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Guillaume Dumont, Mart Ots

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## **SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS IN PERSONAL BRANDING**

Guillaume Dumont

gdumont@em-lyon.com

Emlyon business School, OCE Research Center, 23 Avenue Guy de Collongue. 69130 Ecully,

France

Mart Ots

Mart.Ots@ju.se

Jönköping International Business School

Gjuterigatan 5, 553 18 Jönköping, Sweden

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## ***Abstract***

Personal branding is a rapidly growing phenomenon taking place in multistakeholder ecosystems. This article builds on ethnographic fieldwork from the rock-climbing industry in the US and Europe to show how stakeholders enable and shape the personal branding practices of professional climbers. Findings demonstrate that personal branding is a highly social practice wherein stakeholders provide three types of resources to elaborate personal brands: *material resources*, *informational resources*, and *symbolic resources*. In addition, six main conventions guiding stakeholders' relationships and enabling resource transfer are then identified and theorized. Finally, these findings are built upon to suggest a framework to analyze stakeholder cooperation in personal branding.

## ***Keywords:***

Personal branding, Personal brands, Stakeholder, Social worlds  
framework, Qualitative methods, Athletes

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Personal branding refers to the creation and management of personal brands by people who apply marketing principles to themselves for promotional purposes (Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Shepherd, 2005). This type of branding is a central concern for many professionals, such as athletes (e.g., Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013), models (e.g., Parmentier, Fisher, & Reuter, 2013), knowledge workers (e.g., Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013; Gandini, 2016), bloggers and influencers (e.g., Duffy & Hund, 2015; Erz & Christensen, 2018). People increasingly use social media to elaborate and disseminate a particular image of themselves (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2013). Scholars have described their motivations as self-serving and calculated (e.g., Hearn, 2008, 2010), embedded in the growing marketization of social relationships across professional contexts supported by digital technologies (Gandini, 2016).

This literature suggests that personal branding is a highly individual practice sharing similarities with product branding. However, brands are not created in isolation, but through the complex set of social relationships established among interrelated stakeholders (Michel, 2017; Von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, & Espersen, 2017). These stakeholders play active roles in branding processes by providing resources (Pera, Occhiocupo, & Clarke, 2016). They may have different expectations when collaborating with a brand (Jones, 2005), varying resources and power (Mäläskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011), and diverse backgrounds and norms (Hillebrand, Driessen, & Koll, 2015). Despite this acknowledgment of the role of stakeholders in branding, their potential participation in personal branding has received little attention. A consequence is that knowledge on the influence and role of stakeholders in the creation of personal brands remains limited to descriptive accounts of the multistakeholder ecosystems where personal brands are built.

The aim of this study is to inductively explore stakeholders' participation in personal branding. More specifically, we address the following research question: In an environment populated by multiple stakeholders, how do stakeholders enable and shape personal branding practices? With this aim, we draw upon an ethnographic study of professional climbers in Europe and the US. Being athletes, professional climbers present themselves as icons, incorporating specific products in crafting their lifestyle, documenting their climbs, and creating a thriving follower base supporting their personal branding practices (Author, 2016a, 2018a). The athletes develop close relationships with three interrelated groups of stakeholders: sponsors, media producers, and followers. This interdependence makes professional climbing a suitable context to study stakeholder participation in personal branding.

Herein, professional climbers' personal branding practices are analyzed in light of their relationships with sponsors, media producers, and followers. As a result, the exchanges of personal branding resources are empirically demonstrated and the social dynamics between professional climbers and sponsors, media producers, and followers are theorized. This study draws on the social world's framework (Becker, 1974, 1982), which focuses on identifying stakeholders and unpacking their participation, thus integrating the social interactions among stakeholders in the analysis of personal brand creation. By doing so, it shows that stakeholder participation in personal branding processes revolves around the exchange of three types of key resources. The exchange of resources among stakeholders is enabled by stakeholders' conformance to six specific conventions, representing the informal norms guiding stakeholders' interactions.

Therefore, the main empirical finding suggests that personal branding is a highly social practice wherein stakeholders are providers of resources crucial to the elaboration of personal brands. This article contributes to the growing body of research on personal branding by bringing the role of stakeholders to the fore. First, the participation of stakeholders in the

personal branding process is unpacked by empirically demonstrating their relationships. Second, two main aspects of stakeholders' participation are theorized – namely, the conventions governing the multistakeholder ecosystem, and the types of resources exchanged. It is suggested that identifying conventions is essential to understanding personal branding. Finally, by showing how individuals obtain resources from stakeholders, this article offers managerial insights into the rapidly growing practice of personal branding that are relevant for a number of workers who are creating their personal brands.

In the following sections, we present our theoretical background, including research on personal branding, stakeholder branding, and the social worlds framework, and the methods and data are presented. The main section examines of how each group of stakeholders relates to the focal group involved in personal branding, the professional climbers. Then, we theorize the conventions that shape their relationships, the resources exchanged via these relationships, and the implications for the creation of personal brands are theorized. Finally, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings and the limitations of this study are discussed.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Personal branding and personal brands**

The emergence of personal branding relates to the diffusion of an entrepreneurial mindset into the everyday life and work of self-employed professionals (Gandini, 2016; Pagis & Ailon, 2017). Described as personal branding (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005), human branding (Close, Moulard, & Monroe, 2011; Erz & Christensen, 2018), or self-branding (Shepherd, 2005), personal branding “entails capturing and promoting an individual’s strengths and uniqueness to a target audience” (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011, p. 39). Until recently,

most knowledge of personal branding was confined to practitioner publications advocating the creation of a personal brand to access greater work opportunities. Consequently, how people actually create their brands, the mechanisms underlying this process, and the similarities between personal brands and traditional brands have yet to be explored.

Moving beyond this literature, scholars have begun investigating whether the general principles of branding and brand management apply to personal branding. For instance, Parmentier et al. (2013) explore personal brand positioning in the field of fashion modeling. This study shows that the creation of personal brands by fashion models includes an operation of “documenting” involving different stakeholders and leading to the creation of a media content portfolio supporting the elaboration of the personal brand. Moreover, the collaboration between models and stakeholders from the fashion world helps create a personal brand that is consistent with the organizational field (Parmentier et al., 2013). In professional rock climbing, studies illustrate that the demonstration of upward affiliations with key people in the social world is considered central for documentation (Author, 2017).

Personal branding is also described as essential to enter the organizational field. In their study on social entrepreneurs’ personal branding practices, Bandinelli and Arvidsson (2013) show the salient importance of stakeholders’ validation of the personal brand. For social entrepreneurs to develop their social businesses, their personal brand must first enable other stakeholders who recognize them as “changemakers”. A consequence is that stakeholders’ validations of personal brands allow individuals to access resources, as Erz and Christensen (2018) demonstrate in the case of bloggers. Yet, personal branding is a low institutionalized field and these practices of validation are often informal.

