

## **Thou shalt not consume the rivals:**

### **Rivalry effects on behavioural intentions of sports celebrity brand offerings**

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#### **Abstract:**

*This study investigated whether consumer response to numerous and distinct celebrity related offerings would vary in the presence of rivalry. Using European footballers (soccer players) as objects, the study explored via a quasi-experimental approach the effect of rivalry on purchase intention towards sports celebrity (a) autobiographical material, (b) match ticket, (c) endorsed product, (d) shirt, and (e) entrepreneurial offering, as well as (f) political support of a sports celebrity. The results demonstrate that fans respond less favourably to every market offering of a celebrity footballer associated with a rival team as compared to the ones related to a celebrity of the fans favourite team.*

**Keywords:** rivalry, team identification, sports celebrity brands, football, sports marketing

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Since, humans' inclusion in the list of consumption items (Solomon, 2006) the celebrity brand notion has been gaining academic ground. Celebrity brands, "the subject[s] of marketing communications efforts" (Carlson & Donovan, 2013, p. 193) and media objects, are also viewed as "cultural intermediaries" (Brownlie, Hewer, & Kerrigan, 2015, p. 454). Thanks to their appeal, celebrities not only do sell themselves as objects but also as instruments (Zarkada, Tzoumaka, Siomkos, & Panigyrakis, 2014) and most importantly the lifestyle they follow thus transforming culture into an economic sphere of its own (Moeran, 2003).

On the basis of McCracken's meaning transfer theory (1989) celebrities carry a multitude of meanings. For sports celebrities such meaning stems from the team a player currently competes for, has competed in the past or has linked his career with. Teams are a source of power to their athletes (Carlson & Donovan, 2008) and fan identification with them is associated with positive sports celebrity brand outcomes (Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Tzoumaka, Tsiotsou, & Siomkos, 2014). Accordingly, but viewing the team effect oppositely as in the out-group favouritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), rivalry, has been identified as a meaning that may be transferable to both sponsors (Bee & Dalakas, 2015) and athletes (Chien, Kelly, & Weeks, 2016).

The present study investigated whether consumer response to numerous and distinct sports celebrity related offerings would vary in the presence of rivalry. The European football, which is considered to be the King of sports accounting for 27.1% of the accumulative sports business revenues globally (Collignon & Sultan, 2014) and in which severe rivalries between teams are evident (Bergkvist, 2012) was selected as the context of the study.

#### **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Sports celebrities are considered to be brands on their own. In the sports context, brand equity and brand success are related to positive market outcomes like media exposure, ticket and merchandise sales, donations to the team and corporate support (Apostolopoulou, 2016). This is consistent with the logic that consumer-based brand equity "outcomes" (Keller, 1993, p. 1) should result "in increased utility and allow[s] a brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name" (Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010, p. 48).

Volume and margin increases are evident in celebrity brands. Top musicians, whose concert ticket reflect the entertainment value delivered to the audience, may vary from £106 to £1,140 for a VIP hospitality ticket for Rolling Stones 2012 tour in O2 arena, while a less popular alternative British band, Keane, price their 2012 tour between £31 and £52 (Savage, 2012).

Likewise, celebrity footballers receive higher salaries than their less renowned counterparts and they also negotiate the price of their image rights with the football teams. The increased utility of sports celebrity brands is also evident in the numerous manners they expand their brands, exceeding the football player. In addition to selling themselves thus adding to increased field attendance (Brandes, Franck, & Nüesch, 2008; Hansen & Gauthier, 1989; Trail & James, 2001), watching games on TV and retail spending (Carlson & Donovan, 2013), sports celebrities also endorse goods, services, and ideas. In this function, they lend their name, their image and, most important, their personal meaning to the brands they promote” (Miller & Laczniak, 2011, p. 499), thus working both as objects and instruments of consumption (Zarkada, et al., 2014). Literature findings indicate additional utilities like celebrity entrepreneurship (Strauss, 2012), publishing autobiographies (Chalabi, 2013), leverage on celebrity owned objects (Radford & Bloch, 2013) and voting for celebrity politicians (Marsh, ‘t Hart, & Tindall, 2010).

