

THE INTENTION OF THE FANS TO BUY THE SPONSORS' PRODUCT

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Abstract: More and more companies are investing in sports. In the early years of sports, the sponsors were mainly companies related to video games or the whole computer and high-tech industries. A few years later, the sports audience changed. Instead of the savvy players who support a few teams in an obscure scene, sports competitions now fill stadiums and air on the big TV networks. The sports audience has evolved from a circle of initiates to the general public. Sports events now bring together well-known players, sports fans who invite the online version of their favorite team, as well as children and grandparents. As the audience grows, more and more companies are able to target their customers. Brands from various industries now sponsor sports such as Coca-Cola, Gillette, Redbull, BMW, Nike and Louis Vuitton.

In this paper we started with a short presentation of what sports product branding means, personal branding in sports and some of the best sponsored sports campaigns. In the study of 60 respondents, we wanted to see if the brand of a sports product and the athlete or club that represents their image has any influence on the decision to buy.

Keywords: *brand, sponsorship activation, social media, athlete.*

Introduction

Sports today has become a professional activity run by professional managers (Barbu & Barbu, 2011, Barbu & Barbu, 2012, Barbu & Crăciun, 2012). Like traditional sports, brands have chosen their sponsorship based on their budget and marketing goals. Sports sponsorship can take many forms, and brands have a different value than sponsoring an event, tournament, team or player (Arens & Weigold, 2016).

Sport has become part of society, which all companies in the sector need to consider in order to align their business with these new values (Stroe & Barbu, 2006, Barbu et al., 2020b). Another important aspect to consider is that the distances are shortened. Athletics is not just a women's format, and the mix of sports and fashion will be increasingly accepted by men. At the same time, the elderly wear sneakers and this is an unstoppable reality that is being transferred to all businesses.

Sporting goods are present in almost all sports activities (Barbu, 2009). These can help competing athletes reach their full potential, inspiring new generations. Community-based sports also provide a more comfortable, fun

and rewarding experience. As global interest in sports grows, the trade relations that characterize the industry will become more complex.

Literature review

Product branding in sports

Product branding is understood as the way each product interacts with its consumers through its design, logo and message (Barbu, 2010). If done correctly, following a few basic principles, sports branding can be sustained over time because it creates a strong connection between product and consumer throughout life. The biggest challenge is the possibility of getting the message across to consumers (Barbu, 2010). The message should start with the idea of branding and this idea often comes as an answer to a set of questions that are carefully selected and addressed. Fans engagement with the clubs are mediated by the branded products (Barbu et al., 2019).

Product branding is an essential element to consider as part of a broader branding strategy, as it gives your products their own life and personality.

Excellent product branding attracts customers and makes them come back.

When we refer to sports and product branding, the word "product" refers primarily to sports itself as the product we are referring to. In this sense, we can give a number of examples of sports products that are in an expansion mission, such as: women's football, cycling, golf, swimming, etc. These sports have undergone major developments in the last 10 years.

Thus, returning to the product branding of the sport, the organizational support of the federation must be taken into account. Both the sports leadership and the members affiliated with a sport, the federation must realize that their actions can lead to an increase or decrease in the popularity of sports. That is why it is mandatory for decision-makers to choose their target and audience, their possible competition in terms of target audience and make sure that their sport is perceived primarily as a recreational activity that fills free time to the detriment of competitors (Fill & Turnbull, 2016).

The way in which the benefits of the practice of a certain sport are transmitted thus becomes the main way of access on which the decision-makers must focus their attention. If the benefits of certain sports are well passed on to an individual being persuaded to practice the sport before watching professional events, it is fair to say that the chances of that sport to increase in the market would have increased significantly, thus leading to the commercial success of professionals and events. also. Therefore, the success of a professional sport is given primarily by the promotion of amateur sports, and a good example in this way is given by the large numbers on the number of amateurs who play football. A study conducted by the International Football Federation (FIFA) figures show that in Brazil and Germany the number of amateur football players is over 15 million amateur players, which leads to the highest number of professional participants.

Personal branding in sports

Personal branding is one of the most powerful tools for an athlete to access their target market. Determine how fans, sponsors and the world of professional sports perceive you and

how they remember / recognize you both during and after your career.

