

Sponsorship Landscape of Competitive Sport Climbing in India: Access Barriers, Support Needs and Career Implications

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to examine the sponsorship ecosystem of competitive sport climbing in India with a major focus on the obstacles encountered by athletes and the prospects for enhancing financial assistance. It is based on a quantitative survey of 30 competitive climbers from different geographical regions in India. It utilized descriptive statistics and independent sample t-tests to evaluate sponsorship awareness, accessibility, challenges, and the perceived importance of support systems. The results depict that only 42% of athletes are aware about sponsorship opportunities, and actual access to sponsorship is still limited, short-term and event specific. The findings of the study reveal that lack of funding limits access to coaching, equipment, competition, and international chances. It also suggests that challenges vary based on income levels and international exposure while gender doesn't have a statistically significant impact. However, it also points out that there is a lot of untapped potential for growth. The results imply a critical need of developing a cohesive sponsorship system that integrates transparent procedures, focused financial assistance, and investments in athlete development to amend existing deficiencies and incorporate equitable chances. It is critical to strengthen institutional processes and encourage cooperation between federations, businesses, and policymakers to make India more competitive in global sport climbing.

Keywords: Athlete Development, Climbing, Challenges, India, Sponsorship

1. Introduction

Sport climbing has evolved from a niche outdoor pursuit into a globally recognized competitive discipline, officially making its Olympic debut at the Tokyo 2020 Games. There are three disciplines within this sport, lead climbing which involves ascending with rope protection), bouldering (performed at lower heights with crash mat protection), and speed climbing (which involves racing up a standardized route in head-to-head format). Its presence in the Olympics has

greatly advanced its institutionalization and global reach in addition to increasing its prominence. Until the 1970s, modern sport's development was primarily characterized by rationalization, quantification, and an increasing focus on competitive structures [1]. It was only after the 1970s that climbing witnessed the commercialization of the sport [2] which further led to processes fueled by consumer capitalism and the global sports economy. This change has been made possible in large part by the growing involvement of institutional financing and sponsorships, which have supported infrastructure development, athlete training, and international participation, thereby formalizing climbing as a high-performance sport. As a result of these advancements, climbing has evolved from a countercultural or recreational pastime to a recognized and controlled competitive sport.

With its inclusion in Olympics [3], Sport Climbing has gained substantial traction across continents. There has been increased participation of athletes from Asian countries like Japan, Korea, China, Indonesia, Singapore, European countries like France, England, Germany, Italy, Spain, or North America and Australia, etc., to actively compete at elite levels. Public and commercial sponsorships have proven essential to the evolution of climbing ecosystems in several of these nations, allowing for the steady expansion of training programs, infrastructure, and international participation. The sport is currently governed worldwide by the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) [4], which was established in Frankfurt in 2007 by 48 national federations. Its growing membership, which currently stands at over 90 national federations, is evidence of the sport's rising prominence on a global scale. In 2025 alone, the World Cup series will include more than 14 events and draw over 1,000 climbers [5] a year in both the youth and adult divisions. Notably, smart investments in infrastructure, human resources, and long-term athlete support including organized sponsorship mechanisms have contributed to Japan's impressive performance at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. This illustration demonstrates how certain countries have actively welcomed the sport's competitive potential and offered the institutional support required to keep it going.

In India, the sport is rapidly expanding. With the establishment of climbing gyms all throughout the nation and the holding of zonal and national competitions, the Indian Mountaineering Federation (IMF), the sport's national regulatory organization, has helped competitive climbing gain popularity. Over 700 climbers had registered with the IMF by 2023. Zone winners from the North, South, East, West, and Services zones competed in the 28th National Sport Climbing Championship in 2025[6]. India has also been much more visible in regional competitions. The Asian Youth Championship was successfully held in Jamshedpur in 2024, with Indian climbers winning the most medals [7]. Indian climbers also competed in the Asian Games and the Asian Youth Championships.

Access to sponsorship is a crucial but frequently overlooked aspect of athlete performance. A study published in the Journal of Infrastructure, Policy, and Development claims that sponsored athletes have better access to top-notch training facilities and materials, which results in a 15% boost in performance and a 20% increase in competitive results when compared to their unsponsored counterparts. Costs for equipment, coaching, travel, food, and mental health care must be covered by sponsorships. Structured sponsorship arrangements, like the USA's Elite Athlete Agreement, are essential pillars supporting athletes' Olympic and international aspirations in nations with developed sporting ecosystems. [8]

However, in India, athlete sponsorship is still disproportionately skewed towards prominent sports like cricket, badminton, and athletics [9]. A lack of visibility, a lack of knowledge about sponsorship opportunities, and the informal nature of current support networks make it difficult for climbers to obtain steady funding, even in the face of sport climbing's growing competitiveness and global success. These issues are especially severe for athletes from non-metropolitan areas, where early dropouts or stagnant advancement are caused by a lack of organized institutional support, little exposure, and financial strain.

Despite an increase in young people's involvement in sport climbing in India, the ecology of financial support is still disjointed and uneven. The participation in the sport climbing by Indian athletes is growing rapidly especially among the youth and competitive athletes, however, the financial support ecosystem for the young athletes remains inefficient due to limited access to consistent and structured sponsorships. While some of the mainstream sports such as cricket, hockey, badminton, and football have existing funding pipelines and a well-established supporting infrastructure, the sports climbing athletes often face challenges due to fragmented and informal support systems [10]. Indian climbers usually must pay for their own training, travel, and equipment, unlike popular sports with well-established financial sources. In severe situations, these financial limitations cause athletes to stop competing.

