

Enhancing Effectiveness: Unconventional Marketing Strategies in the Complex Sports Landscape

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Abstract

In nowadays complex sports industry, where the pursuit of wellness and care has taken center stage, companies face the challenge of devising impactful marketing strategies in an increasingly competitive environment. An emerging area of focus is the effectiveness of unconventional marketing techniques, which remains relatively under-researched despite its potential to enhance the impact of strategies. Through a fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), based on multiple case studies, this paper introduces a framework that underscores the significance of originality, novelty, visibility, relevance, engagement, legacy, and authenticity as necessary conditions for stimulating information processing and fostering a positive brand attitude. This research contributes to the existing knowledge on consumer decision-making processes, shedding light on which drivers might improve the effectiveness of unconventional strategies and connecting different executional paths to an increased purchase intention and word of mouth. From a managerial perspective, the investigation capitalizes on how to differentiate investments from traditional media and assist firms with practical guidelines to develop more effective marketing strategies.

Keywords

Sports Management; Unconventional Marketing; fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA); Brand Authenticity; Purchase Intention; Word of Mouth

1. Introduction

In recent decades, managerial practices in sports marketing progressed and the sector experienced a substantial expansion, not only encompassing a marked increase in the number of participants, companies, and sponsor, but also heightening the level of brand associations (Koronios et al., 2021). This growth can be attributed to various factors, including technological advancements (Breuer et al., 2021), the rise of professional marketing techniques applied to sport management, sponsorship deals, and the proliferation of sports leagues and events (Santomier, 2008). Indeed, the global sports sponsorship market, estimated at approximately 57 billion U.S. dollars in 2020, is projected to reach nearly 90 billion U.S. dollars by 2027 (Statista, 2021). However, extant research indicates a concerning trend wherein consumers exhibit limited attention toward marketing advertisements during sports events. As a result, global

sports fans' attitudes are gradually declining (Statista, 2022), and organizations started to recognize the importance of employing innovative and unconventional practices to capture consumers' attention and establish enduring connections with them (Breuer et al., 2021). In this context, unconventional strategies appear extraordinary experiences which possess a set of antistructural characteristics such as positive and collaborative interactions among participants, attenuated boundaries, similar and shared goals (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). These experiences are emotionally intense, unique, memorable and transformative (Skandalis et al., 2019), ultimately contributing to the overall welfare and satisfaction of consumers. Any intentions and expectations are unpredictable, allowing for a more sense of belonging (Rota & Salone, 2014).

Regardless of the growing interest for these innovative techniques (Koronios et al., 2021), there is a lack of existing literature addressing their relevance and effectiveness within the sports industry. Indeed, while it is important to comprehend the factors influencing end-consumers, it is even more crucial to understand the key elements influencing the effectiveness of these strategies to ensure their success consistently. Existing studies by Yoshida et al. (2013), Koronios et al. (2021), and Alhadad et al. (2019) partially address this research gap, and represent an initial effort to provide managers with more holistic information pertaining to the factors attracting consumers to sport organizations through innovative event experiences. Their research generate a conceptual model of sport event innovativeness, including the dimensions of sport offerings and relationship-building activities. The idea however merits further research with respect to formulating an explanation of what factors contribute most to the overall effectiveness of sport event experiences from an unconventional marketing strategy perspective. Koronios et al. (2021) and Alhadad et al. (2019) both develop a reliable and valid measurement scale to explore the factors influencing sport sponsorship's effectiveness. Even if both focus on sport sponsorships rather than unconventional marketing, their examinations underline the key factors that must be considered in order to support sponsorship efficiency and effectiveness. These factors include beliefs about sponsorship, sport involvement and image (Koronios et al., 2021), and customer-based brand equity, brand integration, and brand loyalty (Alhadad et al., 2019). This list is far from exhaustive and additional investigation may concentrate on identifying other fundamental variables, preferably related to unconventional marketing strategies. However, address both authors suggested elements and framework structure is fundamental to analyze the adequacy of sports events as a strategic marketing tool (Shilbury et al., 2015). To fill these gaps, we propose to develop a framework that highlight the necessary and sufficient conditions to guarantee the effectiveness of unconventional strategies in the sports events industry. Understanding the key elements contributing to overall effectiveness empowers marketers to create impactful and memorable campaigns, navigate potential challenges, and foster meaningful connections with their target audience. Indeed, it is an essential tool for brand success, as it distinguishes a company from its competitors (Koronios et al., 2021) and creates a psychological bond with end-consumers (Henseler, 2011). The present research then adds to this literature stream by shedding light on to-date untested underlying mechanisms that explain the impact of a set of drivers on the effectiveness

of unconventional strategies in the sports industry, thereby promoting the overall well-being and contentment of consumers.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Effectiveness of unconventional strategies in the sports industry

As one of the first researchers studying this phenomenon, Levinson & Godin (1994) define unconventional strategies as the collection of communication strategies that employ innovative techniques, tools, and media to promote a product in an alternative manner. Its primary objective is then to captivate and engage the target audience, forge emotional connections between the company and the viewer, increase visibility, enhance brand memorability, and affect purchasing decisions (Dahlén, 2005). Notably, unconventional marketing emphasizes creativity, wonder, and surprise as its core attributes, while its distinguishing feature lies in the audience itself, which is instrumental in spreading and viralizing the brand's advertising campaign. According to Cova and Saucet (2014), the speed of deterioration due to the continuing need for originality, has led to the emergence of numerous types of unconventional strategies, specifically guerrilla marketing, viral marketing, tribal marketing, experiential marketing, ambush marketing, ambient marketing, buzz marketing, and word of mouth. All of these can be effectively implemented in companies of varying sizes, as organizations can derive advantages even with a restricted budget allocation.