Although the presence of stakeholders is implicitly acknowledged in a number of studies, their participation in personal branding processes remains unclear. For instance, Parmentier et al. (2013) show the constant interactions between fashion models with three

groups of stakeholders: photographers, agents, and stylists. Duffy and Hund (2015) note that bloggers' associations with external stakeholders might have implications for their personal brands as they might signal a lack of authenticity. The value of high-profile athletes' personal brands varies according to the growth of their followers or sponsorship contracts (Author, 2018b; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Parris, Troilo, Bouchet, & Peachey, 2014). A recent study (Centeno & Wang, 2017) suggests that key stakeholders participate in co-creating the identity of the human brands of celebrities (see also Erz & Christensen, 2018). However, by focusing primarily on the interactions between consumers and celebrities, this study omits an analysis of the role of all stakeholders involved.

## **2.2 The role of stakeholders in branding**

Whereas research on personal branding centers on the individual as the core of the creation of personal brands, a growing body of literature describes brands as open constructs (e.g., Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). From this perspective, the actions, interactions, engagements and endorsements of stakeholders shape brands (Jones, 2005; Vallaster & Von Wallpach, 2013). Past branding research primarily explored how one particular group of stakeholders – consumers, organized in brand communities – conducts value creating practices (e.g., Schau, Muñoz, & Arnould, 2009; Gambetti & Graffigna, 2015), performs roles and functions (Healy & McDonagh, 2013) while engaging in collaborative relationships with firms and brand owners (e.g., Hatch & Schultz 2010; Skålén, Pace, & Cova, 2015).

Scholars are paying increasing attention to the complex interdependence of multiple stakeholders (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013). Studies of service networks, for instance, have demonstrated how the performance of a firm's key partners is influential for customers' impressions of that firm's brand image (e.g., Fyrberg & Juriado, 2009). A consequence is that

brands appear “affected by, or [are] the sum of, a gamut of relationships” (Jones, 2005, p. 10), and the branding process is increasingly complex and beyond the control of any single actor (e.g., Von Wallpach et al., 2017; Da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013). Branding arises from nested stakeholder performances and reinterpretations, where all actors influence brands based on their own understandings and interests. In organizational and relational processes, brands are dynamic and branding is “socially complex” (Brodie, Benson-Rea, & Medlin, 2017).

Therefore, brand managers, customers, distributors, suppliers, partners, journalists, and other internal and external parties play various roles in the brand construction process. These roles can be exercised directly and knowingly as a partner or official collaborator in the branding process; or indirectly, influencing other stakeholders’ perceptions, decisions and behaviors (e.g., Mäläskä et al., 2011). Due to brands’ value-creating capacity, stakeholders gravitate around them (Fyrberg & Juriado, 2009), providing resources – material, financial, technological, and immaterial (knowledge, skills, reputation, legitimacy) – that enable the brands to develop (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Mäläskä et al., 2011). Relying on a repertoire of practices and procedures to guide their roles and relations with the brand, stakeholders perform a wide range of brand-shaping activities, including word-of-mouth marketing, endorsements and other forms of brand promotion, market intelligence, idea generation, product development, and network management (e.g., Mäläskä et al., 2011). In these nested relationships of social interaction, stakeholders not only provide branding resources and conduct branding activities, but also discursively negotiate and co-create brand meanings (e.g., Gregory, 2007; Vallaster & Von Wallpach, 2013). At any point in time, brands are seen to be constructed by multiple stakeholders’ subjective, and often contesting, meanings that are constantly challenged and reinterpreted as parties interact (Michel, 2017; Von Wallpach et al., 2017).

This complex interplay of exchange and influence illustrates the relevance of exploring stakeholders' roles and functions in the personal branding process. When exploring "fit" in ecosystems, scholars argue that stakeholder roles need to be "complementary" rather than "similar", which means that for value to be co-created, parties must bring different things to the table (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013). A consequence of this is that productive stakeholder collaborations require shared structures, such as shared goals and objectives (Healy & McDonagh, 2013), or shared procedural rules and understandings (Skålén et al., 2015). Drawing on this theoretical grounding, brands represent a complex set of social relationships among stakeholders (Michel, 2017; Von Wallpach et al., 2017). Inspired by these studies, we understand personal brands as being assembled across numerous practices and shaped by different stakeholders (Arvidsson, 2005; Jones, 2005). For this reason, we introduce the social worlds framework (Becker, 1974, 1982), and provide an alternative perspective to personal branding that involves collaborative practices among stakeholders while exemplifying their consequences for the personal branding process.

### **2.3 The social worlds framework**

To identify the different groups of stakeholders involved in personal branding and analyze their relationships, we use the social worlds framework (Becker, 1974, 1982) – that is, a sociological theory unpacking how stakeholder relationships enable the process of art production. The central thesis of this framework is that the production of an artwork has more to do with the institutions, organizations and everyday social interactions among the multiple stakeholders involved in the field, than with the genius or talent of the artist. The activities of these stakeholders are ruled by specific conventions. Consequently, the study of art production must shift the focus from the outcome of the production process (the artwork) to the social dynamics

among the stakeholders involved. The artist and the artwork are pieces of this social world, but by no means its center (Mears, 2011).

Using the social worlds framework to study personal branding means shifting the focus from the individuals building their personal brands to the social dynamics among interrelated stakeholders. Accordingly, rather than studying personal branding solely from the perspective of the individuals engaging in such practices (herein, professional climbers) the different stakeholders surrounding personal brands are acknowledged (herein, sponsor firms, media producers, and followers). Beyond merely acknowledging the presence of multiple stakeholders in the “personal branding field” (e.g., Parmentier et al., 2013), a key advantage of this framework is that it enables scholars to identify each group of stakeholders and to study their participation in personal branding. Three concepts of this framework are useful for the analysis of personal branding developed in this article: social worlds, conventions, and cooperation.

First, the concept of *social worlds*, which refers to “the networks of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things”, produces certain outputs for which the social world is noted (Becker, 1982, p. x). Second, cooperative activity among stakeholders, which may involve arrangements of activities on the production and consumption sides, is organized, regulated and stabilized via *conventions*. Convention applies to the shared understandings of how to do things in a specific context, which in this study is personal branding. Third, to achieve *cooperation*, stakeholders rely on earlier and customary agreements that establish the conventional ways of doing things (Becker, 1974). Cooperation takes place without assuming that all people involved share the same goal (Hammoun, 2009), as not all stakeholders intend to directly contribute to the construction of professional personal brands. However, in personal branding ecosystems, stakeholders are interrelated and collaborate (e.g., Parmentier et al., 2013). The concept of

cooperation recognizes this interrelatedness of activities and interactions that support resource exchanges.