Furthermore, there is presently a substantial gap in the scholarly and policy-oriented discourse due to the lack of comprehensive data on the financial realities and sponsorship experiences of Indian climbers. In light of this, the current study provides a pertinent and timely exploration of the finance and sponsorship landscape of professional sport climbing in India. It identifies untapped potential for enhancing the sponsorship landscape, analyses present obstacles, and reviews current support systems. Research that influences athlete support models becomes crucial as the sport moves into later Olympic cycles and draws larger participation levels.

This study uses primary survey data to analyze access-related hurdles, gauge climbers' knowledge of sponsorship schemes, and offer suggestions for possible enhancements. This study intends to educate federations, private stakeholders, and policymakers about the changing

demands of this dynamic sport by concentrating on the lived experiences of competitive Indian climbers, especially with regard to sponsorship accessibility. Sport climbing gained popularity after being included in the Olympic program, but there is still little scientific research on its performance and support systems, and thus it is very important to investigate this issue.

2. Literature Review

An extensive review of literature has been conducted to understand the sponsorship landscape in terms of sport climbing. The evolution of sport climbing, particularly after its inclusion in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, offers a valuable entry point into the broader discussion of sports governance and sponsorship in India. Batuev and Robinson [12] examines this shift in Organizational Evolution and the Olympic Games: The Case of Sport Climbing, where the sport is traced from being a loosely governed activity to one recognized as a global, standardized competition. The study employed a quantitative methodology based on the interviews with decision-makers within the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) and the national federations of different countries. The findings of the study reveal that the inclusion of Sport climbing in the Olympics encouraged standardization, an emergence of formal funding, along with sponsorship mechanisms, specifically in the countries where sports climbing was already well-developed. This paper has provided a vital contextual backdrop to determine why developing countries like India lag in acquiring structured sponsorship frameworks, despite the global momentum the sport has achieved.

This challenge has been further explored in Neglected Potential: The Crisis in India's Sports Governance and the Struggle of Athletes for Support and Opportunities, by Atul Raghav [13]. This study underlines that the failures in the governance systems impose critical barriers to the athletes' development in the lesser-known sports across India. Using qualitative methodology by combining policy analysis with personal narratives across multiple states, the research highlights how the welfare of the athlete and equity in support are being compromised due to centralized authority, political interference, and lack of transparency in sports. The study further proposes that an excessive emphasis on cricket, persistent gaps in governance, and an inadequate investment at the grassroots level have contributed towards an unstable funding landscape and a lack of institutional support for sports that aren't mainstream, such as sport climbing.

Pursuing this argument further, Khasnis in Solving the Rubik's Cube of Indian Sport: Exploring Impactful Factors and Alternative Ways to Facilitate Success, investigates structural and policy-level barriers that hamper elite sports growth in India. [14] Following a qualitative and quantitative methodology, the study analyses three policies relating to Indian sports from 1954, interviews of national/state level administrators and coaches, the study analyses persistent challenges in policy making and implementation, and further puts forward a contextualized

model for high-quality coach development. A major finding revealed that despite numerous policy iterations, there are still significant gaps in athlete and coach development, and a lack of investment in training and education. Another key observation was that since coaching has not been recognized as a professional career in India, there is a scarcity of top-tier coaches, creating a demand and reliance on international coaches. These results demonstrate that enhancing the ecosystem of sponsorship and support for new sports like sport climbing calls for more than just infrastructure; it also calls for investments in human capital and sound policy implementation.

The emphasis on “people” rather than “hardware” is reinforced in another study by Khasnis, Chapman, Toering, and Collins in *Focus on the People: Key Stakeholders’ Perceptions of Elite Sport in India and its Potential for Development* [15]. This study examines the reasons for India’s underperformance in international sports competitions despite the structural investment in recent years. Using qualitative methodology through conducting interviews of 25 stakeholders, including athletes, coaches, sports management officers, and various government officials across the country, the study reveals that prioritizing “hardware” such as infrastructure, stadiums over “human capital” such as quality coaching and athlete development has undermined long-term progress. Despite the increased financial investment and job security for athletes, the lack of athlete support networks, inconsistent funding, and systemic gaps continue to create roadblocks for growth.

This perspective aligns with another study by Virk, in *Analysis of Budgetary Allocation to Sports Infrastructure in India*, which interrogates the efficiency of government spending in developing sports infrastructures across India [16]. Using a Quantitative methodology involving the analysis of secondary data from the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports budget documents, expenditure reports, and policy papers from 2007 to 2019, the study discovered underutilization of the allocated funds and the decline in the spending efficiency from 143% in 2008-09 to 63% in 2014-15. Despite advancements in funding mechanisms, underutilization and poor maintenance of facilities persist, with infrastructure often failing to translate into athlete development. This indicates that misaligned financial allocation continues to obstruct India’s ability to cultivate competitive athletes in emerging sports.

The roots of these challenges can be traced further back, as Chelladurai, Shanmuganathan, Jothikaran, and Nageswaran argue in *Sport in Modern India: Policies, Practices and Problems* [17]. This study provides a comprehensive overview of India's poor record in international sports and assesses the role of recent government policies and institutional barriers. By employing a qualitative policy analysis and secondary literature, government documents, and performance data from the past, the study reveals that despite increased focus on sports infrastructure, factors such as fragmented governance, inadequate financial resources for non-mainstream sports and insufficient athlete development programs continue to stall progress and hinder India’s

international progress, particularly in the case of non-mainstream sports, such as sport climbing. In this background, corporate sponsorship in sports is an important area that requires further investigation. In Gurpratap Singh's Important Objectives and Important Considerations in Objective Setting for Sport Sponsorship by Indian Companies [18], the driving forces behind corporate sports sponsorship in India are examined. Using a quantitative approach involving a survey of 248 respondents across various corporations and brands covering numerous sponsorship objectives, the study identified that branding, consumer goodwill, and long-term reputation-building are the primary motivators, while profitability and measurable returns rank lower in influencing sponsorship decisions.