Furthermore, determining the potential effectiveness of an unconventional campaign is still a hotly debated topic and the subject of numerous studies in the disciplines of management and marketing (Chimhanzi & Morgan, 2005). According to Perna & Baraldi (2014), the concept of effectiveness refers to the ability of marketing efforts to accomplish desired objectives and yield favourable outcomes. It serves as a metric that quantifies the extent to which marketing activities contribute to the overall success of a company or the success of a particular campaign (Slater et al., 2010). To evaluate effectiveness, marketers commonly employ various analytics tools, data analysis, and performance tracking mechanisms (Elmuti et al., 2009) to monitor and evaluate the impact of their strategies and tactics. This enables them to make data-driven decisions, optimize campaigns, and refine their approach to achieve better results (Büschken, 2009). Nevertheless, even if these messages are better appreciated, these strategies often fall short of expectations, either during implementation or afterward. As a result, previous literature has examined the factors contributing to the effectiveness of a campaign to better comprehend the reasons behind its failure. Within this context, Du Plessis (2015) provides comprehensive academic guidelines that emphasize the essential attributes of a strategy which companies should adhere to in order to effectively implement content marketing practices that yield success, while Koronios et al. (2021) develop a reliable and valid measurement scale to explore the factors influencing sport sponsorship's effectiveness. Despite their distinct topics, the findings serve as an initial framework and make valuable contributions to the ongoing learning process in the conceptual advancement of unconventional marketing.

2.2 Research question and framework

The marketing strategy literature is sometime criticized for the dearth of conceptual, theoretical, and empirical studies focusing on antecedents to effective marketing strategy implementation (Chimhanzi & Morgan, 2005). Despite the existing research on the efficacy of sport sponsorships, limited elements have been developed regarding theoretical frameworks on the effectiveness of unconventional marketing strategies on sport management. The aim is then to investigate what can exert influence on brand success through unconventional marketing in distinguishing a company from its competitors, promoting the perception of having an innovative philosophy, and creating a psychological bond with consumers (Henseler, 2011). By systematically investigate the antecedents of effectiveness, this research contributes to the existing knowledge base as it provides deeper insights into the underlying mechanisms and rationales that govern the impact of specific factors on the achievement of success in unconventional marketing strategies (Figure 1).

2.2.1 Target audience receptiveness

One pivotal element that shape the effectiveness of an unconventional technique is the level of receptiveness exhibited by the target audience (Bodur et al., 2023). Accordingly, the greater the openness and receptiveness of the audience towards non-traditional approaches, the higher the potential impact and effectiveness of the technique. As a result, by considering the receptiveness of the audience as antecedent of the strategies' effectiveness, marketers can tailor their strategies to be more captivating and appealing (Rubin et al., 2022). This enhances behavioral consequences including effects on trust, brand loyalty, word of mouth, and purchase intentions.

2.2.2 Creative and memorable strategy

The execution of an unconventional strategy in a creative and memorable manner serves as another key determinant of its effectiveness. Das et al. (2022) propose that techniques capable of capturing attention, evoking emotions, and leaving a lasting impression on the audience are more likely to succeed in achieving their objectives. Indeed, a creative and memorable strategy amplifies the reach and impact of the campaign, extending its influence beyond the initial target audience. Consequently, as highlighted by Morhart et al. (2015), creativity in messaging and brand positioning fosters brand authenticity and deepens the connection with the target audience.

2.2.3 Brand identity and values

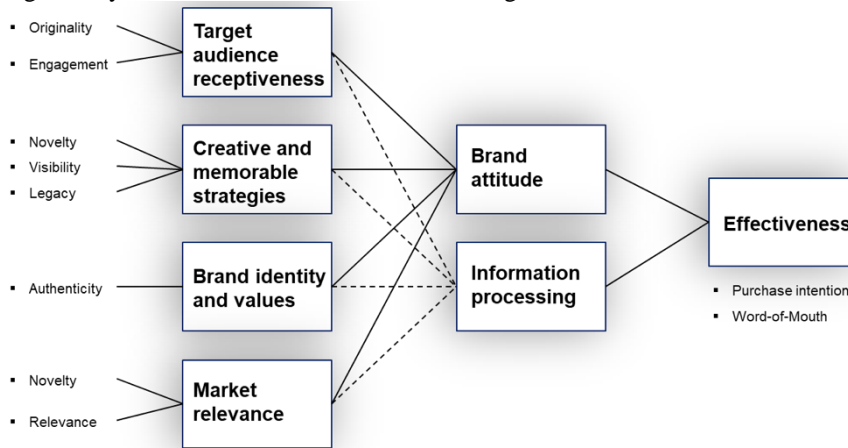
To gain a comprehensive understanding, it is then necessary to explore the influence of brand identity on the overall effectiveness. Contrary to the classical managerial-inspired approach that sees brand identity as static managerial creation (Aaker, 1996), Essamri et al. (2018) consider brand identity fundamental in the participation of value creation and achievement of marketing effectiveness. In this context, when the strategy resonates with the brand's identity and values, it appeals to consumers who share similar beliefs and preferences. This connection fosters a sense of affinity and loyalty, increasing the effectiveness of the strategy in engaging and influencing the audience (Essamri et al., 2018).

