

Uncovering Antecedents and Paths to an Effective Unconventional Marketing Strategy in the Sport Industry

Abstract

In nowadays complex sports industry, companies face the challenge of devising impactful strategies. 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 campaigns. 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 in the sport industry, shedding light on which drivers 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 developed practical guidelines assist firms to develop more effective marketing strategies.

Keywords

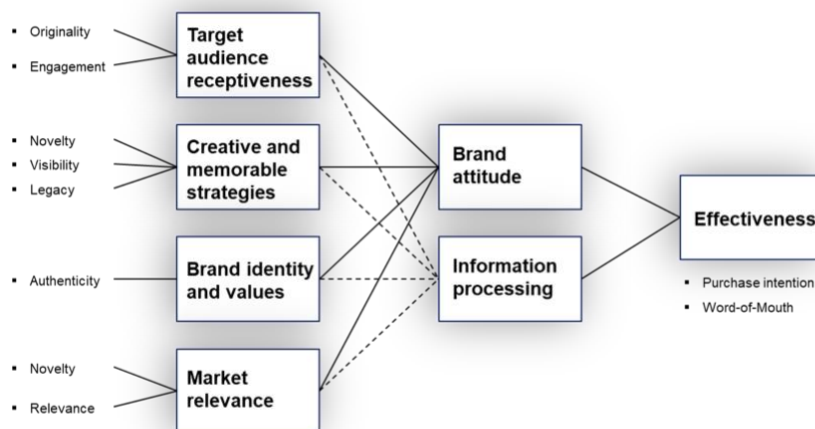
Sports Management; Unconventional Marketing; Fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA); Brand Authenticity; Purchase Intention

Introduction on the effectiveness of unconventional marketing

In recent years, the sports marketing industry has witnessed significant growth and expansion due to technological advancements, professional marketing techniques, sponsorship deals, and the proliferation of sports leagues and events (Koronios et al., 2021). However, research suggests that consumers' attention toward marketing advertisements has been declining (Statista, 2022), leading organizations to recognize the importance of employing innovative and unconventional practices to capture consumers' attention and establish lasting connections with them (Sedky et al., 2022). Unconventional strategies refer to extraordinary experiences that possess antistructural characteristics, including positive interactions among participants, shared goals, and a diminished sense of individuality in favor of communal ideals (Levinson & Godin, 1994). These experiences are emotionally intense, unique, memorable, and transformative, providing a sense of unpredictability and belonging to specific initiatives (Skandalis et al., 2019). Despite the growing interest in these innovative techniques, determining the key elements influencing the effectiveness of an unconventional campaign is still a hotly debated topic and the subject of numerous studies in sports management and marketing. Existing studies by Yoshida et al. (2013) and Koronios et al. (2021) 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. However, insufficient emphasis has been placed on the factors that contribute most to the overall effectiveness of sport event experiences from an unconventional marketing strategy perspective, as only beliefs about sponsorship, sport involvement and image (Koronios et al., 2021), and customer-based brand equity, brand integration, and brand loyalty (Yoshida et al., 2013) were included. Indeed, this list is far from exhaustive and additional investigation may concentrate on identifying other fundamental variables, preferably related to unconventional marketing strategies.

To this end, the authors propose a framework that highlights the conditions needed to guarantee the effectiveness of unconventional strategies in the sports industry (Figure 1). Understanding these elements empowers marketers to create memorable campaigns, overcome challenges, and foster meaningful connections with their target audience.

Figure 1: Key drivers of unconventional marketing effectiveness



By investigating the four antecedents of effectiveness (i.e., target audience receptiveness, creative and memorable strategies, brand identity and values, and market relevance), two mediators (i.e., brand attitude and information processing), two dependent variables (i.e., purchase intention and Word-of-Mouth) and its drivers/conditions for the analysis (i.e., originality, engagement, novelty, visibility, legacy, authenticity, and relevance), 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. Indeed, 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). Moreover, 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. 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. 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. Companies with higher revenues and a stronger market presence tend to possess greater resources and brand recognition (Kaufmann et al., 2000). These advantages can positively impact the effectiveness of their unconventional efforts by providing them with more extensive reach, influence, and customer trust. 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, reflecting their perceptions and emotions towards the unconventional technique (Ray et al., 2021). While information processing captures the cognitive processes (Sampson et al., 1999) 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 (Ray et al., 2021). 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 assesses the extent to which consumers engage in sharing positive experiences and recommendations with others (Huete-Alcocer, 2017), providing also practical dimensions to the framework. The seven theoretical conditions will be discussed in the next section.

