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## SPORTS CELEBRITIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON CONSUMER ATTITUDES

*Apstrakt:* Sports celebrities are often considered heroes both locally and internationally. The behavior of these athletes on the field, where they excel as leaders of their teams, along with healthy values in their private lives, often enriched by philanthropic activities, do not escape the attention of sports marketing experts. With a sports personality whose image is consistent with the company's brand, a mutually beneficial partnership may be established. Athletes can earn substantial additional profits, while companies can enhance their brand image and gain a competitive advantage. Today, the digital environment has made this marketing strategy even more effective, since famous sports figures are better able to directly and effectively influence the attitudes of sports consumers (their fans). The problem arises, however, when sports celebrities damage their own reputation with inappropriate behavior. Sports celebrities can also damage the reputation of their sports clubs, as well as the reputation of the brands they endorse and/or promote. This situation is especially problematic for brands when negative electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM) causes incalculable damage to the company's reputation.

*Key words:* Image of sports celebrities, Sports marketing, Digital environment, Sports consumers' attitudes, Brand.

### INTRODUCTION

Brand image is the image that consumers form in their thoughts when they come into contact with the brand (Keller 2013). Brand image theory acknowledges general customer perceptions of a brand and is influenced by distinctive brand attributes (Ibid). Arai et al. (2014) believe that the brand of a sports celebrity is established through the use of that person's name and his/her symbolic meaning and the values it represents. According to Keller (2013) this kind of brand ensures a competitive advantage in the market. The cultural meanings an athlete carries determine how valuable a „sports star“ is. Status, class, gender, age, and other personal traits that distinguish a player from others are examples of such attributes. Through sporting events and athlete-related products, these cultural meanings can be conveyed from the superstar to the customer (McCracken 1989). Hill and Vincent (2006) addressed this topic stating that a player's personality

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can contribute to the reputation of the team he/she plays for. The researchers accounted for these athletes' contributions to brand creation by classifying both former and present players as compelling media personalities. Sutton et al. (1997) proposed the idea that players might positively influence brand image by proposing that those who also participate in philanthropic activities can boost the team's market position.

Using sports celebrities, with a positive public image, has become a standard practice in sports marketing. The advancement of digital technology has made it even simpler for marketers to interact with their target market more quickly and effectively, while also leveraging the influence, legitimacy, and appeal of well-known sports personalities. Fans of famous athletes trust their idols and if such persons recommend to them the brand they use (whether they are linked to that brand by a sponsorship contract or not), it is highly likely that this will influence their intention to buy such a brand, consume it, and most importantly, that will influence them to continue to spread positive information either in the cyber environment or in real life.

Social media platforms are now flooded with micro and macro influencers, or at least those who pose as such. Their primary responsibility is to represent and advocate brands to other users (their followers), influencing how consumers feel about them (Kwiatek et al. 2021). However, the ill-considered action of a sports star can negatively affect his/her personal image, and the reputation of the team in which he/she may perform. Of course, damaging a personal image can also damage the image of the brand they support or promote. Such a situation in a digital environment can cause negative word-of-mouth (eWOM) among users. Negative eWOM spreads exponentially in the digital environment, and is extremely difficult to control once it enters cyberspace (Baltezarević, Baltezarević 2021).

#### THE INFLUENCE OF FAMOUS SPORTS PERSONALITIES ON THE IMAGE OF THE BRANDS THEY SUPPORT

Celebrity influencers are people who have gained public awareness and use that recognition to promote a company by appearing in advertisements with the brand (McCracken 1989). Numerous factors contribute to our understanding of a sports icon's brand image, including branding (Aaker 1996), consumer behavior (Quester-Thompson 2001), sports marketing (Bauer et al. 2008), marketing communication (Ohanian 1991), and general marketing (Gutman 1982). A sports celebrity's brand image is crucial since it affects both customers' purchasing behavior and the sponsors the celebrity works with. According to the brand image transfer model, when a sports celebrity sponsors an event, their brand image is passed along to the sponsors (Ibid). According to McCracken (1989), when a celebrity and sponsor are linked for a sponsorship, the celebrity's image is passed on to the sponsor. As a result, a celebrity's role is to establish credibility and contribute to the recognition and image of a brand (Madrigal 2000). When a sports fan is associated with a positive image of a famous sports personality, fan identification (Maddux-Rogers 1980) and fan internalization (Kamins et al. 1989) can represent two sorts of symbolic benefits. According to Trail et al. (2005), identification refers to the orientation of the self in relation to other

famous people that causes feelings of intimate connection. In this case, identification refers to the close attachment of sports fans to a sports celebrity. Building on earlier studies, identification affects the sports consumer's level of commitment and results in favorable perceptions of sports celebrities (Madrigal 2000). When a person adopts the views and behaviors of others, internalization takes place (Premeaux, 2005).

