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Research paper

Emotion And Sport Sponsorship: Toward A Better Understanding Of Emotional Connection Between A Brand And Consumer

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study investigates how fashion brands establish emotional connections with consumers through sport sponsorship. It examines the neuroscientific basis of emotion in consumer decision-making and the mechanisms of image transfer in sponsorship.

Methods: A qualitative case study methodology was employed, focusing on the British menswear brand Hackett. A multidisciplinary literature review, including neuroscience, marketing, and brand management, informed the analysis of sponsorship phenomena in real-life contexts.

Results: Findings reveal that Hackett uses sport sponsorship to generate emotional bonds via mechanisms such as identification, halo effect, symbolic meaning transfer, and the mere exposure effect. Partnerships—from historic polo and Formula One associations to contemporary Formula E involvement—demonstrate the role of emotionally charged sport contexts in reinforcing brand identity, extending product lines, and enhancing global visibility.

Conclusion: Sport sponsorship serves as a strategic emotive tool for fashion brands, enabling cross-cultural communication, sustaining brand coherence, and fostering durable consumer-brand relationships. These findings highlight the interplay between emotion, symbolic meaning, and marketing effectiveness in symbolic and identity-driven consumption contexts..

Keywords: Sport Sponsorship, Emotional Connection, Brand Image, Fashion Consumer Behaviour

Introduction

Since the 1980s, sponsorship has emerged as a central component of marketing communication, with global expenditure on sponsorship steadily increasing as brands aim to enhance visibility and foster consumer engagement through high-profile sporting events (Bal et al., 2010). Sponsorship is defined as a mutually beneficial commercial relationship, in which an organization provides resources in exchange for promotional opportunities and

symbolic associations with the sponsored entity (Sleight, 1989; Meenaghan, 1991). By leveraging these associations, brands can reach broad audiences while also targeting specific demographic and psychographic segments (Brassington & Pettitt, 2006). Despite its growing popularity, sport sponsorship remains underutilized in the fashion industry. Fashion brands have traditionally relied on mass media advertising, influencer endorsements, and in-store experiences, even though fashion consumption is inherently symbolic, experiential, and identity-driven (Mintel, 2011b; Okonkwo, 2007).

Sponsorship offers a platform for emotional engagement, providing opportunities for brands to communicate core values, reinforce identity, and create memorable consumer experiences that transcend functional product attributes.

At the core of sponsorship effectiveness is emotion, derived from the Latin *movere*, meaning “to move.” Emotion is a primary driver of perception, attention, memory, and behavior, influencing how consumers process brand-related information and make choices (Franzen & Bouwman, 2001; Chaudhuri, 2006). In saturated and competitive markets, emotional differentiation becomes critical for brands seeking enduring consumer relationships, meaningful brand identities, and sustained loyalty (Gobé, 2009). However, much of the existing sponsorship literature emphasizes cognitive outcomes such as awareness and recall, providing limited insight into the emotional mechanisms that underpin sponsorship effectiveness (Bal et al., 2010).

Neuroscientific evidence underscores that emotional responses precede rational evaluation and are embedded in long-term memory, affecting consumer preferences and behavior over time (LeDoux, 2000; McGaugh, 2003). This indicates that sport sponsorship can operate not only as a visibility and awareness tool but also as a mechanism for shaping brand meaning through affective experiences. Understanding these mechanisms is particularly crucial for fashion brands, where symbolic, experiential, and identity-related values are central to consumer decision-making.

Based on this rationale, the study formulates the following research questions to address key gaps in the literature:

- How does emotion influence consumer brand choice in symbolic and experiential contexts such as fashion?
- How can sport sponsorship be strategically leveraged to establish emotional connections between fashion brands and consumers?

To answer these questions, the study pursues the following objectives:

- Examine neuroscientific evidence on the role of emotion in shaping consumer perception, memory, and decision-making.