Collectively, the literature reveals a consistent theme. While the inclusion in the Olympics has expanded new opportunities for emerging sports like Sport Climbing, India's governance and sponsorship ecosystem has remained structurally weak. Several research scholars have consistently highlighted the misalignments, such as favoring infrastructure over people, gaps in policy implementation versus formulation, and disproportionate focus on cricket, compared to other sports disciplines. Meaningful progress in sports such as climbing will therefore require reforms across governance, increasing efficiency in funding, investment in human capital, and integration of sponsorship strategies. While previous studies have highlighted governance gaps, funding inefficiencies, and the lack of structured sponsorship frameworks in emerging sports in India, little attention has been given to the lived experiences of competitive sport climbers. In light of this gap, the present study sets out the following objectives:

2.1 Objectives of the study

1. To assess the level of awareness and actual access to sponsorship among climbers.
2. To identify the key challenges faced by Indian sport climbers in accessing sponsorship and examine whether these differ across demographic groups.
3. To evaluate the resources and support systems needed to improve sponsorship access and test whether their importance varies across demographic groups.
4. To examine the impact of inadequate sponsorship on athletes' careers.

3. Methodology

This study is based on a quantitative approach to analyze the sponsorship landscape of sport climbing in India. This section elaborates on the hypothesis, research design, sampling, data collection period, survey instrument and ethical considerations. It also discusses the analytical framework of the research.

3.1 Hypothesis

Based on the research objectives, the following hypotheses have been formulated for the research:

H1: There is a significant difference in sponsorship challenges perceived by the climbers across demographic groups.

H2: There is a significant difference in the importance of support systems perceived by the climbers across demographic groups.

3.2 Research Design

The study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey-based approach to examine to existing sponsorship ecosystem in terms of awareness and accessibility, challenges faced by climbers and the ways to improve the scenario. The research has been specifically focused on climbers with competitive experience to put light on the true picture within recognized sport environments.

3.3 Sampling and Sample Participants

The study had adopted a non-probability sampling approach i.e. purposive sampling to identify 30 sport climbers across different regions of India. The data has been collected from climbers who have participated in zonal, national, and international level competitions. Recreational climbers have not been considered a part of the study to ensure that the findings represent competitive athletes.

3.4 Data Collection Period

Data collection was conducted over a period of two months i.e. June and July 2025 using an online Google Forms survey. The link of the survey was shared with climbers through climbing academies that train competitive climbers, social media channels related to sport climbing, and personal contacts within the community of competitive climbing. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and all the responses were treated as confidential over the period of data collection.

3.5 Survey Instrument

The survey has been categorized into several sections to incorporate a comprehensive picture of the sponsorship landscape in climbing. The first section catered to demographic information such as age, gender, competitive level, and region. It was followed by a section on sponsorship awareness and access, current resources and support systems, the challenges faced by climbers in terms of sponsorship, impact on career. The survey further explored the expectation of climbers

in terms of improving the system. The survey consisted of a combination of questions like multiple-choice items, Likert scale-based questions, and open-ended questions as well in order to take into account the detailed personal experiences and perspectives from the athletes.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The purpose of study was clearly shared with the respondents and the data was collected only after informed consent from the participants. All the responses were collected anonymously and treated with confidentiality. The responses were used only for research purposes and study followed all ethical guidelines to ensure participant privacy.

3.7 Analytical Framework

The study has adopted descriptive statistics and independent t-tests as the main tools for the purpose of data analysis. In order to summarize the demographic profiles, level of sponsorship awareness, challenges, resources and impact of low sponsorship, descriptive statistics like frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and rankings were used to summarize demographic profiles, awareness levels, challenges, resources, and impacts of sponsorship. To testing the stated hypothesis, independent sample t tests were conducted. It helped in examining whether perceived challenges and the importance of support systems significantly differed across demographic groups. The three groups taken in the study were, gender, income level and level of competition. The responses from open ended questions i.e. qualitative responses were thematically reviewed to complement the quantitative findings with contextual Qualitative responses from open-ended questions were reviewed thematically to supplement the quantitative findings with contextual comprehension.

4. Results and Findings

This section presents the results of the survey conducted with competitive sport climbers in India. The findings are organized around the research objectives and begin with the demographic profile of respondents, followed by sponsorship awareness and access, challenges, support systems, and the impacts of inadequate sponsorship.

4.1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Out of the total 30 respondents, 31% were female competitive climbers, while 69% were male competitive climbers. A majority of the respondents were adults (53%), followed by youth athletes aged 14-17 years (30%), and finally sub-junior athletes comprising 16.7% of the total respondents. The income distribution analysis revealed a significant skew towards lower-income households (under Rs 2.5 Lacs per annum), with this section comprising 56.7% of total

respondents. Only a small minority of respondents (13.4%) come from higher-income households (above Rs 20 lacs per annum), indicating that elite climbing has not yet been picked up by affluent households. The data on climbing discipline distribution reveals that most respondents practice multiple disciplines of sport climbing, rather than specializing in a single discipline (lead, bouldering, or speed climbing). This is in sync with the demands of the international formats. 26.7% of all respondents practice all the three disciplines of climbing, while the most significant cohort of climbers specialize in the discipline of lead and bouldering (50%). Speed climbing, by itself, is specialized by only 1 respondent, comprising 3% of total respondents.