This framework is useful for investigating the role of stakeholders because it includes parties who at first sight appear to be peripheral to personal branding, thereby highlighting the social dynamics, the exchange of resources, and the mechanisms that govern the overall process. In the section that follows, we identify the conventions governing stakeholder cooperation to analyze stakeholders' roles and their different layers of participation in personal branding.

### **3. METHOD AND DATA**

#### **3.1 Fieldwork**

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in the US and Western Europe between 2011 and 2014, combining participant observation; semi-structured interviews; and photo, video, and text recordings. Ethnography is well-suited to grasp the relationship between “what people do” and what people “say they do” (Cayla & Arnould, 2013). More specifically, it is useful to engage with the individuals' experiences from their point of view (Belk, 2006), uncovering the social dynamics in which personal branding is embedded and the practices it builds on. Methodologically breaking from most of the past scholarship that focused on social media interactions or on the individuals involved in personal branding, this ethnographic fieldwork was valuable to observe the numerous aspects of personal branding that are not apparent online. For instance, it was possible to interact with the climbers and discuss which pictures they selected in tandem with observing the reception of this content on social media. Furthermore, data was gathered from these climbers about how the information provided by their followers'

reception of social media content helped redefine this strategy. Since ethnographic fieldwork work is traditionally inclusive of the multiple actors from the research setting, it was a useful approach to overcome a limiting focus on professional climbers alone. This allowed for the collection of data from media producers, sponsor firms and followers, supporting this paper's analysis of the multistakeholder environment.

[TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

*Participant observation:* This study's dataset consists of participant observations in 60 field-site locations and includes 350 photos, 170 screenshots, 1 460 video clips, 47 full-length movies, and eight talk shows. The first author accompanied several research participants on climbing trips and competitions, attended public presentations and movie projections, and assisted in the discovery and creation of new climbs and the production of media content. Online participation and observation were conducted on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Data collection also involved climbers' blogs and websites, climbing media, and amateurs' self-produced content. Photographs, tweets, and Facebook and Instagram commentaries were gathered and analyzed. The information was compiled in a field diary. By spending days alongside professional climbers in the field and observing their practices, a fine understanding was developed of how they used social media to picture and disseminate their everyday climbing- and non-climbing-related activities. Observing these practices was highly valuable to acknowledge their embeddedness in the relationships between climbers and media producers, sponsor firms, and followers.

*Semi-structured interviews:* The dataset was complemented with 48 recorded and transcribed semi-structured interviews that provided valuable information on the participants' perspectives

of their social worlds and allowed specific questions to be asked (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1998). Interviews were conducted with 22 professional climbers and 15 photographers, filmmakers and journalists. Finally, interviews were conducted with 11 industry members, including coaches and agents who are in close contact with athletes. Participants were selected based on their modality of practice, the type of sponsors, and the basis of already established contacts (Author, 2014, 2018). Additional contacts were generated using snowball sampling techniques combined with direct solicitations. Each interview lasted an average of one to three hours and included a framework of questions articulating several main themes and sub-questions, which were adapted to the interview (see appendix 1).

### 3.2 Analysis

The analytical procedure included content analysis of the interviews and field diary. Both were organized and analyzed through keyword selection and searches. As is common in ethnographic research (e.g., Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012), part of the analysis was conducted iteratively during fieldwork and used to guide subsequent participant observations and interviews. Content analysis was conducted without performing coding strategies, but by manually looking for and establishing relationships in the dataset. This was because it was found that when analyzing practices with a very low level of formalization, codes reduce the creation of accurate relationships within the data. While codes are useful to classify the data for analysis, particularly when conducting comparisons, they can also mask subtleties and the fine-grained nature of the data.

To identify stakeholders, we first examined the practices performed by climbers to gain visibility, primarily by creating and publishing media content (pictures, videos, texts) through different channels (personal websites and social media platforms, specialized press). Because visibility-enhancing activities are often embedded in sponsoring relationships, we looked at the relationships between the climbers' activities and the content of the sponsorship contracts. Media producers are so important that their role was examined in this process. As sponsors and media producers maintain close relationships, we also analyzed the role both groups of stakeholders played in personal branding practices. Finally, we examined how the ongoing conversations between climbers and their followers had a potential impact on personal branding. To compile and visualize this information, we created tables, which outlined how the different levels and types of cooperation among actors were at the core of personal branding.

To ensure the quality of the analysis, we used a triangulation procedure that combined methodological tools and data sources. When a key theme was identified, we searched the data

for related information and refined the key themes and categories. The field diary was very useful for identifying these themes, and the semi-structured interviews provided valuable detailed information to contrast what was found from the field diary. Furthermore, since 22 professional climbers were interviewed, we compared interviews to verify the transversal nature of these themes among interviewees. This was useful to balance the lower number of interviews with industry members. As a result, the information from each climber could be compared and a broader picture could be drawn of how personal branding practices were embedded in the relationships between climbers, sponsors, media producers and followers.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

The analysis of ethnographic data unpacks the main stakeholders' roles in the personal branding practices of professional climbers. Climbing constitutes a social world comprising four major stakeholders:

- professional climbers, who are major celebrities in their sport and holders of sponsorship contracts;
- sponsor firms of the outdoor industry, such as Patagonia, The North Face, or Adidas Outdoor;
- media producers working with professional climbers and sponsor firms to produce media content;
- followers consuming climbing-related media content and products from sponsor firms. Followers are fans who interact in different ways with athletes.

Figure 1 represents this social world, positioning professional climbers at the center, as they represent the “persons” on which the personal brands are built.

[FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

This analysis draws particular attention to the relationships between professional climbers and the three groups of interrelated stakeholders, with a focus on the personal branding practices. The presentation of findings centers specifically on two dimensions of these relationships: the resources exchanged between professional climbers and each stakeholder group, followed by the conventions structuring this exchange. *Resource exchange* refers to the transfer of specific resources with implications for the personal brand, and *associated conventions* are the shared understanding structuring these exchanges. Finally, the participation of each stakeholder group in personal branding is detailed by showing the implications of the resources exchanged on personal brand creation.

#### **4.1 Professional climbers and sponsor firms**

The exchange of financial, material and informational resources structures the relationships between professional climbers and sponsor firms. Professional climbers receive monetary payments, equipment, and services; attend events; and provide sponsor firms with access to online and offline audiences. Table 2 lays out the three conventions governing their relationships: brand assimilation, professional acceptance, and socio-affective bonding. These conventions are based on formal contractual arrangements and informal norms, mutual understandings, and personal relationships.

