

THE ASSOCIATIONS OF SPORT BRAND “UNIVERSITATEA CRAIOVA”

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Abstract: A brand image is a set of associations, usually organized in a significant way. An association and an image are both perceptions that reflect or not an objective reality. The fundamental value of a brand name is often its set of associations - more precisely their meaning for the people. Associations are the basis for purchasing decisions and loyalty to the brand. There is a wide range of possible associations and a variety of ways in which they can provide value.

A brand refers to how a product, service or company is seen in the minds of consumers. Every brand is seen in a certain way by consumers. Note that such a perception can be both negative and positive. Brands can include a product, service or company, but also a state, a person, an event or even a building. In some cases, no logo or slogan is needed, identity is something else. Associations are not just present, they also have some power. A link with a brand will be stronger if it relies on many experiences or exposures to communication, unlike a smaller number of experiences. It will also be stronger when supported by a network of other links.

The present paper aims to present some theoretical aspects regarding the brand associations specific to the sports clubs and the way they lead to the increase of the notoriety, with practical examples from the activity of the organization.

JEL classification: M30, M31

Key words: brand, brand associations, branding in football.

1. INTRODUCTION

As for definitions of the concept of branding, many of these are either incomplete or addressed to people with some branding knowledge. The misunderstandings generated here make the brand work wrong, or even not work at all. One of the most commonly used definitions says a brand is a name, sign or symbol used to identify the products or services of a manufacturer and used to distinguish it from competition””(American Marketing Association). Brand is one of the fundamental elements of the sales process. Using a strong brand can reduce business risks (Moisescu, 2012). As for the brands, we can say that they are the most valuable assets of a company (Crăciun and Barbu, 2014). They cannot be copied and once formed they lead to long-term guaranteed.

Nowadays, football and brand are interdependent. Recognized as the most popular and popular game in the world, football is practiced today in over 205 countries around the world, counting over 50 million legitimate players.

As is natural, this true social phenomenon, called football game, has led to many studies and research.

Football has become a real industry today, investing enormously to get a strong image of a brand that stays in the minds of fans or consumers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Brand theoretical notions*

One of the many branding definitions says, a brand is a name, sign or symbol used to identify the products or services of a manufacturer and used to differentiate it from competition. From here we can realize that brand is like an element of differentiation and identification of products / services (Barbu, 2010).

We can also add to this definition that a brand is a promise of the quality of products and services once identified.

From this definition follows the following features of brand identity: adds value to products; it is a registered trademark; it is a famous company; consists of a logo and a slogan.

Because brands set expectations, they make us no doubt about choosing a product, because we choose the one whose brand we know, because people know what to expect from a brand I know.

The most important thing for brand development - no matter what kind of brand is - refers to the back story that has to bring originality and product differentiation to the market, and brands have to go where the customers they are targeting (Florea et al., 2018).

Nowadays, communication channels are undergoing continuous development, and customers are using more and more platforms. That's why it's important to find socializing channels that you can get as close as possible to those who use your product or service. There is a risk that ignoring these channels will result in a loss of solutions to their problems or concerns in a timely manner.

When deciding to create a brand, consider the following: color; character; emotions; consistency; authenticity.

2.2 *Brand associations*

Brand associations refer to all sorts of items that "bind" a brand to the buyer's memory. Associations are not just present, they also have some power. A link with a brand will be stronger if it relies on many experiences or exposures to communication, unlike a smaller number of experiences. It will also be stronger when sustained.

A large number of brand associations could be more than relevant to any consumer on the market (Keller, 2008). However, a brand manager will not be interested in all possible associations, but only those that can influence consumer behaviour on the market, either directly or indirectly. In this respect, the company's managers will have the following tasks, without which success will not be guaranteed:

- identification of possible brand associations;
- choosing brand associations that may have the greatest impact;
- stabilizing brand associations that will be used to influence consumers;

Choosing optimal brand associations should be based on certain criteria. Therefore, it will be necessary to assign a certain score to each criterion, depending on the importance it has in influencing the purchasing decision (Nistorescu and Meghişan, 2008). Some of the associations will get a lower score and will be eliminated, remaining the optimal one.

If more than three associations are proposed to consumers at the same time, there is a risk that they will eliminate each other and the consumer will not be left with any of these.

Associations that may have an important impact on the purchasing decision of consumers may be based on:

- associations based on product characteristics;
- promotions-based associations;
- associations based on the services that accompany the product;
- associations based on intangible attributes;
- associations based on the benefits obtained by the consumer;
- associations based on usage patterns;
- user-based associations;
- associations with celebrities;
- lifestyle-based associations;
- associations based on competition;

The management of a sport club should take into account all aspects of clubs communication with the fans, including the branding and the commercial aspects (Constantinescu, 2008).