Many in the sports marketing industry will slowly become familiar with the concept of branding for athletes. For those who aren't, here's a look at how the market has changed to allow athletes to build a personal brand, how it can help them make more money outside of their sport, and how brands can use it to - achieves its marketing objectives.

Personal branding is a continuous process of creating, designing and maintaining an image, in which the audience (or followers) can identify and associate with you, helping your brand to reduce noise (Gârboveanu, 2006). A personal brand, on the other hand, is an extension of brand building that involves a person (or group of people) who develops and maintains an image by communicating its ideas, principles, and philosophies to its followers. Personal branding involves identifying your "mission statement," understanding your strengths, unique style, passions, skills, and interests, and continuing to convey your message (which best aligns with your brand) to your audience. Building the brand around what really motivates and interests you is essential, as is consistency in doing so.

The branding process of each athlete starts with a branding idea behind it, some choose to mark their success (simply by putting their name / initials, Jordan, CR7, Tiger Woods TW, Roger Federer RF), others their lifestyle (Floyd Mayweather - TMT, Conor McGregor - The Notorious, The Mac Life, etc.). After all, personal branding is one of the most powerful tools to access your target market. Determine how your fans, sponsors, and professional sports world perceive you as a student-athlete, college athlete, or professional and how they remember and recognize you.

In the pre-social media era, athletes could only communicate with their audience through the press - which means that top athletes had more opportunities to build their audience and, in turn, enter into long-term rights partnerships. image with top sports brands.

Basically, brands will seek to sponsor athletes who have built a brand that aligns with theirs in terms of values, positioning and target audience. Here the opportunity is greatest for brands (Munteanu, 2008).

Brands can pay an athlete to reach out and build a relationship with a target audience with value-based content that tells compelling stories to show what the athlete and the brand represent. By providing value, brands can build trust and relationships with that audience. Among this valuable content, brands can begin to integrate promotional posts (from which they can ask the consumer to buy) into their content plan.

The most important lesson here, for both athletes and brands, is to understand that consumers now have complete control over the media they consume - so if your social content does not entertain or inform - you will lose the branding game and marketing for athletes, at a time when the opportunity will never be so great (Keller, 2009, Barbu et al., 2020a).

The most successful sports sponsored campaigns

Large companies want to associate with the values of sport, with entities sports clubs, sports clubs or sports clubs

Together they participate in humanitarian campaigns, awareness campaigns.

Two examples come from Zlatan Ibrahimovic and "805 Million Names", the anti-hunger awareness campaigns made by the World Food Program - the largest humanitarian agency in the world.

Ibrahimovic: "Every time you hear my name you will think of their name, every time you see me you will see them."

Racism has been a big problem in recent years. One of the best football teams in Brazil, Botafogo, has found a very interesting way to make its fans aware.

Because, of course, the color doesn't matter they reversed the order of the lines on the game shirt. And, of course, no one noticed. The investment in the "The inverted jersey" campaign was \$ 5,000.

Here are the results:

- \$ 1.5 million Return on Investment (ROI),

- 78% increase in visibility,
- 180,000 online mentions,
- 14,000 new fans.

Collaboration is the key to success

The big brands know that football teams have a lot of fans and they are constantly working on their loyalty campaigns.

#BeTheDifference is the campaign that brought under the same umbrella the football clubs Manchester United, AC Milan, Chelsea and Juventus Torino and who together supported ADIDAS.

Following this campaign, ADIDAS partners increased by up to 200% compared to the previous year and thus ADIDAS gained an advance over its main rival, NIKE.

Collaborations between the club / athletes and sponsors bring recognition to both parties

In 2016, PSV Eindhoven celebrates the end of its collaboration with PHILIPS, as the main sponsor, after 34 years - the longest in the history of football clubs to date.

The action was done in a unique way, the team played the last two matches in a special equipment. Its design is a return to the shirt worn in 1982, with classic elements, including the club logo that was used between 1917-1937.

"The Heritage Kit" has very high sales, being available even in the version of the Christmas gift, packed in special boxes.

The use of technology and the experience of the fans is more than important in sports marketing

If the causes of empty stadiums are being studied in Romania, sports clubs abroad have understood how to attract fans to the stadium.