2.2.4 Market relevance

Additionally, recent analysis suggests that the financial and market position of a company may also contribute to the overall long-term success of unconventional campaigns (Chen & Uysal, 2002). Companies with higher revenues and a stronger market presence tend to possess greater resources and brand recognition. These advantages can positively impact the effectiveness of their unconventional efforts by providing them with more extensive reach, influence, and customer trust (Chen & Uysal, 2002). As a result, these four antecedents serve as key factors that influence the overall success and impact of such marketing strategies.

In order to acquire a more profound understanding of the underlying relationships between the antecedents and the effectiveness outcome of unconventional techniques, the research framework incorporates *brand attitude* and *information processing* as mediating factors. Indeed, brand attitude serves as a measure of consumers' overall evaluation and liking of the brand (Faircloth et al., 2001), reflecting their perceptions and emotions towards the unconventional technique. While information processing captures the cognitive processes through which consumers gather, interpret, and integrate information related to the unconventional initiative. These mediators shed light on the psychological mechanisms that may influence the effectiveness of the strategy, providing insights into how consumers' attitudes and cognitive processes contribute to its overall impact. Furthermore, this framework includes two dependent variables, namely *purchase behavior* and *word of mouth*. Purchase behavior represents the tangible action taken by consumers in terms of actually buying the product or service promoted through the unconventional marketing technique (Park & Kim, 2003), and word of mouth, on the other, assesses the extent to which consumers engage in sharing positive experiences and recommendations with others, providing then also a practical dimensions to the framework.

Fig. 1: Key drivers of unconventional marketing effectiveness



3. Methodology

3.1 Research method

The analysis of the comparative multiple case study employs Charles Ragin's Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) methodology (1987). This technique is chosen due to its consideration of causal complexity and emphasis on common conditions underlying specific outcomes. By systematically comparing case studies, this methodology combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to reduce the complexity of phenomena and identify causal conditions leading to an event occurrence (Wagemann & Schneider, 2010). Among the three variants of QCA methodology – namely, fuzzy-set, crisp-set, and multi-value – the research utilizes the fuzzy-set version (fsQCA) based on the advantages of this variant, such as the inclusion of intermediate values, for a more flexible representation of reality. By employing fsQCA, the research aims to capture the inherent complexity and variability of the factors under examination, facilitating a more accurate analysis of causal relationships (Wagemann & Schneider, 2010). Overall, the utilization of all QCA typologies necessitates familiarity and extensive knowledge of the investigated cases (Ragin, 1987), which typically involve a relatively small number of relevant cases. Delving further into the analysis, QCA comprises several phases, as outlined by Oana et al. (2021): (1) identification of the conditions and outcome (2) calibration and coding cases into sets; (3) analysis of necessity and sufficiency through the creation of the Truth Table and configurations; and finally, (4) the interpretation of the obtained results.

The utilization of QCA necessitates then the selection of a reference base case, a thorough understanding and extensive familiarity with the cases under investigation (Ragin, 1987), and a comprehensive awareness of the particular context, historical background, and complexities of the cases at hand (Ragin, 1987). Indeed, the identification of a reference company for the analysis serves as a benchmark against which other case studies are compared (Kunz et al., 2016), while also provides a point of comparison for identifying patterns and relationships among the variables observed in the other brands (Bouncken et al., 2021).

3.2 Focus on Red Bull as the reference case study

Red Bull has been selected as the base case of the methodology, given its strong track record in harnessing the potential of unconventional strategies to captivate consumers and emerge as a pathfinder in sports events universe (Kunz et al., 2016). Above all other brands, Red Bull redefined the concept of sports marketing, investing in its own events and teams (Gorse et al., 2010), and its innovative marketing techniques have made the brand the best-known when it comes to unconventional sports experiences, thereby fostering an exceptional and dominant image in terms of perception of the effectiveness and authenticity in such marketing actions.

The Red Bull company, founded in 1984 by Dietrich Mateschitz has become one of the most renowned brands worldwide, with over 11.5 billion cans sold annually across 175 countries (Red Bull official website). As part of its pioneering approach,

