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Modelling Consumer's Attitude Towards the Use of Sports as a Marketing Platform. Sponsorship and Fans' Attitude Towards It in Eastern Europe Countries from an Ethical and Trustworthy Point of View

Abstract. *We are in an era of more aggressive and less effective marketing, where consumers are taken for granted, most of the time seen as numbers, in spite of the fact that the specialised literature speaks about personalisation and emotions. This is more relevant than ever in the sports world, where the customer is not so much rational, as he is emotional, one day crying and another day exalting due to the actions of his favourite brand – the sports team. In the present research, we evaluate different correlations between types of customers and their attitude related to brands that use sports as a marketing platform, in a sports market that had recently opened to business, that of Eastern European countries (more precisely, Romania). Therefore, starting from the three dimensions of consumer's attitude (cognitive, affective, conative), the current research aims to build a conceptual model for attitude towards brands using sports as a marketing platform in Romania, in which we see the*

correlations between level of interest in sports, attitudes towards sponsorship, and type of sport consumer (practicing, watching on TV or coming to games as a spectator).

Keywords: *quantitative research, sports marketing, consumer behaviour, sponsorship, fan's attitude.*

JEL Classification: M31.

1. Introduction

In the context of the current state of marketing communication, which is perceived as crowded, expensive, and with decreasing effectiveness (Koronios et al., 2021), tools like sponsorship seem to thrive. A proof of the sponsorship thriving is represented by the investments in this communication platform: according to research from the European Sponsorship Association and Nielsen Sports, the total value of Europe's sponsorship market increased by 6.2% over the past year from €29.05bn to €30.86bn (ESA, 2024). Even with the COVID-19 pandemic impact, the interest in sponsoring sports events is on a growing trend based on the increased visibility, wider media coverage, and expanding audience. Another proof of the exponential growth of sponsorship is related to the impressive number of sponsorship proposals that some companies receive that they end up searching for reasons to dismiss them (Greenhalgh et al., 2021). As an entertainment vehicle, sports is in the business of selling memories, once-in-a-lifetime experiences, and also the anticipation of future events (Rose et al., 2021); therefore, connecting brands with this type of energy flow might be the perfect way for positive emotions transfer. In the context of the present paper, studying the sports consumers' attitude towards sponsoring brand takes the central role, as it's vital for any communicational strategy to find the most effective segmentation and targeting alternatives.

2. Literature review on sports marketing and sponsorship

In the specialised literature, sponsorship is viewed as “cash or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically in sports, arts, entertainment, or causes) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential of that property” (Bee & Dalakas, 2021). As part of the marketing communication tools, sponsorship has been described as indirect marketing (Rose et al., 2021) and started to gain traction in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bragg et al., 2018). Including sponsorship among the indirect marketing tools is also supported by Hino and Takeda (2020), who defined sponsorship as a less direct and explicit message, that in return might be more challenging to control. As a major advantage, on the side of the consumer, sponsorship is met with a smaller degree of suspicion and less resistance than other forms of marketing communication (Rose et al., 2021). Moreover, sponsorship has the potential to engage sport consumers and sponsors increasingly aim to create engagement (Schönberner & Woratschek, 2023).

The growth of the sports sponsorship industry is a result of multiple benefits that such a relationship generates for both the sponsor and the sponsee. Thus, the success of a sponsorship collaboration falls under the principles of exchange theory – each party has to generate value to the other party (Greenhalgh et al., 2021). Previous research has proved that sponsorships influence consumers attitudes and brand awareness, both relevant metrics for the return on investment evaluation (Bragg et al., 2018). Based on improved attitudes and brand awareness, increased purchases and company value are a subsequent important positive outcome of a sponsorship relationship (Hino & Takeda, 2020). A prior positive attitude related to the sponsor is likely to increase the chances of purchase, fan engagement, and satisfaction with the sponsor's products. Based on the strong feelings related to a team's heritage, for example, in a sponsorship context, consumers often transfer the positive attitude to the sponsoring brand more easily (Rose et al., 2021). When evaluating the sponsorship outcomes on the side of the sponsee, Bragg et al. (2018) discovered that sponsee-brand association allowed professional sports leagues to enjoy increased exposure and revenues. These positive outcomes are a result of the association between the sponsor's brand and the sponsee's brand (Toscani & Prendergast, 2018).