Often, spectators (fans) attend matches live or watch matches via television, not only because of their interest in the sporting event, but also because they are attracted to the sports stars. In addition to improving team performance, popular athletes also have appeal outside of the playing field (Yang et al. 2009). The media attention paid to such sports superstars is enormous in a world appearing dominated by the cult and appeal of celebrity, and the line between the realms of entertainment and sports is becoming more and more fuzzy (Gilmour, Rowe 2010). It is also important to consider the marketing potential of such personalities in addition to the outcomes and statistics they produce. Without knowing a player's background and attractiveness off the field, even with amazing skill and athleticism, there may not be a connection between the player and the audience (McDonell 2011).

A study by Charbonneau and Garland (2006) assessed an athlete's effectiveness and potential for corporate sponsorship based on three factors: attractiveness, expertise, and trust. In light of these characteristics, Shuart (2007) contends that famous athletes who also possess a heroic aspect display additional value that can be utilized by marketers. Such sports figures can most effectively influence consumer attitudes towards the brands they endorse or promote. He confirmed that the best spokespersons for companies were those players who achieved sporting greatness while still upholding the foundation of cultural values. Goode (1978), claimed that winning, having unique talents, and demonstrating high levels of performance are sources of prestige. On the other hand, Bauer et al. (2008) looked at the bigger picture in their study of sports marketing and investigated the influence of team attributes (team, head coach and achievements) on consumer perceptions of brands and their image. The most insightful information came from Foster et al. (2006), outlined a number of elements important to developing an athlete's personal brand. The player's ability on the field and consistency of performance, the winning history of the team and the player, image in the public (public perception), charisma, as well as the player's experience with the media, are all related to these elements. However, in today's media-influenced culture, stories of bad behavior by well-known athletes are frequent, and disagreements that develop between an individual athlete and his or her team can undermine the branding powers of both the player and the company in question. A player who is well-known to have a poor public image may reflect that image onto the team and endanger its reputation (Ibid).

#### THE INFLUENCE OF FAMOUS SPORTS PERSONALITIES ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

According to Blackwell et al. (2001), consumer behavior is the actions consumers take to acquire, use, and discard goods and services. From the perspectives of sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, statistics, and other fields, it is recognized

as an applied science. Researchers need to understand why consumers act in certain ways and use such knowledge in product creation, sales, advertising, and many other areas of marketing (Ibid). Brand endorsements by sports celebrities are becoming very popular, and many athletes earn significant money for promoting certain brands. The advertising industry takes full advantage of people's fascination with fame by promoting brands it believes can be associated with the star athlete. Because of the athlete's unique relationship to the brand, organizations are compelled to match their products with the sports celebrity who best represents the company's perceived image (James 2002).

The most valuable asset of a business in the expanding sports industry is generally acknowledged to be its brand (e.g., athletes, events, teams, leagues, sponsors) (Kunkel et al. 2014), as powerful brands boost the trust of customers (Berry 2000). Furthermore, previous research on sports brands and their interactions with other brands has primarily focused on consumers' self-reported views, behaviors or attitudes. The ability to better comprehend fan (consumer) responses to sports brands has emerged due to developments in web-based technologies. The digital environment offers potential for sports brand creation and administration, as well as serving as an interaction platform for multiple brands in the sports brand ecosystem (Kunkel et al. 2017). Additionally, it gives marketers the chance to gather behavioral data that they can use to enhance their brand management strategies and fortify bonds between customers and the brands. Given the increased availability of behavioral data, examining actual behavior toward sports brands should become a cornerstone of sports branding research (Ibid). According to Biscaia et al. (2013), in order for a brand to be linked with value, consumer connections with it must be both positive and distinctive. This viewpoint contends that the media, word-of-mouth, impression management, a team or athlete, etc. all have an impact on how consumers perceive products. In the digital transformation of today's society, one should be careful in renouncing the „human touch” (Papakonstantinidis et al. 2021), considering the fact that word of mouth in a real environment has a strong influence on consumer behavior, even more powerful than its digital successor – electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Baltezarević, Baltezarević 2022).