- Analyze how emotional processes contribute to brand building and strategic communication in symbolic and experiential consumption contexts.
- Investigate the emotional relationships between sports, consumers, and brands, focusing on mechanisms such as identification, symbolic meaning transfer, and affective engagement.
- Assess the effectiveness of sport sponsorship as an emotive marketing tool capable of creating durable consumer-brand connections.
- Evaluate strategic approaches for leveraging sport sponsorship to reinforce brand identity, support brand extension, and communicate across diverse global markets.

By addressing these questions and objectives, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how fashion brands can strategically harness sport sponsorship to generate emotional value, strengthen brand equity, and achieve global market resonance.

Literature Review

Neuroscience of Emotion

The limbic system, as conceptualized by Paul D. MacLean (1952), provides a biological framework for understanding emotional processes. Key structures, including the amygdala, hippocampus, hypothalamus, and cingulate gyrus, mediate interactions between emotion, memory, and cognition (LeDoux, 2000; Lewis et al., 2010). The amygdala evaluates incoming stimuli and generates immediate affective reactions, while the hippocampus consolidates these experiences into long-term memory (McGaugh, 2003). This neurobiological foundation explains why emotionally charged stimuli are more likely to be remembered and influence future decision-making (LeDoux, 1999; Franzen & Bouwman, 2001).

Emotion operates as a primary driver of attention and behavior. Neuroscience indicates that affective responses are often processed faster than analytical reasoning, enabling emotions to preempt rational evaluation in guiding choice (LeDoux, 1993; Ekman, 1989). For fashion brands, this implies that emotional associations—elicited through images, narratives, or sponsorship—can shape consumer perceptions and preferences before cognitive deliberation occurs.

Emotion in Brand Perception and Building

Brands communicate meaning beyond their functional attributes, often serving as symbolic representations of identity, status, and lifestyle (Kapferer, 2008; Okonkwo, 2007). Emotional responses to brands are formed through repeated interactions with brand stimuli, including logos, advertising, product design, and experiential touchpoints. The amygdala and hippocampus facilitate this process, enhancing recall, recognition, and the stability of emotional commitment (Chaudhuri, 2006; Franzen & Bouwman, 2001).

Emotional loyalty, grounded in affect rather than rational evaluation, is particularly critical in symbolic consumption contexts like fashion. Consumers often seek experiences that reinforce personal identity and social status, making emotion a key driver of brand preference and willingness to pay a premium (Gobé, 2002; Kapferer, 2008). Consequently, brands that successfully cultivate emotional engagement can differentiate themselves in competitive markets, strengthen brand equity, and sustain long-term consumer relationships.

Emotion in Consumer Decision-Making

Emotions influence decision-making by guiding attention, framing perceptions, and providing heuristics for choice (Plessis, 2011). When emotion and cognition conflict, affective responses frequently dominate, shaping preferences and behaviors even before conscious evaluation occurs (Chaudhuri, 2006; Franzen & Bouwman, 2001). Positive emotional experiences with a brand can generate affective forecasts—anticipatory feelings about future consumption—which increase the likelihood of repeat purchases and brand advocacy (Percy et al., 2004).

This understanding underlines the strategic potential of sponsorship. Emotional experiences associated with sponsored events can transfer to brands, creating lasting impressions that influence consumer decision-making in ways that conventional advertising often cannot replicate.

Emotional Mechanisms in Sport Sponsorship

Sport consumption is inherently emotional, characterized by high arousal, social affiliation, and collective experience. Spectators develop attachments through team identification, Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRG), and shared rituals, which satisfy psychological needs for belonging, self-esteem, and social recognition (McDonald et al., 2002; Lagae, 2005).

Sport sponsorship leverages these emotional mechanisms to influence brand perception. Several processes are central to understanding this transfer:

- Identification: Consumers who identify with athletes or teams are more receptive to sponsor messaging, internalizing the symbolic meaning associated with sport (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Ngan et al., 2011).
- False Consensus Effect: Fans perceive sponsor preference as normative, reinforcing brand acceptance as a socially shared value (Bennett, 1999).
- Halo Effect: Positive emotions elicited by sporting events generalize to the sponsor brand, enhancing perceived quality and value (Bal et al., 2008).
- Transfer Theory: Symbolic meanings and emotions associated with sport are transposed to the sponsor brand, facilitating affective internalization (Ngan et al., 2011).
- Mere Exposure Effect: Repeated exposure in emotionally charged sport contexts strengthens familiarity and favorability toward sponsor brands (Zajonc, 1968).

