

## **DETERMINANTS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN SPORTS MARKETING: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF SPONSORSHIP, BRAND IMAGE, AND DIGITAL CAMPAIGNS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper examines the impact of key elements of sports marketing on consumer behavior and the purchase decision-making process, with particular attention to sponsorship, brand image, digital campaigns, social media, media exposure, and brand loyalty. The aim of the research is to determine how these factors affect consumer perceptions and purchase intentions, as well as whether statistically significant differences exist in relation to the basic sociodemographic characteristics of respondents. The empirical research was conducted using a quantitative approach, with primary data collected through an online survey on a convenience sample of consumers in the Republic of Serbia. Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were employed for data analysis and hypothesis testing. The results demonstrate that sponsorship and the presence of brands in the sports environment significantly enhance brand recognition and the formation of positive consumer attitudes. Furthermore, the findings indicate that social media and digital promotions play a crucial role in stimulating purchases, while loyalty to a sports club and identification with sports-related content additionally drive product choice. Statistically significant differences were found in relation to gender, age, and monthly income, especially in the segments of media exposure and the influence of social media, while differences according to region and marital status were not confirmed. The findings indicate that sports marketing is an important instrument in shaping consumer behavior and improving the market positioning of sports organizations and brands.

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**Keywords:** consumer behavior, sports marketing, sponsorship, brand image, digital campaigns and social media

## **DETERMINANTE POTROŠAČKOG PONAŠANJA U SPORTSKOM MARKETINGU: EMPIRIJSKA ANALIZA UTICAJA SPONZORSTVA, BREN IMIDŽA I DIGITALNIH KAMPANJA**

### **APSTRAKT**

Rad ispituje uticaj ključnih elemenata sportskog marketinga koji utiču na ponašanje potrošača i proces donošenja odluka o kupovini, sa posebnim osvrtom na sponzorstvo, imidž brenda, digitalne kampanje, društvene mreže, medijsku izloženost i lojalnost brendu. Cilj istraživanja je da se utvrdi na koji način navedeni faktori utiču na percepciju i kupovne namere potrošača, kao i da li postoje statistički značajne razlike u odnosu na osnovne sociodemografske karakteristike ispitanika. Empirijsko istraživanje sprovedeno je primenom kvantitativnog pristupa, pri čemu su podaci prikupljeni onlajn anketiranjem na prigodnom uzorku potrošača iz Republike Srbije. Za statističku analizu i testiranje hipoteza korišćene su metode deskriptivne statistike, t-test nezavisnih uzoraka i jednofaktorska analiza varijanse (ANOVA). Rezultati pokazuju da sponzorstvo i prisustvo brendova u sportskom okruženju značajno utiču na prepoznavanje brenda i formiranje pozitivnih stavova potrošača. Takođe, utvrđeno je da društvene mreže i digitalne promocije imaju važnu ulogu u podsticanju kupovine, dok lojalnost sportskom klubu i identifikacija sa sportskim sadržajem dodatno utiču na izbor proizvoda. Statistički značajne razlike uočavaju se u odnosu na pol, starost i visinu mesečnih prihoda, a posebno u segmentima medijske izloženosti i uticaja društvenih mreža, dok razlike prema regionu i bračnom statusu nisu potvrđene. Zaključuje se da sportski marketing predstavlja važan instrument oblikovanja potrošačkog ponašanja i efikasnog tržišnog pozicioniranja sportskih organizacija i brendova.

**Ključne reči:** ponašanje potrošača, sportski marketing, sponzorstvo, imidž brenda, digitalne kampanje i društvene mreže.

### **Introduction**

In a globalized and interconnected world, business organizations must create and maintain the ability to outperform competitors in the market (Garača et al., 2013). Sports marketing refers to the way organizations promote their products and services within a sport-related environment (Shekhar and Shah, 2023). The business sector recognizes sport as a highly profitable market for attracting investment and creating opportunities for business growth. Sport also represents a dynamic economic sector characterized by significant capital flows and financial activity (Putić et al., 2025). The strong link between sport and finance attracted early attention from marketing researchers, which led to

the study of sport within a marketing framework. This approach established the foundation for research on behavioral intentions in sports marketing and supported further development of this field. Understanding the behavior of sports consumers has high value for professionals and researchers in sports marketing (Yim et al., 2020). Sport has an increasing impact on the economic development of modern society (Ratten and Ratten, 2011). Its growing economic potential led to the need for clearer organizational and management approaches in sports organizations. Research connecting sport and management developed as a result, which gradually formed a distinct field that examines the specifics of management in the sports sector.