2.3 Advantages offered by the company's brand associations

Associations, in order to be perceived by consumers in line with the expectations of companies that promote their products, are costly (Rust et al., 2004). Generally, however, the costs of forming a particular image in an association are recovered if the image proposed to the consumer is real.

The main advantages that a company obtains by associating its brand are: positive feedback from consumers, positive attitudes; product differentiation; a base for brand extensions. Associating a product with a particular image creates a valid basis for possible brand extensions.

If a consumer associates a brand with quality and performance, then the chances for an extension of the same brand to be associated with the same factors are very high even if a different product is taken into account.

Appropriate brand associations have a great deal of influence on consumers and provide the manufacturer with an important competitive advantage (Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2003). Instead, inappropriate brand associations will have the opposite effect, negatively impacting consumer behaviour on the market.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research presents the brand associations at the Universitatea Craiova, with a comprehensive analysis of the sport products and services provided. The club chosen, Universitatea Craiova to be the subject of this study because it was one of the most titrated football clubs in Romania, being the first Romanian football team in the semi-finals of the UEFA Cup.

In order to identify the brand associations at the Universitatea Craiova, we conducted a research among the population of Craiova.

The questionnaire was conducted in pursuit of the objectives of this research. It contains 24 items with 117 variables, based on the answers of 246 respondents.

Table 1. The hierarchy of the respondents

Variable	Classification of the variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	206	83.73
	Female	40	16.2
Civil Status	Unmarried	90	36.58
	Married	112	45.53
Age	20 – 30 years	42	17.08
	30 – 40 years	2	0.81
	40 – 50 years	68	27.64
	Over 50 years	62	25.20
Study	Highschool	52	21.14
	College	64	26.02
	Postgraduate studies	0	0
Occupation	Public sector	10	4.06
	Privat sector	174	70.73
	Other occupation	62	25.21
Environment	Urban	178	72.36
	Rural	68	27.64
Income	0 – 1500 ron	68	27.64
	1500 – 2000 ron	86	34.96
	2000 -3000 ron	64	26
	Over 3000 ron	28	8.95

Source: authors' research

After identifying the respondents, following quantitative research, we will analyse their responses.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the following table, we analyse how often respondents visit the club's store and the reasons why they visit this store.

Table 2. Reasons of visiting the club store/How many visits per year

	How many visits per year			Total
	1-5 times	5-10 times	More than 10 times	
Acquisition of textile articles	5.07%	23.91%	15.21%	44.19%
Acquisition of footwear	11.59%	4.34%	7.99%	23.92%
Socialization among fans	0.72%	5.07%	2.89%	8.68%
Purchase other items	5.79%	0%	7.24%	13.03%
Other reasons	3.64%	1.46%	5.07%	10.17%
T total	26.81%	34.78%	38.40%	100%

Source: authors' research

We have correlated the variables: "Visiting Reasons" and "How many times do you visit per year" using a crosstabs with relative column frequencies. The table shows the goals and frequency of visits to the club shop in the respondents' life. The main reason behind the frequent visits is the purchase of textile articles with a weight of 44.19%, while the other reasons represent only 8.68%.

Next, we wanted to see what word associates the people in this study the football club, so we provided a number of attributes from which they could choose.

Table 3. The first word with which the respondents associate the Universitatea Craiova

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
The pride of the city	96	39.0	39.0
Represents Craiova	34	13.8	52.8
The Oltenia team	38	15.4	68.2
Craiova Science	36	14.6	82.8
Craiova Maxima	28	11.3	94.1
			100.0
Total	246	100.0	

Source: authors' research

Using the first impulse of the respondents, we questioned them about the first word that comes to mind when thinking Universitatea Craiova.

In the table 4, we present the best ways to promote the sports club from the perspective of the respondents. They have proposed various methods of promotion, more or less known, which you can see below, in the following table.

Respondents believe that the main ways to promote sport are mainly the brand's reputation (29.4%) and support for supporters (27.6%) – Table 4.

Table 4. The best ways to promote sport

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Brand reputation	72	29.4	29.4
Direct promotion	42	17.1	46.5
Online promotion	24	9.7	56.2
Presentation of sports services at fairs and exhibitions	18	7.3	63.5
Supporting supporters	68	27.6	91.1
Other ways to promote	22	8.9	100.0
Total	246	100.0	

Source: authors' research

The next question was to see how often people in this study visit the club's store to buy the various services or products they provide.