According to Melnick and Wann (2010), building a sports brand necessitates fans' awareness of the athlete, as well as, a comprehension of what distinguishes him/her from other athletes. Subsequently, constructing an adequate representation of their personal life in general, including factors connected to athletes' abilities on and off the field, is required for establishing a brand (Cortsen 2013). Celebrity branding has grown in importance primarily as a result of the value that their personal brand adds to other brands that they use or support. According to Foong and Yazdanifard (2014), brands that collaborate with celebrities generally enjoy a 20 percent increase in sales. Furthermore, Elberse and Verleun (2012) discovered that brand endorsements of sports celebrities not only provided nearly 4% of the brand's annual revenue, but also caused a \$70,000 weekly rise in sales when the athlete excelled in his/her sporting responsibilities. This collaboration has the potential to be a tremendously profitable source of income for sports celebrities, because companies are prepared to invest significant resources in this marketing strategy (Ibid). Stevens et al. (2003) investigated this phenomenon by performing a qualitative study of people seen as heroes by Generation Y.

The results of this study suggest that companies may track trends toward favoring role models with a positive rather than those with a negative image by paying attention to a number of characteristics of sports heroes (such as personality characteristics, athletic skills, social behavior, status as celebrities, and attachment for other reasons) (Ibid). Sports celebrities have become entrepreneurs in their own right, and the brand they represent does not necessarily represent themselves, but their ideas and attitudes that they convey to others (Olenski 2018). Due to the development of the digital environment, well-known sports figures are now more able to act as opinion leaders and shape the attitudes of other users (Baltezarević 2022).

There are numerous examples of athletes who conduct inappropriately on and off the field harming their image, the reputation of their club, and the companies they represent. Often the consequence is the termination of the contract by the club, but also the termination of the sponsorship contract by the companies whose brands they represented. When a famous sports personality exposes himself and behaves inappropriately, it can cause an instant viral effect in the digital environment. Internet users share content at an incredible speed (about a specific event in which a particular athlete is portrayed in a negative connotation). Also, such a situation can cause negative eWOM, which is frequently uncontrollable and which can indirectly negatively affect consumer attitudes towards the brands represented by such athletes. However, if communication on social networks, on the other hand, is carefully approached, it can have a positive effect on consumer attitudes towards sports brands, especially if the influencers are sports celebrities who possess a high level of credibility that earns them the trust of their followers on the Internet. Among the many social networking sites, Instagram definitely stands out as one of the most popular. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) discovered that sports brands that employ user-generated material on their Instagram profiles create better interaction from followers when the postings have a clear product focus. According to Kim-Hull (2017), consumers can be attracted through social media platforms, especially Instagram, for commercial, social, and sporting purposes. Professional athletes can also use these platforms to promote themselves (Smith-Sanderson 2015).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Based on the studied literature, we defined three hypotheses for the purposes of empirical research.

H1: If a famous sports personality possesses heroic qualities, the greater the possibility that he/she will be positively perceived by his/her fans.

H2: If a famous sports personality behaves improperly on or off the sports field, it can negatively affect his/her personal image, as well as the image of the brands he/she represents.

H3: If the story about the inappropriate actions of a famous sports personality moves to the digital environment, it can cause negative word-of-mouth communication (eWom) among Internet users and lead to a viral effect.

The research was conducted using an electronic questionnaire with 15 set statements, closed type, which provided us with the attitudes of the respondents. The first part of the questionnaire contained questions about the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while the second part contained the statements defined by the authors. Out of a total of 200 questionnaires that were sent to potential research respondents, 167 correct questionnaires were used.

## RESULTS

95 (56.9%) male respondents and 72 (43.1%) female respondents participated in the survey. The age structure of the sample shows that there were most respondents aged 18 to 25, i.e. 50 (29.9%), and the least number of respondents aged 36 to 45, i.e. 18 (10.8%). Most of the respondents had a university degree, i.e. 84 (50.3%). Before testing the validity of the set hypotheses, we checked the internal agreement of the scale composed of the variables that we used to test the set hypotheses.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha coefficient

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.795	.799	6

Cronbach's alpha coefficient  $\alpha = .795$  confirms that the variables are well chosen and the scale satisfies the research task of measuring the respondents' attitudes that are correlated with the set hypotheses.

Given that we tested six variables, for an additional check we calculated the mean correlation between each pair of values. The optimal mean value of the correlation between pairs of values on the scale is between 0.2 and 0.4.