As the importance of sport in society and the economy increased, interest in research within the field of sport management also grew. This field is now considered one of the fastest growing areas within modern management. The rapid increase in the number of studies, especially during the last decade, has led to development that has not always been fully systematic. Such dynamics make it more difficult to assess the current state of the discipline and to understand the main directions that have shaped its recent development. The growing importance of sports marketing in the modern sports environment highlights its relevance in the promotion of sports with limited media coverage and a smaller audience base. In this context, certain sports marketing instruments can contribute to increasing public interest in less popular sports disciplines. These elements form an integrated communication framework within sports marketing that can influence audience perception and interest in specific sports. The performance and success of national teams often attract greater attention from the public and the media, which can further support the popularization of particular sports disciplines.

The theoretical basis of this research relies on the stimulus–response theory, which explains individual behavior as a response to external stimuli (Kotler and Keller, 2016). From the perspective of sports marketing, activities such as media promotion, advertising, engagement of well-known athletes, and sponsorship activities represent stimuli that can influence the formation of audience interest. The response to these stimuli appears in the form of increased attractiveness and interest in less represented sports. Previous research also indicates that the success of national teams may have a moderating effect, strengthening the impact of marketing activities on audience interest (Kwak et al., 2015). Research on sponsorship has largely focused on fan loyalty, consumer behavior, and engagement with brands (Buser et al., 2020). Although previous studies classify sponsorship motives into market, social, partnership, and internal goals (Ratković, 2023), only a limited number of studies have examined the sponsorship of individual athletes, especially in sports with lower media visibility.

Research indicates that social media can have a significant role in the process of obtaining sponsorships for athletes with lower media visibility (Mandić,

Gregurec, and Ivanović, 2022). Micro-influencers, who often include athletes from niche sports, achieve higher levels of audience engagement, which makes them attractive to brands that seek authentic connections with their target groups (Fritz, 2023).

Modern athletes hold an important social position, and the wider public often perceives them as credible role models and trusted figures. Their influence extends beyond sports arenas, as they take part in shaping consumer attitudes and behavior patterns. Athletes therefore have strong value in marketing. Consumers tend to assume that an athlete associates their name only with products whose benefits they personally support, which leads to the perception of brand endorsement as authentic and convincing. When a well-known athlete uses or promotes a product, the image of that athlete becomes linked in consumer perception with product attributes such as quality, success, and reliability (Waheed et al., 2024).

In a broader context, marketing represents a complex system of interconnected activities that include development, implementation, promotion, and sales, along with continuous two-way communication with the target market. The main aim of these processes is to meet consumer needs and preferences (Strzelecki and Czuba, 2018). In the sports industry, the concept of a product goes beyond the traditional view of a tangible good or a standard service. A sports product may take the form of an athlete, a specific match, or a large-scale sporting event. Its value for the audience comes from the possibility of direct observation and experience of the sports activity. Through following sports events, spectators develop strong emotional connections and a high level of identification with athletes, teams, or events (Filo et al., 2014).

Sports marketing represents a key instrument through which organizations place their products and services in a sports environment. This approach relies on the emotional, sociological, and economic dimensions of sport and treats it as a specific market (Shekhar and Shah, 2023). Over time, the business sector recognized the strong profit potential of sport, which attracts investment, opens new market opportunities, and contributes to organizational growth and business performance (Sanchez et al., 2022). This connection between sport and economic factors motivated researchers to examine sport within a marketing perspective. Meenaghan (1983) noted that fan passion, interest, involvement, and consumer behavior form the foundation of the sports experience. This view supported later research on behavioral intentions in sports marketing and contributed to the development of this field. Understanding sports consumer behavior therefore holds importance for both researchers and marketing practitioners (Yim et al., 2020).

In relevant literature, behavioral intention is defined as a link between an individual and a specific pattern of behavior (Jaccard and King, 1977). In sport, this intention appears through following sports content, attending sports events, and purchasing sports equipment. Strengthening behavioral intention

allows brands to build long-term value and maintain stable relationships with consumers. Behavioral intentions also provide insight into consumer attitudes toward products and services offered on the market (Xiao et al., 2019). A clearer understanding of consumer needs, expectations, and behavior allows sports marketing professionals to design offerings and direct marketing activities in line with target market demands (Kural and Özbek, 2023).

