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Brand Logos More Prevalent In Recent News Sports Photos

by James Pokrywczynski, John Carvalho and C. Thomas Preston, Jr.

An analysis of sports pages since 1950s showed that newspaper sports photos contained almost no brand logos, However, strategic placement of brand logos on uniforms, equipment or signage within camera shots has increased in the past two decades.

With almost \$14 billion spent annually in the U.S. on marketing through sports,¹ and top sponsorships for the 2008 Olympics averaging \$72 million each,² marketers need to assess every bit of value they get out of their sponsorships. One of the most valued components of a sponsorship, according to some practitioners,³ is the exposure to brands placed within a sports context (uniform/equipment logos, arena signage) received through media coverage of sports. Television, magazine and newspaper editorial coverage of sports give added exposure opportunities beyond those gained with event attendees through verbal mentions—"today's Chicago Bulls game at the United Center,"—or visual brand appearances—photos of action.

Although television⁴ and magazine⁵ exposure to brands in sports have been studied, newspapers' exposure has not. This study attempts to fill that void in the literature at a time of major change in the newspaper industry. Readership is down for printed versions, but up substantially for online versions. This bodes well for brand exposures, since online newspaper versions tend to have more, larger and more colorful photos than does the print version. This gives sponsors' brands greater potential for impacting consumers either cognitively or affectively.

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Newspapers have another advantage when considering the exposure potential of brands appearing in sports photographs. As the local medium capable of providing the most intense, detailed coverage of area sports teams, newspapers sports page consumption may spark a level of intensity and involvement among readers that makes brands in photos more noticeable and influential attitudinally. A recent ESPN sports poll shows 90 percent of Americans consider themselves sports fans, and 30 percent say they are avid sports fans.⁶ A 2009 study showed 36 percent of avid sports fans first check their local newspaper for team information, with another 17 percent going to the paper's website.⁷ An historical perspective on brand exposures in newspaper sports photographs may also give insights on what the future holds for brand exposure opportunities through sports.

Literature Review

Newspaper Sports Coverage

The newspaper sports section has undergone many changes since Joseph Pulitzer organized the first department of sports writers at *The New York World* in the 1870s and William Randolph Hearst combined lively expert coverage with increased pages devoted to sports in *The New York Journal* in 1895 to create the prototype for the modern section.⁸ Mass media augmented sports' influence on society at the turn of the 20th century.

Following World War II, the advent of television initiated a flattening of newspaper circulation, but in sports, the two media established a complementary relationship.⁹ With television providing the game information to fans, newspapers focused less on game reports and more on analytical articles and on human-interest features.¹⁰ By the early 1980s, sports editors were reporting that their newspapers were devoting more space to sports coverage and that the quality of sports writing had improved.¹¹

By 1991, *The New York Times* had increased the space devoted to sports by 50 percent, and its sports staff by 10 percent.¹² Within a few years, *The Times*, long a holdout from having separate sports sections, was starting a separate run for sports, with pictures in color.¹³

As of the late 1990s, the Internet's effects were beginning to emerge.¹⁴ Nevertheless, sports coverage in newspapers was at an all-time high. Some newspapers, such as *The Washington Times*, had converted their Sunday issues almost entirely to sports.¹⁵ After the turn of the century, however, sports sections began to plateau and decline in print versions. Recognizing the challenges posed by new media, one writer warned as early as 2001 that sports sections must change as both reader interests and television coverage change.¹⁶ Another change was that even more sports information was found on the Internet; however, the Internet most often contained access to articles that were found in the print version, as newspapers also put their stories online.