## 2.1 The research gap

Celebrity athletes and teams are involved in a reciprocal relationship. Not only is a star player a brand equity driver for his team (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005; Euromonitor International, 2014), but football teams are a source of power to their athletes as well (Carlson & Donovan, 2008). Those contexts O’ Reilly and Kerrigan described as the relevant ‘brandscape’ (2013, p. 783), but we hereby argue that the footballers’ affiliation to a team, is much more enduring and closely interdependent than that of an actor with a movie thus raising questions about the spatial and temporal boundaries of the brandscape. Finally, from the scope of the athlete as a human brand, it is evidenced that team identification is related to identification with the player and his brand equity outcomes i.e. retail spending and watching games on TV (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). Still, and despite Reed’s (2002) suggestion for the adoption of social identity as a perspective for self-concept–based consumer research, the adverse effects of rivalry have been overlooked in the sports celebrity brand context.

## 2.2 Team Identification

McCracken (1989) proposed the meaning transfer model, according to which the meanings each celebrity carries (e.g. gender, status quo, dynamism, etc.) is of particular importance in the celebrity endorsement context, primarily because of his/her business substance e.g. the roles an actor portrays. Those meanings are so strong that they are, indirectly but in depth, transferred to the endorsed product as long as they become perceived and well accepted by the consumer.

Moreover, social identification, which in this study is expressed as identification with the team, is defined by Wann and Branscombe (1993) as the degree to which an individual feels psychologically attached to a team. Scholars state that it may start from awareness and elevate to attraction, attachment and finally allegiance (Grohs, Reisinger, & Woisetschläger, 2015). It has been shown to be related to the manifestation of customer engagement behaviours (defined in Van Doorn et al., 2010) such as club membership, following statistics and seeking knowledge of the team’s history. It has been found to positively affect game attendance (Carlson & Donovan, 2008; Fink, Cunningham, & Kensicki, 2004; Melnick & Wann, 2011), and numerous consumption patterns, varying from the team merchandise spending, games watched on TV and even the sponsored/endorsed brand purchase intention (Carlson & Donovan, 2008; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Carlson, Donovan, & Cumiskey, 2009; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Kwon & Armstrong, 2002; Lake, Reece, & Rifon, 2010; Ngan, Prendergast, & Tsang, 2011; Tzoumaka, et al., 2014).

**Hypothesis 1:** The degree of fans’ team identification will have a positive relationship with the behavioural intentions regarding sports celebrity offerings, namely:

- a. autobiographical material purchase intention
- b. match ticket purchase intention
- c. endorsed product purchase intention
- d. shirt purchase intention
- e. entrepreneurial offering purchase intention
- f. political support

## 2.3 Rivalry

Literature findings indicate that, as with team identification, rivalry is an equally important social identification anchor. This is indicated by the fact that the rivalry capacity of a team (as in “beating the team’s main rival”) is incorporated in its brand equity associations (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006) and the brand image dimensions of sports celebrities (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013)

Moreover, rivalry is also transferable. Apart from the self-evident negative attitudes towards out-group members, i.e. other teams’ fans (Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012), there are also more consumer-oriented outcomes evidenced in the sports marketing literature. Bee and Dalakas(2015) have demonstrated that when a sponsor is highly affiliated with a rival team, a negative response is exerted by the highly team identified fans, regardless of the strength and favourability of the message’s argumentation. This is further confirmed in the European context as negative feelings expressed by rival team fans regarding sponsorships (Bergkvist, 2012). Simultaneously, a celebrity’s transgression is judged more negatively by the fans of the rival team (out-groups) as compared to the fans of the team the player is associated with (in-groups) (Chien, et al., 2016).