Red Bull has gained renown for creating spectacular events that employ the power of sports marketing to deliver engaging and unforgettable experiences (Ferraresi, 2018), as the Red Bull Cliff Diving World Series. Contrary to other brands, Red Bull's approach goes beyond merely constructing its own identity (Mortimer, 2012); it encompasses a deliberate redefinition of the concept of sports marketing. Rather than solely relying on hefty sponsorship payments for events, teams, or competitions, Red Bull adopts a strategy of ownership, active involvement, and subsequent benefits (Woratschek et al., 2014). A clear illustration of this is the Red Bull Racing Team in Formula 1. The company's decision to invest in this particular sport is grounded in its clear association with qualities such as speed, courage, adventure, and style — traits that Red Bull aims to foster in the minds of its customers (Gorse et al., 2010). As a matter of fact, Red Bull's communication is aligned with the unconventional marketing not only for the spot activities, but also for the marketing philosophy of the company with situations that are at the same time extraordinary, unconventional, extreme and, for sure, astonishing. Indeed, customers engaged with the content feel inspired to surpass their own limitations, consistent with the distinctive Red Bull ethos (Dominique Ferreira et al., 2022). The brand fills up with contents also through the pursuit of community-building (Pedeliento et al., 2019), both online and offline, a concept which revolves around fostering a tribe of devoted customers to allow enthusiasts to share their passion for extreme sports, while affording Red Bull the benefits of customer advocacy, heightened loyalty, and increased engagement (Alexander, 2009). These content creations frequently involve collaborations with stunt performers and professional athletes, to communicate values of accomplishment, with the result of perceiving these as role models to be admired and influence consumer trends and preferences (Keller, 2013). As a result, the power of the unconventional marketing implemented by Red Bull, with a focus on extreme sports events, has previously been analysed in other studies. Indeed, Kunz et al. (2016) define Red Bull as a best practice in offering sponsored entertainment, attributing its success to the generation of unparalleled customer participation and involvement. However, even if Red Bull is considered as a reference company, an investigation limited to solely a single case study is not representative. Thus, while the reference base case helps establishing the boundaries and parameters for the analysis, by systematically comparing different cases, researchers can effectively determine which the conditions that are pivotal for attaining the desired outcome, enabling meaningful comparisons and assessments.

3.3 Data collection

The collection of data encompasses organizations that employ similar unconventional marketing strategies within diverse sporting contexts. The evaluation of comparative case studies within the sports domain holds paramount significance in identifying distinctive attributes that contribute to the achievements of companies, and providing valuable insights for the formulation of guidelines outlining the necessary conditions for the effectiveness of unconventional strategies.

A rigorous selection process, composed of three steps, was employed to identify a limited number of brands for analysis. In the first phase, the most popular

sports globally are identified, according to Tendu & Apindi (2023) analysis. Subsequently, data was collected pertaining to sponsors that maintain a significant presence within these favored sports. Regarding this point, two clarifications should be emphasized: (1) in order to ensure a comprehensive search, sponsors within extreme sports and motorsports were also included in the selection; (2) to guarantee heterogeneity in the research, the inclusion of a small brand (i.e., Oceans Apart) was deemed necessary to provide a diverse analysis. Finally, from this selection, only the most prominent brands that employ unconventional marketing strategies were chosen. These include (1) Coca Cola, (2) GoPro, (3) Ducati, (4) Red Bull, (5) Nike, (6) Adidas, (7) Oceans Apart, (8) Under Armour, and (9) Mercedes-Benz.

Furthermore, the calibration of the analyzed brands necessitated the collection of specific data from a wide range of reliable sources (Abbate et al., 2018), encompassing various types of information, each contributing to the effective assessment of the brands' marketing strategies. Financial data, including annual revenues and rankings, were gathered to provide quantitative insights into the brands' size, growth, and financial performance. Market research reports and industry analyses were consulted to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the brands' positioning within the market, their market share, and consumer perception. To gauge the extent of their involvement in sports, data regarding sponsorship agreements and partnerships were sourced from official channels such as the brands' websites and dedicated sponsorship databases. By collecting and analyzing this diverse set of data, a calibrated understanding of the analyzed brands' marketing strategies was then achieved.

3.4 Data analysis

3.4.1 Identifying measures of the conditions and the outcome

Given our primary interest to examine the key elements influencing the effectiveness of an unconventional marketing strategy, we set "effectiveness" as the outcome. Once the outcome of interest has been defined, the further step is to carefully select the conditions to be included in the research analysis. Conditions are defined as a combination of variables that are minimally necessary and/or sufficient to cause a specific outcome. As suggested by Ragin (1987), these should be theoretically motivated and not excessively numbered as it would decrease the likelihood of finding similarities within the population under analysis (Oana et al., 2021). Through the incorporation of seven theoretical conditions (i.e., originality, novelty, visibility, relevance, engagement, legacy, and authenticity), an analysis of their relationships with the framework antecedents can be conducted, providing a more specific and nuanced understanding of how the antecedents manifest in practice. In detail:

Originality. This condition plays a crucial role in setting a campaign apart from competitors and capturing consumers' attention (Das et al., 2022), as it involves offering something fresh, innovative, and distinct from existing market offerings (Tang et al., 2021). This condition aligns with the first antecedent of the proposed framework, since including originality, the examination of how unique and innovative approaches impact audience receptiveness becomes feasible.

Novelty. Corresponding to both second and fourth antecedent, when a company brings a unique strategy, it can contribute to its memorability, can attract attention, and generate interest among consumers, leading to a memorable execution, increased market visibility, and relevance for the company (Das et al., 2022). As a result, the company's market position is enhanced, providing a strong foundation for the effectiveness of its strategy (Tang et al., 2021).

Visibility. This condition enhance brand exposure, broaden reach, and consumer engagement opportunities (Syrdal et al., 2023). For this reason, visibility is linked to the second antecedent of the framework, as when an unconventional technique gains high visibility, it increases the likelihood of capturing the attention of the target audience. The more people are exposed to the strategy, the greater is the opportunity for making a lasting impression and be remembered (Grohs & Reisinger, 2014). By leveraging creative and memorable elements in the execution of the strategy, companies can enhance visibility and increase the impact on the audience (Alhadad, 2019).

