinary experiences. The guide was reviewed to ensure a logical flow of the questions, to identify an interview bias and remove a possible ambiguity (Kallio et al. 2016). Then the guide was tested in the field by interviewing one triathlete who fit the target group of this study. The field test allowed us to see any misunderstandings of the questions, how long the interviews will take and whether the questions will generate rich data or not. The pre-formulated questions may have been subject to change based on the interviewee's responses and dynamics of the interview situation. There have also been questions that were not asked during the interview, because participants had already answered them when talking about a different question (e.g., Appendix A, 5.2 *Did the participation in the Ironman change how you/others see yourself?* and *Do you think people perceive you differently because of it (doing triathlon)?*). Further, questions may have been rearranged during the interview if they fit into the conversation more naturally at a different point.

To conclude, this multi-phased approach ensured that the interview guide was logically structured, empirically tested and aligned with the research objectives. This rigorous preparation serves to enhance the dependability of the findings, allowing for a systemic yet open-ended exploration of how participants navigate their identities through the participation in extraordinary experiences.

4.3.3 Sampling Technique

The sample for this research consisted of ten former or currently active middle- and long-distance triathletes. The experience level of participants differed from several months to up to 20 years.

To be eligible to take part in an interview, triathletes needed to be signed up for a middle- and long-distance race and actively training for it, or they must have already taken part in such a race. The reason for these requirements was to determine what impact participation in middle- or long-distance triathlon has on the athletes.

This paper used a non-probability sampling approach, meaning that it was not possible to determine the probability that any given element of the population will be included in the sample (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). To ensure that athletes meet the requirements we used a purposive sampling approach (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021) in combination with snowballing, to reach a wider audience and overcome the difficulties of finding participants who meet the criteria (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The decision to approach the researchers was left to the participants, to ensure their full willingness to take part in the interviews, a process which bears the characteristics of volunteer sampling (Omeihe & Harrison, 2024).

To find participants, several different social media platforms were used to share the announcement. In the beginning, both our personal and professional networks were used. The announcement was shared multiple times in our Instagram stories, a few days apart, being visible for 24 hours each time. Besides Instagram we shared the announcement on LinkedIn, offering our network the opportunity to react, share, and comment on our post to spread it.

The announcement contained an invitation for the participants to reach out to us via direct message if they wanted to participate in an interview and further met the requirements. Additionally, a short note to share the information with possible participants was included in the post. The goal was to offer our network the opportunity to directly forward the information to athletes that fit our requirements. To spread the information more broadly, we asked friends inside and outside the triathlon community to share the posting on their own social media or directly forward it to potential participants.

4.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted online on Microsoft Teams, as participants came from different countries outside of Sweden. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the participants' consent. When possible, the interviews were conducted in the participants native language to ensure full understanding and to be able to catch emotions and insights that otherwise may have been lost in translation. In total, nine interviews were conducted in German, one interview was conducted in English.

The interview transcripts were coded in the original language to avoid mistakes or statement distortions. If quotes were used in-text, they were translated into English to the best of the researchers' knowledge, making sure that the meaning of the statement was delivered correctly.

To analyse the data, the template analysis approach by King and Brooks (2017) was used as a guideline. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) this template analysis follows a thematical approach and offers flexibility. As this study adopts a social constructionist approach, this process was chosen because of its flexibility which is achieved through the gradual development and modification of a template.

After becoming familiar with the data through conducting the interviews and reading through the transcripts, several potential topics were derived from the data. However, they were rather broad than specific. To receive more in-depth findings, new possible themes have been defined based on previous findings from the material. At this point, the researchers were thoroughly familiar with the material. The identified themes were used to create a preliminary template. This template included four main themes and ten subthemes (Appendix B).

As suggested by King and Brooks (2017) the further process did not stick strictly to the template to remain open to new ideas. However, by defining the preliminary template early on, it was possible to focus on the most relevant areas.

The interview transcripts were coded using the preliminary themes (Appendix B) which have been identified earlier, staying open to possible adjustments. The interview transcripts were colour coded manually, highlighting relevant text passages in predefined colours using Microsoft Word. Comments on different passages were used to identify potential additional themes or subthemes. The highlighted text passages were manually copied and pasted into

Microsoft Excel. Further themes were identified by analysing the collected text passages in the Excel Sheet. The newly derived themes were added to the final template and themes that did not contribute to answering the research question were eliminated. The final template was used as structure for the analysis (Appendix C).

4.5 Evaluating Quality Criteria

The following paragraphs outline the quality criteria applied to this study to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. Drawing on established principles of qualitative research, this study is evaluated based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Each criterion is discussed in relation to the research design, data collection and analysis to demonstrate how the rigor and validity of the findings are ensured.

4.5.1 Credibility

Credibility, as defined by Jensen (2008a), refers to the extent to which research findings accurately represent the phenomenon being studied and are based on appropriate data collection methods.

In this study, credibility is ensured using semi-structured interviews, which are particularly suitable for exploring subjective experiences such as identity construction and symbolic consumption. The appropriate selection of the data collection method is considered a key foundation for credibility (Jensen, 2008a). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows participants to express their experience in detail, thereby generating rich and nuanced data which enhances credibility. Additionally, we tried to conduct as many interviews as possible in the participants native language to avoid misunderstandings and ensure that meanings are captured accurately, which supports the correct representation of the phenomenon (Kallio et al. 2016). The pre-testing of the interview guide further contributes to the credibility, as it ensured that questions are clear, relevant and capable of capturing the intended constructs (Kallio et al. 2016). In addition, quotes were carefully translated to preserve their original meaning and ensure an accurate representation of participants' perspectives.

4.5.2 Transferability

According to Jensen (2008b), transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts. Instead of universal claims, qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalization but for contextual understanding (Bell et al. 2022).

When ensuring transferability, we looked at “two key considerations: (a) how closely the participants are linked to the context being studied and (b) the contextual boundaries of the findings” (Jensen, 2008b, p.886). In this regard, participants were required to meet specific criteria (described in chapter 4.3.3). This ensured a strong alignment between participants and the researched phenomenon of extraordinary endurance experiences. At the same time, the findings are bounded by this specific context, as the study focuses on a particular group of endurance athletes within a western country setting being chosen based on purposive and snowball sampling. While this might limit statistical generalisability, it enhances analytical transferability, as the insights may be applicable to similar contexts, such as other endurance sports or forms of extraordinary consumption experiences and provide insight into the identity construction processes of triathletes.

4.5.3 Dependability

According to Shenton (2004) dependability is the consistency and reliability of the research process, meaning that the study could be repeated under similar conditions and yield comparable results.

To enhance dependability, the research process was documented transparently. The study clearly describes the research design, sampling approach, interview procedure and template analysis. The development of the interview guide following Kallio et al. (2016) contributes to the consistency of the data collection and enhances the reliability of this study. The guide is provided for the reader to examine (Appendix A), and the transcripts are available upon request. This transparency allows the reader to understand how the findings were derived and how the analysis was conducted. The use of the template analysis according to King and Brooks (2017), provided a transparent approach to data analysis, while still ensuring an open-minded process.

The detailed description of the whole research process allows other researchers to follow the steps taken and understand how the results were obtained, which strengthens dependability (Kallio et al. 2016).

4.5.4 Confirmability

According to Jensen (2008c), confirmability is the degree to which the findings are shaped by the participants' data rather than the researchers bias. It is supported through transparency and systematic procedures that allow others to trace the research process (Kallio et al. 2016).

To ensure confirmability in this study, we grounded the analysis in the interview data and systematically coded the transcripts based on predefined categories.

Furthermore, the transparent documentation of the research process, including data collection and analysis procedures, allows the reader to understand how conclusions were reached and to assess the objectivity of the findings

4.6 Limitations

The methodology chapter of this thesis is subject to some limitations.

Firstly, the announcement that we were looking for triathletes was shared on our private accounts on Instagram and on our own LinkedIn profiles. This may have led to a certain bias as our network may be rather homogeneous. However, through the possibility of sharing or commenting on the post on LinkedIn and sharing the post on Instagram with familiar triathletes, we were able to reach more people outside of our network.

Secondly, our focus lies on middle- and long-distance triathletes as we define extraordinary experience through the exceptional distances. Other distances may have been discussed during the interviews, if they were part of the interviewees background, however, interviewees were only able to participate if they prepare for or finished a middle- or long-distance triathlon.

Further, 90 percent of the interviews were conducted in German and the quotes used in this study required translation. Nuances, meanings or cultural expression may have been lost or

altered during this translation and the interpretation of certain findings may therefore be influenced by linguistic differences.

Finally, we did not reach out to middle- and long-distance triathletes ourselves and asked the potential participants to reach out to us. This may have led to a more extroverted sample, that wanted to talk about triathlon and their experiences with us. More introverted athletes, who did not want to share their opinions may have not reached out to us and their insights could not be considered in our research.

4.7 Research Ethics

To ensure ethical values during the interview process, we followed predetermined rules for interviewing every participant. These rules were based on Bell and Bryman's (2007) principles of ethical practices. Therefore, we made sure that all interviewees were provided with detailed information about the purpose of this study, the interview procedure and the intended use of the data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confirming that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point in the process without any negative consequences.

Participants were also informed that the interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed. Consent for recording was obtained both prior to and at the beginning of each interview to ensure full transparency. Before starting the interview, the participants had to sign a waiver that they agree to do this interview on their own free will and that the audio of the interview would be recorded as well as transcribed.

All data were handled confidentially and used for academic purposes only. While basic demographic data such as age, gender, and country of origin was collected, all identifying information such as names were anonymized in the report itself to protect interviewees identities.

Furthermore, the interviewees were given full transparency about what we would use their data for and for how long it will be saved. The interview recordings will be saved locally until this thesis has been graded with a passing grade. The transcripts are available upon request.

Given the research topic, no significant ethical risk or harm to participants were expected. During the interview the interviewees had the chance to ask questions and skip questions at any time that they did not want to answer. During the interviews efforts were made to build rapport and ensure a pleasant atmosphere for the conversation.

5 Findings and Analysis

The following chapter includes the main findings from the semi-structured interviews relevant to the research question. Five main themes have been identified as well as two to three subthemes per main theme. The following subchapters examine the main and subthemes through the lens of symbolic consumption. The main themes include: extraordinary experiences as a lifestyle; symbolic consumption in equipment and event choice; race experiences as symbolic identity marker; symbolic consumption across experience levels; and internal validation and external recognition through triathlon.

5.1 Extraordinary Experiences as Lifestyle

The first theme examines how participants include triathlon in their daily lives. The impact of the sport in triathletes' lives has been analysed and as a result, we explored two additional subthemes. The findings suggest that triathlon plays a central role for athletes and that they build their lives around the sport. To conclude, triathlon as an extraordinary experience is a lifestyle, or as interviewee 9 states *“triathlon is not just training, it is a way of life”*.

The findings show that it is not just the races themselves that count as an extraordinary experience. The training sessions for race preparation are also part of the extraordinary experience as both, race and training, are closely intertwined.

5.1.1 Centrality of Triathlon

Participants described triathlon as very demanding in terms of time, requiring a significant commitment in everyday life. Interviewee 10 even compared it to having a part-time job. All participants mentioned a weekly training load between ten to 20 hours, which shows its significant impact on everyday life. Interviewee 1 described it as *“a lot of regular and long training sessions you invest in”*. Especially in preparation for a specific race, training hours can increase.

We found that most participants defined triathlon as priority when structuring their day affecting not only themselves but also closer family with their training and race schedules. Triathletes plan their daily lives around triathlon or describe a certain routine they have developed to juggle everything: *“It’s pretty much a routine. I think it’s just one of those tasks that’s on the list every day, like brushing your teeth, and I don’t question it anymore either”* (Interviewee 10).

Because of the enormous amount of time required for training, participants need to balance their training with work or studies. This leads to training during lunch, early mornings, or in the evening after work. Interviewee 6 mentioned that *“there is not much time for free time left”*.