[TABLE 2 AROUND HERE]

#### 4.1.1 Resource exchanges and associated conventions

Professional climbers perform multiple work tasks for sponsor firms. Josh, an American professional climber, explains:

*I kinda have a classic athlete role, which is being used as marketing material, and [act] as a brand ambassador, appearing at events, signing posters and all that stuff, but I am also helping out with the development of the team, marketing strategies, event development and partnerships and stuff like that.*

Josh performs these tasks for most of his seven sponsors, although he does not always receive monetary compensation. He clarifies: “I am paid by four of my sponsors. They give me a yearly paycheck. The other three give me gear, but no bucks.” Accordingly, this study’s findings show that the relationships between professional climbers and sponsor firms can be limited to the exchange of climbing gear.

The production and dissemination of media content are central to the everyday work of professional climbers and are often guided by their relationship with the sponsor firms (Author, 2016a). Jenny, a team manager at a leading US-based producer of climbing shoes, makes this clear while explaining her expectations about the athletes she oversees:

*I expect my athletes to send pictures and videos frequently; top athletes must send pictures every week and a video per month. That’s logical, as part of their job is to get the views and the coverage, and then there is a public relations team in the company that checks how visibility has been created by the athletes.*

The salient importance of media work is corroborated by professional climbers. They describe being constantly under pressure to produce and disseminate pictures and video clips, but also to be active on social media. Josh is particularly explicit in this regard:

*Every day, I post a video. I do a video of myself... training, climbing... I publish comments and explain how I feel, give updates – depending on the day – on Facebook, for instance, where it is really easy to do so – like posting a picture of myself climbing, training, or having a coffee.*

Josh and Jenny outline that the relationship between sponsor firms and professional climbers is structured by the former's expectations of the latter to constantly produce media content and gain visibility. The exchange of resources involves material support (e.g., climbing gear) from sponsor firms, media content (e.g., photos and video), and additional services provided by professional climbers. Three main conventions govern these exchanges.

The first convention, *brand assimilation*, revolves around the need to create, visualize, and disseminate associations between professional climbers and sponsor firms. For instance, Josh frequently displays the logo of the brands of his sponsors in his pictures, videos, and comments posted on social media. This recurrent practice is a core convention of the relationships between professional climbers and sponsors. It shapes the production of media content where brand assimilations are created, displayed and disseminated as professional climbers display the products and logos of their sponsors in everyday activities.

It was found that these relationships are often governed by a second convention with a strong emotional dimension: *socio-affective bonding*. Most informants explain sharing close and long-term bonds with their sponsors (Author, 2016a). Josh describes this convergence of the commercial and the socio-affective as: “We have a relationship that is work, of course, but

[it is] also really personal, you know. I know these people; I know them really well, and it is much like a friendship.”

This convention has several implications for sponsorship. Existing emotional ties might jeopardize the development of additional collaborations with other sponsors for loyalty reasons, but also help the exchange of resources within established relationships. For instance, during informal fieldwork interviews and participant observation, professional climbers often explain that the feedback and tips from well-acquainted team managers and sponsor employees with whom they share close relationships provide useful directions to develop their personal brand.

In addition to economic and informational resources, sponsor relationships also provide climbers with the symbolic resources required to build personal brand legitimacy and to validate their status as professionals rather than amateurs. Alexandra, a renowned professional climber, explains that sponsorships help amateur climbers present themselves as “professionals”, even though they are not being paid by sponsor firms:

*They [the amateurs] try to impress people by saying, “I am a professional climber; you should sponsor me!” In their mind, everyone who is sponsored is a professional climber. And in the US, a professional climber is anybody who has sponsorship and says, “I am a professional climber”, even if they make 300 USD a month, that’s all.*

The validation of professional status is a third convention we called *professional acceptance*. The excerpt above illustrates that professional acceptance is needed to create personal brand value as professional climbers and that associations with sponsor firms constitute symbolic resources creating legitimacy. Sponsor firms do this in practice by, for example, creating and

promoting teams composed of the unestablished low-income climbers who Alexandra describes as amateurs. In other terms, amateur climbers must build their personal brand by first presenting themselves as professional climbers and then turn existing gear sponsorship into monetary sponsorship. This emic understanding demonstrates that symbolic resources are essential in elaborating and validating the personal brand.

#### *4.1.2 Implications for personal branding: Strategic sponsor selection and brand narratives*

The conventions and resource exchanges have two major implications for personal branding: they inform the creation of a brand narrative and provide information to orient the selection of sponsor firms. Firstly, sponsor firms influence the personal brand narrative by guiding the everyday activities of the professional climbers who they support. These activities are photographed and filmed, and this media content is then used to create the climbers' personal brands. Secondly, the strategic selection of sponsor firms refers to how professional climbers choose their sponsor relationships based on the potential fit between their personal brands and those of the sponsor firms.

The study's findings show that many sponsor firms tend to position themselves toward either adventurous rock climbing or competitive climbing. With this aim, the firms scout and endorse professional climbers whose everyday climbing activities and lifestyles corroborate and contribute to their brand narratives. Both stakeholder groups describe "fit" as essential because it shapes climbing activities and the narratives climbers elaborate to create their personal brands. Consider the following example from Morgan, a professional climber who stopped competing to focus on outdoor rock climbing after having won titles in world cups and world championships:

*I wanted to get out of competition climbing, but these firms wouldn't have sponsored me for that. Now, my new sponsors don't want me to go to competitions. They don't. In fact, they are much more interested if I go rock climbing.*

Maintaining past sponsorship contracts was highly challenging for Morgan. His move from competition to rock climbing forced Morgan to secure new sponsors whose brand narratives were coherent with his activities. Consequently, Morgan intends to secure contracts with sponsor firms whose brand narratives center around the outdoor and lifestyle dimension of climbing. In summary, by supporting certain climbing and lifestyle practices, sponsor firms influence the elaboration of the personal brand narratives, with implications for how climbers choose between the offers from different sponsors. Furthermore, Morgan explains why he refused a well-remunerated contract from Adidas:

*I already refused Adidas a couple of times; I disagree with their marketing. I don't think that Adidas has the... I don't know, has the soul of the climbers. Adidas belongs to other sports. When I see someone climbing with the three stripes on their clothes, it's just weird!*

The selection of sponsor firms is essential for professional climbers because they direct personal branding practices. However, many professional climbers have limited offers from sponsors, thus restricting their choice of potential future climbing activities, lifestyles, and associated brand narratives. Therefore, the relationships between professional climbers and sponsor firms are not limited to economic exchange, but involve adopting specific practices and lifestyles. This suggests that sponsor firms as a stakeholder group have direct implications for the creation of personal brands.