4.2 Sponsorship Awareness and Access

4.2.1 Awareness of Sponsorship Opportunities

Awareness of sponsorship opportunities among Indian sport climbers was found to be inconsistent and fragmented. Out of 31 respondents, only 42% were aware of sponsorship opportunities that were available for climbers in India, while the majority, i.e. 58% had no awareness of sponsorship opportunities. Those who were aware of sponsorships, mentioned a few brands like Boulderbox, Tata Steel Adventure Foundation, and DreamSports, indicating that visibility of sponsorship is limited and concentrated to a few entities only, and the broader community of climbers remain unaware of sponsorship opportunities.

4.2.2 Sources and Types of Sponsorship

When the respondents were asked about the sources and types of sponsorship accessed by them, it is found that the support is short term and sporadic. Among the small subset of respondents who had exposure to sponsorship, 67% received travel-related assistance, while 44% reported receiving equipment or gear sponsorships. In contrast, only less than 10% reported any form of direct financial sponsorship. The findings suggest that sponsorships and financial support is largely event specific, and hence lacking in sustained athlete development goals.

4.2.3 Actual Access to Sponsorship

Actual access to sponsorship was found to be severely inadequate and narrowly available to a few. Only 29% of climbers reported either themselves or someone they knew having received any sponsorship, while a majority of climbers (71%) reported not. Even for those who received sponsorships, it appeared to be event-specific assistance, such travel expense reimbursement to domestic or international competitions, or assistance in securing climbing shoes or gear.

35% of the respondents reported attempting applications for sponsorship, but only 10% of the total sample reported receiving sponsorship after applying, indicating that most applications were

unsuccessful. As regards the application process, most climbers pointed out that procedures were unclear, requiring personal outreach or referrals and a lack of standardized criteria.

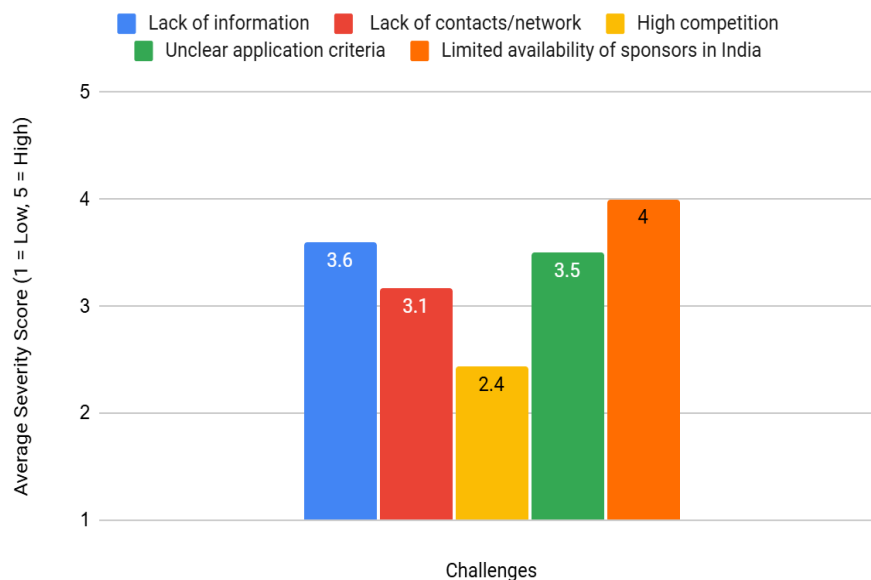
Access or awareness of international sponsorship opportunities was even more scarce, with only 10% of respondents reporting exposure to support from overseas brands. Those who did have the knowledge indicated that the international sponsorship had greater clarity and structure compared to Indian organizations, while such opportunities remain out of reach for the majority of the Indian climbers.

4.3 Challenges in Securing Sponsorship

4.3.1 Severity of Challenges

This section discusses the challenges faced by climbers in sponsorship acquisition. It considers challenges like lack of information, lack of contacts/networks, high competition/ unclear application criteria, limited availability of sponsors in India. Figure 1 below depicts average severity score of perceived challenges.

Figure 1: Average Severity score of Perceived Challenges in Sponsorship Acquisition



Source: Survey Data

Figure 1 depicts how climbing athletes in India perceive the severity of different challenges in securing sponsorships. Responses were rated on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 meant not severe

and 5 extremely severe. The responses were averaged across all participants. The responses reveal a clear picture that limited availability of sponsors is the biggest challenge amongst climbers in India. It had a mean score of 4 while almost 47% of the respondents flagged it as a n extremely severe problem. It signals a sponsorship ecosystem which is very small as compared to the athlete's needs. Moreover, lack of information and unclear application criteria also emerged as major roadblocks. Their mean scores of responses came out to be 3.6 and 3.5 respectively. These challenges showcase an environment where even highly motivated athletes with good performance may fail to secure sponsorship because the process is not transparent and very limited guidance is given to the athletes.

Another issue turned out to be lack of contacts/network with a mean score of 3.17. It lies in the moderate range which depicts that personal connections and networks do matter but they are not the most critical barrier. An interesting finding came out that high competition received lowest mean score i.e. 2.43 with only 7% rating it as an extremely severe challenge. These findings suggest that true picture may be contrary to what we expect. Competing with others is less of a challenge as compared to overcoming the scarce and unclear sponsorship landscape in climbing. These findings suggest that the sponsorship environment in India is majorly constrained by access and clarity instead of rivalry. A major transformative effect could be seen by addressing the information gap, standardizing the application procedures, and expanding the number of sponsors instead of merely reducing competition.

4.3.2 Differences Across Demographic Groups

4.3.2.1 Differences Across Gender

An independent sample t test was conducted to examine whether perceived sponsorship challenges varied across gender i.e. male and females. The first step was to run the Levene's Test for equality of variances which turned out to be not significant, $F(1, 28) = 1.00$, $p = .325$. It indicated that the assumption of equal variances was met. Descriptive statistics and t-test results are presented in table 1 below.

