

Sports themes in advertising

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Published online: April 30, 2021

(Accepted for publication April 15, 2021)

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2021.s2149

Abstract

Sport is an inseparable element of our day-to-day life, and thanks to its universality it allows people, social groups, nations and societies to communicate with each other, regardless of any differences between them. Not only the popularity of sport, but also its multidimensionality, a number of inherent attributes, strong feelings which surround it and the high efficiency of ads translate into increased interest in sports sponsorship. However, sports-based communication is not reserved only for sponsors. In communication, sports themes are exploited by many other companies that are not related to sponsorship. They use commonly available associations related to sport and its attributes. By using them, they not only sell products and services, but also build a spiritual bond, community of experiences and goals, while focusing on making emotional relationships with recipients at the same time. Such communication influences better understanding and perception of the brand, which leads to the purchasing decisions of consumers. Bearing in mind that sport is so important for recipients, its multidimensionality, how eagerly it is used as a communication platform, questions arise as to what companies actually communicate using sports themes. This is especially true in the area of advertising and its skyrocketing reach, the most persuasive, effective and edifying attitudes and forms of brand promotion. With a help of sports themes, advertisements not only refer to feelings close to us and enter the sphere of our interests, passions and goals, but also refer to our system of values and convey universal ideas with which selected groups of recipients can identify. This helps in positioning the advertiser's brand, creates its unique image and the opportunity to communicate with customers on a level close to them. The aim of the study is to show the most common sports themes used in advertising, both in the communication of companies directly and indirectly related to sports. It presents disciplines that were most often used in advertising spots, sports themes that were implemented and whether they served to support sales. or building a brand image and establishing relationships. The study included analysis which considered 200 advertising campaigns of 60 mainly international companies from the European and American markets.

Key Words: sport advertising, sponsors, sport, sports sponsorship, sponsorship communication, brand building, brand communication

Introduction

Sport is an inseparable element of our day-to-day life, becoming one of its most important aspects (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2007, p. 20; Coalter, 2007). Due to its universality, it allows people, social groups, nations and societies to communicate with each other, regardless of any differences between them (Czerwiński H., Sadowski J., Sozański H., eds, 2013). We look at sport not only through the knothole of competition, obtained results and broken records. Sport has many functions, which include: social, health, educational, entertainment, recreational, economic, fitness, integration and defense (Stryczek 2011). Sport also has one attribute that is crucial for the fans and the business at the same time. These are unforced, sincere and often very strong feelings. which fans relate to. It can be achieved with a given discipline, team, event or athlete, creating closer ties between supporters.

Not only the popularity of sport, but also its multidimensionality, a number of inherent attributes, enormous emotions it arouses and high efficiency translate into increased interest in both sports sponsorship and communication based on sport (Lagae, 2005, p. 43; Kwak, Kim, & Hirt, 2011, pp. 225–250). It is also important that sport is easy to commercialize (Salo, 2011, p. 13). Sports sponsorship increases a brand's exposure and access to its products. At the same time, sponsors hope that the feelings connected to following the athletes' struggles will result in faster associations and better remembering of product, company and brand names, which leads to creating closer ties with customers (Biscaia, Correia ... 2012, pp. 227-242; Kończak, 2020 (a), p 46). Sponsoring becomes a form of communication between the company and the market (Datko, 2012, p 31), bringing together previously distant and unrelated groups of stakeholders (Cunningham, Cornwell, 2009, pp. 65-86). The effectiveness of sponsorship today lies not only in the rights that distinguish the sponsor market, but mostly in comprehensive 360-degree communication, which gives a real market advantage (Kończak, 2020 (b), pp. 2921 - 2922).

However, sports-based communication is not limited to sport and its sponsorship. In communication, sports themes are exploited by many other companies that are not related to sponsorship. The first group consists of brands using ambush marketing, which happens mostly with attractive sports entertainment events, key championships and other important events (Tomanek, 2020, pp. 1130 – 1135; Sznajder, 2015, pp. 274-275). Naturally, ambush marketing makes only a part of the sports communication market. In fact, numerous companies cannot be accused of this practice. It is because they use permitted and publicly available associations related to sport and its attributes. Given the attractiveness and diversity of these associations, the number of communication and promotional activities enabling contact with target groups is constantly increasing (O'Reilly, Lafrance Horning, 2013, pp. 424-437; Jedel, Kończak 2019, p. 157).

Companies using sports themes not only sell products and services, but build a spiritual bond, a community of sensations and goals, which helps establish relationships with the community concerned, strengthening emotional contacts with the audience. Such communication influences better understanding and perception of the brand, which leads to the purchasing decisions of consumers.