Table 5. Frequency of consumption of services and products of Universitatea Craiova

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 - 3 times	26	10.5	10.5
3 - 6 times	58	23.6	34.1
6 - 9 times	78	31.8	65.9
9 - 12 times	48	19.5	85.4
over 12 times	36	14.6	100.0
Total	246	100.0	

Source: authors' research

Analysing the frequency of consumption services and products which the club makes available in its own store, we noticed that 26 respondents visited the club shop 1-3 times, 58 respondents 3-6 times, 78 respondents 6-9 times, 48 respondents 9-12 times, and 36 respondents returned more than 12 times.

In correlation with the other questions, the next one sought to know the level of satisfaction of the respondents, after using the services and products provided by the football club.

Table 6. Satisfaction of respondents as a result of consumption of sports services and products

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Not at all satisfied	0	0	0
Dissatisfied	4	1.6	1.6
Indifferent	22	8.9	10.5
Satisfied	84	34.2	44.7
Very satisfied	136	55.3	100.0
Total	246	100.0	

Source: authors' research

Respondents surveyed said they were very satisfied with the services they paid, in a proportion of 55%, while at the opposite end there were no consumers who said they were totally dissatisfied with what they received.

In the desire to capture the image of the Universitatea Craiova in one word, we gave the respondents the choice of the following attributes: "performance", "pride", "dedication", "professionalism". The majority of 39.9% opted for "pride" and the lowest 13.8% described the club as "proud" (Table 7).

Table 7. Associating the image of the Universitatea Craiova

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Performance	62	25.2	25.2
Pride	34	13.8	39.0
Dedication	52	21.1	60.1
Professionalism	98	39.9	100.0
Total	246	100.0	

Source: authors' research

Table 8 shows the strengths of the sports club from the perspective of the questionnaires. The response variants presented in the table were proposed by them, so we tried to track the first impulse in the minds of people through this question.

Table 8. The main strengths of the club Universitatea Craiova

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
The brand	46	18.7	18.7
Qualified staff	40	16.3	35.0
Valid High quality sports services	102	41.5	76.5
Attention to details	58	23.5	100.0
Total	246	100.0	

Source: authors' research

The main strength of the Universitatea Craiova club is represented by good quality services with 41.5%, followed by attention to details with a share of 23.5% and the branding power by 18.7%.

As far as the specific elements of the football club are concerned, the people in the study have identified a number of attributes that differentiate the club from other sports teams, considering that through them Universitatea Craiova has proved its originality.

Table 9. Significant elements of the Universitatea Craiova

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Custom equipment	34	13.8	13.8
Originality of the logo	36	14.6	28.4
Originality of uniforms	28	11.4	39.8
Ambience created during matches	116	47.2	87.0
Other items	52	13.0	100.0
Total	246	100.0	

Source: authors' research

The ambience created during the games is the main way of remarking the services within the Universitatea Craiova club, accounting for 47.2%. Respondents are the least interested in the originality of uniforms, which ranks last with 11.4%.

In the following table, we wanted to measure the quality of the products and services offered by the club, as well as the way respondents perceive it, which is one of the most important elements that any organization, regardless of its profile, tries to integrate it into its policies its customers, especially those targeted at clients.

Table 10. The perception of the quality of club services at the Universitatea Craiova

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very low	0	0	0
Low	2	0.8	0.8
Indifferent	0	4.1	4.9
High	106	43.1	48.0
Very high	128	52.0	100.0

Total	246	100.0
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Source: authors' research

Quality is judged to be very high by the majority of respondents to the questionnaire. Taking into account the fact that there is no middle quality, the percentages obtained in analysing the degree of quality provided by the services provided by the Universitatea Craiova show that the strategy adopted by their leadership in the promotion of services is reflected in the positive perception of the clients.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This article aims to develop the importance of the branding concept in different areas, the understanding on brand associations specific to sports clubs and how they lead to increased awareness. Besides sports results, an increase in the strength of the association can be obtained through a solid club communication, especially using digital channels (Dugalic, 2018).

There are various limitations that are normal and should serve as a starting point for future research. The first limitation in this paper is related to the size and structure of the sample. Thus, future studies could try to conduct interviews in different sports club in the country or abroad and rely on larger samples to better understand the importance of branding in sport.

Future studies should also include different categories of sport organization. This type of study would provide a more in-depth picture of the sports rules about branding and its connections with sport.

Another point to be discussed in future research is to understand the importance of branding in different types of sports, the link between the athlete's who represents brand, how this influences the fans behaviour and reaction.

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