Sports marketing is a dynamic discipline. Continuous academic interest in sports organizations, athletes, and sports events confirms the relevance of this field. Previous studies analyze different dimensions of sports marketing (Janković and Jakšić Stojanović, 2019), and recent research confirms its continued importance (Lintumäki and Koll, 2023). Technological development has expanded the scope of this discipline and opened new research areas. Current studies focus on the impact of social media (Laurell and Söderman, 2018), the growth of esports (Gandomani and Elahi, 2022), and various forms of technological adaptation and digital transformation in sport (Lee et al., 2021). Sports marketing is now viewed as a broad research field with ongoing development. One of the main drivers of this expansion is increasing interest in consumer behavior patterns in sport. Research on behavioral intentions has gained greater importance in this context (Hulland and Houston, 2021).

## **Methodology**

The research methodology is based on a quantitative approach, with primary data collected through a survey method. The sample consists of 112 respondents from the Republic of Serbia, including 48 males (42.8%) and 64 females (57.2%). The sample includes respondents with different sociodemographic characteristics in terms of age, region, marital status, and monthly income. The age structure is dominated by respondents older than 46 years (88.4%), while the territorial structure includes participants from all regions of Serbia.

A questionnaire was developed for this study, grounded in relevant previous research in sports marketing and consumer behavior (Buser et al., 2022; Filo et al., 2015; Kural and Özbek, 2023; Meenaghan, 1983; Yim et al., 2020). The instrument covers sociodemographic characteristics and variables related to perceptions of sponsorship and promotion, consumer behavior, the influence of social media and influencers, media presence, purchase factors, and brand loyalty. Respondent attitudes were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 for complete disagreement to 5 for complete agreement.

Data collection took place from February 1 to March 20, 2026, through an online questionnaire created on the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire was distributed via email using available contact lists, including students, acquaintances, and a broader population interested in sports content, as well as through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Viber. Participants received information about the study objectives in advance.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, which supported unbiased responses.

After data collection, the data were organized and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were applied, including frequencies, percentages, mean values, and standard deviations. Differences between two independent groups were tested using the t-test, while one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with appropriate post hoc tests was used for comparisons across multiple groups. The level of statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . Based on the defined research subject and objectives, a null hypothesis (H0) was formulated, which assumes that sports marketing factors do not have a statistically significant effect on consumer behavior or the purchase decision process. Two alternative hypotheses were also defined. The first alternative hypothesis (H1) assumes that statistically significant differences exist in the perception of sports marketing instruments depending on sociodemographic characteristics. The second alternative hypothesis (H2) assumes that sponsorship, social media presence, and loyalty to a sports brand have a positive and statistically significant effect on the purchase decision process.

### ***Results***

A total of 112 respondents participated in the study, including 48 males and 64 females (Table 1). The majority of respondents are older than 46 years (88.4%) and come from Belgrade (44.6%) (Table 1). Most respondents are either married (42%) or divorced (42%), with a dominant share reporting income above the average level (42%). Based on the results shown in Figure 1, respondents most frequently follow basketball (31.3%) and tennis (26.7%).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

		f	%
Gender	Male	48	42.9
	Female	64	57.1
Age	Up to 18 years	2	1.8
	26-35	2	1.8
	36-45	9	8.0
	46+	99	88.4
Region	Belgrade	50	44.6
	Vojvodina	25	22.3
	Šumadija and Western Serbia	14	12.5
	Eastern and Southeastern Serbia	23	20.5
Marital status	Single	6	5.4
	Married	47	42.0
	Divorced	47	42.0
	Widowed	12	10.7
Monthly income level	Below average	37	33.0
	Average	28	25.0
	Above average	47	42.0