## 4.2 Professional climbers and media producers

Professional climbers are the actors, stars and models of a dramatized plot crafted via media content. Media content is typically produced by working with media producers, who provide the pictures and videos used to craft the personal brand narrative. Table 3 shows that the relationships between professional climbers and media producers support the exchange of two main types of resources: material resources (media content), and symbolic resources (prestigious associations). Two conventions structure these exchanges. First, the expectation to document climbing activities and lifestyles; and second, the embeddedness of these activities in a communicative narrative and the creative style typical for the media producer. We named these conventions *documenting* and *style alignment*.

[TABLE 3 AROUND HERE]

#### 4.2.1 Resource exchanges and associated conventions

Professional climbers demonstrate and share the outputs of their activities with sponsor firms by providing them with media content. With this aim, they produce their own photographs and videos, but also collaborate with photographers and filmmakers who are the primary stakeholders documenting climbing activities and lifestyles. Lucie, a European photographer, explains:

*They are high-profile climbers, and their job is being in pictures, climbing for their sponsors, etc... They need it [the content] as a feedback to sponsors, to justify the money they make, and then when they do something big, it needs to be shot, you know. They need media content; thus, they need media producers.*

Lucie illustrates the multiple activities serving the purpose of documenting, which operates as a convention structuring the relationships between media producers and professional climbers. Documenting is of salient importance since climbing activities often take place in remote locations and the exchange of media content is at the core of the relationships between professional climbers and sponsor firms.

Professional climbers highlight the influence of sponsor firms on their work with media producers, because media content must be aligned with their branding strategies. Consider the following example from Juan, a Spanish photographer. During the interview, one of his pictures for a commercial advertisement was reviewed and he explains: “I shot this picture for Patagonia last year and, of course, the picture is much different than if I was working for Red Bull.” When asked to explain the difference, Juan said:

*First, the choice of the clothing would have been different. Not only because of the companies, of course, but also because of the style of the clothes. Red Bull is much more “sport-oriented”, while Patagonia is lifestyle and adventure. Then, I wouldn’t have placed the guitar there if the picture would have been for Red Bull. Also, the final editing would have been different. Look at the colors of this picture, for instance.*

The image shot for Red Bull differs in terms of stylization, presentation of the climber, and the choice of the background and lights. This becomes clear when Juan details how the respective branding narratives of the two sponsor firms shape his work. Overall, these excerpts outline that media producers are essential for professional climbers to have media content aligned with the brand narrative of sponsor firms. We define the need to produce this type of media content as *style alignment*, which is the second convention structuring the relationship between media producers and professional climbers. These relationships are shaped by a mutual dependence, as illustrated by Gregory, a French filmmaker, who shares his view on working with professional climbers:

*They are models; they are acting as [people do] in other areas like cinema and other [industries]... and without them, I cannot do my job. I don’t have any actors... and if I do not have any actors, I cannot do my job. Thus, we mutually contribute to each other.*

The use of the terms “model” and “actor” reveals the importance of elaborating a public persona as part of the personal branding process. Media producers participate in this process through the production and dissemination of media content. Conversely, professional climbers

are essential for media producers because, as Gregory explains, they constitute the subject of their work.

Finally, working with renown climbers is valuable for media producers. This is because climbers' reputations facilitate the dissemination of the media content, as Mattie, an American photographer, outlines while explaining the implications of working with two well-known climbers: "When I work with Chris Sharma, I am sure that I will sell most of the pictures very soon," and "because of working with Alex Honnold, I started developing more relationships with The North Face." This quote illustrates the symbolic dimension of the exchange, as both professional climbers and media producers benefit from their respective reputation and visibility.

#### *4.2.2 Implications for personal branding: Stylistic expression*

A main implication for personal branding is that media producers help turn climbing activities into unique narratives. Style alignment is a convention referring to the search for alignment between the climbing activities, the climbers' lifestyles and the branding narratives of the sponsor firms. The implication of this guidance in creating unique stories is called *stylistic expression*.

To align the climbers' personal brands with the brand narratives of the sponsor firms, the expertise and work of photographers and filmmakers are essential and lead to the creation of aligned content. Jessie, a professional climber who was presenting a recent movie at a climbing festival at the time of the interview, explains that the creative and alternative nature of the work of a specific filmmaker motivated their collaboration to produce the movie: "We worked with this guy for our last movie; he's a true genius! He is a real artist that I love; what he does is artwork, not only movies, so he stands out!" Jessie is interested in the specific style

of this filmmaker, as his uniqueness relates to his non-climbing background, and his climbing movies differ strongly from the stories created by other media producers. According to Jessie, this is because the filmmaker uses the following in his movies: songs that vary from the traditional music canon used in climbing movies, alternative and original angles to shoot climbers, and unique narratives by building interesting stories about climbers' lives. Jessie also uses the images and video clips created during their collaboration in his personal branding strategies, as this media content helps him craft, picture and disseminate a specific brand narrative.

Stylistic expression has important implications for personal branding, as detailed by filmmaker Sebastian below. The following excerpt demonstrates that *stylistic expression* relates to the creation of a specific storyline. More specifically, Sebastian explains how the narrative thread of the story revolves around a subtle selection and presentation of events from the climber's life:

*We have already developed a story that focuses on his struggle to become a well-known climber outside of Europe, and his crazy training methods and how he makes a living and the kind of pressure that he puts on himself and the kind of pressure that his family puts on him. So, when we go, we already have an idea, [a] first story, that helps us focus on collecting shots that support that story.*

The selection of these lifestyle elements and their articulation into a meaningful story is essential to inspire followers and increase personal brand value by building a sense of uniqueness. Overall, the relationships between media producers and professional climbers provide media content and style alignment, as well as shape the directions taken by the personal brands.

### 4.3 Cooperation between professional climbers and followers

Professional climbers deploy social media strategies to create and develop a base of followers. As a stakeholder group, followers provide qualitative information (e.g., how the personal brand is perceived) and quantitative information (e.g., the number of social media followers) central to the process of personal branding. Table 4 shows that the main resources exchanged through these relationships are informational and symbolic. The core convention structuring this exchange is *reliability*, and the implication for the creation of the personal brand revolves around *feedback and inspiration*.

[TABLE 4 AROUND HERE]

#### 4.3.1 Resource exchanges and associated conventions

Followers constitute an extended network supporting the development, dissemination and reach of climbers' personal brands. One reason is that followers comment, like, and repost the media content published by professional climbers, photographers and filmmakers, and sponsor firms. Professional climbers thrive on the support of a growing number of followers. Marcus, a professional climber, describes how he aims to inspire people by making climbing look appealing and accessible to followers:

*My thing is to invent new stuff. I try to make people dream, and I want every climber, everyone who sees me [to] think that this [climbing] is accessible. How can I say... [I want to] introduce climbing to everyone, you know! I say [that] I am*

*accessible; I climb hard, but when we do a climb well, next to it there is also a 7a [easier climb]. You inspire people and do not present yourselves as you are; [if you do so] you don't speak to anyone, you don't generate anything, you just do it for you, and this is not the goal!*

The quote outlines how support must be gained by creating and disseminating appealing content that inspires people. Hence, a core convention structuring the relationship between professional climbers and followers is *relatability*. It represents the need for professional climbers to provide followers with a sense of identification that deepens their relationship. This is accomplished by demonstrating ordinariness, searching for a delicate balance between the exceptional and the mundane without downplaying their skills (see also Author, 2016b).