An example comes from Portugal, from SL Benfica, and the promotion of the collaboration with the new sponsor Emirates in a very special way. A few minutes before the start of the match, an Emirates crew surprised the 65,000 fans with a demonstration of rescue instructions adapted to their support of the team (Safety instructions).

The results of the campaign, which won the Clio Sports Awards this year, are astonishing:

- 65,000 live audience,
- 386,000 TV audience,

- 24 million online views,
 - 930,000 interactions,
 - 300,000 shares.
1. Here is the promised selection of the best sports marketing campaigns of international clubs, which have been successful (<https://sportescu.ro/20-idei-marketing-sportiv-succes-video/>):
- Manchester City - formation of CFG (City Football Group);
 - Manchester City - #citystories campaign;
 - Manchester United + Chelsea + Real Madrid + AC Milan + Juventus => #BeTheDifference ADIDAS;
 - Detroit Pistons - dynamic use of emails to fans with the latest team updates;
 - PSV Eindhoven - celebration of the end of the partnership with Philips, as main sponsor, after a collaboration of 34 years;
 - SL Benfica - Safety Instructions;
 - PSG player Zlatan Ibrahimovic - "805 Million Names";
 - Arsenal - Launch of the Strong Together Trilogy Kit on the River Thames;
 - All Blacks - AIR New Zealand Sponsorship;
 - Botafogo - The inverted jersey;

Findings and discussions: The intention of the fans to buy the product

Regarding the practical part of this work, we used a survey in order to gather information and to draw conclusions regarding the opinion of the respondents on the influence that the

big brands have and their association with famous athletes on the intention to purchase the promoted products. Due to insufficient in-depth examinations in this area, our paper must be a starting point and a prelude to future investigations that can be based on the existing study.

In order to identify the students' opinion regarding the learning habits using software tools, we conducted a research among the master students of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, between March 10, 2022 - 05 April 2022 comprising 60 respondents.

The questionnaire was conducted to meet the objectives of this research. It contains 26 items with a number of 89 variables. The data obtained were subjected to univariate, bivariate and multivariate analysis, supported by the Microsoft Office Excel program.

In the desire to compile the profile of the respondent, we analysed the answers of 60 respondents, master students of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Craiova.

In the table below we have made a small presentation of the demographic questions addressed to our respondents. As you can see, the population is young, aged between 18 and 34, predominantly male, high school graduates or graduates, the vast majority being employed, and passionate about various sports.

Table no.1 Presentation of demographic characteristics

Vary	Classification of the variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	36	36
	Female	24	24
Marital status	Unmarried	17	67
	Married	30	20
	Divorced	13	13
	Widow	0	0
Age	18 – 24 years	12	12
	25 – 34 years	19	19
	35 – 44 years	14	14
	45 - 54 years	10	10

	over 55	5	5
Level of training	general school	0	0
	hischool	5	5
	college	34	34
	postuniversity study	21	21
Occupation	Student	7	7
	employee	27	27
	Unemployed	0	0
	household	8	8
	Entrepreneur	9	9
	Another occupation	9	9
Environment	Urban	47	47
	Rural	13	13
Revenue	< 1999.99 lei	0	0
	2000 – 2999.99 lei	29	29
	Peste 3000 lei	31	33
Favourite sports	football	10	10
	tennis	16	16
	cycling	22	22
	swimming	47	47
	extreme sports	19	19

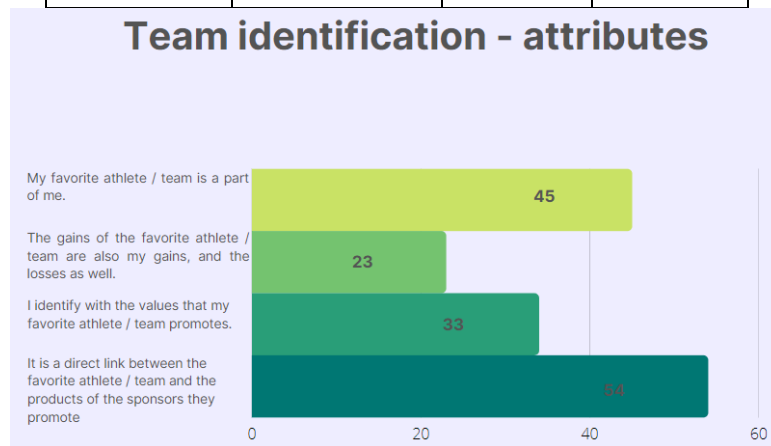


Figure 1. Distribution by identification attributes

In this question, we aimed to see what are the attributes that allow fans to identify with their favorite team or athlete.