Relevance. Understood as the profitability of a company (Ailawadi, 2003), relevance is aligned with the fourth antecedent, which suggests that the market relevance of a company positively impacts the overall effectiveness of an unconventional strategy. When a company achieves higher revenues, it signifies that its products or services are meeting customer needs and gaining traction in the market (Bodur et al., 2023). This market relevance plays a significant role in determining the effectiveness of an unconventional marketing (Chen & Uysal, 2002).

Engagement. By creating interactive experiences, encouraging participation, and evoking emotional responses, businesses can deepen customer engagement, resulting in long-term relationships (Syrdal et al., 2023). This increased engagement leads to a higher likelihood of the audience being receptive to the marketing message and responding positively to the technique (Rubin et al., 2022), hence being consistent with the first antecedent. This positive relationship enhances the effectiveness of the technique as customers are more likely to share their experiences, recommend the brand to others, and actively support the company's marketing efforts (Bodur et al., 2023).

Legacy. Building a brand legacy involves establishing a strong reputation, trust, and credibility over time (Reiman, 2012). This condition corresponds to the second antecedent, as the legacy of a brand creates a favorable context for an unconventional technique, increasing its memorability, customer receptiveness, and overall effectiveness (Edell & Moore, 1993).

Authenticity. Aligned with the third antecedent of the framework, the inclusion of authenticity as a condition allows for an investigation into how well the technique reflects the genuine and trustworthy nature of the brand (Osorio et al., 2023). When a brand consistently portrays its authentic identity and values, it distinguishes itself from

competitors and establishes a unique position in the minds of customers, resulting in overall effectiveness (Morhart et al., 2015).

3.4.2 Calibration and coding cases into sets

In fuzzy Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) methodology, all variables need to be calibrated in order to convert categorical measurements into a scale ranging from 0.0 to 1.0 before conducting the analysis (Ragin, 1987). In this study, fuzzy sets were constructed using a four-value scale (0, .33, .67, 1) to align with the nature of the collected data representing the seven theoretical conditions. Consequently, the value 0.33 signifies a non-membership in the fuzzy set (since it is smaller than the breakpoint threshold of 0.5), although this non-membership is “smaller” than complete non-membership (0). Similarly, the value 0.67 represents a fuzzy set membership “less” than complete membership (1), but greater than the crossover point (0.5) (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). Furthermore, the logical framework for the measurement process of the theoretical conditions and outcome is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Criteria for membership scores and coding

Condition	Effectiveness	Originality	Novelty	Visibility	Relevance	Engagement	Legacy	Authenticity
Measurement	Brand Equity	Level of uniqueness	Level of innovation	Views on Youtube	Profitability of the company	Engagement Rate	% of Promoters (NPS)	Customer Based Brand Authenticity (Napoli et al., 2014)
0.00	Low brand equity	Low level of uniqueness	Low level of innovation	Less than 1 Mln views	Less than 1 billion (\$) revenues	Less than 1%	Less than 50%	Less than 30%
0.33	Moderate brand equity	Moderate level of uniqueness	Moderate level of innovation	Between 1 and 20 Mln views	Between 1 and 50 billions (\$) revenues	Between 1% and 3.5%	Between 50% and 60%	Between 30% and 50%
0.67	Good brand equity	High level of uniqueness	High level of innovation	Between 20 and 40 Mln views	Between 50 and 100 billions (\$) revenues	Between 3.5% and 6%	Between 60% and 70%	Between 50% and 70%
1.00	High brand equity	Very high level of uniqueness	Very high level of innovation	Above 40 Mln views	Above 100 billions (\$) revenues	Above 6%	Above 70%	Above 70%

This table provides a comprehensive overview of the systematic approach employed to operationalize the variables associated with the theoretical constructs. It ensures a rigorous and standardized measurement process and analysis of the research variables. Since this research addresses effectiveness in relation to the effects generates on the target audience, we solely assess brand equity and its dimensions (loyalty, awareness, associations, and perceived quality), represented as key indicators of the campaign’s effectiveness (Aaker, 1996).

Table 2: Calibration table

Id No.	Company	Effectiveness	Originality	Novelty	Visibility	Relevance	Engagement	Legacy	Authenticity
1	Coca Cola	0.67	1	0.67	0.33	0.33	0	0.67	0.67
2	GoPro	0.67	1	0.33	1	0	0.67	0	1
3	Ducati	0.33	0.33	0.33	0	0.33	1	1	0.67
4	Red Bull	1	1	1	1	0.33	0.67	0.67	1
5	Nike	0.67	1	0.67	0	0.33	0.67	0.67	0.67
6	Adidas	0.67	0.67	0.33	0	0.33	0.67	0.67	0.67
7	Oceans Apart	0	0.33	0	0	0	0.67	1	0
8	Under Armour	0.33	0.67	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.67
9	Mercedes-Benz	0.67	0	0	0.33	1	0.67	0.67	1

Moving on, table 2 presents the fuzzy set values assigned to each case in the data set, based on the classification derived in Table 1, along with their corresponding membership scores. Our decision to provide a comprehensive list of examined companies and their specific details mitigates the risk of appearing arbitrary in assigning fuzzy membership scores (Abbate et al., 2018). The company data utilized in the analysis were sourced from multiple reliable and diverse sources, including the official websites, Statista, and YouTube Statistics & Analytics. Furthermore, to measure effectiveness, the average of the values obtained from each dimension of brand equity was addressed. It is noteworthy that the condition of relevance exhibits relatively lower membership values within the fuzzy set, in contrast to authenticity, which demonstrates a higher membership.