Table1: Descriptive Statistics and Independent-Samples t-Test Results Comparing Males vs. Females for Perceived Sponsorship Challenges

Gender	n	M	SD	t(28)	p-value	Cohen's d
Male	19	16.05	4.03			
Female	11	15.91	3.51			

t-test result	0.10	.922	0.04
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Source: Analyzed from Survey Data

The results revealed that there are no statistically significant differences in perceived sponsorship challenges between males and females with the values $t, t(28) = 0.10, p = .922$. The effect size also came up as negligible (Cohen's $d = 0.04$). Male climbers ($M = 16.05, SD = 4.03$) and female climbers ($M = 15.91, SD = 3.51$) reported similar levels of sponsorship challenges, suggesting that gender does not play a meaningful role in shaping athletes' perceptions of the difficulties faced in securing sponsorships.

4.3.2.2 Differences Across Income Groups

For comparing the challenges on the basis of income, the original six income categories were regrouped into two levels i.e. Low-income ($\leq ₹5L$) and high-income ($> ₹5L$). This categorization was done to ensure adequate sample sizes for each group and to also improve the reliability of the statistical analysis. An independent-samples t test was conducted to examine whether there are statistically significant differences in perceived sponsorship challenges and access to resources between the two income groups. Levene's Test for equality of variances turned out to be not significant with values, $F(1, 28) = 1.63, p = .213$. It indicated that the assumption of equal variances was met. Descriptive statistics and t -test results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Independent-Samples t -Test Results Comparing Low vs. High Income Groups

Income Group	n	M	SD	t(28)	p-value	Cohen's d
Low Income	20	17.15	3.86			
High Income	10	13.70	2.45			
t-test result				2.57	.016	0.99

Source: Analyzed from Survey Data

The results revealed that there are statistically significant differences in perceived challenges between the two groups, $t(28) = 2.57, p = .016$, Cohen's $d = 0.99$, indicating a large effect size. Low-income climbers ($M = 17.15, SD = 3.86$) reported to experience substantially greater sponsorship challenges as compared to high-income climbers ($M = 13.70, SD = 2.45$). This suggests that climbers from lower-income households face greater financial and informational

barriers, however, those from higher-income backgrounds may have better access to structured sponsorships, exposure, and institutional support.

4.3.2.3 Differences Across Competitive Levels

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to examine whether perceived sponsorship challenges varied across competitive levels. It compared domestic climbers (zonal and national level combined, $n = 17$) and international climbers ($n = 13$). Levene's Test for equality of variances was run first and came out to be not significant, $F(1, 28) = 0.21$, $p = .649$, indicating that the assumption of equal variances was met. Descriptive statistics and t-test results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Independent-Samples t-Test Results Comparing Domestic vs. International Climbers

Competitive Level	n	M	SD	t(28)	p-value	Cohen's d
Domestic climbers	17	17.76	1.82			
International climbers	13	14.31	1.55			
t-test result				5.49	< .001	2.02

Source: Analyzed from Survey Data

The results revealed a statistically significant difference in the perceived challenges between the two groups, $t(28) = 5.49$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.02$, suggesting a very large effect size. Domestic climbers ($M = 17.76$, $SD = 1.82$) reported facing substantially greater challenges in securing sponsorships compared to international climbers ($M = 14.31$, $SD = 1.55$). This indicates that athletes competing only within India encounter greater financial and informational barriers, whereas international competitors benefit from better access to structured sponsorships, exposure, and institutional support.

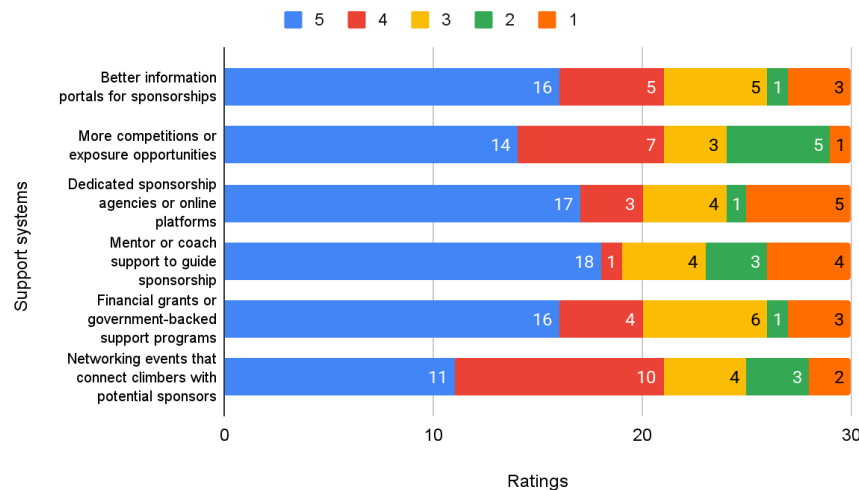
4.4 Perceived Importance of Resources and Support Systems

4.4.1 Ranking of Resources and Support Systems

This section discusses how climbers perceive certain support systems for improving the sponsorship access. The support systems and resources taken into consideration are better information portals for sponsorships, more competitions or exposure opportunities, dedicated sponsorship agencies or online platforms, mentor, or coach support to guide sponsorship,

financial grants or government backed support, networking events that connect climbers with potential sponsors. Figure 2 below depicts the perceived helpfulness of these resources.

Figure 2: Perceived Helpfulness of Support Systems for Improving Sponsorship Access among Indian Climbers.