These mechanisms collectively illustrate that sport sponsorship functions as an emotional branding system, converting transient affective experiences into durable consumer-brand connections.

Integration with Fashion Branding

In the fashion industry, where symbolic, experiential, and identity-related values dominate, the emotional mechanisms described above are particularly relevant. Unlike purely functional products, fashion items convey self-expression, lifestyle, and social status (Okonkwo, 2007). Sport sponsorship offers a platform for fashion brands to align with aspirational narratives, heritage values, and globally recognizable symbols, thereby facilitating emotional resonance across cultural and geographic boundaries.

For instance, Hackett London sponsors polo, motor racing, and rowing, reinforcing its identity rooted in British heritage, tradition, and understated

luxury. In contrast, Adidas and Nike engage with mass-participation sports, such as marathons, Olympic events, and football tournaments, conveying values of achievement, endurance, and global community. Similarly, The North Face, through sponsorship of mountaineering and adventure sports, communicates resilience, exploration, and a deep connection to nature (Table 1).

These examples show how fashion brands leverage sports to generate emotional associations, enhance consumer identification, and transfer symbolic meaning. By selecting consistent with brand values, brands strengthen attachment, support coherent extensions, and sports reach international markets. Storytelling, imagery, and event narratives often replace overt logos, highlighting symbolic meaning transfer. Overall, sport sponsorship acts as an emotional branding system, fostering durable consumer-brand relationships and cross-cultural communication.

qualitative methods capture the processes through which emotions are created, experienced, and transferred in real-life sponsorship settings (Bryman & Bell, 2007). A deductive research logic guided the study, drawing on established theories of emotion, branding, and sponsorship to structure the empirical inquiry and examine their applicability in the fashion context.

Case studies are particularly suitable when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are unclear, and when an in-depth exploration of complex processes is required (Yin, 1984). This approach enables a nuanced analysis of emotional mechanisms that are often difficult to capture through surveys or large-scale datasets. By focusing on a single case, the study accounts for contextual specifics, symbolic meanings, and experiential factors that are central to emotional branding but may be overlooked in broader studies (Kumar, 2008).

Hackett London, a British premium menswear brand, was selected as the focal case due to its extensive and sustained involvement in sport

Table 1 Sport Sponsorship Strategies in Fashion Brands

Brand	Sponsored Sport	Symbolic Meaning / Values	Emotional Goal
Hackett	Polo, F1, Formula E	Heritage, Prestige, aspirational lifestyle	Brand attachment, identification
Adidas	Marathons, Football	Achievement, endurance, global participation	Global community, achievement pride
Nike	Football, Olympic	Performance, excellence, inspiration	Motivation, inspiration
The North Face	Mountaineering, Adventure sports	Exploration, Resilience	Connection with nature, thrill

Research Purpose and Methodology

This study investigates how sport sponsorship fosters emotional connections between fashion brands and consumers, and how such connections contribute to brand building and marketing effectiveness. Rather than proposing a new theoretical framework, the research aims to deepen understanding of the emotional mechanisms underlying sponsorship, particularly within symbolic and identity-driven consumption contexts such as fashion.

Given the interpretive and context-dependent nature of emotion, a qualitative case study approach was adopted. Unlike quantitative methods, which primarily measure outcomes,

sponsorship despite being a non-sport brand. This choice allows for an examination of how sport sponsorship functions as an emotional branding strategy within the fashion industry, highlighting mechanisms such as symbolic meaning transfer, identification, and affective engagement.