Due to the extensive time commitments required by the sport, evidence suggests that triathlon participation influences identity construction primarily as a function of time investment: *“you don’t do anything else other than work and that [triathlon], if you are working. Then, of course, it’s hard to argue that it doesn’t shape your identity or has a strong influence on it”* (Interviewee 1).

These findings indicate that extraordinary experiences in terms of middle- and long-distance triathlon are not limited to single event experiences. The sport becomes an integral part of triathletes’ daily lives due to the high priority they place on it and the long hours of training. Participants therefore establish routines to fit triathlon into their lives. As a result, their entire lifestyle is shaped by triathlon. At the same time, identity is shaped through the sport simply because of the time triathlon takes up.

Through the lens of symbolic consumption our findings can be linked to self-symbolism which is shaped by extraordinary experiences (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). While Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) are looking at self-symbolism in regard to the personal experiences consumers have with brands and what they stand for, we set ourselves apart by focusing on the personal experiences consumers have with the sport or due to the sport itself. The personal experiences athletes have through the sport are constantly repeated and deeply ingrained in their lives which therefore automatically influences their identity.

In the light of Luna-Cortés’ (2017) findings, which suggest that consumers seek experiences that align with their identity, we assume that triathlon forms part of athletes’ identities. As the alignment of an experiences with a consumer’s identity increases the value of the experience (Luna-Cortés, 2017) we suggest that identity construction and extraordinary experiences go

hand in hand, and that identity construction is strengthened by extraordinary experiences and vice versa.

5.1.2 Obstacles as a Source of Strength

Besides the time and money participants spent on triathlon they face other obstacles. Due to the high importance of training, participants need to adapt their nutrition but also social activities to their training schedule. However, all participants mentioned that they remained committed despite facing obstacles along the way. They further described obstacles which might hinder training progress, such phases of low motivation, especially during winter, but also injuries and illnesses. Nevertheless, participants draw strength from the obstacles they overcome: *“Those days when you really can’t be bothered but push through anyway – I reckon that definitely makes you stronger”* (Interviewee 6).

As triathlon is a priority for most participants, there are situations where they choose the sport over social activities. For example, athletes prioritize sleep after an exhausting day of training over going to out with friends (Interviewee 7).

Our findings show that triathletes are affected by the sport: Obstacles as injuries, lack of motivation, or the absence of social activities are part of their daily life. Participants try to balance life and overcome those obstacles. Just as we recognise the impact of a high training workload, we also see the obstacles triathletes must overcome as an integral part of everyday life. Similar to training, overcoming obstacles can be seen as a form of symbolic consumption. For athletes, mastering these challenges is meaningful because it proves what they are capable of. Therefore, this process serves as a strong indicator of identity construction, as athletes actively describe the benefits of overcoming difficulties. Ultimately, gaining strength from these challenges highlights a transformation process that triathletes go through.

In line with Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) triathlon can become an integral part of athletes’ extended self through the effort, and the emotional energy they invest in triathlon, which positively effects the construction of their identity.

Chapter 5.1 explored the influence of triathlon in athletes’ daily lives as resource for identity construction. Athletes’ everyday lives are heavily shaped by triathlon or even planned around the sport. Through this, middle- and long-distance races, as extraordinary experiences, become

closely intertwined with daily training routines. This everyday training is also filled with obstacles that contribute further to the process of identity construction.

5.2 Symbolic Consumption in Equipment and Event Choice

While the previous chapter has examined the impact of triathlon in athletes' everyday life, this chapter focuses on the consumption behaviour regarding triathlon equipment and events.

Based on existing theory on symbolic consumption (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), we initially assumed that brands related to triathlon would hold significant symbolic meaning for athletes and thus directly shape their identity. However, our findings show that athletes seem to value functional aspects more than brand meanings. We suggest that equipment is rather used as a tool to achieve success, which in the end is the main factor that contributes to identity construction. However, in this context, triathletes' motives need to be viewed critically. Therefore, the concept of vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940) is introduced. Motives are described as "typical vocabularies having ascertainable functions in delimited societal situations" (Mills, 1940, p.904). Besides individual reasons for motivation, social influence needs to be considered, and motives are selected regarding their social acceptance: A motive needs to convey an acceptable self-image but also must be accepted by others (Mills, 1940). When analysing the interview findings, it must be considered that decisions could be based on prevailing expectations and beliefs that exist within the triathlon community.

5.2.1 Equipment as Tool for Extraordinary Accomplishments

Participants tend to base their decisions on the functionality of a product to improve their own performances. They value functional aspects, such as quality, value of money, product fit and product features more than a certain brand, which is shown by interviewee 1's statement: *"If it says Canyon on the bike or not does not really matter. It could be a different brand as well, but other brands are way more expensive"* and reinforced by interviewee 9 saying that: *"It's never a case of 'I really identify with a particular brand' – it is always about what makes sense"*.

Participants mentioned researching products in different ways, for example interviewee 9 took part in swim nights to try different wetsuits to find a model that suits him best and in which he

could swim the fastest: *“You could try out different brands and different types. I really did swim 100 meters every time, and I have realised this one feels good. And at the same time, my girlfriend timed how long it took me. After that, it has become clear, this model feels great and is fast”*.

Products were also chosen because of superior product features or better quality: *“The Garmin actually tracks swimming quite well. Something other watches don’t manage so well”* (Interviewee 10).

These quotes illustrate that athletes use consumption objects as performance-enabling resources rather than as symbolic brand markers. The product actively contributes to the identity construction by supporting athletic performance and self-improvement, which are central components of the triathlete’s identity. Therefore, symbolic consumption is transferred from the brand to the athletic achievement enabled by the product. The use of the product enables the triathlete to achieve exceptional athletic accomplishments rather than serving as a status symbol.

To conclude, symbolic consumption goes beyond a products’ utility, focusing on the meaning of a product (Belk, 1988). Athletes make purchase decisions primarily based on the functionality of products, valuing substance over hype, creating a serious authentic athlete identity. However, they derive meaning from the products insofar that products become part of their extended self, enabling them to perform their best. In line with Elliott & Wattanasuwan (1998) this indicates that consuming the products is part of symbolic consumption as they become tools for achieving top performance from where athletes extract meaning. Equipment therefore is used to carry triathletes through an extraordinary experience and may get its symbolic meaning through the achievement of the experience. Through their consumption behaviour triathletes have expressed personal values (Luna-Cortés, 2017) putting product functionality over the brand and public perception. The findings show that identity is not necessarily created using certain brands, but more through the achievements made possible by the equipment.

5.2.2 Social Influence and Appearance as Identity Drivers

We discovered appearance as another factor for choosing a certain product. Multiple interviewees mentioned that the design or look of products were relevant for their decision-

making, especially for equipment that is visible during the race e.g., for helmet, bike, and triathlon suit (e.g., Interviewee 1 & Interviewee 2).

According to most participants, social media presence plays a minor role since their focus lies more on quality and functionality (e.g., Interviewee 1). In contrast, some participants mentioned that they were still influenced by social media or the marketing of certain brands, especially in terms of sunglasses (Interviewee 2) and triathlon suit: *“I thought they [triathlon suit] looked really nice, and because they’re just so hyped [on social media], I thought I’d go and get another one”* (Interviewee 6).

Interviewee 9 further mentioned strong marketing campaigns of brands like Nike, which offer a diverse range of shoes for different occasions, influencing his brand choice positively since he can buy multiple running shoes from the same brand and be familiar with the quality of the products: *“Nike did a great job with their Sub Two Project, where they wanted to run a marathon under two hours. They created a whole palette with the Vaporfly”*. This shows that athletes purchase decisions are influenced by certain marketing campaigns, but they are still able to switch brands when finding a product that fits their requirements better: *“Other brands have also emerged, particularly in the competitive sector. I like to try a few different ones to see which shoe might be faster and which suits my running style best”* (Interviewee 9).

This suggest that marketing attracts athletes but does not imprison them. The fact that they will choose a different brand if another product fits their physical requirements better proves that their identity is rooted in achievement and not brand loyalty.

Furthermore, athletes frequently relied on peer recommendations while still taking other aspects such as price into consideration: *“It was recommended by a friend. It’s like the cheapest on the market that is still very safe and cute”* (Interviewee 2).

Beyond direct recommendation from peers, seeing other triathletes wearing a certain brand serves as an indicator for quality. Observing the gear preferences of other triathletes during races functions as a form of social proof, influencing participants own decision-making processes: *“If of all the triathletes we saw in Copenhagen or also internationally, 30 percent, or 25 percent wear a triathlon suit from Fusion, then there must be something to it, I believe”* (Interviewee 1).

The findings show that recommendations, marketing and social media have a certain degree of influence on athletes and their purchase decisions. However, products that have a positive impact on their personal goals and fit their preferences influence decision-making even more. Athletes recognise the widespread use of various brands and see it as an indicator for product quality which they need to perform in an extraordinary experience.

The fact that athletes take aesthetic considerations, for products that are visible during the race, into account is an expression of social symbolism (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Athletes use their appearance to conform and thereby influence both the image, they project to the outside world, and the construction of their identity. Athletes sharing similar opinions can further extend social symbolism and foster a sense of belonging. They may create a collective social identity through recommendations and exchanges of opinions about certain products. The observation of gear at triathlon events can be seen as brand-following which is mediated through peers rather than active advertising. The importance of design and look indicates that products are still used to express their identities. Design and look especially matter for products which are connected to athletes' own appearance e.g., helmet or triathlon suit, influence the athlete's appearance and directly shape how they are seen by others. The appearance of other equipment, such as bike or watch, is not immediately noticeable or directly linked to the athlete's physical appearance. Consequently, it may not influence the construction of identity through design and look, but rather through functional aspects, as described in chapter 5.2.1.

5.2.3 Functionality as Main Driver in Branded Events

Ironman counts as one of the most important brands in triathlon and is well-known to individuals inside and outside the triathlon community. While some interviewees described the participation in an Ironman as a goal, the brand itself only plays a minor role for others when signing up for a race.

Just as with equipment, the Ironman brand plays a minor role for most athletes; major aspects for event choice are availability, event date, and organization quality. Nevertheless, there are not many long-distance races other than Ironman or Challenge Roth. Participants often need to choose the Ironman branded events due to the lack of other options. Besides availability, participants have a trustworthy picture of Ironman and expect good organisation during race day. Due to its popularity athletes can better predict what to expect on race day. Ironman further offers an exceptional event experience, standing out from other events. In contrast, local races

often cannot ensure a smooth race: *“I do have a certain preference because local races aren’t as well organised as an Ironman. You can really tell the difference when it comes to the Ironman organisation. Apart from that, I don’t really have any strong preferences”* (Interviewee 4).

This suggests that a poorly organized race threatens the athlete’s ability to perform. Therefore, consuming the reliable Ironman product is a functional guarantee to athletic achievement which is the base of their identity maintenance.

Once quality has been assured, participants mentioned that the brand itself does not influence their decision, what matters to them is the distance and the performance they deliver: *“I don’t think I really care whether it’s Ironman or Challenge Roth. What matters to me is the distance, I think”* (Interviewee 6). This suggests that athletes build their identity through the achievements made (managing to cover the distance) rather than through taking part in an Ironman-branded event, which would enable them to call themselves an “Ironman”.

Athletes who follow the goal to participate in the world championships in Hawaii need to do at least one Ironman branded full-distance race to qualify for the world championships. This is another reason for choosing Ironman over a non-branded event.: *“... so logically, I’ll have to do at least two Ironman races”* (Interviewee 9). After having participated in Hawaii the brand loses its importance: *“Now that I’ve been there, it doesn’t matter to me anymore that it is Ironman”* (Interviewee 8).

