

BRANDING IN SPORT

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Abstract

Sport has been and continues to be a fun way for the masses and a long tradition since the ancient Greek and Roman times. People have always used sport to escape from their everyday problems. Emotions are the ones that lead sports fans to continue to support their favorite athletes and teams. Over the centuries, sports events have evolved into billions of dollar industries through large investments from corporations who want to associate the brand with a team or athlete. Most people, when they hear branding or branding, think about logos, but branding is much more than that. A brand has DNA, personality, identity, and so on. Brand is the essence of the product, and the logo is a small part of this complex set of elements. This paper aims at presenting some theoretical elements on the link between branding and sport, describing the branding process, the strength of the personal brand, trying to explain the reasons for choosing an athlete as an influencer for a particular brand. The paper is structured on several sections. The first section presents the concept of branding, the importance of branding in sports and the reasons why athletes are chosen to represent some of the world's largest brands. The following section presents the study carried out in this paper, the methods used and the results obtained. The last part of the article outlines the conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future work.

Keywords: *athlete, branding, personal brand, brand image.*

Clasificare JEL : *M30, M31*

1. Introduction

In modern times, sports competitions - being pursued by millions of people have become a new medium for companies to communicate with the general population. This has led to the development of the brand from a local scale to a truly global scale in recent years, media and technology being one of the most important factors in this development [10].

What does the brand mean today? Perhaps many of us would say that it is a logo, a slogan and a mix of colors that define a company. But branding means a lot more. For sports teams around the world, branding is essential for identifying, creating a fan base, and generating substantial revenue. Without a solid branding, many teams would not benefit from the support they need to succeed. Sports branding is a reach concept that was approached by many authors in the literature [15, 17]. Our focus in this paper will be on the the link between brand image and athletes.

2. Literature review**2.1 The definition of the brand**

There are many definitions of the concept of brand, but many of them are either incomplete or addressed to people without serious branding knowledge [2]. The misunderstandings generated here make the brand work wrong, or even not work at all.

If we were to define the brand, we could say that "a brand is a name, sign or symbol used to identify the products or services of a manufacturer and used to differentiate it from competition" [3]. From this definition we understand the brand as an element of differentiation and identification of products / services.

A brand is the way a product, service or company is seen in the minds of consumers [13]. Of course, every brand is seen in a certain way by consumers. Note that such a perception can be both negative and positive. Also note that not just a product, service or company can be brands, but also a state, a person, an event or even a building. In some cases we do not even need a logo or a slogan, identity is something else.

Although a brand is an identity, it is a brand only if it is exposed, communicated and recognized. From here we can extract a brand new definition: A brand is the way a product/service/company is visualized/memorized in the minds

of consumers [13]. However, each consumer perceives the brand differently, this perception can be both negative and positive.

Appropriate branding can lead to considerable sales not only of a single product but also of other products associated with the brand. [6]

2.2 The link between brand image and athletes

People involved in branding are trying to develop or match the expectations behind the brand experience, creating the impression that a brand associated with a product or service has certain qualities or features that make it special or unique [9]. Thomson (2006) said that a brand is, therefore, one of the most valuable elements in an advertising theme. The art of creating and maintaining a brand is called brand management and it takes a colossal job to get the desired results [16].

Surprisingly, however, relatively few researchers have systematically studied how athletes or people in general can build personal brands that distinguish them from colleagues and provide such reward opportunities [1]. Only a few academic papers in the field of marketing or consumer research refer to the branding process of people. Celebrity literature casts light on the nature of celebrity, but less on the specific processes through which a person can develop. Beyond academic literature, most analyzes of the phenomenon are limited to books written for a general audience and although valuable none of them addressed the issue how people in a profession (such as a sport) can build personal brands with a high level of equity [4].

In terms of brand image, we can say that it is related to identity and is the way in which identity is perceived and understood by people interacting with the brand [5].