Results

Brand Background and Sponsorship Context

Founded in 1983, Hackett London is a British premium menswear brand celebrated for its traditional tailoring, heritage, and understated luxury. Although its primary business is fashion rather than sports apparel, Hackett has consistently leveraged

sport-related partnerships as a core component of its brand-building strategy. Over the decades, the brand has associated itself with sporting properties reflecting values such as craftsmanship, tradition, and performance. Historically, its sponsorship portfolio included polo, motor racing, rowing, and tennis, activities symbolically aligned with British heritage, prestige, and authenticity. This coherent approach ensured that sponsorships reinforced a unified brand narrative rather than functioning as isolated promotional events (Wakefield & Bennett, 2010; McDonald et al., 2002).

Hackett became the official clothing

performance uniforms for Formula E staff globally (Formula E, 2024; Formula E, 2025). The renewal of this partnership into subsequent seasons highlights Hackett's ongoing commitment to integrating sport into its global brand communication strategy.

Sport Sponsorship as Emotive Communication

Hackett's sponsorship consistently aligns with its brand identity, demonstrating sport sponsorship as an emotional branding tool rather than just promotion. Its historic association with polo, motor racing, rowing, and tennis reinforces British

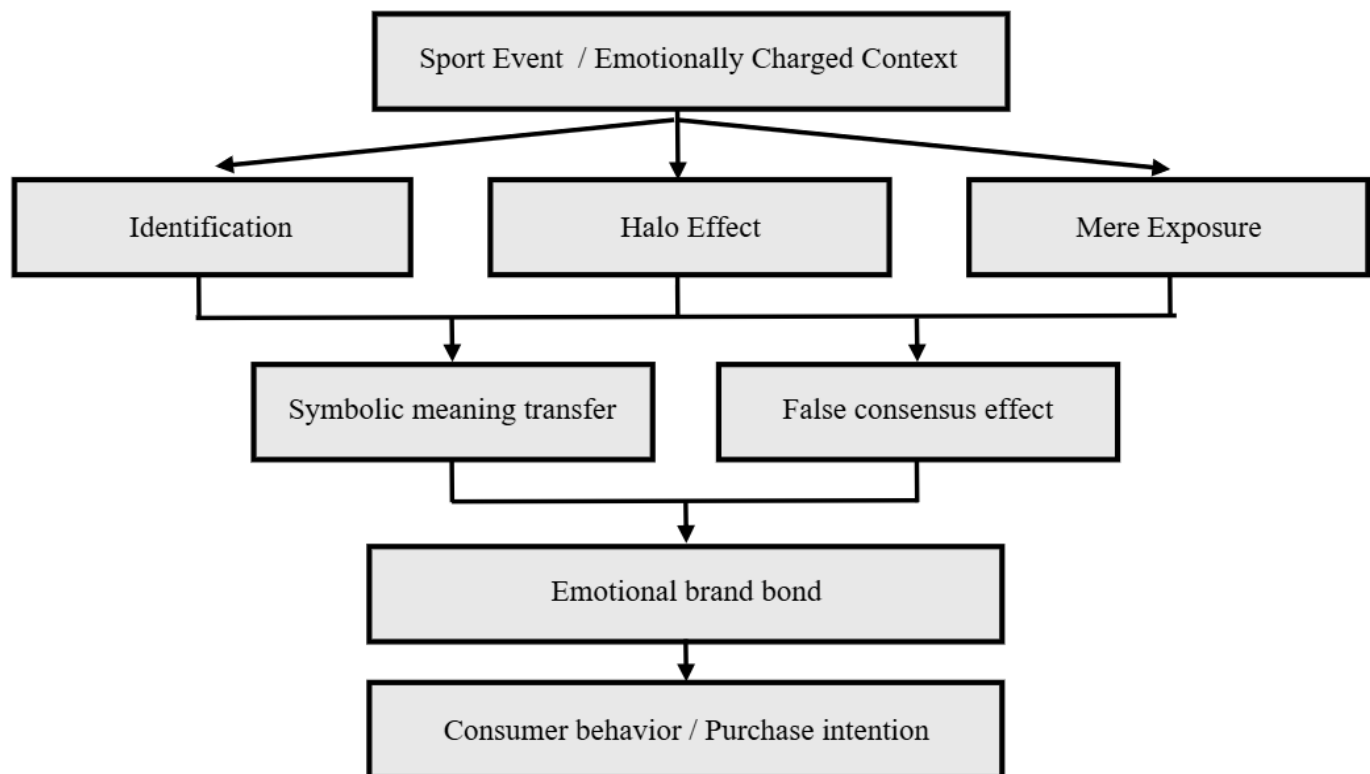


Figure 1 Emotional Mechanisms in Sport Sponsorship

partner of Williams Martini Racing in Formula One in 2015, supplying team apparel and branded merchandise (Williams Martini Racing, 2015). Additionally, the brand established a long-term collaboration with Aston Martin, serving as the official supplier of travelwear and office wear for the Aston Martin Cognizant Formula One™ Team. These partnerships exemplify the alignment of Hackett's identity with elite performance, precision, and British luxury (Aston Martin F1 Team, 2024; RaceScene, 2025). More recently, in 2023, Hackett launched its activewear sub-brand, Hackett Sport, and became the Official Apparel Partner of the ABB FIA Formula E World Championship, supplying technical and

heritage, tradition, and understated luxury (Wakefield & Bennett, 2010; McDonald et al., 2002). These activities facilitated consumer identification, especially among audiences deriving self-esteem and social meaning through affiliation with elite sports, and subtly transferred symbolic values such as prestige, performance, and aspiration from sport to brand (Ngan et al., 2011). Emotional gratification was intensified by exclusivity, strengthening the psychological bond between brand and consumer.