3.4.3 Truth Table and configurations

The Truth Table is a data matrix with 2^k rows, where k is the number of causal conditions considered in the analysis (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). The construction of the Truth Table is based on two criteria: (1) the minimum number of observed cases required for a given configuration to be considered (referred to as the frequency threshold); and (2) the minimum level of consistency entailed by a given solution (Ragin, 1987). Before analyzing the obtained solution sets, the number of rows in the Truth Table are reduced (i.e., logical minimization) to make solutions more conceptually manageable and without loss of information (Ragin, 1987).

Table 3: Sufficiency analysis – intermediate solution

Path	1	2	3	4	5
Originality	☑	☑	☑	☑	☐
Novelty	☑		☑	☐	☐
Visibility	☐	☐		☑	☐
Relevance	☐	☐	☐	☐	☑
Engagement		☑	☑	☑	☑
Legacy	☑	☑	☑	☐	☑
Authenticity	☑	☑	☑	☑	☑
Raw Coverage	0.46507	0.399202	0.46507	0.199601	0.331337
Consistency	1	1	1	1	1

☑ : presence of a condition

☐ : absence of a condition

A blank space indicates that the condition is not relevant for that configuration (it may be present or absent).

The sufficiency analysis yields three sets of solutions: the complex, the parsimonious, and the intermediate solution. Due to the potential high number of detected configurations and the complexity of variables, interpreting the findings of the first two analyses can be challenging and often unfeasible (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). Additionally, the intermediate solution encompasses both most significant (i.e., core conditions) and peripheral conditions (present only in the intermediate analysis), rendering it preferable for a comprehensive research (Abbate et al., 2018).

Table 3 presents the intermediate results obtained from the Truth Table, which represent the central and generally sufficient conditions for achieving the selected outcome of effectiveness (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). Commencing the analysis of the intermediate results, it becomes apparent that a multitude of “paths” or configurations arise from this examination. These paths can be interpreted in the following manner. For effectiveness to occur, the combination of originality, novelty, legacy, and authenticity, along with the absence of visibility and relevance, leads to positive effectiveness, regardless of the level of engagement (path 1). To achieve a positive outcome, when engagement, legacy and authenticity occur, they must be accompanied by either (i) originality, with the absence of visibility and relevance, and regardless of novelty (path 2), or (ii) with originality and novelty, with the absence of relevance, and regardless visibility (path 3), or lastly (iii) with relevance and the absence of originality, novelty, and visibility (path 5). To conclude the explanation of the finding, one more path can be determinate to achieve effectiveness, accordingly the presence of originality, visibility, engagement, and authenticity, with the absence of novelty, relevance, and legacy (path 4). Furthermore, from the analysis relevance is outlined as the most absent condition, while authenticity is always present.

Moving on, according to Oana et al. (2021) framework, the solution coverage should exceed 0.50, while the unique coverage should be greater than zero for empirical

relevance. The solution coverage is found to be 0.9341, meeting the relevance requirement. The unique coverage values for all paths except the second path are 0.1337, satisfying the relevance criteria. However, the second path demonstrates a unique coverage value of 0.0678. Although meeting the relevance criterion, this measurement does not provide substantial information and is thus not considered in the results discussion. Regarding raw coverage, an acceptable range for raw coverage is considered to be between 0.25 and 0.65. Four out of the five paths exhibit acceptable raw coverage values, while path number 4 falls short of the acceptable coverage threshold with a value of 0.199 (below 0.25). To analyze whether the parameters of fit suggest a set relation, the reference value (0.75) of consistency is taken into consideration. If the consistency of a configuration is low, it implies that it lacks empirical support. In our analysis, all paths demonstrate sufficient consistency, as they exceed the reference value of 0.75. This indicates that the combinations of causal conditions identified in each path are supported by empirical evidence.

Not only the sufficient analysis, but also the necessary one was carried out (Table 4), accordingly the examination of the empirical cases in which the outcome under study manifests itself, resulting in the degree of necessity (i.e., consistency) of a condition for the occurrence of the output (Wagemann & Schneider, 2010). Based on the results in Table 4, authenticity is the sole condition that is strictly necessary for the analysis, as it exhibits a consistency value exceeding 0.9. However, there are significant relationships between the presence of these conditions and outcome effectiveness. In terms of coverage, these conditions are empirically relevant, as all of them have a measurement above 0.50 (Oana et al., 2021). Consequently, fsQCA allows for the identification of conditions that may not be strictly necessary but are highly significant in influencing the occurrence of an outcome (Pappas & Woodside, 2021).