As we want to show in this study, there is a direct link between the favorite athlete / team and the products of the sponsors they promote. Respondents also consider the athlete or favorite team as part of them, which causes them to purchase sponsored products, so this attribute is related to the highest.

Being fans of various athletes or teams, it is clear that they consider the gains as their own and the losses as well.

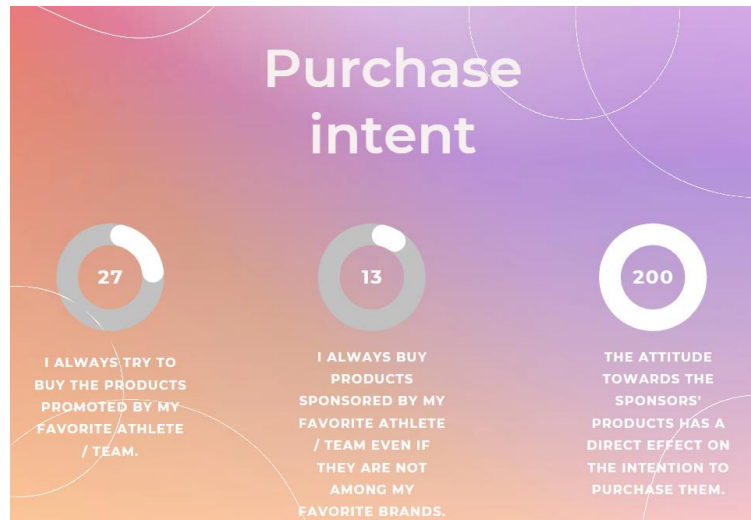


Figure 2. Distribution according to the purchase intention

The intention of the respondents to buy is highlighted by the following statements, so they always buy the products promoted by the favorite athlete, even if sometimes these products are not among their favorite brands, but the fact that the athlete or favorite team is the brand image, determines them to buy various products.

The attitude of the sponsor is also very important, not only the image of the athlete behind the brand.



Figure 3. Distribution according to the brands associated

Among the most well-known brands that are associated with famous athletes or teams are Nike, Puma, Filla, Champion, and others, being also some of the companies that offer some of the highest quality products

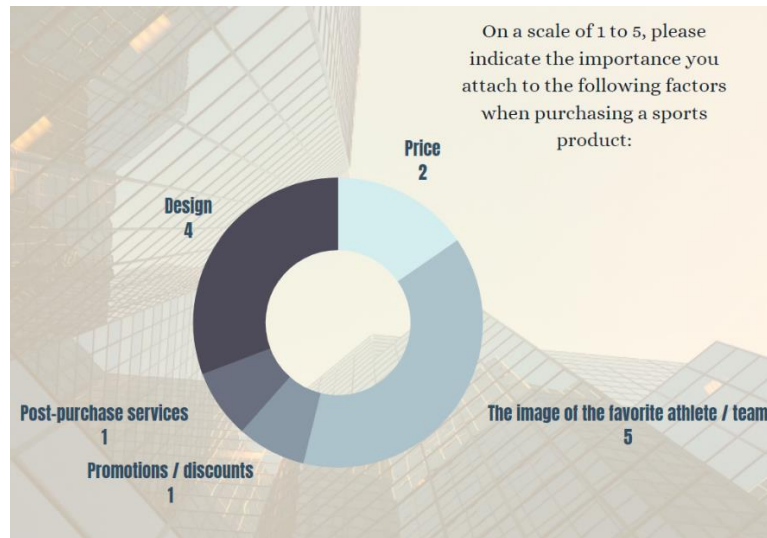


Figure 4. Distribution by influencing factors

The next question, based on an evaluation scale, was to highlight the main factors that are taken into account in the intention to buy.

As expected, the most important factor for fans is the athlete or the team that represents the image behind some products, this relationship also relies on large companies when choosing various forms of sports sponsorship, because athletes have become some of the biggest influencers today.

After-sales services or possible promotions or discounts also weigh very little on the purchase decision.

Price or design ranks second in these factors that influence the purchase intention.