Even though the brand is not the top priority for the majority, we found two participants that paid more attention to the brand itself. The aspect of calling themselves an Ironman and the prestige that comes with it has influenced their decisions. Both athletes were first-time Ironman participants (Interviewee 1 & Interviewee 3), seeing the participation more as a challenge and life goal. They have both started triathlon explicitly for their participation in the Ironman event. Based on our findings, we can assume that the brand plays a more important role for one-time Ironman participants, seeing the race as a challenge to test their limits. The brand provides social-symbolism with instant prestige and a recognizable label for non-triathletes. For experienced athletes the identity shifts from external validation to an internalized self-concept (e.g., Interviewee 8). They no longer need the brand because they have proven to themselves and others who they are. Nevertheless, this finding needs to be confirmed by further research.

To conclude, the findings show that the distance is more important to the triathletes than it being a branded event. Many participants criticized the high prices for participation (e.g., Interviewee

10). However, due to a certain monopoly position, athletes have little choice but to take part in the Ironman branded event.

Through the Ironman brand triathletes can create a distinct public self-image, symbolized by the label of being an “Ironman”. Yet, the brand is not the primary driver when signing up for an event, instead functional aspects matter more. The meaning for triathletes does not necessarily lie in the brand itself, but in the athletes’ achievements made in events. This can be linked to the two dimensions of symbolic consumption: the social meaning of consumption objects, and the role of these meanings in identity construction (Luna-Cortés, 2017). The social meaning is reflected in utilizing the event as a stage to validate athletic competence which serves as a foundation for constructing a resilient athletic identity.

5.2.4 Ironman Hawaii as Ultimate Symbolic Achievement

For experienced triathletes we recognised the Ironman World Championships in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii as an outstanding achievement or life goal. Interviewee 9 described the World Championships as “*a mecca for triathletes*”. This tracks back to childhood mediated experiences also mentioned by interviewee 9, describing his memory of watching the Ironman World Championships in Hawaii with his family. It functions as an early childhood socialisation where the cultural myth of “Ironman” is first internalized and becomes a lived experience.

Taking part in the World Championships carries a certain prestige within the triathlon community and is seen as recognition for the efforts made. As interviewee 5 states: “*I’d say that people might have seen you in a slightly different light*”.

Thus, the World Championships in Hawaii can be seen as extraordinary experience that carries a symbolic meaning and is seen as the ultimate symbol for achievement. For that the Ironman brand presents the path or the entrance ticket to this extraordinary experience.

Our findings show the special character and meaning of Ironman Hawaii for triathletes. The experience of participating in this event is in line with self-symbolism and social-symbolism (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Individuals can use this experience to develop their self-identity by accomplishing an extraordinary achievement. The high reputation of the event, as well as the prestige and status it delivers shape the participants’ social-symbolism. The

participation in the World Championships has a symbolic meaning for athletes by reflecting the accomplishment of a life goal and achieving exceptional results. The social world attaches significance to the World Championships recognising it as an outstanding achievement.

The previous theme examined the factors which influence triathletes' consumption or event choices. Products are used in terms of their design, and performance enhancement and therefore help athletes to construct an identity as successful triathletes. In terms of events, we also discovered that, like equipment, quality aspects are valued more than the brand itself while still having a more symbolic to triathlon beginners.

Returning to the vocabularies of motive by Mills (1940) our findings must be viewed critically as motives can be socially influenced e.g., by the triathlon community. It cannot be said with certainty that triathletes base their decisions solely on their own opinions and motives. Functionality, design and opinions on the Ironman brand could be seen as the prevailing view within the community. Athletes may regard certain aspects (e.g., quality, design) as important because these are characteristics of products that are highly valued by the triathlon community, and it is expected that athletes will take such aspects into account during consumption decisions.

5.3 Race Experiences as Symbolic Identity Markers

While theme two focused on the creating an athletic identity through the participation in branded events and challenging symbolic consumption in equipment choice, the following theme explores how triathlon events are consumed not only as physical competitions, but also as emotionally and symbolically meaningful experiences. Interview participants described the finish line, the race atmosphere, medals, branded races and iconic event moments as highly important aspects of their race participation. These experiences often function as symbolic markers of achievement or resilience. In this context, middle- or long-distance triathlon participation can be understood as a form of extraordinary consumption experience which contributes to identity construction through emotional intensity and social recognition.

5.3.1 Emotional Meaning of the Finish Line

Participants consistently described the finish line as one of the most emotionally significant aspects of their triathlon participation. Crossing the finish line symbolized more than simply completing a race, it represented overcoming personal limits and validating months of training.

The finish line emerges as a key moment of symbolic identity confirmation. Several participants consistently described the act of crossing the finish line not merely as the end of a race, but as the culmination of months of invisible preparation and personal sacrifice. Interviewee 3 explained that crossing the finish line created a feeling that was “*indescribable*”, because “*when crossing the finish line, everything suddenly falls off you somehow*”. The interviewee further emphasised the long-lasting emotional value of this experience by stating that he is still having “*goosebumps*” and “*still like[s] looking at finish-line pictures today*” even years after having participated in the race (Interviewee 3).

Similarly, interviewee 1 described the emotional aftermath of race completion as highly meaningful, explaining that even after extreme physical suffering during this race “*10 or 15 minutes after the finish, you already tell yourself you will be back next time*”. Furthermore, interviewee 6 described that the extraordinary experience immediately triggered the search for the next challenge: “*the next day it was already about asking what comes next*”. To add to this, interviewee 8 mentioned feeling “*empty*” and not knowing what comes next.

Whereas interviewee 2 framed the finish line as symbolic proof of personal capability, describing the experience as “*crossing the line knowing that I said I was going to do something and then I did it*”.

The findings suggest that the finish line functions as a symbolic moment of self-transformation. The moment can be seen as emotionally charged and deeply meaningful showing the athlete’s effort and discipline. It becomes symbolic proof that the individual can overcome extraordinary challenges.

Additionally, the emotional attachment participants maintain toward finish line memories and photographs indicates that these experiences become integrated into long-term narratives. Extraordinary endurance events therefore appear to function as identity-confirming rituals through which participants repeatedly reinforce desired self-perceptions.

Their desire to immediately pursue the next challenge also suggests that identity construction through extraordinary endurance experiences is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event.

In line with Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), this reflects self-symbolism as the individuals use consumption experiences to construct and affirm their identity. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) argue that consumers use symbolic meanings embedded in experiences, products and brands to construct and communicate identity. In this context, the finish line operates as a symbolic consumption object because it embodies culturally valued meanings such as resilience, achievement and mental toughness. Therefore, participants consume the symbolic meanings attached to race completion to validate desired identities.

At the same time, the visibility of the finish line through spectators and finish photos transforms this internal achievement into a socially recognizable signal. The finish bridges the internal-external dialect of identity construction, making athletes' identity legible both to themselves and to others.

5.3.2 Atmosphere and Spectator Support as Performance Enhancers

Interview participants described the race atmosphere and spectators as a central element of the whole event experience. Spectators, iconic race locations, a professional race organization and emotionally charged moments all played a significant role in motivating participants and building enjoyment during the competition.

The atmosphere of the event functions as a powerful form of lived symbolic experience. Athletes highlighted elements such as *“the sun rising during the swim”* (Interviewee 4), *“very attractive scenery”* (Interviewee 4) and having other participants wishing them good luck at the starting line (Interviewee 3) as central to the meaning of the event.

Interviewee 8 describes the atmosphere at Challenge Roth as highly emotional and motivating, explaining *“there are so many enthusiastic people at the side of the course hyping you up”*. The participant further explained that the race atmosphere temporarily transformed his self-perception: *“then you kind of feel like a semi-professional”*.

The same interviewee emphasised that iconic race moments remain memorable long after the race itself is finished: *“Especially in Roth, places like Solarer Berg ... those are the memorable moments”*.

Interviewee 3 similarly highlighted the immersive atmosphere of major races by describing the experience of being overtaken by professional athletes while camera helicopters filmed the moment overhead: *“then the professionals passed me ... and there was a helicopter above filming them”*.

Importantly, one participant explicitly contrasted mediated representations of watching races on YouTube with the lived experience of *“to actually stand there”* and participate (Interviewee 4). He emphasized that watching the race online could not replicate the experience of participating in the event and experiencing the atmosphere. This suggests that the symbolic meaning of long-distance triathlons is intensified through the direct participation. While the mediated experience may create interest and imagined meanings which are associated with endurance sports, the physical participation generates a much stronger emotional and identity-related impact. The race itself not only becomes meaningful because it is observed but because it is personally lived and experienced.

The findings further suggest that the race atmosphere plays a major role in transforming middle- and long-distance triathlon participation into a socially immersive extraordinary experience. The cheering spectators, the iconic race locations and the professional settings create an emotional intensity that allows participants to step outside of their daily life and enter a world associated with elite athleticism and achievement.

Feeling *“like a semi-professional”* (Interviewee 8) demonstrates that athletes not only consume the sport for the physical event itself but also the meanings associated with a high-performance sports culture. The described atmosphere therefore contributed directly to the identity construction by enabling the participants to temporarily adopt an identity which is associated with professionalism and accomplishment.

In addition, the fact that the interview participants repeatedly revisit these moments mentally suggest that the race atmosphere creates a lasting symbolic meaning beyond the event itself.

The findings strongly reflect Elliott and Wattanasuwan’s (1998) distinction between “mediated experience” and “lived experience”. The authors argue that mediated experiences emerge

through the consumption of media, whereas lived experiences emerge through the participation in social practices and face-to-face encounters (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Further, the atmosphere surrounding long-distance triathlon events provides symbolic cues which are associated with prestige and recognition. By participating in an emotionally intense and highly celebrated race environment, athletes symbolically consume these meanings and incorporate them into their self-concept. The race atmosphere therefore functions as a symbolic resource that supports the identity construction, the belonging and the self-enhancement of the triathletes.

5.3.3 Symbolic Meaning of Race Objects

Participants attach symbolic values to medals, tattoos and branded merch. These objects often represent discipline and membership in the endurance sport community.

Interviewee 1 emphasized that medals primarily symbolize long-term dedication rather than just simply the race itself: *“it is basically the sign that you stayed committed for half a year or maybe even a full year”*. Participants further mentioned displaying medals at home to think back to the day they received it: *“I just like to look at it and remember the day I got it”* (Interviewee 3).

While comparing the experience levels of the interview participants we noticed that all the experienced triathletes do not attach great importance to their medals. For example, interviewee 7 mentioned that *“medals do not have any meaning for me”* while interviewee 10 noted that the more events they participate in the less meaning is attached to the medals: *“honestly, the more events you do, the more they [medals] lose their significance”*. Further, triathlon newcomers mentioned that the medal from their first Ironman participation means a lot to them, and they display it at home: *“I bought a frame where I put all my things from the Ironman inside”* (Interviewee 3).

One participant also emphasized that he does not keep a lot of merch from the race itself, because he has participated in so many races by now that he received a lot of t-shirts: *“they keep throwing t-shirts at you here, and they just disappear into the back of my wardrobe”* (Interviewee 4). When talking about the Ironman backpack, a few participants highlighted that they use the backpack for their training gear when going to the pool or gym, but it does not

have any personal meaning to them: *“I’ve been using it as my swim bag since then [70.3 World Championship in 2017], and it honestly feels like it is falling apart for a while now. I don’t really care ... it will stay the swim bag until things start falling apart – not because I am super attached to it but because it just ‘the’ swim bag”* (Interviewee 8).

Interviewee 3 highlighted having a tattoo of the M-Dot Logo which is used as a symbolic display of achievement: *“partly to show that you actually did it”*. The participant further clarified that the symbolic meaning of the tattoo by stating that *“it is symbolic in the sense of saying: ‘I am an Ironman’”*.

The findings indicate that the race-related objects mostly function as symbolic representations of personal transformation and extraordinary achievement. However, the symbolic importance attached to these objects differs significantly depending on the athlete’s experience level in long-distance triathlon and their personal identity development.

For less experienced athletes, medals appear to function as highly meaningful symbolic markers of transformation and commitment (e.g., Interviewee 1 & Interviewee 3). This suggests that medals externalize otherwise invisible efforts and allow athletes to materialize personal achievement. Particularly for long-distance triathlon newcomers, race objects appear to stabilize and reinforce the newly emerging endurance identity.