Over the years, Hackett has adapted this strategy to contemporary global motorsport. In 2023, the brand launched Hackett Sport and became the Official Apparel Partner for the ABB FIA Formula E World Championship, supplying technical and

Table 2 Emotional Trigger – Consumer Response

Emotional Trigger (Sport Context)	Consumer Response	Underlying Mechanism
Achievement (team or athlete success)	Pride, admiration, motivation	Identification, Halo Effect
Anticipation (pre-event excitement)	Increased attention, engagement	Affective arousal, Symbolic Transfer
Tension (Competition)	Heightened focus, emotional investment	Halo Effect, Affective Transfer
Triumph (Victory)	Joy, emotional attachment, loyalty	Identification, Mere Exposure, Symbolic Transfer
Exclusive (Elite Associations)	Aspirational connection, self-esteem	Identification, Social Identity Theory

performance wear for Formula E personnel at global events (Formula E, 2024; Formula E, 2025). The renewal of this partnership into subsequent seasons underscores Hackett's continued commitment to integrating sport into its marketing and communication strategy. By balancing heritage and contemporary engagement, Hackett demonstrates how narrative associations and symbolic alignment with high-profile sport properties can communicate emotional meaning without relying solely on overt logo placement.

Figure 1 illustrates the key psychological mechanisms through which sport sponsorship influences consumer-brand relationships. High-arousal sporting contexts trigger emotional responses that are rapidly processed by consumers. Identification with athletes or teams, halo effects, symbolic meaning transfer, mere exposure, and the false consensus effect convert these transient emotions into durable brand attachments, enhancing consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and brand loyalty.

By strategically leveraging these mechanisms, Hackett converts sport-related emotions into lasting consumer engagement, demonstrating how sport sponsorship operates as a multidimensional tool for emotional brand communication.

Emotional Transfer and Consumer Attachment

Sport provides emotionally charged contexts—achievement, anticipation, tension, and triumph—which Hackett uses to evoke affective responses. Neuroscientific evidence shows these reactions are processed rapidly, influencing brand attitudes before conscious evaluation (LeDoux, 1993; Ekman, 1989). Repeated exposure—from historic Formula One to current Formula E—facilitates affective transfer, enhancing recall, positive attitudes, and purchase intentions (Wakefield & Bennett, 2010).