**Hypothesis 2:**The rivalry condition will have a negative effect on behavioural intentions regarding sports celebrity offerings, namely:

- a. autobiographical material purchase intention
- b. match ticket purchase intention
- c. endorsed product purchase intention
- d. shirt purchase intention
- e. entrepreneurial offering purchase intention
- f. political support

## 3. METHOD

The approach followed is quasi-experimental survey design. More specifically it is a one-group post-test protocol, a form that allows results observation of the treatment group. In this study the extraneous variable to be controlled was the participants’ perception of athlete’s image, which was accomplished through the usage of photos. The questionnaire administration followed the random assignment logic of an experiment. The instrument is a self-administered online questionnaire uploaded to the server of the collaborating academic institution and disseminated by the country’s most popular sports site at the time ([www.sport24.gr](http://www.sport24.gr)); ranked 15th in popularity among all sites ([Alexa.com](http://Alexa.com)) via content marketing and social media marketing techniques. The two rival teams selected are the clubs with the greatest number and duration of conflict, as well as the conflict, peer and bias factors of rivalry (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). Moreover, they are the most popular Greek teams, the two great “eternal” rivals dominating the sports fan base (having 56% of the total population supporting them) (Metron Analysis, 2015).

### 3.1 *The Instrument*

The three players used in this study were identified through a preliminary survey addressing the same audience via the same vehicle (sports site), in which participants were asked to spontaneously name their favourite footballer. The three most likable domestic players, who compete or have linked their names with the two great rival teams in the domestic championship, were selected. The selection was also oriented to them meeting different criteria of ethnicity (Greek versus foreign), race (Caucasian versus African), working status (active versus veteran), which have been reportedly been relevant to celebrity effectiveness outcomes (Radford & Bloch, 2013; Rühley, Runyan, & Lear, 2010). Further details on the players’ profiles can be found in the Appendix.

Respondents were first asked “Which is your favourite team?” and in the case where the respondents favoured one team, the identification with was assessed via the 9-item scale of Theodorakis, Dimmock, Wann and Barlas(2010). Then they were randomly exposed to one of the three footballers and were asked about their behavioural intentions regarding six celebrity offerings and more specifically on the purchase intention towards (a) the footballer’s autobiographical material, (b) ticket to a match the player would compete, (c) a product (sports apparel) that he endorses, (d) a shirt (jersey) with his name printed on it, and (e) his entrepreneurial offering, namely a coffee shop, as well as the possibility to politically support the footballer when running for an office.

#### 4. RESULTS

Overall, 607 fully usable questionnaires were selected. Of those 205 were dropped for not meeting the rivalry condition resulting to a sample of 401 participants who supported one of the two Greek teams considered to be great rivals. The majority of the participants were male (88.8%). The mean sample age was 25.7 years old. Young adults (18-24 years old) were the dominant population (41.3%), followed by the late Millennials (25-34 years old) who accounted for 34.3%. Subjects aged 35-54 years old represented 7.7% of the sample while their over 55 years old counterparts only a 2.7%. The participants were educationally dispersed, with university degree holders being the majority (44.3%) followed by high school graduates (32.1%). In terms of favourite team 48.2% supported Olympiacos and 52.8% the great rival team Panathinaikos.

A dummy variable was created for rivalry in the following manner: In the case where an Olympiacos fan was exposed to a footballer of Olympiacos there was no rivalry ( $=0$ ), whilst when an Olympiacos fan was exposed to a footballer of Panathinaikos the rivalry condition was present ( $=1$ ).

We ran multiple regressions to test for team identification and rivalry effects. All six regression equations were of overall statistical significance:

(a) **Autobiographical material purchase intention** [ $F(2,399) = 71.30, p < .001$ ] with an  $R^2$  of .263. It was found that team identification significantly predicted autobiographical material purchase intention ( $\beta = .20, p < .001$ ) as did rivalry ( $\beta = .45, p < .001$ ) thus confirming hypotheses H1a and H2a.