Table 4: Necessary analysis

Condition tested	Consistency	Coverage
Originality	0.866267	0.723333
Novelty	0.730539	1.000000
Visibility	0.530938	0.889632
Relevance	0.528942	0.889262
Engagement	0.800399	0.749533
Legacy	0.800399	0.705986
Authenticity	1.000000	0.788976

3.5 Discussion of the results

The primary objective of this research is to provide practical guidelines for brands to maximize their benefits through the implementation of effective unconventional marketing strategies. The analysis of the pathways in the qualitative analysis highlights paths 1 and 3 as the most suitable configurations, offering the highest coverage values to identify relevant causal relationships (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). These pathways share common characteristics, including the presence of originality, novelty, legacy, and authenticity, along with the absence of relevance. The

findings suggest that the presence of authenticity (exhibit in each path, with consistency equal to 1), combined with the absence of relevance, leads to a favorable outcome. Embracing authenticity allows brands to establish meaningful and enduring relationships with consumers, contributing to long-term success and competitive advantage (Tang et al., 2021). Consumers' brand attitude, shaped by the combination of these conditions, influences their overall perception and evaluation of the brand. The positive brand attitude, in turn, directly impacts consumers' purchase intention and likelihood of engaging in positive word of mouth recommendations, as consumers are more inclined to engage in positive behaviors. Interestingly, understanding the role of information processing as a mediator sheds light on the cognitive mechanisms through which consumers evaluate and respond to unconventional techniques. By aligning the information processing experience with the findings, brands can enhance the effectiveness of their marketing efforts and foster positive consumer responses (Cheung et al., 2020). Additionally, the study highlights that the absence of relevance aligns with existing literature (Levinson & Godin, 1994), emphasizing that such strategies do not necessarily require a substantial budget and can be effective without relying solely on visibility and expense.

The developed framework suggests that the target audience is more receptive to strategies that offer something new and creative (Das et al., 2022), aligning with the first three antecedents. However, the relevance of a company may present a unique perspective that challenges the premise of last antecedent (i.e., market relevance). Further research is needed to fully comprehend this finding and its implications, emphasizing the complexity of evaluating the effectiveness of unconventional techniques. The analysis additionally indicates that the effectiveness, resulting from the combination of these antecedents, has an impact on both purchase behavior and word of mouth communication. Consumers are more likely to be influenced in their purchase decisions and engage in positive word of mouth recommendations (Cheung et al., 2020) when they perceive an unconventional strategy as characterized by originality, novelty, a strong legacy, and an authentic representation of the brand. This aligns with the notion that consumers are naturally drawn to distinctive and genuine experiences, leading them to actively engage with and advocate for brands that effectively incorporate these elements into their strategies. Moreover, the absence of relevance suggests that even with a modest investment in a strategy, consumers are willing to embrace and engage with strategies that stand out and offer unique experiences, regardless of their immediate relevance to the market.

Lastly, the calibration table highlights that Red Bull, GoPro, and Mercedes-Benz exhibit an authenticity value equal to 1, indicating that these companies have successfully implemented unconventional strategies with exceptional effectiveness compared to others. Therefore, experiential marketing, viral marketing, and product placement, as corresponding unconventional techniques, are highly recommended for achieving success within this industry.

4. Conclusions, implications, and further research

4.1 Theoretical contribution

The implementation of unconventional marketing guidelines in the theoretical existing literature offers valuable contributions in several aspects, including broadening the overall knowledge on consumers' methods of decision-making, emphasizing the critical role of authenticity, originality and innovation in marketing, and assisting in understanding how unconventional marketing strategies may enrich existing sports literature. As explored by Kotler et al. (2008), existing research primarily focuses on variables influencing consumer behavior through traditional marketing channels, such as price, quality, and brand reputation. However, this research reveals the necessity of exploring the impact of emotions, social relationships, and other non-traditional aspects on consumer behavior. Authenticity emerges as a primary criterion, necessitating companies to adhere to their core beliefs and brand identity (Osorio et al., 2023). While establishing an authentic brand can be challenging, it provides insights into how customers respond to a brand's emotional and social attributes (Bodur et al., 2023). Indeed, previous research indicates that consumers are drawn to and favor offerings that are perceived as authentic (Napoli et al., 2014). Researchers have additionally examined consumers' search for authenticity in advertising (Beverland et al., 2008) to understand its influence on achieving positive consequences (Osorio et al., 2023). The current research also provides novel insights regarding brand authenticity's nature and highlights its importance for branding theory and practice. As a matter of fact, this research extends recent efforts to measure brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015), which develop a scale to track consumers' authenticity perceptions. However, we add valuable insights regarding the investigation of relational authenticity in consumer-brand relationships and in sports domains. Therefore, this research provides empirical support for brand authenticity as a necessary condition to achieve the effectiveness of an unconventional marketing campaign in the context of sports. Not only authenticity is deeply analyzed in existing literature, but also originality and novelty (Das et al., 2022; Dwivedi & Pawsei, 2022). In this regard, Das et al. (2022) discuss the meaning and importance of creativity in marketing, while Dwivedi & Pawsei (2022) offers significant contributions to the importance of innovation and novelty in marketing as these represents a source of competitive differentiation and growth for most firms. Although both authors explicate a wide array of drivers of marketing originality, innovation, and novelty, this research may specify additional factors that enhance the level of success of a marketing campaign and examine various combinations of drivers that lead to the overall effectiveness.