For a sponsorship to be effective for both the sponsor and the sponsee, there are a few factors that need to be considered. Multiple researchers have argued the fit between the sponsor and sponsee is one of the primary conditions (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021; Madrigal & King, 2021), as it fosters enhanced image transfer and brand credibility (Madrigal & King, 2021). This fit should firstly be related to the match between the sponsor's target market and the sponsee's fan base (Greenhalgh et al., 2021). The sponsor-sponsee fit can also relate to national congruence, as discovered by Hone and Takeda (2020), while sponsor-sponsee regional proximity decreases the likelihood of a sponsorship relationship dissolution (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021). If there is no obvious fit between the sponsor and the sponsee, defined in terms of features, attributes, or image characteristics (Madrigal & King, 2021), the need to set de context using analogies that point to the similar points between the two entities emerges (Madrigal & King, 2021). Additionally, the longer-lasting of the partnership between the sponsor and the sponsee, the more likely a strong company-sponsee association in the customers' mind firstly (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021). When evaluating the involvement of SMEs in sponsorships, Datson et al. (2021) point to a preference for local long-term partners that are chosen based on personal connection, being less objectives oriented and more focused on engaging with communities. On the sponsee side, the image transfer from the brand to the sponsee is to be considered when choosing the sponsorship partners, even in the current context where the sponsors seem to hold most of the power (Toscani & Prendergast, 2018).

The sponsorship critics point that there is not enough research on the subject of objectives, strategic approach, and lack of integration with other corporate objectives (Koronios et al., 2021). Also, the lack of a clear definition of their target market on the side of the sponsors represents another sponsorship challenge (Greenhalgh et al.,

2021), as they have difficulties in discovering the best sponsorship collaboration that will enhance their reach for their target audience. Also, there are negative outcomes that might result in sponsorship relationships. For example, when sponsoring a rival team, the sponsor is exposed to negative attitudes from the consumers (Bee & Dalakas, 2015), especially if they are highly identified sports fans. Another example of negative outcomes appears in the context of unhealthy products being endorsed by professional athletes, an area where Bragg et al. (2018) argue for a more ethical self-regulatory pledge on the sides of both the sponsor and the sponsee.

In this framework, the preoccupation for ethical concerns is considerable, since beyond the breach of the sponsor-sponsee contract, an unethical behaviour can affect major stakeholders on both sides (Eagle et al., 2020). When looking at the sports world, ethical concerns are raised related to multiple aspects on the side of the sponsor like: perceiving sponsorship as a substitute for real engagement in social issues, defining sponsorship as exchange or philanthropy, the negative impact of sponsors in the sponsee's world (Klincewicz, 1998), the sponsor's influencing power on sports' decisions or the sponsee's decisions. On the other hand, on the sponsee side, ethical concerns are related to elements like: unethical choice mechanism for the sponsors relative to the industry they operate in (fast food, gambling, sex-related), failure to offer what was promised through the contract (based on under-delivering and over-promising) (Eagle et al., 2020).

Given this context, getting a better understanding of the attitude of fans related to the sponsors is crucial, as it is the foundation of the brand acceptance journey. For example, based on the positive feelings associated with sports events, fans' attitude on the sponsor is improved because of the positive feelings transfer on to the relationship with the sponsor (Boronczyk & Breuer, 2020). On the other hand, intrusive sponsorship displays might generate a negative experience that will transfer to the experience related to the sports element (Cheong et al., 2019). In the context of sports, brands have a chance to establish meaningful personal memories, which is an important steppingstone towards brand love (Rahman et al., 2021). Understanding fans' attitude is essential, as it is the basis of behavioural influence, the starting point of the brand acceptance journey. A journey that also consists of credibility, clarity, and precision as features for brands (Reitsamer & Brunner-Sperdin, 2021) and brands partnerships. Therefore, starting from the three dimensions of sports fans' attitude towards brands (cognitive, affective, conative), the current research aims to evaluate the attitude towards sports sponsorship through the eyes of the consumers, from an ethical and trustworthy point of view.

3. Research Methodology

As the main objective of marketing through sports is to target sports consumers, trying to raise awareness, improve brand image, or increase sales, it is important to see how the targeted audience feels about the association with one of their favourite activities – sports. Thus, the present research is analysing sports consumers attitude

towards brands using sports as a marketing platform, going in-depth on each of the three attitude dimensions – cognitive, affective, and conative.

Our approach is led by the trend in the specialised literature, where the attitude is analysed based on its components or dimensions. Starting from Oliver's (1999) multi-dimensional attitudinal brand loyalty model, Ahn and Back (2018) revealed the association between cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions and integrated resort brand value, thus pointing out the need for a stage-flow research perspective. Having this as the basis for our analysis, the research was organised around the following main objectives:

- a) Analysing the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of sports consumer's attitude towards brands using sport as a marketing platform.
- b) Determining the influence of consumer's level of interest in sport on his attitude towards the brands that use sports as a marketing platform.
- c) Determining the influence of consumer's type of involvement in sports on his attitude towards the brands that use sports as a marketing platform.
- d) Determining the level of confidence that teams' or athletes' recommendations hold within the sports consumers segment.