At the same time, the findings reveal that the symbolic meanings which are attached to medals and merchandise diminish with increasing experience, as several athletes described that medals are losing significance over time. This suggests that symbolic consumption can change once the triathlon identity becomes more internalized and stable. For experienced triathletes, the symbolic meaning of event participation shifts away from the material representation towards the lived experience itself as well as intrinsic enjoyment. The symbolic objects therefore lose part of their identity-confirming function because the athletes no longer require external symbols to validate their athletic identity to the same extent.

However, the Ironman tattoo represents a permanent symbolic embodiment of identity and communicates a belonging to the Ironman community while also publicly symbolising the successful completion of an extraordinary challenge.

Overall, the findings indicate that symbolic consumption in triathlon is dynamic rather than static.

The findings strongly reflect Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) understanding of symbolic consumption as a process through which consumers use symbolic meanings to construct, maintain and express their identity. In the context of the long-distance triathlon participation medals, tattoos as well as branded merchandise function as symbolic consumption objects because they embody culturally valued meanings such as discipline, resilience or achievement. The findings additionally support Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) notion that symbolic meanings are socially shared and culturally recognizable. For example, the M-Dot tattoo functions as a socially communicative identity marker because the Ironman logo carries widely recognizable meanings associated with an extraordinary endurance achievement.

The decreasing importance that is attached to medals and merchandise among experienced triathletes suggests that symbolic consumption evolves alongside identity development. Once an athlete internalizes their identity more and becomes secure, external symbolic objects appear to lose part of their identity-confirming function. This reflects Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) argument that symbolic resources are used dynamically depending on the consumers ongoing identity project.

All in all, the findings demonstrate that symbolic consumption within long-distance triathlon is not fixed but changes as athletes move from identity acquisition to identity maintenance and internalization.

5.4 Symbolic Consumption Across Experience Levels

While theme three focused on how long-distance triathlon events and race-related objects become symbolically meaningful, this theme explores how these meanings differ depending on athletes' level of experience within the sport. The previous theme demonstrated that the finish line, the race atmosphere and symbolic race-related objects contribute strongly to the athletes' identity construction. Building on this, this theme examines how middle- and long-distance beginners and experienced athletes consume these symbolic meanings differently. Three of the interview participants have been identified as triathlon beginners, and seven interview participants have been identified as experienced athletes. An experienced athlete is someone who has been doing triathlon for at least three years and has participated in multiple short-, middle- or long-distance races. Therefore, a beginner is someone who has practiced triathlon for less than 3 years. The findings suggest that beginners are more strongly motivated by visible

achievements and external validation, whereas experienced athletes' increasingly shift their focus towards intrinsic motivations and self-improvement.

5.4.1 Beginners Seek Validation Through Extreme Challenges

Less experienced participants frequently framed their triathlon participation around symbolic achievement and proving themselves. Completing extreme endurance events was often associated with personal validation and social recognition.

Interviewee 1 explained that his primary motivation for participating in a full-distance Ironman was not triathlon itself, but rather the extraordinary challenge associated with it: *"For me, it is more about the challenge than about triathlon itself"*. The participant further emphasized that *"the long distance was basically the only next step forward"* after having participated in an ultramarathon and ultra cycling race.

At the same time, interviewee 1 acknowledged the importance of the social prestige that comes with participating in a full-distance Ironman: *"social status definitely plays a role"* (Interviewee 1). Similarly, interviewee 6 described endurance sports as a process of constantly searching for the next goal and a higher achievement: *"How can I set new goals for myself"*. He further explained that he *"want[s] to achieve even more"* than he has right now and connected his achievement to external validation: *"How can I somehow show these improvements externally?"*

These statements indicate that the visible achievement and symbolic recognition are particularly important during earlier stages of long-distance triathlon participation.

The findings suggest that beginners use extraordinary endurance challenges as a symbolic milestone for constructing and validating their athletic identity. Long-distance events therefore function as proof of resilience and exceptional capabilities. The desire for harder and longer challenges indicates that the identity construction occurs through progressive escalation of extraordinary experiences (from marathon to ultramarathon to long-distance triathlon). The completion of increasingly difficult races allows athletes to continuously reinforce self-perceptions associated with toughness and achievement. Additionally, external recognition through friends, family or social media appears particularly relevant for beginners because their

endurance athlete identity is not yet fully internalized. Social visibility and symbolic prestige can therefore help them to confirm and stabilize their desired identity.

Connecting this to Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), it is noticeable that long-distance triathlon beginners are still trying to negotiate their identity externally but also internally. Their self-symbolism is still at the beginning of their athletic identity and therefore relies heavily on symbolic achievements and socially recognizable milestones to reinforce desired self-concepts. Consequently, extraordinary endurance events serve not only as athletic accomplishments but also as symbolic resources through which beginners can validate both to themselves and to others that they possess the characteristics associated with endurance athletes.

5.4.2 Experienced Athletes are More Intrinsically Driven

More experienced triathletes appear to be less focused on prestige and social validation, but increasingly motivated by self-improvement, performance optimization and by the intrinsic enjoyment of the sport itself.

Interviewee 2 explicitly stated that brand prestige had become less important over time and that she had done *“random sprint triathlons”*: *“I don’t really care about the brand itself and like being an Iron Man or Iron Woman”*. Instead, she framed races more pragmatically: *“If it was cheaper, like, sure, I’ll take that”*. This can be connected to the findings in chapter 5.2.3 where the functionality of branded events exceeded the symbolic reputation.

Similarly, interviewee 9 described that his race participation decisions are often guided by practical considerations rather than symbolic prestige: *“financial rationality won”*. He also highlighted that his participation becomes normal and that he wants to improve his performance from race to race and is disappointed if it does not work out even though it is still a great finish time: *“And then, suddenly, it becomes normal. By your second middle distance, you’re already disappointed if you didn’t do better than the first time”*.

Interviewee 8 also strongly emphasized his intrinsic performance goals: *“I want to improve my performance”*. He further described his motivation as both, intrinsically and extrinsically driven: *“The motivation is both internal and external”*.

The findings suggest that experienced triathletes gradually internalize their endurance athlete identity. This results in their identity construction becoming less dependent on symbolic

prestige and more strongly connected to their personal mastery and self-improvement. The participation in extraordinary experiences remains important but their symbolic meaning changes. Instead of trying to prove their worth externally, the races become an opportunity to improve their performance and refine their athletic capabilities.

The findings also indicate that the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation coexist rather than fully replacing one another. Even though more experienced triathletes seem to be more intrinsically driven, they still appreciate recognition and symbolic meanings, but this becomes less dominant over time.

Connecting this to Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) understanding of symbolic consumption, the findings suggest that symbolic resources become less important for the identity validation once the athlete's endurance identity becomes more established and internalized. While races and practice experiences continue to function as identity resources, they primarily reinforce competence and self-development rather than social status.

This theme demonstrated that symbolic consumption processes differ across experience levels. Beginner triathletes often consume long-distance triathlon events as symbolic achievements that provide them prestige and identity reinforcements. In contrast, more experienced triathletes increasingly internalize the endurance athlete identity and become more focused on their self-improvement rather than social recognition.

5.5 Internal Validation and External Recognition Through Triathlon

This theme explores how triathlon participation shapes both, the athletes' self-perception and their social perception. Participants frequently described triathlon as influencing their discipline, mindset, routines and perceived character. At the same time, they believe that endurance sports participation communicates socially desirable qualities such as resilience or ambition to others. Long-distance triathlon therefore not only functions as a sport, but also as a socially meaningful identity marker.

5.5.1 Triathlon as Proof of Mental Strength and Capability

Participants frequently interpreted their long-distance triathlon participation as proof that they could overcome difficult challenges. Interviewee 2 explained: *“Crossing the line knowing that I said I was going to do something and then I did it”*. She also added: *“Maybe like the way people view me as well, it’s like, yeah, like she can do hard things like that”*, when being asked if her Half-Ironman participation would change how other people would see her.

Interviewee 3 similarly added: *“You somehow get the feeling that you can achieve anything”* and interviewee 9 emphasized similar qualities: *“Goal-oriented ... great perseverance”*.

These findings suggest that triathlon functions as symbolic proof of personal capabilities and resilience. Completing an extraordinary endurance challenge strengthens their self-efficacy and reinforces identities that are associated with mental toughness and perseverance.

Participants not only perceive themselves differently after having completed a middle- or long-distance triathlon but also believe that others recognize these qualities in them. Extraordinary endurance experiences could therefore contribute simultaneously to the individuals internal and external identity validation.

The findings strongly align with Elliott and Wattanasuwan’s (1998) understanding of identity as an ongoing symbolic project that is being constructed through consumption. The authors argue that individuals actively construct their desired identities using culturally available symbolic resources. In the context of long-distance triathlon, extraordinary experiences function as a symbolic resource through which participants validate their identities associated with discipline and mental toughness. The participants statements show that they internalize the symbolic meaning which is culturally attached to endurance sports and integrate them into their self-concept.

Furthermore, the findings can also be connected to the concept of “symbolic self-completion” (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982 cited in Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998, p.134), where individuals use symbolic actions or achievements to reinforce their desired self-identities when they feel like they are lacking any personal qualities. Completing a long-distance triathlon therefore not only functions as an athletic accomplishment, but also as a symbolic confirmation of personal strength and capability.

5.5.2 Perceived Social Recognition and Role Model Status

Several interview participants described their long-distance triathlon participation as something that shaped not only how they see themselves, but also how they believe they are perceived by others. In particular, endurance sport was associated with socially valued characteristics such as discipline and reliability.

Interviewee 9 explained that his triathlon participation communicates positive personal qualities to others, stating that people would likely perceive him as “*very goal-oriented*” and as someone with “*great perseverance*”. The participant further elaborated that he got his job because his employer was looking for “*someone who could function as a role model*”. Additionally, the interviewee argued that having a history in competitive endurance sports is increasingly viewed as positive in professional settings because it signals discipline and commitment.

Similarly, interviewee 8 emphasized that “*this triathlon mindset*” extends beyond the sport itself and shapes all kinds of other areas of life. The participant explained qualities that have been developed through triathlon, such as “*endurance*” and “*working steadily and consistently towards something*”, are transformed into work and everyday life.

These findings suggest that triathlon participation functions as a socially recognizable identity marker. Interview participants believe that completing an extraordinary endurance challenge communicates culturally valued characteristics both within and outside the endurance sports community. Therefore, triathlon becomes more than a physical activity, it acts as symbolic evidence of resilience and discipline.

The findings strongly reflect Elliot and Wattanasuwan’s (1998) understanding of self-symbolism and social-symbolism. They suggest that self-symbolism and social-symbolism are closely connected rather than separate processes. Participants often sought internal self-validation and external social recognition through their participation in extraordinary endurance experiences. This shows how symbolic consumption within the endurance sports context contributed to both personal identity construction and social identity communication.

This theme showed that triathlon shapes both, self-perception and social-perception. Participants described that endurance sports are proof of discipline and resilience, while also believing that others associate triathlon participation with perseverance and commitment. The

findings further suggest that long-distance triathlon operates simultaneously as self-symbolism and social-symbolism. Athletes use extraordinary endurance experiences to internally validate their desired identities and to externally communicate socially valued characteristics.

6 Discussion

In the following chapter the key findings of the analysis are summarized and discussed on how they contribute to the research objectives and research question. Furthermore, the theoretical implications are examined by linking the findings to existing literature, supporting, but also challenging past literature. Besides contributing to existing literature, the findings are also intended to serve as a basis for managerial implications.

