

**EDITORIAL:**

**The paradoxical marketing of sports equipment brands  
[El marketing paradójico de las marcas de material deportivo]**

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As Ko (2013) pointed out, the sport industry is a large and fast growing business. The U.S. market accounted for as much as \$400-435 billion in 2012. Sports equipment companies provide the products required to practice and enjoy sports: clothing, footwear, and other apparel and gear. Therefore, sports equipment brands surround all the aspects shaping the sports industry. In addition, they extend their arms to also embrace the fashion market.

A few equipment brands, such as Nike and Adidas are listed among the most powerful brands in the world (Badenhausen, 2012). Data about some giant brands of this industry reflect the relevance of this business. For example, Nike global sales were to \$21 billion in 2011 (Cendrowski, 2012); Under Armour spent \$205.4 million on marketing in 2012 (Lambert, 2013) and Nike \$2.4 billion in 2011 (Cendrowski, 2012); The football teams Real Madrid and Barcelona get an average of \$49 million a year from Adidas and \$43 million from Nike, respectively (Ozarian, 2012); and Adidas paid \$130 million to become the official sportswear provider of London 2012 summer Olympics (Anderson, 2013).

The history of the marketing actions achieved by sports equipment companies is really interesting (e.g. Falk, 2009; Hollister, 2008; Katz, 1994; Smit, 2008; Strasser & Becklund, 1991). However, a common marketing practice achieved by these companies is paradoxical. Some brands carry out permanent contradictions in their marketing operations, and the industry as a global business, has some questionable mantras that deserve to be investigated within the sport marketing and management academic field. Following a cinematic analogy, I will explain two paradoxes within this industry that remains unresolved.

*The Michael J. Fox paradoxes*

In 1985, Robert Zemeckis directed one of the most successful films of the 80's: *Back to the Future*. The movie starred by Michael J. Fox. Zemeckis dressed Fox with a pair of Nike shoes when the actor was in the current time (1985) and with a pair of Converse shoes when he travelled to the past (1955). Fox, the hero of movie,

wore the two sports equipment brands that perfectly defined two eras of the north-American culture of sports (see Aamidor, 2006). And these shoes were intentionally filmed with several closed-ups.

Thomas F. Wilson characterized the villain of the film, a charmless guy who enjoyed humiliating Fox's family. However, thanks to Fox's actions, the situation turned around, and Wilson receives several shaming lessons during the film, including a bath of muck. At the end of the story, Wilson is presented as a ridiculous man, serving the Fox's family, and dressed with a recognizable Adidas track-suit.

The film was released on July, with much success. Just a month later, in August, another film starring by Fox was released: *Teen Wolf*. This new movie narrated the story of a low-profile teenager (Fox) who was an unsuccessful basketball player in high school. Then, after discovering that he was actually a werewolf, his life changed to become the most popular kid and the star of the basketball team. The film ended with the victory of his team in the final game, thanks to Fox's performance, who decided to play as a human and not as a werewolf, to demonstrate that he could win without any supernatural trick. Adidas dressed all basketball teams in the movie (included the villain), and Fox wore Adidas shoes all the time.

Therefore, with these two films released practically at the same time three decades ago, we can identify: (1) the same celebrity, Fox, wearing three competing sports equipment brands in the two movies (Nike, Converse and Adidas) linked with the positive associations connected with a young hero; and (2) The same brand (Adidas) appearing in the first movie connected to negative associations linked to the charmless villain, and appearing in the second movie connected to both losing and winning teams (negative and positive associations, respectively). These associations are the basis for the image and positioning of a brand (see John, et al., 2006), for building the meaning of the brand, and transferring this meaning from the product to the consumer wearing such brand (see Dimofte & Yalch, 2011).

These two points elicit two important paradoxes for the marketing actions implemented by sports equipment brands.

First, why do most companies force athletes and other celebrities to only dress its brand? When a player signs a sponsorship contract with a brand, then the brand forces him to wear only its products for public appearances. And if the player breaks the rule, then he is sanctioned or the contract is voided. For example, in July 2013, the football player of the Bayern Munich, Mario Götze, was sanctioned by the sponsor of the team, Adidas, to pay 10000 Euros. Götze appeared with a Nike T-shirt in the presentation of his official Adidas team T-shirt. But the sponsorship deal between teams and brands excludes footwear. Therefore, Götze would appear every game in the season dressed by Adidas (clothing) and Nike (shoes). Consequently, people will associate Götze with Adidas and Nike, two brands that both sell clothes and footwear. This could lead us to the conclusion that the sponsor of the player (Nike) should have warned Götze to wear his Nike T-shirt for the presentation, in order to avoid unnecessary legal problems with Adidas; and the sponsor of the team (Adidas) should not have sanctioned the player, because it is impossible to disassociate Götze from Nike, because every game of the season he will be wearing Nike shoes.

Something similar happened when the footballer Cristiano Ronaldo announced his renewal with Real Madrid, in September 2013. Ronaldo wore a pair of glasses without grade from the vintage collection of Nike (his personal sponsor), when the team has a millionaire contract with Adidas. However, in this case, no penalty was imposed. But again, do people link Ronaldo with Adidas, with Nike, or with both? And how does this affect global sales of such brands? An analogous question could be made for the other global football star, Leo Messi, who is sponsored by Adidas but his team (F.C. Barcelona) is sponsored by Nike.