The research was design on the hypothesis that the more interested the consumer is in sports, the more open he is to sports marketing techniques. This is also discussed in a series of study conducted by YouGov on the US major sports leagues market, the most important conclusion being that hardcore fans are more sponsor supporting, ad receptive, and ad engaging than the general population (Wakefield, 2021). But at the same time, this highly interested sport consumer is paying more attention to the way in which sport is used as a marketing platform, and the mistakes made by brands, clubs or athletes can lead him to distrusting these associations.

Data was collected through an online survey within a national representative panel for the urban adult population. This panel is the property of national research company (iSense Solutions), and it is covering all relevant market segments of Romania. The sample size of 1009 respondents was determined based on a $\pm 3.09\%$ margin of error, with a 95% confidence level, and an incidence rate of Romanian sports consumer of 50%, considering here those practicing sports, but also those that consume sports in a passive manner, such as watching it on tv or going as spectators to games. The sample structure was built based on age, gender, and town size for the place of residence.

Considering that a general approach in terms of sport consumption of both urban and rural would not have been relevant, we have decided that, for this research, our target will be represented by the urban population, as they are the ones setting the trends and spending the most. In this article, we will present only the results obtained from those respondents that showed a minimum interest in sport, meaning that the sub-sample for the following analysis in composed of 898 respondents, the sports consumers. The rest of the sample was used for other important elements (not relevant in this article), such as reason for disinterest in sports and factors that would

increase this interest in the future. Data was processed, curated, and analysed using the statistical software platform IBM SPSS 23.

4. Research Results

In this section, we will present the results of our research based on each main objective, both from a univariate and a bivariate analysis perspective. Considering that the results presented here are just a part of the bigger research project, it is important to first make some comments about the survey coverage and flow. In this complex study, we have targeted all Romanian adults from the urban areas, dividing them first based on their interest in sports. The segment having such an interest was the most analysed, starting by identifying the level of involvement, based on three types of sport consummation – doing sports, watching sports on TV, or going to games.

4.1 Analysing the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of sports consumer's attitude towards brands that use sport as a marketing platform

Using the Oliver's (1999) multi-dimensional attitudinal brand loyalty model, we have analysed the attitude based on its three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and conative (or behavioural). According to Manzuma-ndaaba et al. (2016), the cognitive behaviour is rational, the affective behaviour is often irrational, and the action behaviour increases business performances through enhanced profits and decreases in marketing communications cost.

Thus, we have built specific statements for each dimension, asking respondents to present their level of agreement for each. The attitude was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, but for analysis purposes, the responses were recorded in SPSS on a 3-level scale, so the discrepancies and the variations can be controlled, especially in the correlations based on the bivariate analysis. So, from this point forward, the attitude is described on a scale from 1 (disagreement) to 3 (agreement).

The cognitive dimension is all about awareness and recall, as it is representing the individual's knowledge about the phenomenon (Basaran, 2016), thus we wanted to identify if brands that sponsor teams or athletes are usually remembered easier. The affective dimension refers to the individual's feelings toward a concept, brand, company (Fan & Qiu, 2014), leading to its image being better or worse within the consumers' perception. This is the reason for which we have asked respondent to mention if brands that support sports as sponsors have a better image in their opinion. The conative dimension is the action step, describing how consumers act on the information and how they feel about a specific brand (Basaran, 2016), thus the sentence in our research focused on whether people decided to buy a product or service because it was recommended by the teams or athletes that they appreciate. All this information is presented in Table 1, also showing the marketing meaning of each dimension and corresponding sentence.

Table 1. Attitude dimensions and their corresponding sentences from the research

Attitude dimension	Sentence from the questionnaire	Marketing meaning
Cognitive dimension	<i>"I usually remember the brands that sponsored the teams / athletes that I appreciate"</i>	Awareness and recall
Affective dimension	<i>"Brands that support sports as sponsors have a better image in my eyes"</i>	Brand image
Conative dimension	<i>"It happened that I decided to buy a product / service because it was recommended by the teams / athletes that I appreciate"</i>	Action (purchase)

Source: Authors' processing.

In Table 2 are presented both the distribution of respondents and the average score for each sentence, as well as the statistical indicators for mean relevance. Based on the standard deviation and the coefficient of variation, we can state that the means are significant, as the coefficient of variation is below 30% (Zaky, 2016).