Bearing in mind that sport is so important for recipients, its multidimensionality, how eagerly it is used as a communication platform, questions arise as to what companies actually communicate using sports themes. This is especially true in the area of advertising and its skyrocketing reach, the most persuasive, effective and edifying attitudes and forms of brand promotion. The purpose of this study is to present the results of research on advertising campaigns in which sports themes were implemented. The article presents the most popular sports themes used in the surveyed ads, as well as:

- sports most commonly used in advertising,
- the most common heroes,
- usage of sports themes to advertise products and brands,
- differences and similarities in communication between sports and neutral brands,
- most popular elements of storytelling advertising

Materials & methods

The author analyzed 200 advertising campaigns of 60 brands (TV & Internet - audio-video format) that aired between 2010 and 2020. For the purpose of this study, two groups of companies were distinguished. The first group consists of brands that are exclusively or largely active on the sports market, associated with active or passive use of sport (later referred to as - sports brands). It mostly includes: producers of sports equipment, sports TV channels, bookmakers or brands from the FGMCG industry, which are addressing the sports industry. All things considered, 61 campaigns of 20 companies were analyzed. Under Armor (5 advertising campaigns), Nike (5), Everlast (1), 4F (3), FILA (2), Adidas (5), Puma (5), STS (3), Paddy Power (5), PMU (4), Canal + Sport (1), BBC Sport (4), HBO Sports (2), Super Bowl (1), Giant Baseball (2), Red Roses (1), TycSport (1), Head (3), Intersport (4), Gatorade (4).

The second group includes companies whose business activities are not directly related to sport, and/or their sports connections constitute a much smaller part of the business (later referred to as - neutral brands). In conclusion, 139 campaigns of 40 companies were analyzed: Samsung (5 advertising campaigns), Pepsi (5), Coca-Cola (5), Red Bull (5), Mastercard (3), Heineken (5), Castrol (5), Cochonou (3), Media Markt (3), Citroen (3), Orange (5), Renault (4), Mercedes (5), Specsavers (5), Beats by Dre (3), Huawei (5), Banco de Chile (1), Audi (2), Activia (1), H&M (2), Qatar Airlines (4), Emirates Airlines (3), Turkish Airlines (3), Rolex (5), Volvo (3), Oriflame (3), Neonet (3), Carlsberg (5), Warka (5), Tyskie (5), Harnaś (1), T-Mobile (1), Esquire (1), Hyundai / Kia (2), Budweiser (5), PGNiG (1), Guinness (3), Procter and Gamble (5), Contrex (2), VISA (3). The analyzed brands include both the largest and best-known sports sponsors, mainly in Europe and the US, as well as some of the best-known brands using ambush marketing. Next to them, there are companies that are not associated with any of the above activities, but in their advertising portfolio there is communication based on sports themes to be found. The vast majority of these brands are international corporations or national companies with their activities going beyond one country.

Results

The first aspect that was analysed concerned sports disciplines to which companies alluded in their advertising communication and its use as a platform for communication with clients. To nobody's surprise, football emerged as the absolute leader. A huge number of 72 campaigns contained football references. The Olympic Games took second place (22), and athletics came third (21). The next positions were taken by: general exercises to improve physical condition (15), a mix of sports (14), winter sports (11), running (10). There were also ads which lacked reference to any discipline, but the slogans and content of the advertisement referred to the spirit of sport, competition and its other attributes (10). Subsequently, advertising campaigns referred to such disciplines as tennis (8), racing and horse racing (8), motor racing in various categories (7), basketball (7), baseball (7), rugby (5), cycling (5) swimming (5), extreme sports (4), martial arts (3), regattas (2), volleyball (1), snooker (1).

The second element of study (Tab.1) concerned the extent to which sport is used in product's advertising, its direct support of the products and services sales, and to what extent they help in brand-building,

its positioning, image, reputation, whether the products are in the background or are not presented at all, and the if the message focuses on values, emotions, ideas, relationship building and other aspects close to the brand's customers.

Table 1 Brand building vs sales of products in ads based on sports themes (n = 200), (Author's research)

	Sports brands	Neutral Brands
Direct advertising of products and services	31	50
Image advertising with products	21	71
Image-based advertising based on brand values, feelings, brand's vision and mission, which focus on building its reputation without presenting products	9	18

Among neutral brands, there is a clear advantage of image advertising, and among sports brands it is easy to spot a relative balance. Such result is related to the goals of not only sponsorship, but also sports-based communication, where there is a discussion about which goals are more important: these connected to sales or those associated with brand building and establishing relationships with stakeholders (Andreff, Szymański, 2006; Jobber, 2007, pp. 653-655). At the same time, most market research and opinions of scholars indicate that sport is ideal for achieving goals related to brand building and communication (Dolphin 2003, pp. 173-186, Bylicki P., Kończak J., 2018; Sponsoring Insight 2019, IEG 2018, p.6.). Goals related to building the brand and its communication are fostered by the multidimensional nature of sport and its cultural and social references, as well as the ability to generate enormous feelings.