Professional climbers are expected to present themselves as accessible, and followers provide them with feedback about how they experience and perceive the content and picture the activities of the climbers. Marcel, a French professional climber, advises:

*They [the followers] are truly cool. I have tons of feedback on my climbs from people I meet on the street, for example, and this is really cool; it's really impressive. They don't tell me "you're the best" ... but they tell me that... they give me the sensation that with what I do, I do something unique, which stands out, and they find it cool.*

For Marcel, the face-to-face feedback and the comments from followers on his Facebook, YouTube or Instagram posts are sources of information about how the media content is experienced. Like other informants in this study, Marcel also experiences negative comments,

and explains that one of his videos was poorly received by followers as they denounced the self-centered nature of the content that was perceived as narcissistic.

While professional climbers provide followers with entertainment, inspiration and a sense of identification by making their everyday work and life public, followers facilitate professional climbers with key informational and symbolic resources. These resources include information that guides personal branding strategies and increases personal brand value – notably when followers express and disseminate comments and notes about the personal brands of the professional climbers they follow. As followers consume the product of sponsor firms, sponsor firms use the number of followers as an indicator of the value of the personal brand.

#### *4.3.2 Implications for personal branding: Feedback and inspiration*

The findings show that the information provided by followers has two main implications for personal brands. As professional climbers must demonstrate intimacy, accessibility and relatability to followers rather than being introverted or exclusive, building appealing content and narratives to create the personal brand relies on the combination of exceptional skills and achievements with mundane, ordinary, and normal activities.

Online practices provide an example of this aspect – for instance, during an observation of the Facebook debates and Instagram contests launched by professional climbers. They encourage followers to express their opinions by retweeting or regramming their posts, creating an “intertextual, physical and virtual space” that is necessary for branding (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 247). Therefore, followers not only play an active role in contributing to the dissemination of content, but also provide information to professional climbers, media producers, and sponsor firms. The implications for personal branding is explained by Marcus, who states that a recent

picture of his children posted on Facebook generated more likes and comments than a photo of him doing a climb:

*The other day, we posted a picture of the kids while we were at a cliff in the South of France, and you know what? The pic received many more “likes” than the one of Nancy [his girlfriend] climbing this very hard route two days ago. Then, of course, this makes us think about what we post!*

This excerpt emphasizes how followers’ feedback on the content used in personal branding strategies leads climbers to adjust the content elaborated. Similar observations were made about the function of user comments published on climbers’ YouTube and Vimeo pages. As most informants explained, this information helps orient the narratives they craft in their videos or the choice of music to set the ambiance, for instance. Consequently, developing a follower base and gathering essential information from these stakeholders are two crucial personal branding practices.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study contributes to the personal branding literature by exploring the practices deployed by professional rock climbers to create their personal brands in a multistakeholder ecosystem. By describing and analyzing the participation of multiple stakeholders, we extend our understanding of personal branding beyond previous studies’ primary focus on the motives and practices of the branded individual. This study builds on a rich body of ethnographic data and the social worlds framework was introduced to unpack how the relationships among stakeholders are established and contribute to the personal branding process. Findings show

that stakeholders' relationships are central to enabling and shaping the personal branding process, as they provide three types of key resources to individuals building their personal brand. Moreover, findings outline that the exchange of resources is governed by six conventions that represent stakeholders' understanding of "how things are done" within the social world under study. As personal branding is mainly an informal practice, we suggest that conventions are of particular importance to access resources. In the section that follows, we discuss the role of conventions and resources exchange in light of prior literature on personal branding. Finally, three managerial insights derived from these findings are presented.

### **5.1 The conventions of personal branding**

Personal branding occurs in social contexts where multiple stakeholder groups coexist and collaborate. A consequence is that brand value is created by the social relationships among the stakeholders gravitating around the individuals engaged in creating their personal brands (Gandini, 2016). Other consequences are that stakeholders contribute to the validation of the personal brand (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013; Erz & Christensen, 2018) and provide media content and additional resources supporting the construction of the personal brands (Parmentier et al., 2013). Our findings corroborate observations that stakeholders might contribute to personal branding, but extend these studies by demonstrating and theorizing the central participation of stakeholders – that is, media producers, followers and sponsors – in the personal branding process. More specifically, this research highlights that six conventions guide their participation. These conventions have been grouped as they relate to three core and interrelated components of the personal branding processes: a) the creation of personal brand content, b) the social relationships in which the personal brands are embedded, and c) the validation of the personal brand.

a) This study contributes to research on the creation of personal brand content (e.g., Duffy & Hund, 2015; Parmentier et al., 2013) by showing that two main conventions guide content creation. The first convention, *documenting*, relates to the need to produce media content to elaborate the personal brand and to contribute to its dissemination. The second, *style alignment*, emphasizes the alignment between the individual practices of the professional climbers as presented via media content and the brand narratives of other stakeholders – herein, sponsor brands.

b) The findings corroborate studies suggesting that personal brand value is developed through social relationships among stakeholders (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Gandini, 2016). These studies are expanded upon by theorizing two conventions governing this aspect of personal branding. The first is *relatability*, which is the creation of a feeling of intimacy between the branded persona and the audience; and the second is *socio-affective bonding*, which refers to the emotional nature of the relationships established between the individuals and the groups of stakeholders.

c) Finally, recent studies offer insights on how stakeholders participate in the validation of the personal brand (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013; Erz & Christensen, 2018). It is suggested that this process is driven by two conventions of the social world: *brand assimilation*, in regard to the practices of making visual manifestations of stakeholder relationships (e.g., by displaying logos); and *professional acceptance*, which refers to the emic understanding of what constitutes a valuable personal brand within a specific social world. These conventions contribute to the notion of stakeholder validation by unpacking the micro-social practices supporting the creation of consensus around the personal brand, and facilitating subsequent exchange of resource between stakeholders.

By identifying and theorizing these conventions, this study is useful in providing a holistic understanding of the informal norms governing stakeholder participation in personal

branding. Previous studies introduced three of the six conventions identified in the empirical material: professional acceptance (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013; Erz & Christensen, 2018), relatability, and documenting (Parmentier et al., 2013). We advance these studies by providing empirical evidence of three additional conventions and by theorizing them as: 1) brand assimilation, 2) professional acceptance, and 3) socio-affective bonding.