Table 2. Distribution of respondents and average score

Statements related to attitude	Distribution of respondents			Average score (on a scale from 1 to 3)	Std. dev.	Coef. of var.
	Disagree	Indifferent	Agree			
COGNITIVE DIMENSION						
<i>I usually remember the brands that sponsored the teams / athletes that I appreciate</i>	13.7%	33.9%	52.4%	2.39	0.706	0.296
AFFECTIVE DIMENSION						
<i>Brands that support sports as sponsors have a better image in my eyes</i>	6.6%	28.5%	64.9%	2.58	0.613	0.237
CONATIVE DIMENSION						
<i>It happened that I decided to buy a product / service because it was recommended by the teams / athletes that I appreciate</i>	29.7%	31.3%	39.0%	2.09	0.524	0.250

Source: Authors' processing.

Comparing the average score to the interval limits (from 1 to 3, where 1 means disagreement and 3 means agreement to the statement), we can interpret each value. When it comes to the cognitive dimensions, it seems that people tend to remember brands that sponsor the teams or athletes that they appreciate, as there are 52.4% of respondents who agree with this statement. For the next statement, we discover an even bigger agreement, where 64.9% sports consumers confirm that brands that support sports as sponsors have a better image in their perception, leading to emotional transfer from the sport element to those brands. When it comes to the action part in marketing through sports, the score is right in the middle, which means that sports consumers are divided approximately equal between those positively responding to recommendations coming from the sports world and those ignoring them. Although this is just a surface-scratching analysis, we already can see a trend

regarding the sports consumers' openness to marketing through sports, as they tend to recall brands that are exposed in sports contexts, they even have a better opinion about those brands and a one-third openness to sports entities recommendations.

However, the marketing theory says that there are different segments on the market with different opinions and behaviours, thus a general analysis of the above-mentioned attitude is not sufficient. As a consequence, in the following sections, we will see how the level of interest in sports can lead to different attitudes towards the brands that use sports as a marketing platform and, also, how this attitude is influenced by the consumer's type of involvement in sports or his demographic profile.

4.2 Determining the influence of consumer's level of interest in sport on his attitude towards the brands that use sports as a marketing platform

As presented in the beginning of this section, we have evaluated the Romanian adult population interest for sports, on a 5-level Likert Scale, where 5 represents "very interested". In the subsequent analysis, we have excluded those who declared to have no interest in this domain, thus keeping only the respondents that are relevant for a discussion on using sports as a marketing platform, meaning those who have chosen 3, 4 or 5 on the above-mentioned scale.

Our hypothesis is that the more interested the consumer is in sports, the more open he is to sports marketing techniques. As it can be observed in Table 3, this hypothesis is confirmed based on the escalation that occurs in the percentage of those agreeing with the sentence 'I usually remember the brands that sponsored the teams / athletes that I appreciate': from 34.2% for those somehow interested in sports to 66.2% for the consumers very interested in this domain. In other words, the consumer tends to pay more attention to brands that enter the sport world when his connection to this world is more powerful.

Equally important is to see if the use of sport as a marketing platform had the expected outcome, as companies KPIs are not stopping at awareness, but rather aim for brand image and sales boost. In the middle section of Table 3 we see the distribution of the respondents based on their level of agreement with the sentence 'Brands that support sports as sponsors have a better image in my eyes' correlated with their level of interest in sports. Again, we can notice that as the interest in sports increases, so is the chance that the brand supporting sports is appreciated, leading to an improved image. Considering that more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of consumers with a very high interest in sports (77.1%) have a better opinion about brands supporting sports, this a winning strategy for brands that know how to target the proper segments. In other words, this is not a strategy that will draw the attention of everyone, and, for sure, it is not one to win over every sports consumer, but for a brand with a well-defined targeting that includes sports fanatics, that will be a smart and efficient move, with direct impact on its brand image.

The end-objective of marketing actions is to sell, thus the consumer's journey from knowing a brand to liking that brand and, in the end, buying it is the most

important flow that research on consumer attitude must focus on. This is the reason why we have asked our respondents about their purchase decision of a product/service because it was recommended by the teams/athletes they appreciate. As it can be seen in the last section of Table 3, there is a huge difference between people somehow interested in sports, with just 21,1% of them confirming on the above-mentioned fact, and people very interested in the sports phenomenon, where 56.7% of the respondents bought the recommended brand.