6.1 Research Findings

The following section summarizes the five main findings of this study. The analysis of the interview data demonstrates that middle- and long-distance triathlon participation extends beyond physical exercise and competitive performances. Instead, triathlon functions as a meaningful lifestyle, a symbolic identity project as well as an emotionally intense extraordinary experience. At the same time, the findings reveal tensions between functional and symbolic consumption, particularly regarding the use of equipment and branded event organizers such as the Ironman brand. Further, the analysis highlights how symbolic meanings differ across experience levels and how triathlon participation shapes both self-understanding and social recognition.

6.1.1 Extraordinary Experiences as Lifestyle

The research findings of this study demonstrate that middle- and long-distance triathlon should not be understood as an isolated event experience but rather as a lifestyle that is integrated into the everyday life. Participants described how their training routines structure their daily schedules, social activities, nutrition and recovery. Extraordinary experiences therefore extend beyond the race day itself and include the entire preparation process. Through the lens of symbolic consumption, middle- and long-distance triathlon becomes a symbolic expression of discipline and perseverance. The willingness to invest large amounts of time and accept

sacrifices further reinforces triathletes' self-concepts. The findings of this study suggest that symbolic meanings not only emerge through a successful race completing but also through the ongoing commitment and lifestyle that is associated with the sport itself. Long-distance triathlon therefore functions as a continuous identity project rather than a temporary leisure activity.

6.1.2 Symbolic Consumption in Equipment and Event Choice

The analysis has revealed that previous assumptions made by the researchers, namely, that athletes use brands because of the symbolic meaning they convey, for example choosing brands that fit their self-image or are well-regarded by society, could not completely been identified. The analysis shows that triathletes consider primarily functional aspects in product decisions, mostly valuing substance over hype. Interview participants emphasised e.g., quality, performance and fit when selecting equipment. Similar patterns appeared regarding race participation decision, where event organization, race date, location and qualification opportunities were often more important than the event brand Ironman itself. Beginners make more use of the symbolic value the Ironman brand represents while experienced athletes construct their identity more from completed achievement than from branded events. Ironman Hawaii can be highlighted as it represents a strong symbolic achievement, combining personal accomplishment and social recognition within the triathlon community. Therefore, symbolic meanings still emerged indirectly through the extraordinary achievements associated with products and races. This indicates that symbolic consumption in triathlon differs from traditional consumption contexts where brands themselves often function as primary symbolic resources. Instead, the symbolic meaning is attached more strongly to the accomplishment enabled by the product or event. Functional consumption and symbolic consumption therefore coexist rather than contradict each other within endurance sports participation. Further, identity is constructed more through the achievements made than by only using brands. Equipment thereby operates as a tool to achieve athletic performances.

6.1.3 Race Experiences as Symbolic Identity Markers

The findings further highlight that a middle- and long-distance triathlon participation is consumed as an emotionally intense and symbolically meaningful experience. Interview participants consistently described the finish line, race atmosphere, spectators and iconic race

moments as highly emotional experiences which validated the months of preparation and personal sacrifice. The finish line particularly emerged as symbolic proof of discipline and capability. In addition, the race atmospheres allowed athletes to temporarily step into identities associated with elite performances and athletic excellence. Symbolic race objects such as medals, tattoos, and merchandise materialized their experiences and helped athletes preserve and communicate their achievements. However, the symbolic value attached to these objects changes over time, as more experienced triathletes increasingly focused on the lived experience itself rather than the external representation. The findings therefore demonstrate that symbolic consumption in endurance sports is dynamic and closely connected to emotional intensity, memory construction, identity reinforcement and exceptional athletic performance.

6.1.4 Symbolic Consumption Across Experience Levels

The study also revealed important differences in the symbolic consumption across experience levels. Triathlon beginners often framed their participation arounds seeking new challenges, and external validation. Competing in a long-distance triathlon race functioned as proof of their capability and as a socially recognizable accomplishment. In contrast, more experienced triathletes increasingly emphasised self-improvement, mastery and intrinsic enjoyment of the sport itself. While symbolic prestige remains relevant, it becomes less central to the triathletes' identity validation over time. These findings suggest that symbolic consumption evolves alongside athletes' identity development. In earlier stages of their triathlon journey, athletes rely more heavily on visible symbols and external recognition to stabilize a newly emerging endurance identity. As the experience level increases, the endurance identity becomes more internalized and less dependent on symbolic prestige. Nevertheless, symbolic meanings never fully disappear, as globally recognised brands such as Ironman continue to provide socially shared meanings which are associated with extraordinary achievement and an elite endurance performance.

6.1.5 Internal Validation and External Recognition Through Triathlon

Finally, the research shows that long-distance triathlon participation significantly influences both the athletes' self-perception and their perceived social standing. Participants frequently described long-distance triathlon as proof of discipline and resilience. Completing an extraordinary endurance challenge strengthens athletes' self-efficacy and reinforces their

desired self-identities. At the same time, participants believed that others associate long-distance triathlon participation with commitment and reliability. The sport therefore functions as a socially recognizable identity marker that extends beyond the athletic context into the professional and everyday life. Athletes use extraordinary endurance experiences to internally validate their desired identities and to externally communicate socially valued characteristics. Long-distance triathlon can therefore be understood as a symbolic resource that simultaneously contributes to the personal identity construction and the social identity communication.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The following chapter links the findings from the analysis to the literature that was reviewed in chapter 2. Theoretical implications are given to support, extend or challenge existing literature on extraordinary experiences, identity construction and symbolic consumption.

6.2.1 Extraordinary Experiences

Extraordinary experiences have primarily been defined as memorable and transformative events that diverge significantly from everyday life (Arnould & Price, 1993). Characteristics are high levels of emotional experience, intrinsic enjoyment (Arnould & Price, 1993; Rundio et al. 2020), and an unrehearsed and spontaneous nature (Abrahams, 1986 cited in Arnould & Price, 1993). They are described as life-changing and magical moment, and are closely linked to self-renewal, self-discovery and personal growth (Arnould & Price, 1993).

In endurance sports, particularly in middle- and long-distance triathlons, the standard definition of extraordinary experiences is not entirely accurate. While Arnould and Price (1993) separate extraordinary experiences from everyday life, our findings show that extraordinary experiences can be expanded to athletes everyday lives. Training and the race itself are closely intertwined and cannot be seen separately. Even though the race alone was originally defined as extraordinary experience, it became clear that the impact on everyday life was too strong to be separated from it. This can be linked to Scussel et al. (2023) who described that the training process is as important for athletes as the race itself.

In line with past literature, extraordinary experiences in endurance sports have a transformational character (e.g., Rundio et al. 2020; Scussel et al. 2023) and are impacted by a

high level of emotions (Arnould & Price, 1993; Lindberg & Østergaard, 2015). Additionally, we found that triathletes are mostly led by intrinsic motivations. Athletes become more confident in what they are doing over time and develop strong character traits, which they can apply in everyday life situations.

However, in contrast to Abrahams (1986 cited in Arnould & Price, 1993), races are not unrehearsed or spontaneous. Athletes prepare for several months to finish a middle- or long-distance triathlon.

Existing literature examines extraordinary experiences often through the lens of escape (Cova, 2021; Varley, 2011). Cova (2021) and Cova et al. (2018) identified five themes of escape that reoccur in CCT literature. We can classify middle- and long-distance triathlon in the category of extreme leisure activities (Cova, 2021; Cova et al. 2018) and therefore can argue that it counts as an escape from everyday life. Nevertheless, as triathlon becomes an integral part of everyday life, we see it more as a balance than an escape, which has a positive impact on mental health and physical fitness.

In contrast to existing literature, extraordinary experiences in endurance sport often are not just one single experience and athletes often participate in such experiences more than once. In line with Arnould and Price (1993) we discovered that re-entering life can be difficult for athletes, wondering what comes next. A reason for this could be that one outstanding moment during the extraordinary experience overshadows negative experiences which leads to a positive evaluation of the entire experience (Arnould & Price, 1993).

Our findings offer another perspective on extraordinary experiences, differentiating from some definitions of existing literatures and at the same time supporting other aspects. The topic of extraordinary experiences can be wide-ranging and may differ through various angles. While our findings build on existing perspectives, they also reveal new ones.

6.2.2 Identity Construction

Identity construction in CCT research is concerned with the “core self”, a metaphor assuming that individuals structure their aims and resources in order to create a coherent live (Rokka & Ulver, 2023, p.19). This perspective is particularly relevant in middle- and long-distance

triathlon, where participation often extends over multiple years and becomes deeply embedded into athletes' everyday lives.

Individuals actively shape their identities through what Mick and Buhl (1992, p.318) describe as “life projects”, understood as an ongoing and constantly changing processes of self-fulfilment and self-development. The findings support this perspective, showing that triathlon participation contributes to long-term personal transformations, including changes in behaviour and routines. In line with Rundio et al. (2020) athletes develop characteristics that are perceived as necessary for success within the sport, thereby continuously shaping and reinforcing their identities.

This process is closely linked to the integration of extraordinary experiences into everyday life. Scussel et al. (2023) argue that athletes must combine routines with extraordinary experience at each stage of the consumption journey. The findings support this view, by demonstrating that the boundaries between everyday life and extraordinary experiences become increasingly intertwined as triathlon becomes part of the athlete's daily routine and self-understanding.

Thompson (2013, p.210) uses an extended version of the term “project”, calling it “symbolic project”, provided further insight into the process. He suggests that individuals use symbolic goods, that reflect their understanding of self-concept to construct and communicate their identity. While the findings of this study support this argument, they also extend it by showing that athletes draw symbolic meaning not only from consumption objects but also from their own performances and achievements. The participation in middle- and long-distance triathlon events serves as a means of pursuing and validating athletic accomplishments. Medals, for example, function as symbolic representations of athletes' personal transformation and achievement, enabling them to reflect upon and communicate their progress.

Identity is constructed through emotional intensity, symbolic meaning and social recognition. Especially the finish line counts as an important moment for identity construction and at the same time as proof of athletes' personal capability.

As identity construction is a well-established topic in CCT research we contribute by looking at it from a different angle using symbolic consumption. The findings add to existing literature by examining symbolic meanings of products, brands, and extraordinary experiences within triathlon as drivers for identity construction.

6.2.3 Symbolic Consumption

Prior studies on symbolic consumption in the endurance sports context have examined experiential consumption, leisure activities, sporting goods, and digital self-presentation (Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Luna-Cortés, 2017; Ohl & Taks, 2007), this study demonstrates how long-distance triathlon combines physical experiences, symbolic meanings, identity construction and social recognition in a unique way.

First, the findings extend Ohl and Taks' (2007) argument that sporting goods function as symbolic resources in sports consumption. While their research mainly focuses on sporting goods and visible material culture, this study shows that symbolic consumption in long-distance triathlon goes beyond the products themselves. Viewing middle- and long-distance triathlon through a symbolic consumption lens reveals how athletes use extraordinary experiences as symbolic resources for their identity construction. The participants not only attached symbolic meaning to the equipment they use or the branded races they participate in, but especially to training routines, sacrifices, suffering and race completion which extends Ohl and Taks (2007) previous research. Therefore, extraordinary experiences themselves function as symbolic resource through which athletes construct and maintain their identities.

In line with Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) experiential consumption perspective and consumers seeking "fantasies, feelings and fun" (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p.132), triathlon participation was strongly connected to emotions and personal meaning rather than a purely functional utility. The research findings therefore expand the literature of symbolic consumption in endurance sports from material products towards an embodied and experience-based consumption.

Secondly, the research findings strongly support and extend Dimanche and Samdahl's (1994) conceptualization of leisure as symbolic consumption. They argued that leisure activities carry a "sign value" (Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994, p.121) and communicate something about the individuals to themselves and to others. Interview participants use their middle- and long-distance triathlon participation to express discipline, resilience, ambition and commitment, both to themselves and to others. However, this study shows that symbolic consumption within the endurance sports context operates not only through race participations, but also through long-term preparation and lifestyle adjustments. Athletes structure their work, social life and routines around their training schedule, showing that extraordinary experiences become embedded into

everyday life. This extends the existing literature by demonstrating that the whole process of being a long-distance triathlete and the lifestyle they live is a symbolic consumption and helps maintain their endurance athlete identity.