The table above illustrates how specific emotional triggers inherent in sport contexts generate distinct consumer responses and the psychological mechanisms that underpin affective transfer. For example, achievements by athletes or teams evoke pride and admiration, internalized through identification and the halo effect. Anticipatory moments before competitions heighten consumer engagement and attention, facilitating symbolic meaning transfer. Similarly, moments of tension, competition, and triumph elicit emotional investment, reinforcing brand attachment via repeated exposure and affective reinforcement. Exclusive or elite associations, such as Hackett's partnerships with Formula One teams, enhance consumers' aspirational connection and self-esteem, strengthening long-term emotional bonds.

Mechanisms such as identification, halo effect, and symbolic meaning transfer underpin this process. Consumers who identify with athletes or teams are more receptive to sponsor messaging, internalizing sport-related symbolic meaning (Fisher

& Wakefield, 1998; Ngan et al., 2011). Positive emotions elicited by sporting events generalize to the brand via the halo effect (Bal et al., 2008), while repeated exposure enhances familiarity and favorability through the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968). Collectively, these mechanisms illustrate how Hackett converts transient sport-related affect into durable emotional bonds with consumers, demonstrating that sport sponsorship operates as an emotional branding system.

Brand Building and Global Reach

Hackett's sponsorship strategy strengthens intangible brand elements—identity, personality, and values—supporting coherent brand equity and mitigating the risk of dilution (Kapferer, 2008). By associating with both traditional British sports and contemporary global motorsport, Hackett maintains portfolio coherence while anchoring product lines in emotionally resonant contexts. Special collections linked to polo, motor racing, and Formula E reflect this integration, demonstrating how emotional branding reinforces product strategy.

The universal nature of emotion enables sport sponsorship to act as a cross-cultural communication platform. Hackett's visibility is amplified at international motorsport events, engaging diverse audiences. Media coverage, on-site activation, and repeated exposure in high-arousal sports reinforce consumer attachment, highlighting the cost-effectiveness and broad impact of emotional sponsorship.

Summary of Case Findings

Hackett's evolving sponsorship—from historic polo and Formula One to current Formula E—shows its long-term commitment to emotional branding. By aligning sports with both heritage and contemporary values, Hackett transfers symbolic meaning, strengthens brand attachment, supports coherent brand building, and expands global reach. This case exemplifies the integration of neuroscientific insights, psychological mechanisms, and brand management theory into practical sponsorship strategy, highlighting how fashion brands can leverage sport to create durable, emotionally grounded consumer relationships.

Conclusion

This study explored how emotion influences consumer brand choice and how fashion brands can leverage sport sponsorship to foster emotional connections. Findings demonstrate that emotion is a central driver in symbolic consumption, shaping brand perception, recall, and purchase intention beyond rational evaluation. Hackett's sponsorship activities—from historic polo and Formula One partnerships to contemporary Formula E involvement—illustrate that strategic alignment with sports enables emotional transfer, strengthens brand attachment, and enhances global brand visibility.

Sport sponsorship functions as an emotional branding tool by embedding symbolic meanings, facilitating consumer identification, and supporting coherent brand extensions. For fashion brands, this approach allows for culturally transcendent communication, reinforces brand identity, and provides a platform for sustained global engagement. These findings underscore the importance of affect-driven strategies in brand management and suggest that leveraging high-arousal, identity-relevant sponsorships can create enduring consumer-brand relationships.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, emotion was addressed at a broad, general level. Future research should investigate discrete emotional dimensions, such as excitement, pride, or nostalgia, and examine their differential effects on consumer behavior. Second, the study is based on a single case—Hackett London—which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Conducting multi-case studies across diverse fashion brands and sponsorship categories could enhance external validity. Finally, the analysis relied primarily on secondary sources and observational data. Future studies should incorporate primary data, including consumer interviews, experiments, or neuromarketing techniques, to directly capture emotional responses and their impact on behavioral outcomes.

Building on these limitations, future research could explore several directions. These include examining the role of discrete emotions in consumer

brand choice, assessing the effect of image transfer on brand recall and long-term brand equity, and comparing the effectiveness of sport sponsorship with other forms of endorsement, such as celebrity or cultural sponsorship, within fashion marketing. Additionally, investigating cross-cultural differences in emotional responses to sport sponsorship could provide valuable insights for global brand strategy.

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