Table 3. Influence of consumer's level of interest in sport on the three dimensions of his attitude

<i>Cognitive dimension</i>		Level of interest in sports		
Level of agreement with the sentence ' <i>I usually remember the brands that sponsored the teams / athletes I appreciate</i> '	<i>Somehow interested</i>	<i>Interested</i>	<i>Very interested</i>	
Disagree	19.5%	15.4%	7.5%	
Indifferent	46.3%	33.7%	26.3%	
Agree	34.2%	50.8%	66.2%	
<i>Affective dimension</i>		Level of interest in sports		
Level of agreement with the sentence ' <i>Brands that support sports as sponsors have a better image in my eyes</i> '	<i>Somehow interested</i>	<i>Interested</i>	<i>Very interested</i>	
Disagree	8.9%	6.7%	4.8%	
Indifferent	44.7%	28.4%	18.1%	
Agree	46.3%	64.8%	77.1%	
<i>Conative dimension</i>		Level of interest in sports		
Level of agreement with the sentence ' <i>It happened that I decided to buy a product / service because it was recommended by the teams / athletes that I appreciate</i> '	<i>Somehow interested</i>	<i>Interested</i>	<i>Very interested</i>	
Disagree	34.2%	34.2%	20.1%	
Indifferent	44.7%	30.8%	23.2%	
Agree	21.1%	34.9%	56.7%	

Source: Authors' processing.

The three correlations discussed in this section (which are statistically representative, based on Chi square tests results below 0.05, and with a medium strength, based on the contingency coefficient value between 0.295 and 0.398) show us that marketing through sports strategies are highly efficient within the segment of people very interested in sports; thus future policies in this direction must start with a precise segmentation and targeting, to ensure the sponsorship success.

4.3 Determining the influence of consumers' type of involvement in sports on their attitude towards the brands that use sports as a marketing platform

As mentioned earlier in this section, we have analysed the sports consumer based on three types of sport consumption – doing sports, watching sports on TV, or

attending sports events. However, we did not address them separately, as the same individual can be found both in the sports practitioner, viewer, and spectator segment. Thus, the current research brings a new perspective on looking at the sport consumer, as we do not see a person being described by one dimension (doing, watching, or attending), but rather identify 7 segments based on aggregated data, as presented in Figure 1. For each segment, there is also information about its level of interest in sports, on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 5 means very interested).

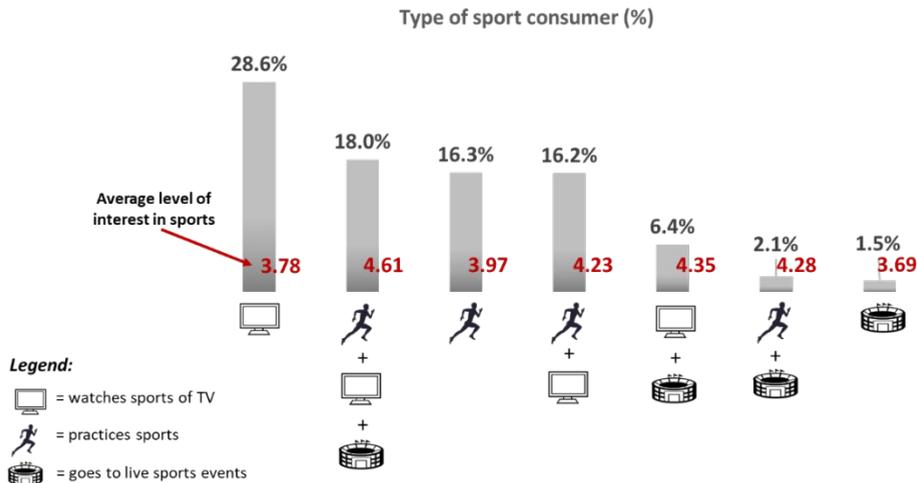


Figure 1. Type of sport consumer according to their implication in sports and average level of interest for this phenomenon

Source: Constantinescu et al., 2022.

The importance of this segmentation relies on the fact that when looking at the market in this way we can discover what types of sports activities we can promote, as it is not at all efficient to try selling sport practice, for example, to someone from the 1st, 5th, or 6th segment, who you now know is not interested in this part of the sport area. Moreover, when building marketing through sports strategies, we need to know which of these seven segments respond best to our campaigns. Therefore, in this part of our paper we have done a series of correlations between the two variables. Before presenting the results, we must mention that all three correlations are statistically representative, based on Chi-square tests results below 0.05, and with a medium strength, based on the contingency coefficient value between 0.225 and 0.355.

Table 4, presenting the correlation between the cognitive dimension and the type of sport consumer, shows us which are the segments that respond positively to marketing through sports strategies, paying more attention to them, and thus recalling the sponsoring brands. In this category we have the second segment (those doing sports, watching it on TV and attending games) with a 68.7% agreement to our statement ‘I usually remember the brands that sponsored the teams / athletes that I appreciate’. Close to this segment is also the 5th one, where we have a 65.2%

agreement. These two are the segments with the most exposure to marketing campaigns, as they follow sport both in the arena and on TV.