Thirdly, the findings validate and extend Luna-Cortés' (2017) argument that when consumers perceive a congruence between an experience and their identity, they use social networks more intensively to materialize and communicate their experiences. The findings suggest that symbolic consumption in middle- and long-distance triathlon is particularly pronounced during earlier stages of identity construction, where branded events and visible achievements serve as symbolic resources for identity validation. As athletes gain more experience and internalise their endurance identity, symbolic consumption becomes less externally oriented and increasingly shifts toward intrinsic self-development which extends Luna-Cortés' (2017) argument. This finding suggests that symbolic consumption is dynamic rather than static and evolves over time alongside athlete identity development.

Finally, the findings complicate traditional distinctions between functional and symbolic consumption. Participants consistently prioritised functionality and performance when buying equipment or selecting their races. However, symbolic meanings still emerge strongly through the extraordinary achievements that are associated with these products and races. This suggests that functional and symbolic consumption are not contradictory with endurance sports. Instead, the used products and races gain symbolic value due to their ability to enable athletes to accomplish extraordinary experiences.

6.3 Managerial Implications

Our findings reveal relevant practical implications for event organisers, and marketing and brand managers.

A demand for non-branded middle- and long-distance events by athletes has been discovered. Smaller event organizers can take the opportunity to organize middle- and long-distance events themselves. Athletes further evaluate a great atmosphere at events as important factor. To keep athletes signing up for following events, event organizers need to ensure a great atmosphere which, at best, also stands out. They should therefore invest in spectator management, a memorable course design, a great finish line experience as this is one of the most important

factors of the race and emotional event production. At the same time, these factors help triathletes to strengthen their sense of identity, which leads to a long-term commitment to the sport. Athletes do not only consume the physical challenge, but they consume the emotional intensity and symbolic of the event environment. Creating emotionally memorable moments may increase participant satisfaction and strengthen their loyalty towards a particular race. Furthermore, event organisers should especially pay particular attention to identity drivers during the event, such as the finish line, the event atmosphere and the athletic achievements made. Ironman events serve as a prime example of this, offering athletes an unforgettable finish, capturing the race atmosphere through photography, and providing a ‘first-timer’s bell’ for athletes to celebrate their achievements, fostering identity development. In addition, event organisers could offer year-round engagements for athletes to take part in, such as community events or training camps, which would integrate the sport even more into the athletes’ daily lives and thus help to maintain triathletes’ identity over the year whilst, generating profit for the event organiser.

Brands within the triathlon industry need to ensure high quality products to enable athletes to perform at their best and be able to create an authentic athlete identity. Athletes spend research on products and try different brands and products to find the best solution for themselves to deliver the desired results. They are trying to adopt a more functionally driven approach in their consumption behaviour, valuing qualitative products which help them to achieve personal bests. Therefore, we suggest focusing on the products’ functionality and quality aspects in advertisements, as well as the brand’s potential contribution to the athletes’ success as they value this the most and use it to construct an authentic athletic identity. This could be done through success stories, performance data, athletic co-creation as well as significant athletic achievements (e.g., sub two-hour marathon record in Adidas running shoes (Eberlein, 2026)) to strengthen their visibility and credibility among athletes. Word of mouth recommendations have an important impact, as athletes tend to trust the experiences and advice of fellow athletes. This should be taken into consideration by brands and event organisers when developing their marketing strategies.

The findings showed a difference in beginner and experienced triathlete identity construction. While beginners seek social validation and are extrinsically motivated, experienced athletes are motivated by performance improvement and intrinsic factors. This implies that brand’s marketing should evolve over time and adjust to the athlete’s lifecycle. For beginners, the

Ironman brand and visible social proof are powerful and should therefore be emphasised when advertising events. For experienced athletes, performance improvement and personal goals matter more. A loyalty program that evolves with the athlete's experience can be helpful to address the different target groups over time. Event organizers could also design different marketing campaigns for these funnel groups to address their diverse identity needs correctly.

7 Conclusion and Future Research

This chapter concludes the findings of the thesis while providing the limitations which should be taking into consideration when reading this paper. Further research opportunities are presented to extend the existing research in the future.

7.1 Conclusion

This thesis explored how triathletes construct their identity through the participation in extraordinary experiences. The research is situated in the middle- and long-distance field as this can be seen as an extraordinary experience. It aimed at understanding how triathletes use their participation in extraordinary experiences to construct their endurance athlete identity internally and externally. By conducting ten semi-structured interviews with triathletes who have already participated or are actively training to participate in a middle- or long-distance triathlon and applying Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) symbolic consumption framework throughout the analysis, five key themes have emerged: *extraordinary experiences as a lifestyle; symbolic consumption in equipment and event choice; race experiences as symbolic identity marker; symbolic consumption across experience levels; and internal validation and external recognition through triathlon.*

The findings of this study reveal that middle- and long-distance triathlon participation is more than just an endurance sport and extends it beyond physical exercise or competitive performance. Instead, triathlon becomes a long-term identity project that is integrated into the athlete's everyday life. The athlete's identity construction is not limited to the race participation itself but emerges throughout the lifestyle adaptations, sacrifice, commitments and the continuous training process itself. Triathletes use it as a source of symbolic meaning which can be used to continuously construct and maintain their identity.

The findings suggest that symbolic meanings are primarily derived from the accomplishment itself rather than from the products or brands surrounding the participation. Athletes'

consumption decisions of equipment, event entries and race-related merchandise are primarily driven by functional considerations such as performance, quality and practicality. Nevertheless, these consumption practices possess symbolic value because they enable the participation in extraordinary experiences. Consequently, symbolic value is attached less to the brands themselves and more to the accomplishment and personal transformation they facilitate. At the same time, globally recognised brands such as Ironman continue to provide socially shared meanings that communicate exceptional endurance accomplishments to a broader audience.

Notably, the findings indicate that symbolic consumption is neither static nor uniform across triathletes. Beginners often rely on visible symbols and external recognition to validate their emerging identity as endurance athlete, whereas more experienced athletes increasingly emphasise self-improvement and intrinsic satisfaction. As experiences grow, identity validation becomes progressively internalised, although symbolic meanings never entirely disappear.

When looking through the lens of Elliot and Wattanasuwan's (1998) symbolic consumption framework, the findings illustrate how extraordinary endurance experiences function as symbolic resource for both self-symbolism and social-symbolism. In answering the research question: *How do middle- and long-distance triathletes use extraordinary experiences to construct their identity?* this study concludes that athletes construct and reinforce their identities by integrating triathlon into their everyday lives and attaching symbolic meanings to extraordinary achievements while using these experiences to both validate their desired self-identities and communicate socially valued characteristics to others.

This research contributes to the growing literature on extraordinary experiences as well as symbolic consumption and identity construction by demonstrating how long-distance triathlon participation functions as a powerful symbolic resource for identity formation. While prior research has mainly focused on products and brands as symbolic resources (e.g., Ohl & Taks, 2007), the findings of this study suggest that extraordinary endurance experiences themselves can become the central source of symbolic meaning. Furthermore, this study challenges that notion of extraordinary experiences being an isolated event by showing how they are embedded into everyday routines, training practices and lifestyle commitments. Finally, the findings introduce a dynamic perspective on symbolic consumption by illustrating how the symbolic meanings attached to participation evolve around different experience levels. They shift from external validation and social recognition for beginners towards self-improvement for more

experienced athletes. In doing so, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how extraordinary experiences influence identity construction over time.

7.2 Limitations and Future Research

While this research offers meaningful insights on the identity construction of triathletes, several limitations must be acknowledged. The methodological limitations have already been recognized in chapter 4.6. The following limitations will only include thematic limitations such as a potential say-do-gap, gender imbalance or limited age diversity.

Participants may have described behaviours that differ from their actual actions which could lead to a say-do-gap. Therefore, self-reported motivations and consumption practices cannot be independently verified. For example, when being asked about why they use a certain brand, they could have said that they like the quality of the shoe but not mentioned that a greater reason for buying the item was because a lot of influencers on social media wear it. Thus, the findings reflect perceptions and narratives rather than directly observed behaviour. To address this in the future, further research could use shop-alongs to get a deeper understanding of why an athlete chooses a certain brand or product and therefore try to understand their behaviour.

Participants for this study were recruited from a predominantly western European context and cultural meanings attached to endurance sports may differ across societies. Therefore, the findings may not be fully transferable to non-western contexts, and future research could explore identity construction across different cultural settings.

This study has looked at participants experiences at a single point in time and since identity construction is an ongoing process and likely to evolve on an athlete's journey, longitudinal changes could not be directly observed. The findings therefore rely on retrospective accounts and the participants' memories. To address this further, future research would benefit from longitudinal approaches where identity construction can be captured over time. Methods such as diary studies, participant journals, repeated interviews or ethnographic observation could provide deeper insights into how symbolic meanings develop before, during and after extraordinary endurance events. Following athletes across several years would allow researchers to observe how endurance identities emerge, evolve and become increasingly internalized. Such approaches could further improve the understanding of the transition from

novice participant seeking external validation to experienced athletes who derive meaning primarily from self-improvement.

Finally, a limited age diversity and gender bias must be acknowledged. Since participants were younger than 40 years old, this study has not looked at older age groups who may attach different meanings to participation and achievement. Therefore, the findings may not fully represent the identity construction across all age groups. Consequently, future research should include a broader age range to get a bigger picture. Additionally, female participants only represented 20 percent of the interview sample. Since experiences and identity construction processes may differ across gender, hence the findings may reflect male perspectives more strongly than female perspectives. Since this study has looked at both genders in a non-comparable way, future research could investigate whether women and men attach different symbolic meanings to achievements, brands and sporting participation. The role of age and life stage in shaping the motivation to participate in such an endurance event and the identity processes related to it could also be of significance.

Future research is needed to deepen the understanding of how athletes construct their identities through extraordinary experiences. While this study focused on middle- and long-distance triathletes, several questions remain regarding e.g., the role of experience and digital environments. Although this study provides valuable insights into identity construction through the symbolic consumption of extraordinary endurance experiences, several opportunities for future research remain.

While this study has focused on different experience levels future studies could explore in depth how first-time long-distance triathletes perceive and consume the Ironman brand. Since the findings of this thesis suggest that triathlon beginners use the symbolic meaning behind the Ironman brand more than experienced athletes, it could be investigated whether Ironman functions primarily as a symbolic marker for beginners while becoming less important for experienced athletes. A larger sample for triathlon beginners could provide more nuanced insights into these early stages of endurance identity construction.

Since this research studied triathlon in the context of extraordinary experiences, future research could investigate whether similar identity construction processes occur in other ultra-endurance and lifestyle sports that count as extraordinary experience. Besides long-distance triathlon, future researchers could look at ultra-distance running, cycling or swimming to explore whether

these extraordinary experiences serve as symbolic resource in similar ways across these different sporting communities.

Future research could explore the role of social media, influencers and online communities in shaping triathlon and endurance athlete identities. Platforms such as Instagram, Strava, YouTube and TikTok increasingly serve as spaces where athletes share achievements, communicate symbolic meanings, and engage with like-minded communities. Further studies could investigate whether triathlon influencers contribute to the formation of aspirational athlete identities and consumption norms, as well as how digital visibility influences the relationship between self-symbolism and social-symbolism. In addition, potential tensions between authentic participation and the performative aspect of social media, particularly the public display of achievements and extraordinary experiences could be examined.

In summary, this study provides valuable insights into the identity construction of triathletes in the context of extraordinary experiences, shaped by behavioural and socio-cultural limitations. The recognition of these limitations as well as the methodological limitations is crucial for interpreting the findings of the interviews and for future research purposes. Collectively, future research examining different athlete groups, digital environments and longitudinal developments would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding for how extraordinary experiences function as symbolic resources for identity construction over time.