Thus, in order to connect the brand to the people who interact with it, different strategies are used to attribute the human characteristics to the brand. This process aims at creating brand personality.

The big brands have realized that the association of their products with athletes will contribute not only to the increase in sales but also to the creation of the brand personality.

Apart from sports performance, for the commercial valorization of an athlete's celebrity, some of the most important assets are the athlete's personal brand [7]. Thus, a strong personal brand contributes not only to attracting money, increasing profits, the number of supporters around the world, but also to developing unlimited connections.

Social Media has been able to loyalty to fans, to bring new ones, to achieve transparency in the sport world, bringing the athlete closer to his fans.

The personal brand of an athlete includes, besides his public identity, a number of elements that he wants to share with fans such as passions, values in which he believes, his position on various themes, the famous friends around him, his causes on who supports them or other details they make public [8].

Looking at the psychology of the sports audience, there are several reasons behind why they choose to become passionate about the fans of the game. They can devote a team of interest to them, favors certain players or watch games because they enjoy the beauty of the sport.

Fans make judgments on a player, just as a consumer judges a product. It is essential for a brand to match as many product rating factors as the player's rating factors [12].

What are the reasons for companies to link brands to the image of more and more athletes?

Sports brands are a giant industry that earns millions of revenue.

Whether it's LeBron introducing a new pair of Nike sports shoes, Federer who makes a Mercedes-Benz advertisement or Ronaldo drinking Gatorade after gym, brand names are willing to spend as much as possible to support the athletes in many reasons.

One of the reasons is brand awareness [11].

Large brands can capitalize on the positive public image of the athlete, the image and values of the company. The best approval deals work to fit the image of a corporate brand with the athlete image to target consumers with similar values and to increase brand awareness. Another reason is the validation of product features.

A thick and healthy hair athlete might be contracted to promote a certain shampoo brand to create the impression that her hair is due to the use of shampoo. Also, an athlete might be contracted to promote a certain brand of nutritional sports drinks, giving the impression that his physical and athletic performances result from the use of a specific sports drink.

3. Research methodology

Given the nature of research issues, this study was based on a survey, believing that this method is best suited to gaining insights and acquiring knowledge that is currently not so well grounded in the athlete's brand literature. 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.

As research methods in this paper we used bibliographic study, where we concentrate on the analysis of specialized literature, and statistic-mathematical method in data processing.

This study looked at the respondents' view of what branding means in sport. The survey was conducted between September 20 and October 10 on a sample of 480 people in Craiova by completing an online questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 14 questions that initially aimed at creating a profile of the people surveyed, and then followed various issues related to the topic under discussion. The structure of the sample is presented in table no. 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the respondents

Variable	Classification of the variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	330	68.75
	Female	150	31.25
Civil Status	Unmarried	350	73
	Married	130	27
Age	20 – 30 years	330	68.75
	30 – 40 years	90	18.75
	40 – 50 years	60	12.5
	Over 50 years	0	0
Study	Highschool	50	4.06
	College	270	70.73
	Postgraduate studies	150	25.21
Occupation	Student	170	10.42
	Human Resources Inspector	20	4.2
	Medical Assistant	30	6.25
	Freelancer	30	6.25
	Other occupation	230	47.92
Environment	Urban	370	85.37
	Rural	100	14.63
Income	0 – 1500 lei	70	14.59
	1500 – 2000 lei	90	18.75
	2000 -3000 lei	180	37
	over 3000 lei	40	8.4

Source: authors' research

The hypotheses of the study are:

H1: Promotion is necessary for the brand, with fans / consumers interested in the ways of promotion, which guarantees a certain quality of services / products offered.

H2: The superficiality in the choice of services / products offered by a sporting brand is influenced by the notoriety of the people representing the brand image.

H3: Sports Branding is an innovative, ever changing and reinventing field, strongly impacted by the negative advertising promoted by sportsmen representing the brand image.

H4: Brand image is related to identity and is the way in which identity is perceived and understood by people interacting with the brand.