Source: Survey Data

Better information portals for sponsorship are the need of the hour (with an average rank of 4). 53% of the respondents felt that the most important resource needed to help in their climbing journey is better information portals about sponsorship. The other remedies and resources to help climbers journey, that the respondents were asked to rank, such as competitions and exposure opportunities, dedicated sponsorship agencies, mentoring to help guide sponsorship applications, financial grants from government and networking opportunities to connect climbers with potential sports, were all close on trial with average rank close to 4. The second resource that the climbers voted as the most important one is dedicated sponsorship agencies or online platforms for sponsorship, with a 39.3% of climbers voting it to be the most important criteria.

4.4.2 Differences in Perceived Importance of Support Systems and Resources

4.4.2.1 Differences across Gender

To examine whether perceived helpfulness of support systems and resources differed by gender, an independent-samples t-test was conducted comparing male climbers ($n = 19$) and female climbers ($n = 11$). Levene's Test for equality of variances was not significant, $F(1, 28) = 0.03$, p

= .860, indicating that the assumption of equal variances was met. Descriptive statistics and t-test results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics and Independent-Samples t-Test Results Comparing Males vs. Females for Perceived Helpfulness of Support Systems and Resources

Gender	n	M	SD	t(28)	p-value	Cohen's d
Male	19	22.37	6.64			
Female	11	25.00	8.11			
t-test result				-0.96	.343	0.37

The results revealed that there is no statistically significant difference in perceived helpfulness of support systems and resources between males and females, $t(28) = -0.96$, $p = .343$. The effect size was small (Cohen's $d = 0.37$). While female climbers ($M = 25.00$, $SD = 8.11$) rated the support systems and resources as slightly more helpful than male climbers ($M = 22.37$, $SD = 6.64$), this difference was not significant at the 5% level. These findings suggest that gender does not play a major role in shaping athletes' perceptions of the usefulness of available support systems and resources.

4.4.2.2 Differences across Income groups

To examine whether perceived helpfulness of support systems and resources differed across income levels, an independent-samples t-test was conducted comparing low-income climbers ($\leq ₹5L$, $n = 20$) and high-income climbers ($> ₹5L$, $n = 10$). Levene's Test for equality of variances was not significant, $F(1, 28) = 1.80$, $p = .191$, indicating that the assumption of equal variances was met. Descriptive statistics and t-test results are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics and Independent-Samples t-Test Results Comparing Low vs. High Income Groups for Perceived Helpfulness of Support Systems and Resources

Income Group	n	M	SD	t(28)	p-value	Cohen's d
Low Income	20	21.95	7.10			
High Income	10	26.10	6.90			
t-test result				-1.52	.139	0.59

The results depicted that there is no statistically significant difference in perceived helpfulness of support systems and resources between the two groups, $t(28) = -1.52$, $p = .139$. The effect size was moderate (Cohen's $d = 0.59$). While high-income climbers ($M = 26.10$, $SD = 6.90$) rated support systems as slightly more helpful compared to low-income climbers ($M = 21.95$, $SD = 7.10$), this difference was not significant at the 5% level. This implies that income level does not have a strong influence on climbers' perceptions of how helpful existing support systems and resources are.

4.4.2.3 Differences across competitive levels

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare perceptions of support systems and resources between domestic climbers (zonal and national levels combined, $n = 17$) and international climbers ($n = 13$). Levene's Test for equality of variances was not significant, $F(1, 28) = 0.00$, $p = .962$, indicating that the assumption of equal variances was met. Descriptive statistics and t-test results are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics and Independent-Samples t-Test Results Comparing Domestic vs. International Climbers on Perceived Support Systems and Resources

Competitive Level	n	M	SD	t(28)	p-value	Cohen's d
Domestic climbers	17	22.12	6.81			
International climbers	13	24.92	7.64			
t-test result				-1.06	.298	0.39

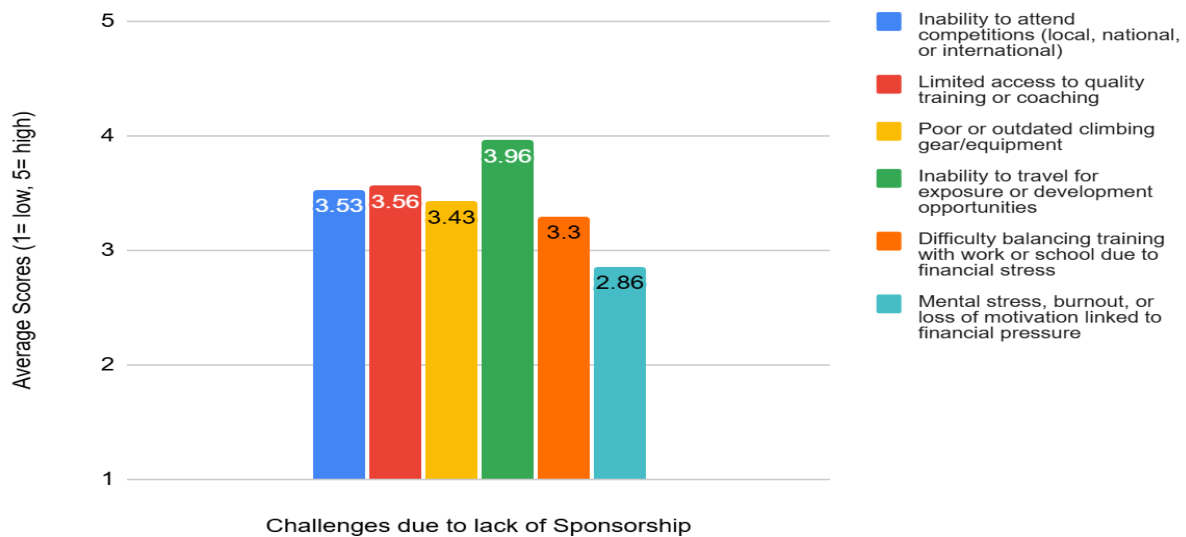
Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. Cohen's d represents effect size.