Brand Exposure in Media

With the enormous amount of media coverage of sports, both on television and in print, logos and signage reaches millions of potential consumers. A study comparing brand exposure potential across six major sports—auto racing, baseball, basketball, tennis, hockey, football—identified sports that could deliver more exposures (time and frequency), such as hockey and auto racing, versus longer but less frequent exposure episodes, such as tennis and basketball.¹⁷ Although a follow-up study by the same author showed brand exposures from signage during televised events garnered only about 10 percent of the recall gained from the same brand advertised in a 30-second commercial, cognitive effects still suggested the brand exposure has impact.¹⁸ A study of the 2008 NASCAR season showed television coverage netted sponsors more than 138,000 exposures at a total value of \$1.7 billion.¹⁹ According to Stevens,²⁰ brand exposure received from sports sponsorships continues to be important as:

- network television commercial time is astronomically expensive
- high media clutter requires creative ways to reach consumers
- high product density on store shelves requires brand awareness

A study of a year of *Sports Illustrated* magazine photos over three decades showed a tenfold increase in the number of photos that included marketers' logos, from 41 photos with logos in 1974 to 401 in 1994.²¹ The most common exposures were for athletic apparel and equipment logos. Although major sports like professional football, baseball, basketball and hockey provide the most exposures through photo coverage, other sports like skiing and tennis also provided ample exposure opportunities.

Brand awareness can be maintained by repeated exposures to the brand name and logo, effects that are provided by sports sponsorship and particularly by placement of arena advertising. The exposure is non-intrusive, serving as a backdrop to the sports action occurring at the arena. Because it cannot be separated from the action, this communication form is difficult to tune out perceptually. In addition, the excitement and interest experienced by sports consumers²² simultaneous with exposure to the brand/logos have the potential through association to leave positive feelings in consumers toward the advertised brands.

An examination of the actual exposure that these brands/logos have through photographic coverage and an evaluation of their effects, if any, on readers, has potential value for advertisers as well as arena signage sales personnel. Research on this topic can be conceived in two stages.

- First, examining the nature of exposure that brands/logos in sports receives in photographic coverage of various sports
 - Second, evaluating the potential communication effects of such exposures on readers would require an experimental or quasi-experimental design in which viewers are asked to recall (unaided, partially-aided and aided) brands/logos after reading all or part of a newspaper
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Theoretical Considerations

One of the basic questions in studying exposure potential in newspaper sports photos is whether these background messages can have any effect on a reader. Literature on exposure and perception provides some help. Krugman²³ differentiates between conscious vision and peripheral visions and suggests that, physiologically speaking, fixating on a particular object can only be accomplished within a three-degree arc. He contends that most of our vision is "peripheral." According to Krugman, this peripheral vision permits us to see without paying particular attention to what is seen. This type of "seeing" can occur very quickly (under one-tenth second), and Krugman claims there is good reason to believe such stimuli can affect a reader. Glimpses of brands/logos as part of a sports photo seem to match this "peripheral" vision.

Psychology research has identified comprehension of stimuli with exposure durations as short as 160 milliseconds.²⁴ In one experiment by Nickerson,²⁵ viewers of 200 slides exposed for less than two seconds each were able to recognize correctly 95 percent after 24 hours and up to 60 percent almost one year after the experiment.

While this research suggests that glimpses of brands/logos in sports photos have definite potential for exposure impact, other researchers²⁶ claim that retention depends more on the quality of the encoding operations performed than on the time of exposure. For brands/logos in sports photos, the encoding quality is limited and beyond the boundaries of this study. However, attention to the range of exposure opportunities available to a sports sponsor may shed light on the variation in exposure quality.

Given the cognitive potential from exposures to brands described above, even brief background stimuli as part of a newspaper sports photo, the question of attitudinal effects from such exposure also requires consideration. Zajonc's mere exposure effects hypothesis²⁷ lends support to the notion that mere and repeated exposure to a stimulus leads to increased familiarity. This familiarity is often associated with an increase in positive attitudes and feelings toward the stimulus. In the photo exposure context, the cumulative effects of brands from sports photos, along with exposure from other marketing communication forms is likely to breed a brand familiarity that sponsors can benefit from in the form of brand attitudes.