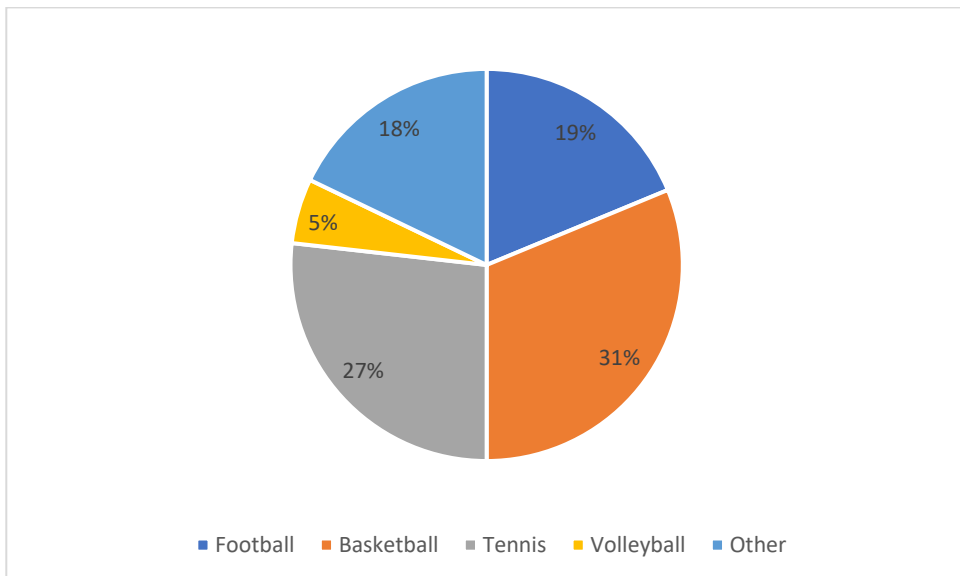


Figure 1. Which sport do you follow most frequently

Based on the results presented in Table 2, the highest level of agreement for personal participation and purchase relates to the statement that respondents actively engage in sports during their free time (M=4.32, SD=0.46). In terms of sponsorship and advertising perception, the highest agreement is observed for the statement that sponsor logos on jerseys influence brand recognition (M=4.77, SD=0.51). The highest level of agreement for consumer behavior relates to the statement that respondents are more likely to purchase a product from a brand that sponsors their favorite sport or team (M=4.66, SD=0.63). For social media and influencers, the highest agreement is recorded for the statement that promotion on social networks encourages purchase (M=4.39, SD=0.49). The results in Table 2 also indicate that respondents rarely follow sports events either live or through media (M=2.42, SD=0.90). Respondents report that product quality is more important than brand (M=4.10, SD=0.31) and that they prefer to purchase products with the logo of their favorite club (M=4.50, SD=0.50).

Table 2. Level of agreement with the stated claims

	Min	Max	M	SD
	Lično učešće i kupovina			
I actively participate in sports in my free time	4	5	4.32	0.46
I often purchase sports equipment or sports clothing	1	5	3.18	0.63
	Perception of sponsorship and advertising			
The presence of brands in sport is important to me	1	4	2.57	0.93
I easily notice and remember advertisements during sports broadcasts	1	5	3.25	1.18
Sponsor logos on jerseys influence my brand recognition	3	5	4.77	0.51
Advertisements in stadiums and arenas attract my attention	1	5	2.90	1.47
Sponzorstvo sportskih događaja pozitivno utiče na moj stav prema brendu	2	5	4.18	0.93
	Consumer behavior			
I am more likely to purchase a product from a brand that sponsors my favorite sport or team	2	5	4.66	0.63

The image of a sports brand is an important factor when purchasing sports equipment	1	5	2.98	1.11
	Social media and influencers			
I often follow sports content on social media	2	5	4.15	1.05
Posts from sports brands influence my opinion	2	5	4.02	0.93
Athletes and influencers influence my product choice	1	5	2.46	1.03
Sports brand campaigns on social media are appealing	1	5	2.13	1.27
Promotions on social media encourage me to make a purchase	4	5	4.39	0.49
	Media exposure			
I often follow sports events live or through media	1	5	2.42	0.90
	Purchase factors			
Price is the most important factor when purchasing sports equipment	2	5	3.67	0.96
Quality is more important than the brand	4	5	4.10	0.31
	Brand loyalty			
Loyalty to a sports club influences my choice of brand	2	5	3.60	0.76
I prefer to purchase products with the logo of my favorite club	4	5	4.50	0.50
I am willing to pay more for a well-known brand	1	5	2.42	1.12
Loyalty programs increase my likelihood of purchase	2	5	3.41	0.98

The study examined whether differences exist in the perception of sports equipment in relation to gender, age, region, marital status, and monthly income. An independent samples t-test was used to examine differences by gender and age, while one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to test differences by region, marital status, and income level. Based on the t-test results presented in Table 4, a significant difference is observed for media exposure, where male respondents report a higher level of agreement that media exposure is more important

Table 3. Differences in the perception of sports equipment by gender

	Male (N=48)	Female (H=64)	t	p
	Mean value			
Personal participation and purchase	3.75 ± 0.34	3.75 ± 0.36	-0.115	0.909
Perception of sponsorship and advertising	3.52 ± 0.55	3.55 ± 0.55	-0.276	0.783
Consumer behavior	3.90 ± 0.67	3.76 ± 0.67	1.089	0.279
Social media and influencers	3.46 ± 0.46	3.40 ± 0.52	0.601	0.549
Media exposure	2.75 ± 0.66	2.18 ± 0.99	3.585	0.001*
Purchase factors	3.92 ± 0.51	3.86 ± 0.48	0.632	0.529
Brand loyalty	3.45 ± 0.51	3.51 ± 0.41	-0.709	0.480

\* Statistical significance at the level of 0.05

Based on the t-test results presented in Table 5, a significant difference is observed for media exposure, where older respondents report a higher level of agreement that media exposure is more important.