The results showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the perceived importance of support systems and resources between the two groups, $t(28) = -1.06$, $p = .298$, Cohen's $d = 0.39$. Although the mean scores reported by international climbers ($M = 24.92$, $SD = 7.64$) were slightly higher compared to domestic climbers ($M = 22.12$, $SD = 6.81$), this difference was not large enough to reach statistical significance. Cohen's d indicates a small-to-moderate effect size, suggesting minimal practical differences between the groups.

4.5 Impacts of Inadequate Sponsorship on Athletes' Careers

This section discusses the impact of inadequate sponsorship on athlete's careers. It considers aspects like inability to attend competitions, limited access to quality training and coaching, poor or outdated climbing gear, inability to travel, difficulty balancing training with school or work, mental stress. Figure 3 below depicts the perceived challenges due to lack of sponsorship.

Figure 3: Perceived Challenges due to lack of Sponsorship among Indian Climbers



Source: Survey Data

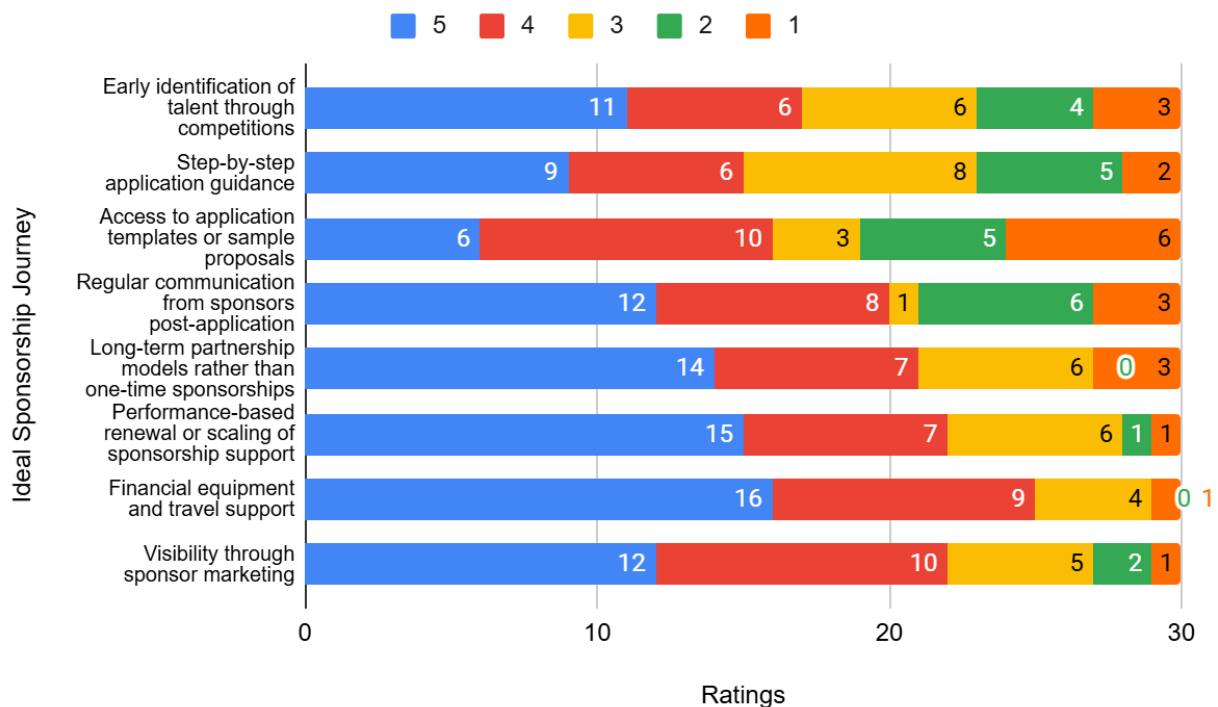
Insufficient funding or sponsorship creates several challenges for climbers, the most significant one being that they are unable to travel for exposure or development opportunities (with an average scale of 3.9 as perceived challenge). 53% of respondents felt it was the biggest impediment in their climbing journey. Limited access to quality training or coaching was a close second, with an average score of 3.5. Other challenges that are faced by climbers due to financial barriers are similar average scores, inability to attend competitions (local, national, or international), poor or outdated climbing gear/equipment, and difficulty balancing training with work or school due to financial stress. The least perceived challenge is mental stress, burnout, or loss of motivation linked to financial pressures, with an average scale of 2.8 as the perceived challenge.

4.6 Expectations of an Ideal Sponsorship Journey

This section discusses what climbers consider to be an ideal sponsorship journey. It considers steps like Early identification of talent through competitions or scouting, Step-by-step application guidance (via mentorship or training), Access to application templates or sample proposals, Regular communication or feedback from sponsors post-application, Long-term partnership models rather than one-time sponsorships, Performance-based renewal or scaling of sponsorship support, Financial, equipment, and travel support bundled into one comprehensive

sponsorship package, Visibility through sponsor marketing (e.g., social media promotion, interviews, events). Figure 4 below depicts climbers' requirements in terms of ideal sponsorship journey.

Figure 4: Ideal Sponsorship Journey as per Climbers in India



Source: Survey Data

5. Discussion

The findings of this study unveil important insights into the sponsorship ecosystem for competitive climbers in India. One major theme that is repeated across the analysis is that there is an absence of a structured, institutionalized financial support system for climbers. The limited financial resources that are available are sporadic, event-focused, and lack a sustained, developmental, or long-term approach. With an increasing number of Indian competitive climbers qualifying for national and international competition, a lack of a structured financial sponsorship system creates impediments to growth and sustenance.