References

- Arnould, E. J., & Price, L. L. (1993). River Magic: Extraordinary Experience and the Extended Service Encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp.24–45, <https://doi.org/10.1086/209331>
- Atkinson, M. (2008). Triathlon, Suffering and Exciting Significance. *Leisure Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp.165–180, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360801902216>
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the Extended Self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp.139–168, <https://doi.org/10.1086/209154>
- Belk, R. W., & Costa, J. A. (1998). The Mountain Man Myth: A Contemporary Consuming Fantasy. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 25, no. 3, pp.218–240, <https://doi.org/10.1086/209536>
- Bell, E., & Bryman, A. (2007). The Ethics of Management Research: An Exploratory Content Analysis. *British Journal of Management*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 63–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2006.00487.x>
- Bell, E., Bryman, A., & Harley, B. (2022). *Business Research Methods*, 6th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Berzonsky, M. D. (2011). A Social-Cognitive Perspective on Identity Construction, in S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, & V. L. Vignoles (eds), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, [e-book] New York: Springer Science+Business Media, pp.55–76, <https://doi.10.1007/978-1-4419-7988-9>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Bowerman, R. (2026). History, <https://www.ironman.com/about/history> [Accessed 26 May 2026]
- Carù, A., & Cova, B. (2003). Revisiting Consumption Experience: A More Humble but Complete View of the Concept. *Marketing Theory*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp.267–286, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931030032004>
- Celsi, R. L., Rose, R. L., & Leigh, T. W. (1993). An Exploration of High-Risk Leisure Consumption Through Skydiving. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 20, no. 1, p.1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1086/209330>
- Çetin, A. (2019). Triathletes' Motivational Dimensions for Participation in Ironman, and Comparison of these Factors with Their Life Satisfaction and Achievement Perceptions. *International Journal of Human Movement and Sports Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp.43–50, <https://doi.org/10.13189/saj.2019.070301>
- Costas, J., & Kärreman, D. (2016). The Bored Self in Knowledge Work. *Human Relations*, vol. 69, no. 1, pp.61–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715579736>
- Cova, B. (2021). The New Frontier of Consumer Experiences: Escape through Pain. *AMS Review: Official Publication of the Academy of Marketing Science*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp.60–69, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-020-00175-8>

- Cova, B., Carù, A., & Cayla, J. (2018). Re-Conceptualizing Escape in Consumer Research, *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp.445–464, <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-01-2017-0030>
- Deutsche Triathlon Union e.V. (2026). Distanzen, <https://www.triathlondeutschland.de/triathlon-distanzen> [Accessed 26 May 2026]
- Dimanche, F., & Samdahl, D. (1994). Leisure as Symbolic Consumption: A Conceptualization and Prospectus for Future Research. *Leisure Sciences*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp.119–129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490409409513224>
- Easterby-Smith, M., Jaspersen, L., Thorpe, R., & Valizade, D. (2021). Management and Business Research, 7th edn, London: Sage Publications
- Eberlein, N. (2026). Marathon-Rekord und starkes Quartal: Adidas im Höhenflug, BR24, 29 August, <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/wirtschaft/adidas-im-hoehenflug-marathon-rekord-und-starkes-quartal,VIAtm9P> [Accessed 29 May 2026]
- Egan-Wyer, C. (2019). The Sellable Self: Exploring Endurance Running as an Extraordinary Consumption Experience, PhD thesis, Department of Business Administration, Lund University, <https://portal.research.lu.se/en/publications/3e119423-2545-49c1-a619-2009ed6536c6> [Accessed 28 January 2026]
- Elliott, R., & Wattanasuwan, K. (1998). Brands as Symbolic Resources for the Construction of Identity. *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp.131–144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.1998.11104712>
- Galletta, A. & Cross, W. E. (2013). Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication [e-book], New York: New York University Press, <https://www-jstor-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/stable/j.ctt9qgh5x>
- Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and Self-Identity, [e-book] Cambridge: Polity Press, https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/view/work/bibliographic_entity|bibliographic_details|4712194
- Goolaup, S. & Nunkoo, R. (2023). Reconceptualizing Tourists' Extraordinary Experiences. *Journal of Travel Research*, vol. 62, no. 2, pp.399–411, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875211064632>
- Holbrook, M. B., & Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The Experiential Aspects of Consumption: Consumer Fantasies, Feelings, and Fun. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp.132–140, <https://doi.org/10.1086/208906>
- Höpner, A., Almeida, S. O., & Brasil, V. S. (2022). The Rock in Rio Extraordinary Consumer Experience Journey: A Value-Based Approach. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp.92–106, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEFM-05-2021-0041>
- Husemann, K. C., Eckhardt, G. M., Grohs, R., & Saceanu, R. E. (2016). The Dynamic Interplay between Structure, Anastructure and Antistructure in Extraordinary Experiences. *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 69, no. 9, pp.3361–3370, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.02.008>
- Ironman Group. (2025a). How Do I Know If I'm Ready for an IRONMAN 70.3?, <https://www.ironman.com/news/how-do-i-know-if-im-ready-ironman-703> [Accessed 26 May 2026]

- Ironman Group. (2025b). Ironman Global Participation Trends Feature Youth Surge and Market Expansion, <https://www.ironman.com/news/ironman-global-participation-trends-feature-youth-surge-and-market-expansion> [Accessed 26 May 2026]
- Jensen, D. (2008a). Credibility, in L.M. Given (ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, pp.138–139
- Jensen, D. (2008b). Transferability, in L.M. Given (ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, p.886
- Jensen, D. (2008c). Confirmability, in L.M. Given (ed.) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, p.112
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic Methodological Review: Developing a Framework for a Qualitative Semi-structured Interview Guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 72, no. 12, pp.2954–2965, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>
- King, N., & Brooks, J. M. (2017). Template Analysis for Business and Management Students, [e-book] London: SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473983304>
- Knechtle, B., Knechtle, R., Stiefel, M., Zingg, M., Rosemann, T., & Rüst, C. A. (2015). Variables That Influence Ironman Triathlon Performance - What Changed in the Last 35 Years?. *Open Access Journal of Sports Medicine*, vol. 2015, no. 6, p.277-290, <https://doi.org/10.2147/OAJSM.S85310>
- Kozinets, R. V. (2001). Utopian Enterprise: Articulating the Meanings of Star Trek 's Culture of Consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 28, no. 1, pp.67–88, <https://doi.org/10.1086/321948>
- Kozinets, R. V. (2002). Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp.20–38, <https://doi.org/10.1086/339919>
- Lamont, M., & Kennelly, M. (2012). A Qualitative Exploration of Participant Motives Among Committed Amateur Triathletes, *Leisure Sciences*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp.236–255, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2012.669685>
- Lindberg, F., & Østergaard, P. (2015). Extraordinary Consumer Experiences: Why Immersion and Transformation Cause Trouble. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp.248–260, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1516>
- Luna-Cortés, G. (2017). The Influence of Symbolic Consumption on Experience Value and the Use of Virtual Social Networks [Influencia Del Consumo Simbólico En El Valor De La Experiencia Y El Uso De Las Redessociales Virtuales]. *Spanish Journal of Marketing - ESIC*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp.39–51, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sjme.2016.12.005>
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible Selves, *American Psychologist*, vol. 41, no. 9, pp.954–969, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954>
- Mick, D. G. & Buhl, C. (1992). A Meaning-Based Model of Advertising Experiences, *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp.317–338, <https://doi.org/10.1086/209305>
- Miguel-Ortega, Á., Rodríguez-Rodrigo, M.-A., Mielgo-Ayuso, J., & Calleja-González, J. (2025). Triathlon: Ergo Nutrition for Training, Competing, and Recovering. *Nutrients*, vol. 17, no. 11, p.1-47, <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu17111846>

- Mills, C. W. (1940). Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive. *American Sociological Review*, vol. 5, no. 6, pp.904-913, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2084524>
- Myburgh, E., & Kruger, M. (2022a). Do They Behave the Same? Identifying the Motives and Behavioural Intentions That Influence the Event Loyalty of Different Distance Triathletes. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, vol. 22, no. 3/4, p.211-242, <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSMM.2022.10048698>
- Myburgh, E., & Kruger, M. (2022b). A Self-Identification Typology of Endurance Sport Participants. *Event Management*, vol. 26, no. 6, pp.1235–1257, <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599522X16419948390844>
- Myburgh, E., Kruger, M., & Saayman, M. (2014a). A Motivation-Based Typology of Triathletes. *South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education and Recreation*, vol. 36, no. 3, pp.117–134, ISBN: 0379-9069
- Myburgh, E., Kruger, M., & Saayman, M. (2014b). Segmentation by Age of Triathletes Participating in Ironman South Africa. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp.1-21(n.p.), ISSN: 2223-814X
- Myburgh Marx, E., Kruger, M. & Saayman, M. (2014). First-Time versus Repeat Triathlon Participants at Ironman South Africa. *The African Journal for Physical, Health, Education, Recreation and Dance*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp.1010–1039
- Ohl, F. & Taks, M. (2007). Secondary Socialisation and the Consumption of Sporting Goods: Cross Cultural Dimensions. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, vol. 2, no. 1/2, p.160-174, <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSMM.2007.011406>
- Omeihe, K. O. & Harrison, C. (2024). Qualitative Research Methods for Business Students: A Global Approach, [e-book] London: Sage, ISBN: 9781529679458
- Prinz, J. (2019). IRON(O)MICS: The Market for Long-Distance Triathlon, in P. Downward, B. Frick, B.R. Humphreys, T. Pawlowski, J.E. Ruseski, B.P. Soebbing (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Sports Economics*, [e-book] London: SAGE Publications Ltd, pp.482–491, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526470447.n47>
- Ravitch, S. M. & Carl, N. M. (2021). Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological, [e-book], 2nd edn, London: SAGE, ISBN: 9781544333809
- Rokka, J., & Ulver, S. (2023). Consumer Identity Work: Identity and Consumption, in E. J. Arnould, C. J. Thompson, D. Crockett, & M. F. Weinberger (eds.), *Consumer Culture Theory* [e-book], 2nd edn, London: SAGE Publications, pp. 15-32, ISBN: 9781529614435
- Ronkainen, N. J., Kavoura, A., & Ryba, T. V. (2016). Narrative and Discursive Perspectives on Athletic Identity: Past, Present, and Future. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, vol. 27, pp.128–137, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2016.08.010>
- Rundio, A., Dixon, M. A., & Heere, B. (2020). “I’m a Completely Different Person Now”: Extraordinary Experiences and Personal Transformations in Sport. *Sport Management Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp.704–718, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2019.09.004>
- Schouten, J. W. (1991). Selves in Transition: Symbolic Consumption in Personal Rites of Passage and Identity Reconstruction. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 17, no. 4, p.412-425, <https://doi.org/10.1086/208567>

- Schouten, J. W., McAlexander, J. H. & Koenig, H. F. (2007). Transcendent Customer Experience and Brand Community. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp.357–368, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-007-0034-4>
- Scott, R., Cayla, J., & Cova, B. (2017). Selling Pain to the Saturated Self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 44, no. 1, pp.22–43, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucw071>
- Scussel, F., Suarez, M., & Petroll, M. (2023). Transformational Escapes: Accessing Consumer Transformation through Extraordinary Experiences. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, vol. 22, no. 5, pp.1199–1210, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.2203>
- Shenton, A. (2004). Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research Projects. *Education for Information*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 63-75, <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Shipway, R. M. (2010). On the Run: Perspectives on Long Distance Running, PhD thesis, Faculty of Health & Social Sciences, Bournemouth University, https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/16239/1/Library_Copy_PhD_Thesis_-_On_the_Run-_Richard_Shipway-25_August_2010.pdf
- TEAMCHALLENGE GmbH. (2024). Triathlon in Roth 2024 erreichte 342 Millionen Menschen - Steigerung der Gesamtreichweite um 6, <https://www.challenge-roth.com/de/news-area/triathlon-in-roth-2024-erreichte-342-millionen-menschen-steigerung-der-gesamtreichweite-um-6.html> [Accessed 26 May 2026]
- Thompson, C. J. (1997). Interpreting Consumers: A Hermeneutical Framework for Deriving Marketing Insights from the Texts of Consumers' Consumption Stories. *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol. 34, no. 4, p.438-455, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3151963>
- Thompson, J. B. (2013). The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media, [e-book] Cambridge: Polity, <https://research-ebsco-com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/linkprocessor/plink?id=55f5d3b8-a03c-3d53-91fb-107809ee035e>
- Tumbat, G., & Belk, R. W. (2011). Marketplace Tensions in Extraordinary Experiences. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp.42–61, <https://doi.org/10.1086/658220>
- Underwood, R., Bond, E., & Baer, R. (2001). Building Service Brands via Social Identity: Lessons from the Sports Marketplace. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp.1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2001.11501881>
- Varley, P. J. (2011). Sea Kayakers at the Margins: The Liminoid Character of Contemporary Adventures. *Leisure Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp.85–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614361003749801>

Appendix A – Interview Guide

1. Opening

- What is the purpose of this study/interview
- Consent for participation and recording (before the interview with a document and when starting the recording)

2. Warm-Up

- How did you get into endurance sports?
 - did you have any role models, family members or friends influence your decision? Or perhaps social media?
 - How?
- Can you tell me about your background in triathlon?
 - Reasons? Reason for starting triathlon?
 - With what discipline did you start?
- Are you training for a specific event right now?
- How does triathlon influence your daily life?
- How much time do you spent on training every week?
 - Are there situations where you put your triathlon training above something else? (e.g., no alcohol when going to dinner etc.)