Based on the t-test results presented in Table 4, a significant difference is observed for media exposure, where older respondents report a higher level of agreement that media exposure is more important.

Table 4. Differences in the perception of sports equipment by respondent age

	36-45 (N=9)	45+ (H=99)	t	p
	Mean value			
Personal participation and purchase	3.77 ± 0.56	3.74 ± 0.33	0.185	0.858
Perception of sponsorship and advertising	3.84 ± 0.58	3.51 ± 0.54	1.756	0.082
Consumer behavior	3.77 ± 0.56	3.83 ± 0.69	0.233	0.816
Social media and influencers	3.46 ± 0.44	3.41 ± 0.50	0.313	0.755
Media exposure	1.44 ± 0.88	2.51 ± 0.86	3.563	0.001*
Purchase factors	3.83 ± 0.55	3.89 ± 0.49	0.351	0.727
Brand loyalty	3.50 ± 0.25	3.48 ± 0.48	0.092	0.926

\* Statistical significance at the level of 0.05

Table 5. Differences in the perception of sports equipment by respondent age

	36-45	45+	t	p
	(N=9)	(H=99)		
	Mean value			
Personal participation and purchase	3.77 ± 0.56	3.74 ± 0.33	0.185	0.858
Perception of sponsorship and advertising	3.84 ± 0.58	3.51 ± 0.54	1.756	0.082
Consumer behavior	3.77 ± 0.56	3.83 ± 0.69	-0.233	0.816
Social media and influencers	3.46 ± 0.44	3.41 ± 0.50	0.313	0.755
Media exposure	1.44 ± 0.88	2.51 ± 0.86	-3.563	0.001*
Purchase factors	3.83 ± 0.55	3.89 ± 0.49	-0.351	0.727
Brand loyalty	3.50 ± 0.25	3.48 ± 0.48	0.092	0.926

\* Statistical significance at the level of 0.05

Based on the ANOVA results presented in Table 6, no significant difference is observed with respect to the region of respondents.

Table 6. Differences in the perception of sports equipment by respondent region

	Belgrade region (N=50)	Vojvodina (N=25)	Šumadija and Western Serbia region	Eastern and Southern Serbia region	F	p
			(N=14)	(N=23)		
	Mean value					
Personal participation and purchase	3.68±0.33	3.84±0.40	3.92±0.38	3.71±0.29	2.521	0.062
Perception of sponsorship and advertising	3.53±0.51	3.54±0.54	3.61±0.60	3.49±0.62	0.134	0.939
Consumer behavior	3.82±0.63	3.94±0.63	3.85±0.84	3.69±0.71	0.525	0.666
Social media and influencers	3.43±0.52	3.44±0.46	3.65±0.44	3.29±0.48	1.554	0.205
Media exposure	2.28±0.96	2.52±0.87	2.57±0.85	2.56±0.84	0.817	0.487
Purchase factors	4.01±0.51	3.72±0.48	3.92±0.51	3.80±0.41	2.295	0.082
Brand loyalty	3.51±0.50	3.45±0.31	3.75±0.40	3.32±0.47	2.650	0.054

\*Statistical significance at the level of 0.05

Based on the ANOVA results presented in Table 7, no significant difference is observed with respect to respondents' marital status.

Table 7. Differences in the perception of sports equipment by respondents' marital status

	Single (N=6)	Married (N=47)	Divorced (N=47)	Widowed (N=12)	F	p
	Mean value					
Personal participation and purchase	3.66±0.25	3.77±0.40	3.72±0.34	3.83±0.24	0.493	0.688
Perception of sponsorship and advertising	3.56±0.61	3.63±0.54	3.46±0.57	3.41±0.44	1.000	0.396
Consumer behavior	3.41±0.58	3.85±0.69	3.76±0.68	4.16±0.53	1.937	0.128
Social media and influencers	3.36±0.42	3.49±0.50	3.38±0.50	3.41±0.50	0.457	0.713
Media exposure	2.33±1.03	2.48±0.88	2.36±0.94	2.50±0.90	0.198	0.898
Purchase factors	3.75±0.27	3.96±0.49	3.81±0.50	3.95±0.54	0.944	0.422
Brand loyalty	3.33±0.49	3.53±0.36	3.46±0.50	3.50±0.62	0.411	0.745