(b) **Match ticket purchase intention** [ $F(2,399) = 126.96, p < .001$ ] with an  $R^2$  of .389. It was found that team identification marginally significantly predicted match ticket purchase intention ( $\beta = .10, p < .10$ ) and rivalry predicted it significantly ( $\beta = .60, p < .001$ ) thus partially confirming hypothesis H1b and confirming H2b.

(c) **Endorsed product purchase intention** [ $F(2,399) = 14.28, p < .001$ ] with an  $R^2$  of .067. It was found that team identification did not predict endorsed product purchase intention ( $\beta = .12, p = .11$ ) but rivalry significantly predicted it ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ) thus rejecting hypothesis H1c but confirming H2c.

(d) **Shirt purchase intention** [ $F(2,399) = 104.56, p < .001$ ] with an  $R^2$  of .344. It was found that team identification significantly predicted shirt purchase intention ( $\beta = .17, p < .001$ ) as did rivalry ( $\beta = .54, p < .001$ ) thus confirming hypotheses H1d and H2d.

(e) **Entrepreneurial offering purchase intention** [ $F(2,399) = 20.43, p < .001$ ] with an  $R^2$  of .092. It was found that team identification did not predict entrepreneurial offering purchase intention ( $\beta = .04, p = .355$ ) but rivalry significantly predicted it ( $\beta = -.30, p < .001$ ) thus rejecting hypothesis H1e but confirming H2e.

(f) **Political support** [ $F(2,399) = 24.46, p < .001$ ] with an  $R^2$  of .109. It was found that team identification predicted political support ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ) as did rivalry ( $\beta = .29, p < .001$ ) thus confirming hypotheses H1f and H2f.

The hypotheses testing results are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Hypotheses Testing

#	Behavioural Intention	Hypothesis 1 Team Identification Effect	Hypothesis 2 Rivalry Effect
a	Autobiographical material purchase intention	confirmed	confirmed
b	Match ticket purchase intention	partially confirmed	confirmed
c	Endorsed product purchase intention	rejected	confirmed
d	Shirt purchase intention	confirmed	confirmed
e	Entrepreneurial offering purchase intention	rejected	confirmed
f	Political support	confirmed	confirmed

#### 5. DISCUSSION

Our study is the first to holistically examine the social identification effect in sports celebrity related consumption. We thus investigated both (1) team identification and (2) rivalry effects on the behavioural intentions towards six offerings a celebrity footballer, namely (a) the footballer's autobiographical material, (b) ticket to a match the player would compete, (c) a product that he endorses, (d) a shirt with his name printed on it, and (e) his entrepreneurial offering, namely a coffee shop, as well as the possibility to politically support the footballer when running for an office.

Moreover, it is the first work to provide empirical evidence that rivalry is an association incorporated in the sports celebrity conceptual properties, resulting in fans being less likely to purchase items or support activities of a footballer who is associated with a rival team.

Team identification was proved to be significant for purchase intention of autobiographical material, the player's shirt and political support and marginally significant for match ticket purchase intention. On the other hand, it was not relevant to the purchase intention regarding an endorsed product and an entrepreneurial offering. Apparently, being an avid fan of a team is not sufficient condition for the latter consumption patterns. This can be also viewed as an indication that team identification *per se* is not relevant to every utility a celebrity may have to its potential consumers.

On the contrary, this does not hold true for rivalry. Our findings indicate that rivalry is the single social identification factor relevant to every offering. Its effect may vary on the basis of the behaviour in question. For example when it comes to attending a football game to watch a footballer competing, or buying a player's shirt, the rivalry effect is relatively larger ( $\beta=.60$  and  $\beta=.54$ ) as compared to buying the product the footballer endorses ( $\beta=.20$ ) or supporting his political candidacy ( $\beta=.29$ ). A consideration regarding this effect is fact that the first two types of celebrity related consumption are closely connected with the sports team, whilst the latter are not. Moreover, as with team identification it confirms that this type of social identification is not equally relevant to every utility a celebrity may have.