Methodology

The research employs the comparative multiple case study utilizing the fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) methodology (1987). 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 (Ragin, 2014). The utilization of fsQCA necessitates the selection of a reference base case - the *Red Bull Company* – to effectively determine which conditions are pivotal for attaining the desired outcome. The brand was chosen 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 one when it comes to unconventional sports experiences (Kunz et al., 2016). Furthermore, a rigorous selection process was employed to identify both the other suitable brands and conditions for the analysis.

Firstly, companies were chosen based on their popularity score in global sports rankings (Tendu & Apindi, 2023), including extreme sports and motorsports. The selected companies are (1) Coca Cola, (2) GoPro, (3) Ducati, (4) Red Bull, (5) Nike, (6) Adidas, (7) Oceans Apart, (8) Under Armour, and (9) Mercedes-Benz. Moving on, 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. The seven theoretical conditions (i.e., originality, novelty, visibility, relevance, engagement, legacy, and authenticity) were selected based on an analysis of their relationships with the framework antecedents, providing a more specific and nuanced understanding of how the antecedents manifest in practice. Conditions are defined as a combination of variables that are minimally necessary and/or sufficient to cause a specific outcome (Meyer et al., 1993). As suggested by Ragin (2014), 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).

To begin with, originality 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. Corresponding to both second and fourth antecedent, when a company brings a unique strategy, it can contribute to its novelty, can attract attention, and generate interest among consumers (Hetet et al., 2014), 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. Moreover, visibility enhance brand exposure, broaden reach, and consumer engagement opportunities (Syrdal et al., 2023). For this reason, this condition 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. Then, 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. 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). Next, building a brand legacy involves establishing a strong reputation, trust, and credibility over time (Reiman, 2012). This condition indeed 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. Finally, 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).

In the last step of data analysis, fuzzy sets are constructed using a four-value scale (0, .33, .67, 1) to align with the nature of the collected 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), while the value 0.67 a membership “less” than complete membership (1), but greater than the crossover point (0.5).

Table 1: 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

Table 1 presents the fuzzy set values assigned to each case in the data set, 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. The calibration necessitated the collection of specific data from a wide range of reliable sources, encompassing various types of information each contributing to the effective assessment of the brands’ marketing strategies and correct calibration of the outlined conditions. 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. 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.

Table 2: 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

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 (Fiss, 2011). From the Truth Table, two different analyses are performed: the sufficiency analysis (with three sets of solutions – the complex, the parsimonious, and the intermediate solution) and the necessary analysis. Due to the potential high number of detected configurations and the complexity of variables, interpreting the findings of the first two sufficiency 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, Table 2), rendering it preferable for a comprehensive research (Abbate et al., 2018).

Indeed, through the sufficiency analysis, numerous “paths” or configurations emerge that can be interpreted as follows. 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). Lastly, one more path can be determinate, accordingly the presence of originality, visibility, engagement, and authenticity, with the absence of novelty, relevance, and legacy (path 4). Furthermore, relevance is outlined as the most absent

condition, while authenticity is always present. These can be also confirmed by the necessary analysis, where authenticity exhibits a consistency value exceeding 0.9, contrary to relevance which possesses 0.52. Moving on, the analysis of the pathways 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 (necessary condition), along with the absence of relevance. Embracing authenticity allows brands to establish meaningful and enduring relationships with consumers, contributing to long-term success and competitive advantage. 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). In relation with the developed framework, the combination of the conditions influences consumers' overall perception and evaluation of the brand, which in turn, directly impacts their purchase intention and likelihood of engaging in positive word of mouth recommendations (Cheung et al., 2020), as consumers are more inclined to engage in positive behaviors. This aligns with the notion that consumers are naturally drawn to distinctive and genuine experiences (Calder et al., 2016), leading them to actively advocate for brands that effectively incorporate originality, novelty, a strong legacy, and authenticity into their strategies (White et al., 2019). Additionally, the findings highlight that the absence of relevance aligns with existing literature (Levinson & Godin, 1994), emphasizing that such strategies do not require a substantial investment and can be effective by solely relying on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the experience, regardless of its budget.

Conclusions, implications, and further research

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 and future sports literature. Indeed, 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. 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. These guidelines will specifically provide practical recommendations, best practices, and insights derived from the research conducted (Hutter, 2015). Indeed, guidelines may assist organisations in making better-informed conclusions regarding the best course of action to pursue (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). This approach additionally facilitates the evaluation of opportunities and the selection of the most suited one based on objective criteria, resulting in outlining critical areas and prioritizing actions necessary for achieving the desired results.

Nevertheless, this study also present limitations in the 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, which can pose challenges for non-experts and increase the likelihood of errors in the analysis (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). Furthermore, conducting a research exclusively in one industry may result in an incomplete understanding of the subject matter, with a non-representative study sample and compromised findings (Yoshida et al., 2013). Finally, in an ever-changing industry, unconventional marketing methods are expected to continue playing a fundamental role in the sports business. Further

research may explore alternative methods and contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand.

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