Table 4. Cognitive dimension – level of agreement with ‘I usually remember the brands that sponsored the teams / athletes that I appreciate’

Level of agreement	Type of consumer, based on involvement (%)							Total
	<i>Watch on TV</i>	<i>Doing sports, watch on TV and going to games</i>	<i>Doing sports</i>	<i>Doing sports and watch on TV</i>	<i>Watch on TV and going to games</i>	<i>Doing sports and going to games</i>	<i>Going to games</i>	
Disagree	16.3%	7.1%	15.2%	19.6%	10.6%	0.0%	0.0%	13.8%
Indifferent	36.0%	24.2%	43.3%	32.5%	24.2%	47.6%	50.0%	34.0%
Agree	47.8%	68.7%	41.5%	47.9%	65.2%	52.4%	50.0%	52.3%

Source: Authors' processing.

On the other hand, we have also some segments within which the sports through marketing strategies are not so efficient when it comes to brand recall. The first segment, those people consuming sports just on TV, is the first example, considering that this is a big size segment (having 28.6% out of the total market). Also, the 3rd segment, represented by those people that just practice sports and don't follow it on TV or live in the arenas, is a segment with a lower recall level for sponsoring brands. The 4th segment is a mixture of the two above-mentioned segments; thus, it is no surprise that they also have a lower recall level.

Moving forward from brand awareness to brand image, we have the affective dimension, which, as seen in Table 5, follows the same trend as the cognitive one. This means that we have segments with a high response rate (2nd, 5th, and 6th), where we see more than ¾ of the consumers declaring to have a better image of the sponsoring brands. If we look closely, we see that what these 3 segments have in common is their willingness to make an effort for sports and travel to the sport arena. On the other hand, the lowest level is again registered for those who just watch sports on TV.

Table 5. Affective dimension – level of agreement with ‘brands that support sports as sponsors have a better image in my eyes’

Level of agreement	Type of consumer, based on involvement (%)							Total
	<i>Watch on TV</i>	<i>Doing sports, watch on TV and going to games</i>	<i>Doing sports</i>	<i>Doing sports and watch on TV</i>	<i>Watch on TV and going to games</i>	<i>Doing sports and going to games</i>	<i>Going to games</i>	
Disagree	9.3%	4.4%	3.7%	11.0%	0.0%	4.8%	0.0%	6.7%
Indifferent	35.3%	19.8%	29.9%	28.8%	16.7%	19.0%	46.7%	28.4%
Agree	55.4%	75.8%	66.5%	60.1%	83.3%	76.2%	60.3%	64.9%

Source: Authors' processing.

The last stage of the conversion process refers to the purchase decision, where the conative dimension of the consumer’s attitude intervenes.

Table 6 reveals the same segments both in terms of positive reactions to marketing through sports strategies and negative ones. We can make a comparison, for example, between the first two segments, observing that the percentage of people who bought a product/service recommended by teams/athletes is double for the triad-type sports consumer (the one that is practitioner, TV viewer, and spectator) compared to those who only watch sports on TV, 57.5% compared to 25.3%.

Table 6. Conative dimension – level of agreement with “it happened that I decided to buy a product / service because it was recommended by the teams / athletes that I appreciate”

Level of agreement	Type of consumer, based on involvement (%)							Total
	<i>Watch on TV</i>	<i>Doing sports, watch on TV and going to games</i>	<i>Doing sports</i>	<i>Doing sports and watch on TV</i>	<i>Watch on TV and going to games</i>	<i>Doing sports and going to games</i>	<i>Going to games</i>	
Disagree	37.0%	16.6%	33.5%	34.0%	23.1%	9.5%	13.3%	29.7%
Indifferent	37.7%	26.0%	29.3%	26.5%	29.2%	38.1%	46.7%	31.3%
Agree	25.3%	57.5%	37.2%	39.5%	47.7%	52.4%	40.0%	39.0%

Source: Authors’ processing.

Based on the analysis in this section, we can conclude that the biggest segment from the market – sports TV viewers (with a market share of 28.6%) – is the less impacted by the marketing strategies of brands involved in sports, as 25.3% of the respondents bought something recommended by teams/athletes they appreciate.

4.4 Determining the level of trust that teams’ or athletes’ recommendations generate within the sports consumers segment

Our final objective is about the future of marketing through sports strategies, as it is not enough to just convince people to buy for the first time but rather to show them that the decision is sustainable and profitable in the long run. This is the reason why we have evaluated the respondents’ perception on a final statement about their trust in the recommendations made by teams or athletes. As presented in Table 7, this level of trust differs based on the consumer’s level of interest in sports.