A key finding is the gap between awareness and access to sponsorships. A significant proportion of climbers reported little or no knowledge of sponsorship opportunities, and among those who

were aware, visibility was confined to a handful of brands and institutions. This can be accounted for by the fact there are no information sharing channels, or portals where climbers can access knowledge of sponsoring brands. There are no conduits or platforms connecting climbers with brands that are willing to sponsor the climbers either, further widening the gap. Most of the emphasis is on mainstream sports like cricket and football, which aligns closely with Raghav's (2024) observation that inefficiencies in government planning and spending, and overemphasis on sports like cricket, have compromised emerging sports disciplines in resource allocation [13]. The absence of structured information platforms or of brands actively recruiting climbers thereby creates a situation where the climbers are heavily reliant on families, and hence the underprivileged climbers and those belonging to the lower income groups take the maximum brunt of this situation. This situation inherently privileges those climbers with greater social and financial capital, and further marginalizes climbers from underserved communities.

Although gender was not revealed as a statistically significant differentiator in the access of sponsorship funds, the income levels and competition exposure are strongly contributing to perceived challenges. Low-income climbers faced significant challenges compared to their higher-income counterparts, underscoring the significant impact of the economic background on the possibility of sustaining a career in climbing. This resonates with the broader literature on inequality in Indian sports governance, which highlights that financial capabilities of athletes have a decisive role in regression as competitive athletes (Chelladurai et al., 2002). International-level climbers reported fewer challenges than those who only competed in domestic competitions, further corroborating the study by Batuev and Robinson about advantage conferred by exposure to structured sponsorships abroad, and standardization and access to funds brought about by Olympics in some countries abroad. [12]

Another major revelation is the perceived severity of challenges. Climbers identified that lack of information, scarcity of brands and organizations that sponsor climbers and unclear application criteria pose significant barriers to their growth as competitive athletes. The ecosystem is underdeveloped and vague, because of which many zonal climbers are not able to progress to nationals, and nationals' climbers to international competitors. Typically, climbers are developing their financial literacy and management through trial and error, or self-help. As corroborated in a study by Jung Hong and Hee Jung Hong and Fraser (2021 [19]), high performance athletes need support schemes for career development, else they resort to coping mechanisms, most of which create barriers in their progression. Addressing these roadblocks would require institutional reorganization through clearer guidelines, better information sharing of opportunities, and a dedicated sponsorship ecosystem, rather than merely increasing the number of sponsors.

The impact of inadequate sponsorship on the career of athletes are insightful too. Restricted access to coaching implies that climbers are not able to compete at world class routes in scenarios with other international climbers who receive a rigorous and intensive training protocol. Limited travel funds mean many climbers who qualify to compete at Asian or European championship levels are unable to compete, which is not just demoralizing, but eventually affects their career longevity. This finding substantiates the claim in the Journal of Infrastructure, Policy, and Development that sponsorship directly correlates with progressions in athlete performances. It also underscores Khasnis' (2020) emphasis on the need to prioritize human capital through coaching, mentoring, and support structures, over hardware or sporadic one-time investments.

All findings and insights taken together, this study points out that the sponsorship ecosystem for sport climbing in India is largely fragmented and uneven, creating inequitable access. The absence of a coherent sponsorship framework risks impeding the growth potential of climbers. For climbers to progress and become competitive at a world class level, there is a greater need for sponsorship opportunities, which have to be communicated effectively through visible information portals, and dedicated agencies. Moreover, long term partnerships have to be forged, so that the funds are not being allocated on an ad-hoc basis but more aligned with a long-term vision for sustenance, growth, training, mentorship and travel. Only through an equitable outreach that ensures access irrespective of socio-economic background, can Indian competitive climbers grow and flourish in their sport.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the sponsorship landscape for competitive sport climbing in India through the lived experiences of 30 athletes. The results highlight that the sponsorship ecosystem is insufficient, uneven, and unable to meet the sustained development goals of competitive climbers. There is limited information for sponsorship opportunities, with only a small group of brands that are visible. The sponsorship when awarded tends to be short term and event specific in nature.

While gender does not play a significant role in sponsorship challenges, income levels and competition exposure have a strong influence. Low-income athletes experience difficulties in accessing both information and financial resources, and the domestic-level climbers experience significantly greater barriers than their international counterparts. Broader critiques of Indian sports governance tend to corroborate these findings, suggesting a disproportionate focus on mainstream sports such as cricket and the need to institutionalize sponsorship ecosystems and networks. These systemic challenges, such as lack of sponsors, unclear application procedures, and insufficient information channels, create gaps and barriers, as a result of which climbers

have to resort to self-help coping mechanisms, or are forced to restrain their longevity in sport careers.

There is an urgent need for reforms through the creation of dedicated sponsorship portals, a transparent and standardized application process and long-term financial support that invests in human capital, training and growth, as much as infrastructure. These systemic reforms should address the structural inequities in financial support, and only with the help of these interventions, the growth of sport climbing in India can become a reality.

While this research provides timely insights, it also points to the need for further academic inquiry. The sample size of this study is 30 competitive athletes, which can be further expanded in future research to capture broader regional and demographic nuances. Comparative analysis across other non-mainstream sports (such as table tennis, rowing, martial arts) could also give insights on common governance gaps. Third, a policy focused analysis, examining the role of Indian Mountaineering Federation, corporate CSR programs and different government funding schemes could be examined to understand potential reforms.

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