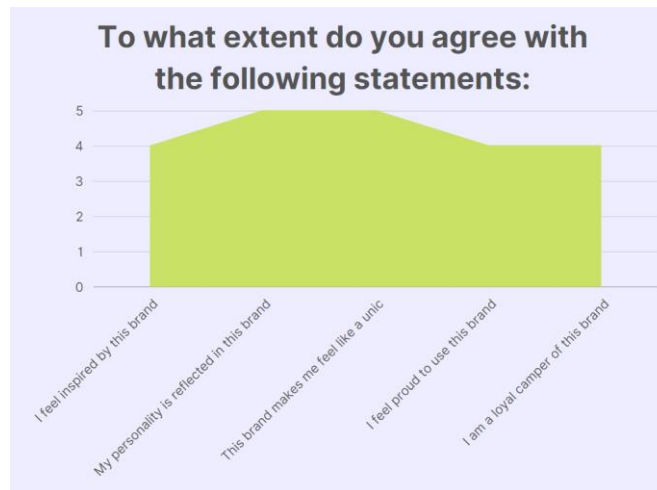


Figure 5. Distribution according to the respondents' opinion on the statements

On a scale of 1 to 5, this question was followed by the opinion of the following statements. In the first place are 2 statements, fans buy products because their personality is reflected in the image that the brand creates through the athlete and also this makes them proud to use this brand promoted by favorite athletes.

Also, the products purchased make them proud to use these products or to make them feel unique.

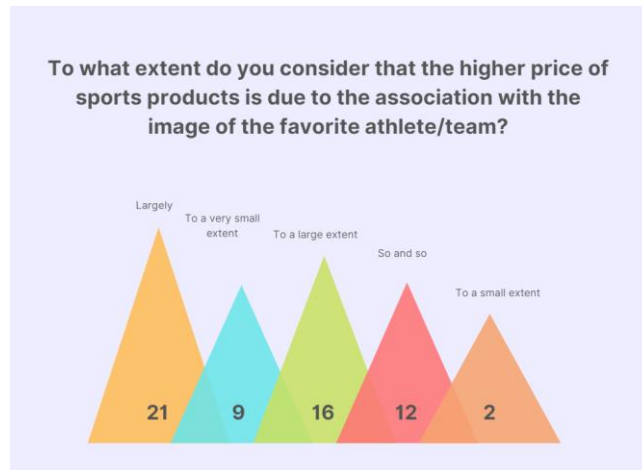


Figure 6. Distribution according to the influence of sport

On a scale of 1 to 5, respondents were asked if they consider that the high price of sports products sold is due to the affiliation of sponsoring companies with athletes / sports teams, thus creating a positive image of the brand that determines the purchase of these products.

As majority answers, respondents consider price to be to a large or very large extent as the main factor.

Conclusions

The global sports technology market has been valued at \$ 17.9 billion in 2021 and is projected to reach a CAGR of 17.5 billion between 2021 and 2026, reaching \$ 40.2 billion by 2026. Market growth may be considered a result of data-driven decisions and operations, increased public involvement and the growth of online and offline sporting events.

In recent years, professional sports organizations have adopted new technologies, such as sports data analysis, smart stadiums, portable devices, and digital signage to improve team performance, attract fans, and deploy smart infrastructure. Smart stadiums have become one of the top trends in the world, with more and more sporting events taking place around the world. Innovations in smart stadiums generate the execution of several projects around the world.

Sports fans are smart, tech savvy and, most importantly, have a lot of money to spend on products they like and see real value (Balaure, 2000). Therefore, if the young players are in your sights and you want to reach their targeting, it is smart.

Even established sports organizations work with big brands in several industries,

including beverages, food, car manufacturers, hardware, and more, to get the message across. Sports fans are very involved in the products and are willing to spend.

Sports branding means promoting what you are passionate about and articulating clearly and confidently what you think whenever you connect with your audience. You also need to pay attention to the details - what you say and do, your social media presence, body language, who you associate with, and more. Any deviations or slippage can affect your brand image.

Branding in sports is just like branding for any other industry. It is an attempt to create an image, a story and a positive association. As a sports team or athlete, you need to address not only the fans who come to the stadium to watch the game, but also the thousands of fans who buy your goods, sponsors and clubs.

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