3. Extraordinary Experiences

- What motivates you to participate in triathlon events (or Ironman)?
- Can you describe a particularly intense or memorable triathlon experience?
 - Why was it memorable?
 - Did you see a difference between different distances? (e.g., Ironman vs. Sprint)
 - How did it influence you as a person?
- Can you describe your emotions before, during and after the race?

4. Identity Construction

- Would you say triathlon reflects something about who you are?
- What does participating/training in/for a triathlon mean to you personally?
- Do you feel that the effort and sacrifices required for triathlon are worth the outcome? Why or why not?
 - Can you give an example of a moment when you questioned whether it was worth it?
- Has triathlon influenced how you see yourself as a person?
 - And how others see you?
- Would you say you define yourself as a triathlete or is it just a hobby?

5. Symbolic Consumption

5.1. *Visibility and Products used*

- Which items and brands do you use when participating in a triathlon? Does it vary in distances?
 - What watch/bike brand do you use? And why?

- How important is it for you to participate in branded triathlon events (e.g., Ironman)? And why?
- What do items you get at a race mean to you personally? (e.g., t-shirt, backpack)
 - Do you display them (e.g., at home, on social media)? Why or why not?

5.2. Body and Performance

- Do you think your body, fitness, or performance communicates something about you to others?
- Did the participation in the Ironman change how you/others see yourself?

5.3. Social Perception

- How do others react when they find out you do triathlon?
- Do you think people perceive you differently because of it?
 - Does this matter to you?

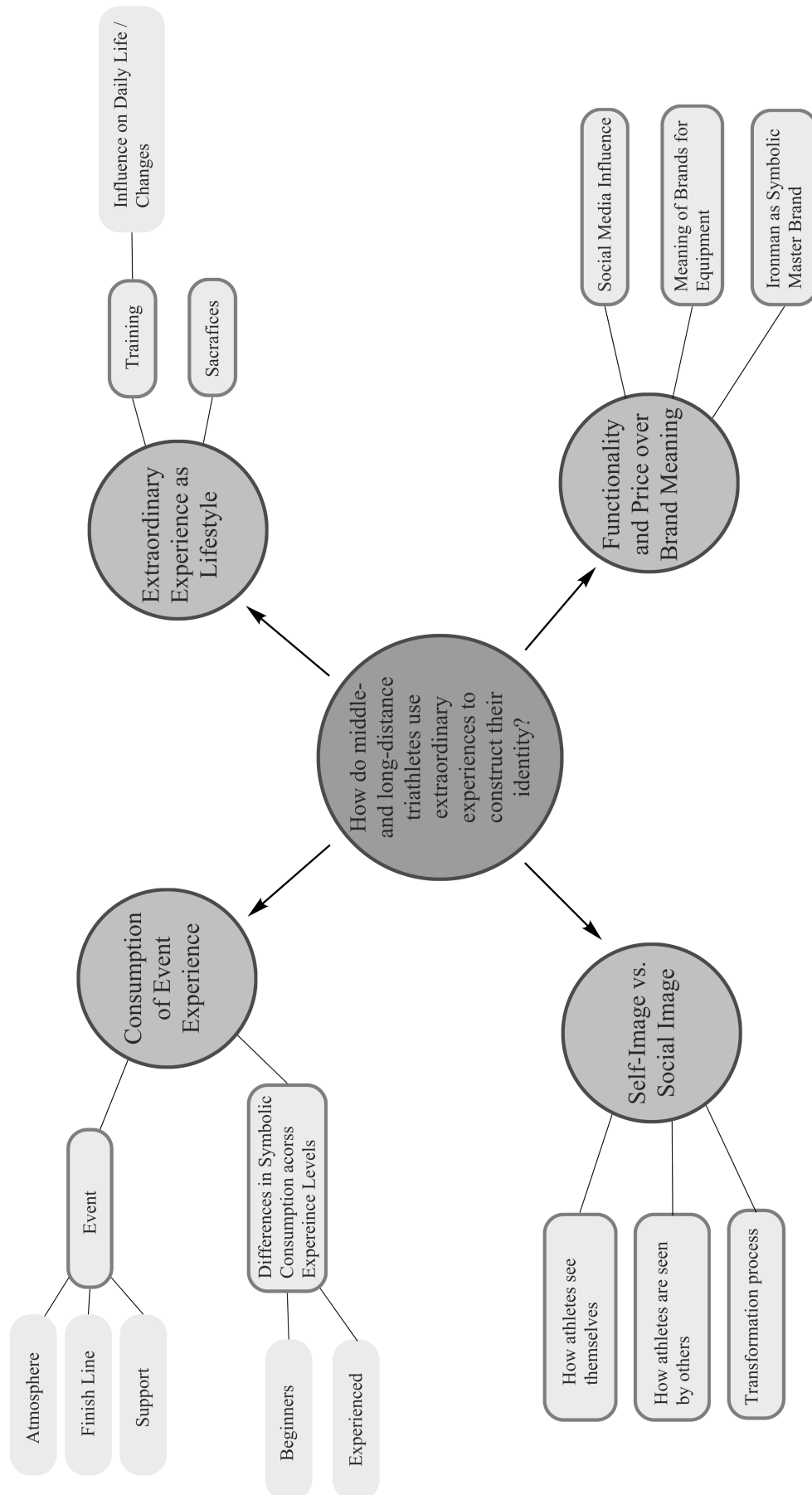
5.4. Communication and Self-presentation

- Do you talk about your participation with others?
- Do you share it on social media? Why / why not?
- In what situations do you mention it? (e.g., when meeting new people, at family gatherings, at work)

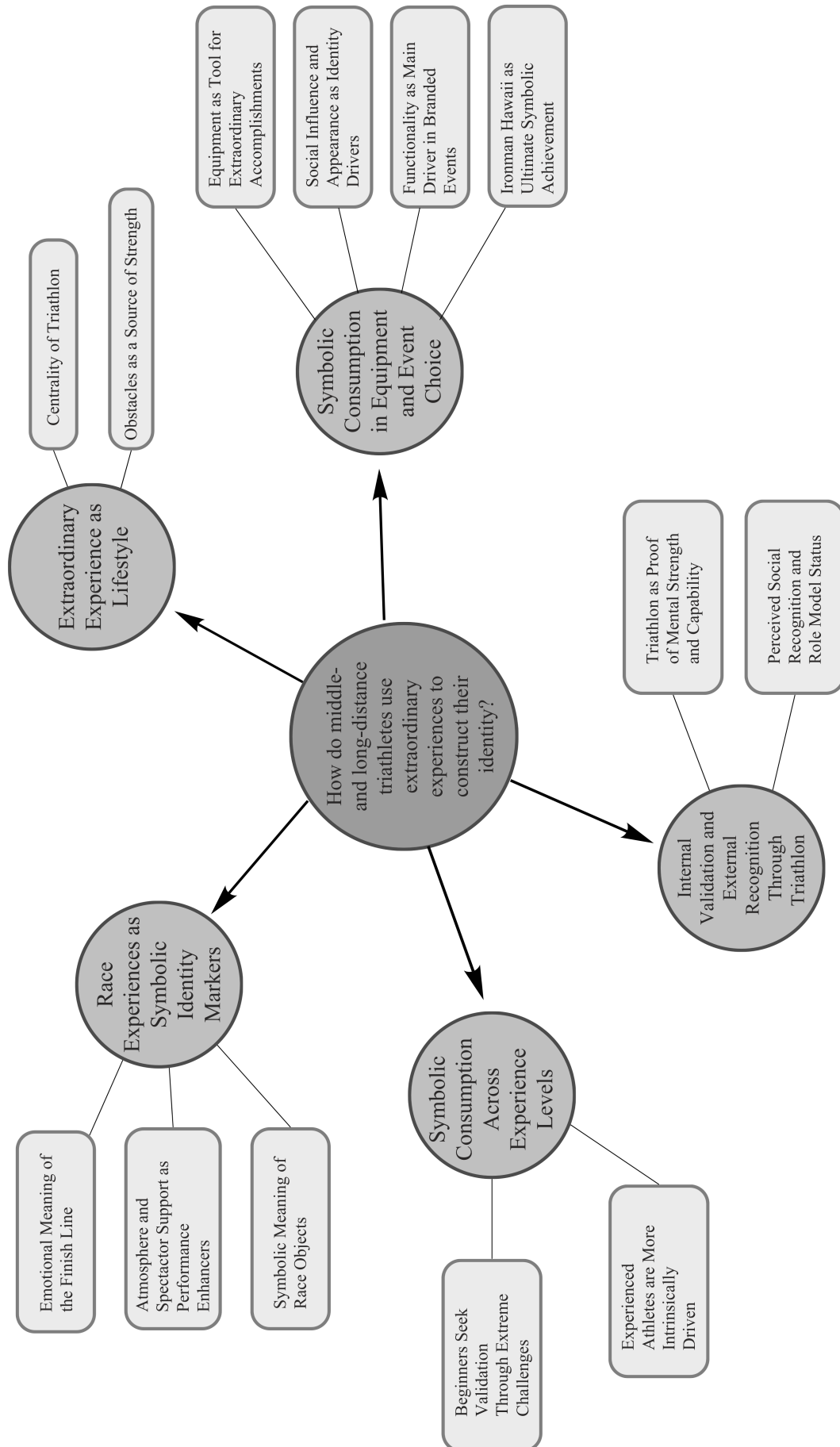
6. Closing

- If you had to summarize: what does triathlon say about who you are?
- Is there anything we haven't discussed that feels important?
- Thank you for participating...

Appendix B – Preliminary Coding Template



Appendix C – Final Coding Template



Appendix D – Declaration of AI Use

During the writing process of this paper, AI tools were used in a limited and supportive capacity.

Specifically, AI-assisted search functions (Scopus AI) were utilized to identify relevant academic literature and support the literature review process. Claude Ai was used to find literature and get feedback on the line of argument and the general structure of the text. Notebook LM and Anara were used to support the literature review process by summarizing articles during the initial stages of searching for literature.

Additionally, AI-based translation tools, including DeepL, Google Translate, ChatGPT, and Gemini were used to assist with translating interview phrases and refining language where necessary. Furthermore, AI was used to help with the refinement of headings.

All content was critically reviewed and validated by the author to ensure accuracy, relevance, and academic integrity. The use of AI was limited to support tasks and did not replace independent analysis, interpretation, or original writing.