Still, and despite the fact that the endorsing capacity and political skills of a footballer are less relevant to his sports career, it becomes evident that consumer intentions to buy or support those will be prone to the rivalry effect to a certain degree. This finding implies that as with the negative response towards sponsors of a rival team (Bee & Dalakas, 2015), sports fans hold rivalry against players as well. Interestingly, not every player included in the pool of footballers was currently competing for the great rival –one was a middle-aged retired footballer-, still the effect was unanimous. This indicates that competing for the great rival may be a long-lasting stigma in the sports business.

### 6.1. Implications & Further Research

The present study is limited to the context of a single country, a single sport as well as the particularities of the research protocol, for example the players included are celebrities renown to the domestic market and internationally, but do not attain the status of a global megabrand e.g. the cases of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, footballers of Barcelona and Real Madrid respectively.

Still, it is the first study to provide evidence that rivalry associations are incorporated to the conceptual properties of a celebrity footballer to such extent that they have negative effect on the purchase intentions of their brand offerings. Given that sport celebrities leverage their brand in a multitude of ways that go beyond their professional expertise thus acting as endorsers, selling their image rights to professional teams and claiming royalties for shirts' sales, acting as entrepreneurs or running for political offices among others, our findings have implications for academia as well as brand managers of celebrity athletes and sport business executives.

Regarding the managerial implications, the brand positioning of a sports celebrity whose career has been associated with a specific team shall first segment the target market to (1) in-group and (2) out-group consumers. The brand management shall initially target the first target group, with which a bond, the sports team is common. This is a favourable association that enhances the broad range of behavioural intentions and as such it should be prioritised. In the case when targeting the second target group, rival fans, is essential e.g. the lack of critical mass, then smoothening the rival associations shall be prioritised.

Accordingly, sports managers and PR executives shall bear in mind the risk of closely fitting the image of a player with that of the team he competes with. Such co-branding modes cannot escape the connotations that follow the athlete in his career. Therefore, declarations of loyalty to the team's culture and fans, and embracing the rivalry rhetoric may serve well when a footballer is actively competing for the specific team, but can be also viewed as a long-lasting barrier when a transition to becoming a massive celebrity brand is attempted.

Concerning the academic implications, and given the findings of our study, further research shall focus on the examination of the rivalry mechanism. Our study provides evidence that rivalry has direct effects on behavioural outcomes of celebrity related offerings. It may be speculated though that this in-group favouritism may have also indirect effects. For example the sports celebrity brand image, which is a key concept regarding brand equity and also affects behavioural outcomes, may be biased towards in-group athletes and against out-group/ rival ones.

To this regard a more close examination of the celebrity athlete image shall be attempted as well. The utilisation of qualitative techniques to explore in depth the way rivalry associations are established (e.g. performance in rival competitions, public statements of the players against the rival, etc.) shall be considered.



Finally, and following the same rationale, comparisons between players' perceived image, would be useful in order to inspect for variance and examine the possibility that the footballers' personal conceptual properties moderate the rivalry effects by either enhancing or diminishing them.

### Acknowledgement

This study was funded by FIFA under João Havelange Scholarship by CIES Research and sponsored by 24Media digital publishing group

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## APPENDIX

**Player 1:** Greek Striker competing at Olympiacos and top scorer in the Greek Superleague who dominated the media with his performance and his antics (at the time of data collection) and gathered a 4.4% share of favourability.

**Player 2:** Polish, retired striker, who played for 15 years for Panathinaikos with which he won numerous Championships and Cups, awards and the fame of all-time leading scorer. He gathered a 4.3% share of favourability.

**Player 3:** French, coloured striker, who played for 2 seasons for Panathinaikos. In his first year he led his team to win the Championship and the Cup and then transferred to an Italian club. He enjoyed celebrity within the popular media due to his being a fashionista. He gathered a 3.2 % share of favourability.