\* Statistical significance at the level of 0.05

Based on the ANOVA results presented in Table 8, significant differences are observed for social media and influencers, as well as for media exposure, in relation to respondents' monthly income. Post hoc test results indicate a significant difference for social media and influencers between respondents with below-average and above-average income ( $p=0.021$ ), where respondents with lower income report higher engagement with social media and influencers. Post hoc test results also indicate a significant difference for media exposure between respondents with below-average income and those with average income ( $p=0.033$ ), as well as those with above-average income ( $p=0.033$ ). Respondents with lower income report lower levels of media exposure.

Table 8. Differences in the perception of sports equipment by respondents' monthly income

	Below average (N=37)	Average (N=28)	Above average (N=47)	F	p
	Mean value				
Personal participation and purchase	3.74 ± 0.36	3.80 ± 0.39	3.73 ± 0.32	0.360	0.699
Perception of sponsorship and advertising	3.61 ± 0.57	3.53 ± 0.52	3.48 ± 0.55	0.571	0.567
Consumer behavior	3.93 ± 0.68	3.80 ± 0.59	3.75 ± 0.71	0.725	0.486
Social media and influencers	3.60 ± 0.45	3.40 ± 0.57	3.31 ± 0.45	3.757	0.026*
Media exposure	2.08 ± 1.01	2.64 ± 0.78	2.57 ± 0.82	4.347	0.015*
Purchase factors	3.91 ± 0.46	3.87 ± 0.57	3.88 ± 0.48	0.078	0.925
Brand loyalty	3.57 ± 0.42	3.50 ± 0.47	3.41 ± 0.47	1.257	0.289

\*Statistical significance at the level of 0.05

## Discussion

The results of the empirical study confirm that sports marketing instruments, especially sponsorship and brand presence in the sports environment, have a statistically significant effect on consumer behavior and purchase decisions. These factors contribute to brand recognition and the formation of positive attitudes. Biscaia et al. (2013) report that sponsorship awareness and emotional attachment to a team increase the likelihood of purchase. The expressed tendency of respondents to purchase branded products linked to their favorite sport is consistent with the findings of Kural and Özbek (2023), which point to the strong influence of loyalty and identification on fan behavior. In addition to traditional instruments, social media and digital campaigns stand out as key communication channels that encourage purchase actions. Abeza et al. (2019) report that digital platforms can transform passive followers into active consumers. Similar findings are presented by Yim et al. (2020), who identify digital interaction and fan engagement as important determinants of consumer behavior. The results also indicate that product quality remains an important factor in purchase decisions, which shows the need to align marketing activities with actual product value.

With regard to sociodemographic characteristics, the results provide partial support for the initial assumptions and point to two notable findings. Differences related to media exposure are present, while digital campaigns show a strong effect within a sample dominated by older respondents, with 88.4% above the age of 46. Earlier studies (Vale and Fernandes, 2018) associate the success of social media in sport mainly with younger generations. The

present findings indicate a high level of digital engagement among older consumers, which suggests that these channels are no longer limited by age groups. No statistically significant differences are found in relation to region or marital status. Traditional theories of sports marketing often link local identity with loyalty (Wann and James, 2018). These results indicate that digitalization and national media coverage reduce geographic differences and lead to a more uniform sports market.

The findings also have practical implications for sports organizations and marketing professionals. The results indicate the need for an integrated approach that includes sponsorship, digital communication platforms, and continuous brand development. This approach can support stronger market positioning and more effective direction of consumer behavior in the sports context.

## **Conclusion**

The conducted research confirms the initial assumption that key instruments of sports marketing have a strong effect on consumer purchase decisions, with certain differences related to gender, age, and income level.

A main limitation of this study relates to the sample size, which limits broader generalization of the results to the entire population. Despite this, the study provides useful empirical insight into the effects of sports marketing, given the limited number of similar analyses in domestic literature. The research model does not include certain variables, such as the level of digital engagement and the intensity of following sports events.

Future research should be conducted on a larger and more representative sample. It is recommended to include additional psychological factors and to examine the influence of influencers, with a focus on Generation Z and digital consumer habits in sport. Comparative studies across different sports and countries in the region may provide further insight into this field.

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