Therefore, another element of the advertising campaigns analysis (Tab. 2) concerned the most important messages, apart from marketing and sales, that reached the recipients. 10 categories of sports themes that appeared in the analyzed advertisements were listed.

Table 2 Sports themes appearing in advertisements (n = 200); (Author's research)

Ad's theme	Sports brands	Neutral Brands
Building relationships, social connections through sport, passive or active participation , not related to fan support	22	53
Transfer of players' image, image transfer related to attractive sports events or competitions	21	58
Building identity, identification of club or national fans. Creating loyalty to the team and building fans' inner pride.	13	38
Building one's own inner strength, the spirit of the advertised hero, support for the tedious work and sports effort of the everyman or athlete.	27	26
Universal values connected with sport, support for the company's mission, as well as for the everyman	13	32
An advocate of fans' passion, supporting fans, giving them arguments that their passion and feelings are important. Advertising spots supporting the soul of a fan.	18	24
Providing the audience with entertainment, fuller joy of experiencing the event itself, discipline and participation in important moments in history of sport.	13	23
Education of recipients through the knothole showing the multidimensional influence of sport on other aspects of the surrounding world.	12	24
Sport as an element of lifestyle, where style and good fun count, not necessarily competition, results or even huge physical effort	15	26
Support of healthy lifestyle	16	18

The literature does not lack typology of fans and models of their involvement (Wos, Samra, 2014, p. 268; Havas Sport 2014; Stewart, Smith, Nocholson, 2003, pp. 206-216). However, there is no single division that would be considered as binding. Therefore, there is no single typology of advertising messages addressed to them. What appears to be clear, most of the advertisements with sports themes are not aimed only at fans. Their target groups are usually way larger.

This can be seen in the message, the narrative layer of the advertisement, and even in the props appearing in the spots. Sports gadgets not related to fan support appeared 35 times in advertisements for sports brands, and 79 times for neutral brands. Fan accessories were only noticed 8 and 53 times, respectively. Fan support was shown only eight times in sports advertisements, and 29 times in advertisements for neutral brands.

It should also be remembered that sport is often described today as a product. Interest in sport is determined by consumer behavior, which fundamentally changes the profile of a sports fan (Organista, Lenartowicz, Galaś, 2017, p. 114; Deloitte 2020). Even your favorite sports events, teams or athletes are a pretext for a much broader look at sport than just the games, competition, support or pride of a club or national team. Sport carries values such as equality, tolerance and solidarity, excellence, courage, perseverance, inspiration, loyalty, honesty and justice (Cedro, 2013, p. 79; *The Fundamentals of Olympic Values, 2016*). Because of this, it is not surprising that a significant part of advertisements use a rich palette of mentioned values, building a brand image based on the ideas important to their customers. Culture-forming processes,

elements of building social connections, not only in the fan dimension, and building the identity of both individuals, groups and entire societies may be added as well (O'Donnell, Boyle 2008, p. 68)

The focus of advertising is not only the discipline, or the sport itself, but on the human being, presented either as an nameless representative of some group or as a well-known athlete. The identity of the ad's main character was another element of this analysis (Tab. 3)

Table 3 The hero of an ad based on sports themes (n = 200), (Author's research)

The hero	Sports brands	Neutral Brands
Man	22	49
Woman	9	15
Tennager	6	14
The Collective Hero	13	51
Sports star/stars	26	53
superstars/legends from beyond the world of sports	3	3
Hero of the brand	-	2

What looks really obvious is the largest representation of current and former athletes as the main characters of advertising spots. Among sports brands, the sports superstars appeared in almost 43% of advertisements, and among neutral brands it was 38%. Athletes are natural "ambassadors", thanks to whom the brand can additionally transfer a positive image to the advertiser's one, drawing on the values inherent in the image of a sports superstar, its features, character, personality and successes (Alonso-Dos-Santos, Vveinhardt, ... , 2016, p. 79, Matyczyński, 2015, p. 12). What is worth emphasizing, superstars, celebrities and recognizable figures from outside the world of sport were used sporadically.