2.4. Results and discussions

Respondents believe that the main ways to promote sport are mainly the brand's reputation (29.4%) and support of the fans (27.6%) – figure 1.

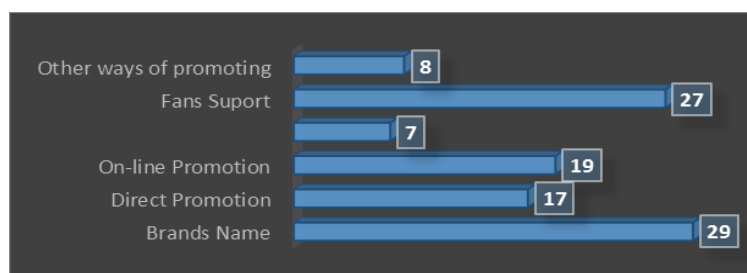


Figure 1. Ways of sports promotion

Source: authors' research

It seems that the best known associations between a brand and a sportsman is the association between Simona Halep and Mercedes-Benz Romania, followed by the one between Gatorade and Serena Williams (figure 2).

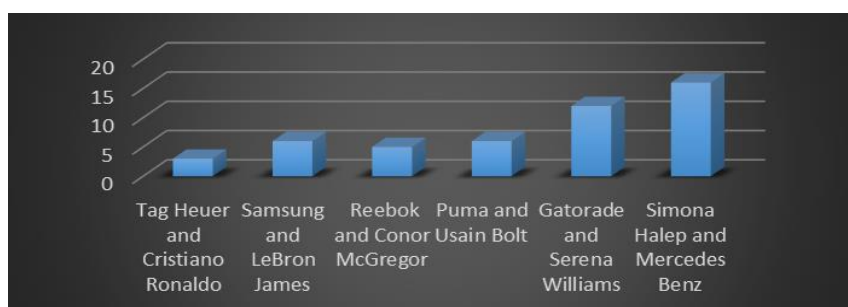


Figure 2. Examples of known associations of brands with athletes

Source: authors' research

Most of our respondents, 63 percent, easily recognize the famous brands of sports industry, 17 percent fail to recognize them, and 20 percent sometimes manage to make the correlation between a brand and an athlete who represent (figure 3).

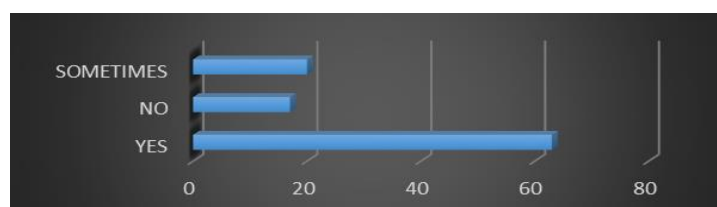


Figure 3. Recognize the famous brands of sports industry

Source: authors' research

The hypotheses of sporting branding are further analyzed as an innovative, constantly changing and reinventing domain in order to validate or invalidate them according to the quantitative research results (table 2).

Table 2. Correlation between brand and quality

		The promotion is 100% necessary for the brand.	The ways of promotion guarantee a certain quality of services / products offered.
The promotion is 100% necessary for the brand.	Pearson Correlation	1	.948
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.009
	N	123	123
The ways of promotion guarantee a certain quality of services / products offered.	Pearson Correlation	.948	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	
	N	123	123

Source: authors' research

The value of the Pearson correlation coefficient is equal to 0.948, which denotes the direct and strong correlation that is created between the variables, the value of the coefficient tending towards 1. The Sig value. the corresponding value is 0.009, so the more a brand is promoted, the more interested the customers / fans of the services / products will be.

In conclusion, the research hypothesis is validated, a sporting brand can only be developed through promotion, consumer satisfaction comes from the use of quality services / products, this element being a key element in the promotion strategy (table 3).