Table 2. Mean correlation values of the tested variables

Item Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
P1	3.05	1.082	167
P2	3.22	1.138	167
P3	2.36	1.121	167
P4	2.96	1.124	167
P5	2.73	1.333	167
P6	3.05	.959	167

From Table 2, we see that the mean correlation values of the tested variables are in the required range, that is, they range from 2.36 to 3.22.

Testing the validity of the set hypotheses gave the following results:

H1: If a famous sports personality possesses heroic qualities, the greater the possibility that he/she will be positively perceived by his/her fans.

The Chi Square test showed that there is a statistically significant relationship as  $\chi^2(16,1) = 221.916^a$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Pearson's  $R = .504$  shows that this is a positive strong correlation.

H2: If a famous sports personality behaves improperly on or off the sports field, it can negatively affect his/her personal image, as well as the image of the brands he/she represents.

The Chi Square test showed that there is a statistically significant relationship as  $\chi^2(16,1) = 205.424^a$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Pearson's  $R = .599$  shows that this is a positive strong correlation.

H3: If the story about the inappropriate actions of a famous sports personality moves to the digital environment, it can cause negative word-of-mouth communication (eWom) among Internet users and lead to a viral effect.

The Chi Square test showed that there is a statistically significant relationship as  $\chi^2(16,1) = 118.063^a$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Pearson's  $R = .167$  shows that this is a positive small correlation.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The use of sports celebrities who have the status of a hero with their lifestyle on and off the field and a highly positive image in the public can provide companies (whose brands they represent) with huge benefits, and provide a competitive advantage in dynamic market conditions. Although this marketing strategy is not new, the development of digital technologies has given it a new dimension. In the digital environment, communication with users is easier and faster, and companies are enabled to more effectively influence consumers' attitudes towards their brands. When famous sports personalities act as influencers on social networks, they convey to their users not only their ideas, but also their preferences for the brands they use. Sometimes, these athletes are sponsored by companies and on their behalf, for money, they promote brands, and thanks to their credibility and fame, they exert a strong influence on consumer attitudes towards that brand and their purchasing decisions. However, there are many cases of sports celebrities who, with their careless behavior (on and off the field), damage their public image, as well as, the image of the brands they support. Of course, the unacceptable behavior of an individual affects the reputation of the sports team to which they belong. Often, the epilogue of these situations is the termination of the contract with the famous athlete. Also, this kind of information is usually transmitted through the digital environment. Internet users exchange this kind of negative content among themselves, which is known in the literature as negative word-of-mouth (eWOM). Once negative information spreads virally among Internet users, it is almost impossible to control it.

Empirical research, conducted using SPSS software, confirmed all three hypotheses set forth in this paper.

Testing H1 confirmed that if a famous sports personality possesses heroic qualities, the greater the possibility that he/she will be positively perceived by his/her fans.

Testing H2 confirmed that if a famous sports personality behaves improperly on or off the sports field, it can negatively affect his/her personal image, as well as the image of the brands he/she represents.

Testing H3 confirmed that if the story about the inappropriate actions of a famous sports personality moves to the digital environment, it can cause negative word-of-mouth communication (eWom) among Internet users and lead to a viral effect.

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## СПОРТСКЕ ЛИЧНОСТИ И ЊИХОВ УТИЦАЈ НА СТАВОВЕ ПОТРОШАЧА

### РЕЗИМЕ

Спортске познате личности се често сматрају херојима, како на локалном тако и на међународном нивоу. Понашање ових спортиста на терену, где се истичу као лидери својих тимова, уз здраве вредности у приватном животу, често обогаћене филантропским активностима, не измичу пажњи стручњака за спортски маркетинг. Могућа је обострано корисна сарадња са спортском славном личношћу, чији је имиџ у складу са имиџом бренда компаније. Спортисти могу да зараде значајан додатни профит, док компаније могу побољшати имиџ свог бренда и стећи конкурентску предност. Данас је дигитално окружење ову маркетиншку стратегију учинило још ефикаснијом, јер су познате спортске личности у бољој могућности да директно и ефективно је утичу на ставове спортских потрошача (њихових навијача). Проблем настаје, међутим, када спортске познате личности непримереним понашањем наруше сопствену репутацију. Спортске познате личности такође могу нарушити репутацију својих спортских клубова, као и репутацију брендова које подржавају и/или промовишу. Ова ситуација је посебно проблематична за брендове када негативна електронска усмена предаја (eWOM) наноси непроцењиву штету репутацији компаније.

*Кључне речи:* имиџ спортских познатих личности, спортски маркетинг, дигитално окружење, ставови спортских потрошача, бренд.