Furthermore, the sports industry has particularly embraced unconventional marketing methods, given its profitability and suitability for delivering authenticity and engagement to consumers in their sports experiences (Hayduk III, 2020). Through the conduction of original research and the subsequent development of guidelines, the theoretical understanding of unconventional marketing strategies is enhanced by providing a structured framework for their implementation. This research provides additional support for future studies that seek to investigate the drivers of sports events effectiveness (Koronios et al., 2021), while also offers potential avenues for exploring the effectiveness of unconventional marketing in sports. Indeed, numerous authors have

examined the characteristics, modes, and impacts of sponsorship in the sports industry. Although not specifically addressed in this research, sport sponsorship is a significant form of advertising that should not be overlooked. As highlighted by Alonso Dos Santos (2018), sport sponsorship has contributed to remarkable economic growth in recent years, and its effectiveness has been demonstrated in generating brand awareness, enhancing image, increasing sales, and fostering consumer connections. By incorporating these guidelines into the sport sponsorships existing literature, it becomes possible to analyze and discuss the underlying principles and mechanisms that drive the effectiveness of unconventional strategies within this domain (Du Plessis, 2015). These guidelines will specifically provide practical recommendations, best practices, and insights derived from the research conducted, thus aiding in enhancing the effectiveness of marketing efforts in this particular context.

4.2 Managerial implications

Concerning the managerial implications, guidelines may assist organisations in making better-informed conclusions regarding the best course of action to pursue (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). This approach facilitates the evaluation of opportunities and the selection of the most suited one based on objective criteria, resulting in more favourable results (Bilkey, 1985). By adhering to these, organisations also focus on critical areas and prioritize actions necessary for achieving desired results. Subsequently, guidelines play a vital role in aligning the organization's aspirations with its action plan, driven by the long-term vision (Killian et al., 2015).

This alignment fosters communication and consistency in the operations of the organisation, while also improving performance and competitive advantage. This allows the company to offer common knowledge and vocabulary that employees may use as a framework for organising, executing, and communicating (Du Plessis, 2015). Likewise, guidelines may guarantee that everyone in the company is held accountable for the achievement of the programme (Bilkey, 1985). Indeed, when guidelines are defined, everyone understands what is expected of them and a clear baseline to measure performance is established. This makes it less difficult to track progress and identify areas which require improvement. In this way, companies are able to carve out a distinct niche and stay ahead of their competitors by fulfilling their objectives. This enhanced effectiveness can eventually result in an advantageous position in the market, since the organisation will be able to supply superior goods or services at a reduced cost (Killian et al., 2015). As a result guidelines may also assist with personnel learning and monitoring (Du Plessis, 2015), as well as ensuring optimal utilisation of resources.

From this perspective, Red Bull serves as an exemplary case study of a company that has effectively harnessed the potential of unconventional marketing methods to captivate consumers and emerge as a pathfinder in extreme sports events (Chen et al., 2005). By selecting Red Bull as case study, the guidelines formulated can be effective, accurate, and reliable, offering valuable insights for the company's extensive customer base, global reach, and established brand reputation (Holt, 2004). Smaller businesses can learn from the knowledge and experience of larger companies by considering Red Bull as a role model. Understanding the factors that make these

unconventional events appealing to customers can provide valuable insights into consumer behavior and preferences, extending the analysis beyond the sports industry to others as well.

4.3 Limitations and further research

The study presents two main limitations: complexity of the methodology, and representativeness of the industry. Firstly, the fsQCA is a complex method that requires a deep understanding of fuzzy set theory and the QCA methodology. This complexity can pose challenges for non-experts and increase the likelihood of errors in the analysis (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). Furthermore, the analysis involves a certain degree of subjectivity in the selection of cases, variables, and conditions. The choice can vary among different analysts, leading to different interpretations of the data and potentially different results. Moving to the second limitation, it is imperative to acknowledge that conducting research exclusively within the sports industry introduces certain limitations that can affect the validity and generalizability of the findings (Kunz et al., 2016). The narrow focus on a specific industry may result in an incomplete understanding of the subject matter, overlooking the interconnectedness and broader impacts of various factors. As a result, it can result in a non-representative study sample and compromised findings. Moreover, the absence of comparisons with similar settings hinders the ability to assess the effectiveness of the guidelines and undermines the validation of the data and findings (Bauer et al., 2015). Further research in this area can build upon the findings of this study and explore several avenues for further investigation. From this perspective, it would be beneficial to delve deeper into the potential ethical consequences that could arise when implementing unconventional practices in the sports industry. Indeed, engaging in such strategies carries the risk of crossing ethical boundaries, as certain tactics may be deceptive or misleading, resulting in consumers' loss of trust in the company (Dedeoğlu & Kazançoğlu, 2010). In this regard, it is worth mentioning critics which have argued that Red Bull's marketing campaigns featuring extreme sports performances and partying can encourage risky behavior and be perceived as dangerous. Although Red Bull has made efforts to emphasize safety and accountability in their advertising (Brasel & Gips, 2011), the potential impact of their marketing on consumer behavior remains a subject of debate.

To conclude, in an ever-changing industry, unconventional marketing is expected to continue playing a fundamental role in the sports business. We hope that this study initiates further research to explore alternative methods or combine multiple approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand.

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