Our hypothesis was that the more interested the consumer is in sports, the more attention he is paying to the way in which sport is used as a marketing platform, and the mistakes made by brands, clubs, or athletes lead to distrust. This has been validated by the research results, as it can be observed in the last line of Table 7, where the percentage of people agreeing to the sentence ‘Product/service recommendations made by teams/athletes aren’t credible anymore’ increases with the level of interest in sports. Credibility is one of the five sports celebrity personality

(SCP) attributes, alongside attractiveness, expertise level, trustworthiness, and character (Rai et al., 2021), having a great influence on consumers' purchase intentions, based on the athlete's or team's brand congruence and their ability for brand image transfer.

Table 7. Influence of consumer's level of interest in sport on their trust in the recommendations made by teams or athletes

Level of agreement with the sentence "Product / service recommendations made by teams / athletes aren't credible anymore"	Level of interest in sports		
	<i>Somehow interested</i>	<i>Interested</i>	<i>Very interested</i>
Disagree	20.6%	27.9%	32.4%
Indifferent	60.8%	45.9%	33.8%
Agree	18.5%	26.2%	33.8%

Source: Authors' processing.

In other words, although people who are very interested in the phenomenon are more open to buying products recommended by teams or athletes, they are also the ones most disappointed by them, and this can be a matter of ethical concerns. There are several levels where we can find ethical issues in marketing through sports, whether we are talking about problems on the part of the team or the athlete, or about problems on the part of the sponsor:

- Bad situations in the life of the athlete or in the club, facts that reflect also in the marketing actions they are involved in; such situations refer to chaotic lifestyle, consumption of prohibited substances, illicit behaviour, illegal financial activities; all these ill-doings negatively affect the team's or athlete's image in front of the public, thus all product recommendations lose credibility;

- Too many products and services promoted; there are a lot of teams or athletes in Romania that promote, in a short period of time, products/services from competing brands, which makes the fan wonder about loyalty; this type of random image association suggest that everything was related to financial compensation, not the true qualities of the products;

- Unhealthy or sensitive products/services which contradict the values of sport; we are talking about products such as sweets, fast food, soft drinks, alcohol, casinos and gambling, and even the COVID-19 pandemic, all these categories challenge the classical sports' values such as health, wellbeing, fairness; considering that unhealthy foods are promoted heavily, through food company sponsorship of elite sport, resulting in extensive exposure among young adults who are avid sport spectators (Dixon et al., 2018), we identify here significant ethical concerns related to lack of protection for easily affected groups;

- Teams and athletes using other brands than the ones officially endorsed; fans are following teams and athletes outside the court also, thus they are interested in the personal life also, therefore endorsements should be aligned with the athletes' lifestyle, because otherwise the recommendations will seem shallow and will lose credibility.

Table 8. Level of agreement to the sentence “Product / service recommendations made by teams / athletes aren’t credible anymore” correlated with the consumer’s type of involvement in sport

Level of agreement	Type of consumer, based on involvement (%)						Total	
	<i>Watch on TV</i>	<i>Doing sports, watch on TV and going to games</i>	<i>Doing sports</i>	<i>Doing sports and watch on TV</i>	<i>Watch on TV and going to games</i>	<i>Doing sports and going to games</i>		
Disagree	25.3%	28.0%	28.0%	29.6%	33.8%	38.1%	25.0%	28.0%
Indifferent	50.5%	34.6%	47.6%	49.4%	35.4%	42.9%	37.5%	45.1%
Agree	24.2%	37.4%	24.4%	21.0%	30.8%	19.0%	37.5%	26.9%

Source: Authors’ processing.

Another analysis in terms of recommendations credibility is the correlation with the sports consumer type, as presented in Table 8. Again, the same two segments stand out – 2nd and 5th. These two segments are the ones with the highest degree of knowledge of the sports phenomenon and the ones that, at the same time, have invested the most in it, hence the lowest share of people with a neutral opinion regarding this statement. In their case, there is a division towards extremes, having a third of the segment in the agreement, respectively disagreement. It is no surprise either that the 1st segment (TV viewers) are the most indifferent to this statement, as their interest in sports is moderate.

5. Discussion

All these correlations led to a conceptual model (Figure 2), in which we integrated the impact of the level of interest in sports on each attitude dimension (left side), as well as the intensity of the link between these dimensions and each type of sports consumer (right side). In the existing literature, we have some similar models, but most of them focus on just one of the two correlations – the one between level of interest in sport and attitude. For example, a 2002 FIFA World Cup sponsorship effectiveness analysis conducted by Ko et al. (2008) shows that favourable purchase intentions (conative dimension) were more likely to occur when consumers held a positive image (affective dimension) of the sponsoring companies and had a high level of sports involvement. Moreover, consumers’ sports involvement positively influenced sponsor awareness, corporate image, and purchase intention.

In a more recent analysis, Koo and Lee (2019) demonstrate through their model that sport involvement moderates the effectiveness of sponsor-event congruence on sponsor credibility, influencing the attitude toward the sponsor and the intention to purchase the sponsor’s product.