Table 3. Correlation between superficiality and reality

	In deciding to buy a sporting product, take in consider whether a star is the image of that brand.	The use of the services / products of a brand is influenced by the way the person representing the brand is seen.
In deciding to buy a sporting product, take in consider whether a star is the image of that brand.	1	.025
Pearson Correlation		.731
Sig. (2-tailed)		
N	123	123
The use of the services / products of a brand is influenced by the way the person representing the brand is seen.	.025	1
Pearson Correlation		
Sig. (2-tailed)		.731
N	123	123

Source: authors' research

The results signal that the two statements are not statistically compatible because by calculating the Pearson coefficient we obtained a value of 0.025 and the value of the Sig coefficient. is 0.731 which is well above the maximum admissible value of 0.05.

In conclusion, there is no link between the two variables, the research hypothesis being invalidated (table 4).

Table 4. Correlation between innovation and negative publicity

	Sports branding is an innovative, constantly changing and reinventing field.	A person who says negative things about the image of a brand automatically attracts another 10 people who will talk badly about it.
Sports branding is an innovative, constantly changing and reinventing field.	1	-.108
Pearson Correlation		.445
Sig. (2-tailed)		
N	123	123
A person who says negative things about the image of a brand automatically attracts another 10 people who will talk badly about it.	-.108	1
Pearson Correlation		
Sig. (2-tailed)		.445
N	123	123

Source: authors' research

By making a correlation between domain innovation and negative publicity, we obtained the value of Pearson's coefficient of -0.108, a value that indicates an inverse correlation between assertions. Coefficient Sig. is not within the

required limits, the value of 0.445 far exceeds the value of 0.05 accepted (table 5). In conclusion, there is no link between the two variables, the research hypothesis being invalidated.

Table 5. Correlation between the sport and the created environment

		The personal brand of an athlete includes, besides his public identity, a number of elements he shares with his fans.	The connection between the brand and the people who interact with it is achieved by attributing human characteristics to the brand.
The personal brand of an athlete includes, besides his public identity, a number of elements he shares with his fans.	Pearson Correlation	1	.921
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.026
	N	123	123
The connection between the brand and the people who interact with it is achieved by attributing human characteristics to the brand.	Pearson Correlation	.921	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.026	
	N	123	123

Source: authors' research

Analyzing the linkage between staff and ambience, we obtained the value of Pearson's coefficient of 0.921 and the value of Sig. corresponding to 0.026, values that provide information about the meaning of the link and the intensity of the link between the two statements.

In conclusion, the research hypothesis is validated, creating a link between the athlete and the created ambience. The hypotheses summary is detailed in table 6.

Table 6. Hypotheses summary

H1: Promotion is necessary for the brand, with fans / consumers interested in the ways of promotion, which guarantees a certain quality of services / products offered.	Accepted
H2: The superficiality in the choice of services / products offered by a sporting brand is influenced by the notoriety of the people representing the brand image.	Rejected
H3: Sports Branding is an innovative, ever changing and reinventing field, strongly impacted by the negative advertising promoted by sportsmen representing the brand image.	Rejected
H4: Brand image is related to identity and is the way in which identity is perceived and understood by people interacting with the brand.	Accepted

Source: authors' research

3. Conclusions

This article aims to develop the knowledge of the concept of sporting branding, the understanding of the reasons that lead companies to link the brands to the image of more and more athletes and how these athletes themselves establish a lifestyle brand using their names.

There are various limitations that are normal and should serve as a starting point for future research. The first limitation in this paper is related to the size and structure of the sample. Thus, future studies could try to conduct interviews in different cities in the country or abroad and rely on larger samples to better understand the increasing importance of branding in sport.

Future studies should also include different categories of fans and supporters of sport. This type of study would provide a more in-depth picture of the sporting branding context and the understanding of athletes' links with major brands.

Another point to be discussed in future research is to understand the consequences of the sporting brand and the positive link between the athlete's brand and the loyalty of the athlete and how the athletes themselves establish a lifestyle brand using their names, examining the various branded athletes.

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