Research Questions

Research questions to test in this study included the following:

RQ1:

As sports marketing has grown, has brand exposure in the coverage of sports in newspapers also grown?

RQ2:

Which sports provide the most opportunities for brand exposure in newspaper coverage of sports?

Method

In his seminal book *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*, Holsti²⁸ noted the usefulness of trend inventories “for identifying major changes across long periods of time.” To trace the evolution of sports sections over a 50-year period, the researchers selected a sample of eight metropolitan newspapers: *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Milwaukee Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. The newspapers were selected because they reflect a variety of regional metropolitan areas and demographic changes over the period. Also, the coding project included information relating to coverage of professional sports, and all eight newspapers are located in cities that host professional sports franchises. The availability of microfilm for these newspapers was not a minor factor.

As for specific sports (RQ2) that featured more brands, auto racing, tennis and skiing photos most often featured at least one visible logo in the sample taken.

A sample of 12 weeks—two weeks, six months apart, from the same year in each decade—were identified. From each decade, the year ending in the same digit was selected: 1956, 1966, 1976, 1986, 1996 and 2006. At the time the analysis was planned, 2006 was the most recent complete year, and the researchers worked backward from there, a decade at a time. Atlanta and San Diego were served by two major newspapers that merged into a single newspaper during this period. In those cases, the pre-merger newspaper with the higher circulation was included in the earlier coding. In multi-newspaper markets, the newspaper was selected based on its survival until the final year of the study.

The decision resulted in a sample of fourteen sports sections per newspaper for each year. According to Stempel,²⁹ a sample size of 12 newspapers within a given year produced adequate results for most such analyses, and increasing the sample size beyond 12 did not increase accuracy. The months were systematically varied so that one month—and, by consequence, one seasonal sport—did not overwhelm the analysis. As a result, each calendar month was included in the study once. The dates within each month were also systematically varied. The decisions resulted in the eight newspapers being studied within the following weeks: Jan. 11-17, 1956; July 10-16, 1956; June 16-22, 1966; Dec. 15-21, 1966; May 21-27, 1976; Nov. 20-26, 1976; April 24-30, 1986; Oct. 25-31, 1986; March 1-7, 1996; Sept. 1-7, 1996; Feb. 5-11, 2006; and Aug. 6-12, 2006.

Microfilms of each newspaper for the dates of the study were obtained through interlibrary loan. Because the variables measured were quantitative and not interpretive, each section was coded only once. Coders mostly relied on the page count within the front-page flag to determine the total number of pages for that day. When that information was not available, they counted the total pages themselves. Sports pages were counted by the coders. When a full-page ad ran at the end of the sports section, it was not included in the sports section page count. Brands in photographs were counted only if at least one half the logo was visible in the photo.

Findings

A total of 672 sports sections were coded for this study. The average size of newspaper sports sections assessed as a percentage of total newspaper size (pages) showed a steady increase every decade until 1996. [See Table 1] With sports representing almost seven percent of the total newspaper in 1956, sports peaked at slightly more than 10 percent of a newspaper in 1996. In 2006, sports sections declined to 9.87 percent of the

total newspaper. This decline has likely continued to the present given reader-ship declines coupled with fewer advertising dollars supporting newspapers.

Sports photos that included at least one visible brand name numbered 67 over the five decades. Those photos featured 81 brand logos. Only one brand logo appeared in any sports photo in the 1956 sample, a boxing photo from *The San Diego Union* featuring the Everlast equipment brand, and none appeared in 1966. As seen in Table 1, the next three decades showed a steady increase in the number of brands appearing in sports photos, peaking at 32 brand appearances in 1996, before declining to 22 in 2006. The results related to RQ1 show the growth of sports sponsorship and a corresponding pattern of growth in

Table 1
Average Pages Per Newspaper
by Decade and Logo Count

Year	Average Pages	Logos
1956	85.53	1
1966	110.66	0
1976	124.19	8
1986	150.66	18
1996	148.53	32
2006	143.07	22

brand appearances through publicity exposure in newspapers.