Overall, the inductively developed perspective suggests that the creation of a valuable personal brand unfolds according to these six conventions. The generalizable insight is that, because stakeholders play an active and multifaceted role in personal branding, individuals must learn and act according to these conventions. Furthermore, the findings also corroborate previous research by showing the informal nature of personal branding (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Parmentier et al., 2013). Its informal nature suggests that conventions are of salient importance beyond the case of professional rock climbers. As the modalities of collaboration among stakeholders are not systematically and explicitly defined, this study's analysis of the conventions could be applied to various other contexts. Indeed, conventions represent the shared norms and rules enabling stakeholder participation in personal branding.

## **5.2 The resources of personal branding**

This study also contributes to studies outlining that personal branding is a set of practices revolving around an intensive use of social media with the aim of building a public persona (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Labrecque et al., 2011; Marwick, 2013). Individuals strive to create a unique personal brand personality (Dion & Arnould, 2016) by “standing out while fitting in” (Parmentier et al., 2013), as well as by establishing relationships with different stakeholders (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Erz & Christensen, 2018). Surprisingly, while personal branding activities and practices require different resources, few studies have examined how individuals

secure these resources. In this context, we suggest that resource exchange is a major dimension of stakeholders' participation in personal branding and that the resources required can be divided into three categories.

Firstly, the findings highlight that stakeholders offer the *material resources* used to create the personal brand. In this case, material resources include finance, the apparel that is used to demonstrate the associations with stakeholders, and the media content provided by media producers. These resources serve the purpose of brand assimilation, as they support the creation of visible associations with stakeholders through the production and dissemination of media content. Previous studies have associated personal branding with the penetration of a commercial endeavor in personal life (Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Shepherd, 2005). Nevertheless, we demonstrate the complex overlapping of personal branding practices with commercially oriented activities shaped by stakeholders, in this case sponsor firms and media producers.

Secondly, the study reveals the importance of *informational resources*, which are the information and knowledge about the different stakeholders needed to build *brand narratives* and *stylistic expression*. As for the celebrities described by Centeno and Wang (2017), interacting with fans via social media is essential to creating the value of the personal brand. Findings demonstrate that the information provided by these interactions is useful for orienting the design and deployment of personal branding strategies as they integrate feedback and inspiration from stakeholders. Therefore, informational resources might support the strategic sponsor selection, too (e.g., Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Finally, the *symbolic resources* provided by stakeholder relationships and the publicity around these associations are outlined. This corroborates prior observations that strategic collaboration with specific stakeholders can increase the value of a personal brand (e.g., Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2012; Parmentier et al., 2013). Research found evidence of symbolic resources in the importance given by stakeholders to their mutual reputation and the role of

reputational spillover among them, which support the valuation of the personal brand by and for stakeholders (e.g., Author, 2017; Gandini, 2016).

In sum, our findings show that acknowledging and analyzing stakeholders' influence matters, as many of the resources required to build personal brands cannot be accessed by individuals alone. By engaging with different stakeholder groups and examining their respective participation in personal branding, we extend previous research focusing on the interactions between the personal brand and its followers on social media (e.g., Centeno & Wang, 2017; Erz & Christensen, 2018). Overall, this corroborates the argument that stakeholders enable personal branding and extends recent research on the co-creative dimension of personal brands (Centeno & Wang, 2017).

### **5.3 Managerial implications**

The case of professional rock climbers has three main managerial implications related to the participation of stakeholders in personal branding.

First, individuals must strive to recognize the stakeholder groups in their environment and to identify, which stakeholder within these groups could contribute to the creation and development of their personal brand by providing specific resources. In this sense, individuals should approach stakeholders while considering the potential for style alignment between their personal brand and the narratives of the stakeholders in order to create a "fit". Failing to do so might complicate the relationships, because there will be a growing incoherency between the personal brand and the type of resources provided by stakeholders. This is of particular importance since alignment with stakeholders has implications for personal branding activities.

Second, people should carefully acknowledge the stakeholders' different goals. Stakeholders have varying goals and expectations that shape their reception of the personal

brands. Consequently, individual experience in this multistakeholder environment provides key information for orienting personal branding. Gathering and analyzing the feedback provided by stakeholders and using this feedback to align everyday personal branding practices is essential for producing aligned content, gaining professional acceptance, and validating the personal brand. This can be done at different levels, from an improved selection of content to strategic stakeholder management.

Third, stakeholders are core providers of the resources needed to create and develop valuable personal brands, and their participation in personal branding is governed by specific conventions. As these conventions represent the shared understanding of how to do things in a specific context, they must be followed to encourage stakeholders to engage in resource exchanges. Deviating from conventions will lead stakeholders to reconsider their participation in the process of personal branding, with several implications for the personal brand.

#### **5.4. Limitations and future research**

There are several limitations in this study that warrant further research. This study was conducted within the rock-climbing industry, which is a specific social world with a certain set of stakeholder relationships. It would be relevant to explore stakeholders' resources and conventions in radically different contexts to unpack their influence on branding processes. Future research could explore the interrelations among stakeholders beyond the personal brand, including how conventions of social worlds affect the branding activities of stakeholders in an industry or market segment as a collective. Although our findings highlight the importance of stakeholder selection as a means of controlling the personal branding process, considerable exploration is still required of the processes, practices and logic of selecting and switching

partnerships, how their branding consequences are assessed, and how available choices vary for different personal brands within and across different social worlds.

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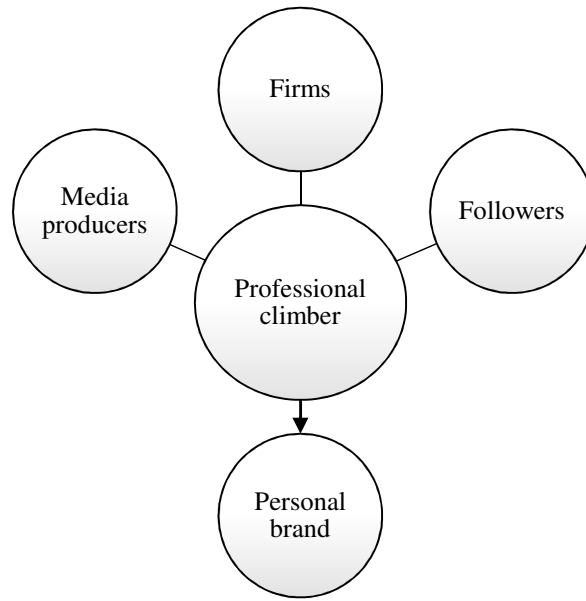