Attracting women to sport in a wider manner proved to be one of the biggest marketing challenges (Nielsen 2018, Sport Biznes, 2013). In the advertisements surveyed, women constituted a clear minority of on-screen heroes, almost on a par with child heroes. In sports brands, they appeared more than two times less often than men, and in neutral brands over three times less often. The building of a community, social connections, and collective identity is represented in great numbers by the collective hero in advertisements, where no single person stands out in the foreground of the advertisement.

While a significant part of large sports events, such as the Olympic Games and football championships, try to prepare a certain mascot, which actually plays the role of a brand hero, there is practically no brand hero (2 spots) in an advertisement with sports themes. This is surprising, lookin at how frequent of a communication procedure it is, and the brand hero becomes a carrier of feelings and values for companies, visualizing the brand's personality, having with the task of warming its image and easy contact with target groups (Teślowski, Dłużniewska ..., 2015, p. 157).

The last analyzed thread was the presence of narrative advertisements which, thanks to their attractive, emotional formula and engaging content, inspire action, disseminate ideas and connect clients on an emotional level. Storytelling allows for changes in attitudes, better understanding of the message, wider perception of the brand and building positive attitudes towards it (Carless, Douglas, 2015, pp. 23-37). Besides, people have narrative awareness and memory, so they naturally arrange events in the form of stories. (Hall, 2001, p 300). Among the analyzed spots , 26 advertisements for sports brands and 55 neutral brands, i.e. about 40%, had clear storytelling features. It shows that sport is a good platform for narrative advertising, which is connected with feelings and stories close to the audience, in which the latter can easily relate to.

Table 4 Storytelling elements of advertising based on sports themes (n = 200), (Author's research)

	Athlete / Captain	The nameless man	Historical myth / founding myth	Milestones	Human story	Brand of the team	Conflict
Sports brands	17	21	9	12	18	11	6
Neutral Brands	25	15	8	7	25	11	11

Among the storytelling elements, brands were most often inspired by human history, and then by milestones, a historical / founding myth, or the team brand. Sports brands used the nameless hero way more often as the axis of the narrative, and neutral brands preferred the appearance of sports superstars. On a rare occasion, conflict served as an inspiration which, according to the researchers, was the narrative axis of the story. This element linked the whole plot and made the message attractive (Kall, Kłeczek, Sagan, 2013, p. 28; Fog, Budtz, ... 2012).

Discussion

This analysis already shows that building a brand image and relationships through social connections are strongly rooted in advertising campaigns next to sales support. These themes coincide with the goals of sports sponsorship, but it might be said that they help achieving goals of other companies using sport as a

platform for communication with their clients. Among neutral brands, there is a clear advantage of image advertising, and among sports brands it is easy to spot a relative balance. Sports advertising is not only about fans. Most of the analyzed spots were not addressed to fans, but to a wider target group. Nevertheless, athletes are most often the main heroes. Despite the fact that attracting women to sport has been one of the biggest marketing challenges in the field of sport for years, they are still the protagonists of advertising much less often than men.

The attractiveness of the storytelling formula is noticeable. Sports feelings are an excellent ground to present ideas and values close to most recipients. Advertising based on sports themes also shows what researchers have been writing about for years. Sport is based not only on sports competition, results, records, champions and fans' feelings. Sport is multi-threaded and multi-faceted. The values assigned to it give way more fields of use and the possibilities in various types of communication (Aicher, 201, p. 33; Rogan. 2008, pp. 267-273). On the other hand, sport reflects the interests of fans, and football is by far the most exploited discipline.

However, the analysis of 200 advertising campaigns of 60 companies does not yet authorize drawing general conclusions about sports themes in advertising. When compared to the goals of not only sponsors, but also other companies using sport in their communication, some trends that have been described here dominate. In order to thoroughly research this topic, it is not only necessary to increase the base of analyzed ads. Worth trying might be comparing the communication of sponsors and companies without rights or the communication levels in which individual industries operate.

Conclusions

Advertising communication based on sports themes has features that can be used in natural culture-forming processes, such as team direction, making leaders the champions, commitment and empowerment of recipients. It allows building the identity of individuals, groups and entire societies. With a help of sports themes, advertisements not only refer to feelings close to us and our interests, passions and goals. They also refer to our system of values and convey universal ideas which selected groups of recipients can identify with. This helps in positioning the advertiser's brand, creates its unique image and the opportunity to communicate with customers on a level close to them. Through the sport, athletes, favorite disciplines, values, ideas, they build a bond between the client and the brand that shares these passions and emotions just like him. Getting to know the content of advertising communication based on sport is one of the elements of understanding what sport is for individuals, groups and societies today. The knowledge of how the awareness of recipients is changed by the powerful advertising industry significantly influences our perception of the world, and thus of sport itself.

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