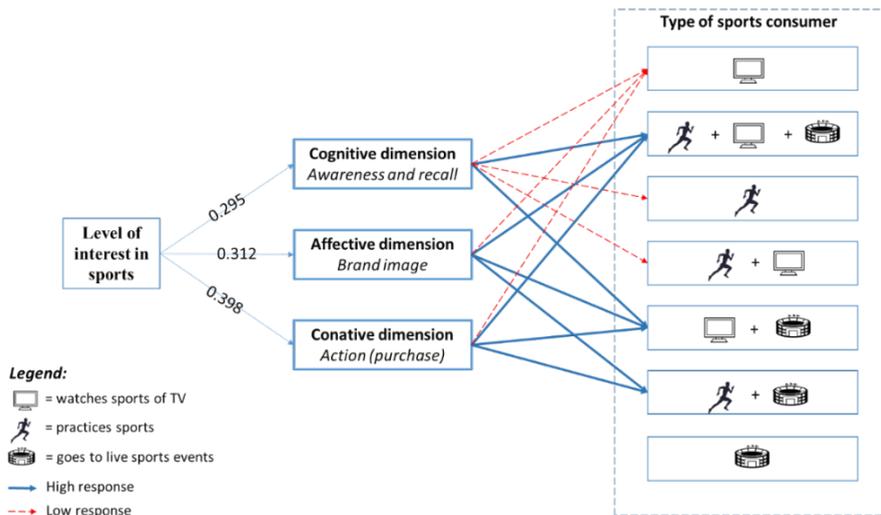


Figure 2. Conceptual model for attitude towards brands using sports as a marketing platform
 Source: Authors' own creation.

The need for a more complex model, which will also include the type of sports consumer, relies on the segmentation and targeting process that every marketing strategy depends on. Here, we must, in fact, make a connection between two components of a marketing communicational campaign – the objectives and the segmentation, considering that our model shows which segments are opened to what type of marketing communicational objectives.

First, when referring to the awareness objective, which corresponds to the cognitive dimension, the highest positive response to such an objective will be received from the 2nd and the 5th segments, as they are also the segments with the highest level of interest in sports (as shown in Figure 1) – 4.61 and 4.23 (on a scale from 1 to 5). Based on the data in Figure 1, by adding the market share of these two segments (18% + 6.4% = 24.4%), we get just a quarter of the market, which is a smaller part compared to the 1st segment (those who watch sports only on TV) and who, more important, have a low response to awareness campaigns of marketing through sports. The 1st segment's low response is present also for the brand image and sales campaigns (corresponding to the affective and conative dimensions).

Based on this comparison, brands can become aware of how to target and what to expect from such strategies. If the brand wants a full AIDA response (Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action), then it should target the people that have both interest in practicing sports and going to live events, as these are the ones with the open mind and heart when it comes to the positive image transfer from their favourite teams and athletes to brands that invest here.

The TV alone is no longer making the connection between brands and fans, as TV viewers are relatively disconnected from the sports phenomenon, if they don't have a more personal and direct encounter with it (doing sports or enjoying it from the stands in live events).

6. Conclusion, implications, and limitations

The present research points on the relevance of understanding the consumers' attitude towards sports sponsors and how the sponsor-sponsee is trustworthy in the consumers' perception. As brands pay more and more attention to the outcome of sponsorship relationships, the greatest value of the present research relates to becoming aware of the targeting relevance also in the context of a sponsorship relationships, as it has an impact on both the sponsor's and the sponsee's most important stakeholder: the customer.

The practical implications of this research are within reach if we think of the various online targeting options that allow brands to spot and approach the most receptive segments. But in order to do that properly, the brands managers have to know which are the characteristics of those segments, in terms of sociodemographics and behavioural profiles. The modern business models in terms of competitive intelligence have to take into consideration both quantifiable factors, as well as sentiment analysis (Tuta et al., 2014), thus sponsors must take into consideration also the emotional footprint that they leave on the market, one aspect being the one related to support for their customers favourite sports club.

Although our research is nationally representative for the urban adult population of one of the biggest countries in the Southeastern Europe, Romania, there are limitations that must be mentioned with the scope of better or complementary research design in the future. First of all, even though urban adult population represent the main target audience of sports events and sponsors, maybe a research dedicated to special segments that were not covered here, such as teenagers or rural population, could highlight some behaviour insights and, thus, some proper marketing through sports strategies for them. Secondly, if we want to build a complementary research, we should also address the topic in an in-depth interview with both sponsor brands and sponsored organisations, as it's interesting to mirror these two parties in terms of their sponsorship goals.

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