No noticeable differences existed across newspapers in the types of sports photos published, their size or the number of brand logos that appeared with two exceptions. *The Dallas Morning News* and *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* displayed no brand logos in sports photos prior to the 2006 sample. Representatives from both sports departments had no institutional knowledge about specific policies that prohibited use of photos featuring brands or efforts to airbrush existing logos out of the photos. However, Irwin Thompson of *The Dallas Morning News*³⁰ said photographers are told to look for neutral backgrounds, but the paper would not avoid printing a “key play” photo just because a logo appeared in the background. He cited an outfield sign at the local ballpark for a major airline as an example of signage that has appeared when an outfielder is attempting to make an important catch.

As for specific sports (RQ2) that featured more brands, auto racing, tennis and skiing photos most often featured at least one visible logo in the sample taken. Baseball photos with visible brands only appeared twice over the five decades of papers sampled. These results are not surprising, since auto racing, tennis and skiing are sports that have embraced the placement of brand logos on uniforms and equipment, while Major League Baseball has been steadfast in keeping brand logos off uniforms.

Uniform and equipment logos were clearly the most likely brands to appear in newspaper sports photos. Signage at playing sites did appear in photos, but at a lesser frequency. The two biggest logos among the 81 identified in this study were found in auto racing photos. Individual performer sports, such as golf, track and luge often featured close-up shots that showed brands on uniforms in larger size.

Conclusions

Newspaper sports photographs provide another media outlet for sports sponsors to gain brand exposures. With 54 brands appearing in the two most recent decades of newspapers sampled, sports marketers’ strategic placement of brand logos on uniforms, equipment or signage within camera shot seems to be working. This period also coincides with major technological developments in image transmission and digitization.³¹ Vast improvements in how photo suppliers like the Associated Press delivered visual images, coupled with *USA Today’s* introduction of advanced color reproduction capabilities, may explain the jump in photo appearances for brands. Photojournalism changed during this period, from a deliverer of facts to a storytelling role, emphasizing photos with more emotions and close-ups, giving brands in sports a better chance to be clear and noticeable.

However, even in the best year (1996) for brand exposure in the sample, 32 total appearances across two weeks of eight different newspapers means brand appearances are rare. This exposure pattern is in stark contrast to magazine

photos, where six or more brands were found in most issues of *Sports Illustrated*, according to one study.³² Television provides even more exposures, although the fleeting nature of such exposures needs to be considered compared to the permanence and longevity of brands featured in print photos.

An advantage of newspapers is the future potential that the Internet presents to brands in sports photographs. The proliferation of newspaper content to the Internet gives sports photographs appearing there a unique, interactive quality that can be used in the future. Much like web page links that can be embedded into the text of web pages, brands appearing in sports photos on the web could use the same technology to allow viewers to click on a brand, which could take them to the brand website where they could learn more about the product or buy it. Microsites specific to the sport/team connected to the sponsorship would make the appeal even more attractive for sports fans. Future research must examine newspaper web content for brand exposure potential as well as address the effects that "avidness" in various degrees among readers have on brand exposures delivered in photos.

Any sampling of news media to assess exposure frequency has the limitation of choosing atypical content to draw conclusions. However, the sample in this study made efforts to control for the timing of year, and hence the sports, that were featured in the sample. Large city dailies with a variety of major sports represented in those areas were included in the sample. Geographic diversity was considered in drawing the sample, although the northwest and south central U.S. regions may have been worthy additions to the sample.

The newspaper industry faces monumental change, with publications filing for bankruptcy, converting to internet-only distribution or closing. A 2009 survey of 50 daily metro newspaper editors shows an average cut of 20 percent in space devoted to sports.³³ The results reported here may not last long in this changing landscape. But the future potential of brand exposure in sports photographs is exciting and worthy of study.

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