Figure 1. Stakeholders of the social world of professional rock climbing

<b>FORMAL AND RECORDED INTERVIEWS</b>	<b>PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION</b>	<b>MEDIA</b>
<p><b>Climbers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 12 Professional outdoor climbers</li> <li>- 10 Professional competition climbers</li> </ul>	<p><b>Outdoor locations:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- USA: 13</li> <li>- Switzerland: 4</li> <li>- Spain: 10</li> <li>- Portugal: 1</li> <li>- France: 2</li> <li>- Italy: 2</li> </ul>	<p><b>Photographs:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 350 Photographs (researcher generated)</li> <li>- 170 Screenshots (researcher generated)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Media producers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 9 Photographers/filmmakers</li> <li>- 2 Journalists</li> <li>- 3 Magazine editors</li> </ul>	<p><b>Indoor locations:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Climbing gyms: 13</li> <li>- Competitions: 4</li> </ul>	<p><b>Video:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1460 Video clips (approx. and participant generated)</li> <li>- 47 Full-length movies (participant generated)</li> <li>- 8 Talk shows (participant generated)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Industry:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 5 Team managers</li> <li>- 3 Personal managers</li> <li>- 4 Climbing consultants</li> </ul>	<p><b>Events:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trade Shows: 1</li> <li>- Movie premieres: 4</li> <li>- Outdoor events: 6</li> </ul>	<p><b>Websites:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 119 Webpage screenshots</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Online:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social network sites: 5 (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Vimeo)</li> <li>- Main media websites: 7</li> <li>- Blogs: 18</li> </ul>	<p><b>Following:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 94 Climbers, media and companies on Facebook</li> <li>- 46 Climbers, media and companies on Instagram</li> </ul>

Table 1. Research data

	<b>TYPES</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>
<b>RESOURCES EXCHANGED</b>	Material and informational resources and services  Symbolic resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Firm receives representational services at online and offline customer events.</li> <li>- Firms (brands) gain access to and information on athletes' social media followers.</li> <li>- Athlete gains information and resources used for self-presentation.</li> <li>- The reputation of the sponsor firm is transferred to the climber because of media appearances.</li> </ul>
<b>CONVENTIONS</b>	Brand assimilation  Professional acceptance Socio-affective bonding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Constant creation of visual assimilation between the climber and the sponsor firm.</li> <li>- 'Being sponsored' is also a means of positioning oneself as a professional and attracting sponsors.</li> <li>- Socio-affective bonds make the cooperation long-lasting, sometimes over climbers' entire careers.</li> </ul>
<b>IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONAL BRANDING</b>	Climbing and lifestyle practices Strategic sponsor selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sponsor firms have direct implications on climbers' practices and lifestyles</li> <li>- The careful selection of sponsors is part of curating a personal brand assemblage.</li> </ul>

Table 2. Relationships between professional climbers and sponsor firms

	<b>TYPES</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>
<b>RESOURCES EXCHANGED</b>	Material resources  Symbolic resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Climbers are central subjects for the work of media producers.</li> <li>- Media content.</li> <li>- Reputation transfers operate between media producers and climbers.</li> <li>- Climbers can benefit from the extended networks of media producers.</li> </ul>
<b>CONVENTIONS</b>	Documentation  Style alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Climbers' activities and lifestyle need to be documented to build credibility.</li> <li>- The public persona is embedded in a communicative narrative crafted as an appealing story.</li> <li>- The style of the content produced must be aligned with the brand (firm) and the person brand (athlete).</li> </ul>
<b>IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONAL BRANDING</b>	Stylistic expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The style and plot of the media content produced is central to the elaboration of the brand.</li> </ul>

Table 3. Relationships between professional climbers and media producers.

	<b>TYPES</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>
<b>RESOURCES EXCHANGED</b>	Informational resources Symbolic resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Number of followers is an 'indicator of influence'.</li> <li>- Feedback on social media publications.</li> <li>- Media content pictures of athletic feats and lifestyle brings meaning, identification, and inspiration to consumers through access to climbers' lives.</li> </ul>
<b>CONVENTION</b>	Relatability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Climbers must be attentive to followers' comments and perception of their activities and lifestyle.</li> <li>- Climbers must present themselves as accessible by balancing down-to-earth, ordinary lives and exceptional experiences.</li> </ul>
<b>IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONAL BRANDING</b>	Feedback and inspiration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consumers' feedback acts as guidelines orienting personal branding strategies.</li> </ul>

Table 4. Relationships between professional climbers and followers

## **Appendix 1: Outline of the semistructured interviews with professional climbers**

### **A. Background information**

General information [e.g., age, origin, family, studies, on side and previous jobs].  
Early start [e.g., first contact, type of practice, frequency, location, context, family].  
Education and work-related information.

### **B. Competition climbing**

Entry [e.g., national context, team, age].  
Institutional support [e.g., nationally supported activity, type of support].  
Motivations [e.g., sponsor pressure, personal, familial].  
Competition circuit [e.g., insights, pro & cons, atmosphere, competitive nature].  
Training [competition focused] & injuries.

### **C. Professional climber**

Tasks [e.g., types of tasks, frequency, schedule, learning process].  
Meanings [e.g., Pro vs. AM, ethical understanding of the job].  
Notable steps [e.g., main climbing achievements, other achievements].  
Rock versus competition climbing [e.g., style, sponsors, orientation].  
Income [e.g., providers, amounts, team managers].  
Travels [e.g., location, selection, sponsor related, social aspect, types of climbing].  
Pro and cons [e.g., work/life balance, private life, reputation and fame, salaries, insecurity].

### **D. Sponsors**

Entry [e.g., first sponsors, type of sponsoring, and evolution of the contracts].  
Role [e.g., support competitions, support climbing outside, help for travel].  
Selection [e.g., prestige, sponsor hierarchy, actual contracts, solicitations].  
Income management [e.g., budget for climbing, savings, importance of sponsor's participation].  
Contacts and communication [e.g., communication, obligations, climbing team].  
Pressure [e.g., travel related, social media, performance, style].  
Mainstream companies [e.g., new player, ethics, conflicts, future].

### **E. Media**

Visibility [e.g., platforms, sponsors, management, Social media use, reputation].  
Learning and training [e.g., collaborator network, partnership, mentors].  
Photographers [e.g., sponsorship related, collaborators, branding related, style, selection].  
Filmmakers [e.g., collaborators, management, incomes, style, planning, sponsorship].  
Personal consumption [e.g., preferences, influences, choices and goals, saturation].  
Fame [e.g., fan based, growth, social context, implications for performance].  
Conflicts [e.g., visibility related, grading related, mainstream media and fans].

### **G. Climbing world**

Popularization [e.g., Olympics, impact on climbing locations, on professionalization].  
Monetarization [e.g., mainstream companies, prize money, salaries].  
Democratization of the performance [e.g., evolution of achievement, multiplication of strong climbers, marginalization of professionals].  
Climbing community [e.g., meaning, evolution, impact on reputation, management].  
Future development and additional themes.