This kind of problems is also presented in other competitions, even in the NBA, where Adidas is currently the official provider of the league but its logo is not visible in the jerseys for the game. However, all players wear Adidas apparel for the warm-up, so that Nike superstars such as LeBron James or Kobe Bryant are frequently seen dressed by the "enemy". Moreover, in individual sports, such as tennis, there are some players who also combine two competing brands, such as Nolan Djokovic, who was dressed by Sergio Tacchini and further by Uniqlo, but his footwear is Adidas. However, there are cases when brands do not want to share anything, as the curious case of the basketball player Marcin Gortat, who lost a deal with Reebok in 2009, because the brand wanted him to cover up a tattoo of the Jordan logo in the leg made some years ago. Gortat refused to do it, and the brand did not supply him more shoes.

Therefore, sponsoring teams and athletes is a paradoxical game, where competing brands are achieving ambush marketing among them (one of the extreme cases was the Nike's release of a collection of *Teen Wolf* shoes in 2009!). The question is how effective is such sponsorship from the customer viewpoint. Recall that the disassociation between clothing and footwear sponsorship contracts comes from some cases occurred in past decades, regarding players who didn't want to play with a specific footwear brand. For example, Liverpool football players had to play the final of the FA Cup in 1966 with Adidas, but some of them played with Gola, and painted the three-stripes with a marker. Something similar happened with the Spanish basketball team in the 80's, because of its Federation had a deal with Adidas regarding footwear, but players such as Andrés Jiménez used to wear Nike shoes, painting three-stripes on them.

In addition, extreme cases have also occurred in the opposite direction. For example, the footballer Johan Cruyff, who had a contract with Puma, denied to wear the official three-stripes Dutch Adidas T-shirt for the 1974 World Cup. At the end, he played with a customized two-stripes T-shirt. On the other hand, in the summer Olympics of Barcelona'92, some basketball players of the Dream Team denied to wear a Reebok track-suit (Reebok had a deal with the US Olympic Committee), for the gold-medal ceremony. Finally, Charles Barkley (Nike), Michael Jordan (Nike) and Magic Johnson (Converse) appeared with several USA flags which covered the Reebok logo.

The Cruyff and the Dream Team examples are cases where the orthodoxy of marketing and sponsorship is fulfilled; when a brand sponsors a person, team or event, no other brand of the same industry can also be a sponsor. However, the reality of consumers is different. People, as Michael J. Fox did in 1985, wear multiple sports brands and combine them. Consequently, do all the mentioned battles between brands really matter? Recall that the vast majority of athletes wear different brands during their careers, so it is always possible to find a picture, an ad, or a broadcasted game when players wear other rival brand. Therefore, it seems that sometimes brands achieve a paranoid and cynical behavior by treating to isolate their celebrities from the competence, considering that many of these brands have practiced ambush marketing in other circumstances. It's like child's play. From a marketing viewpoint this behavior sometimes is justified to obtain positive publicity, but often the positive effect is paradoxically trespassed to the rival brand (as occurred in the Dream Team case). Again this child's play is pervasive along time, as occurred when someone deliberately put an Adidas bag to cover the Puma boots of Cruyff in the 1974 Dutch's official photo, or when in the official photo of the USA basketball team for the Beijing 2008 summer Olympics, the coach Krzyzewski (Nike) covered with his foot the Adidas shoe

of Dwight Howard, and Howard covered with his hand the Nike logo of his pants. Nevertheless, there are some examples in the opposite direction, as the brand 361°, that allows the NBA player Kevin Love to wear punctually other brands.

The second point of the movie analogy relates to the fear brands feel to negative associations yielded by the connection to a non-desired concept (drugs, violence, idiocy, losers, etc.). In *Back to the Future*, Adidas was linked with a man with absolutely no charm and no positive performance, and this is truly a form of hurting a brand. This fact explains why Reebok tried to ban some scenes from the movie *Jerry Maguire* (1996), because the brand was linked to the concept of betrayal (Vanderbilt, 1998). However, it is difficult to find a villain without any charm, so that brands achieve a plethora of paradoxical actions when endorsed athletes achieve a non-desirable behavior, i.e. sometimes they break-up with them, but sometimes they defend them. For example, Nike broke-up with Lance Armstrong and Katrin Krabbe because of doping, but momentarily retained Marion Jones or Alex Rodríguez which were involved in similar scandals. Nike also retained Tiger Woods after his extramarital affair (he lost million-dollar contracts with other brands) and Kobe Bryant after his sexual assault accusation, but Reebok broke-up with the rapper Rick Ross because of a polemic verse of one of his songs linked to denigrate women. The Spanish brand Kelme broke-up with the footballer Oleguer Presas after he publicly defended the release of a terrorist, but some days later, another Spanish brand (Munich) offered him a deal. Adidas broke-up with the NBA player Gilbert Arenas after he wielded a gun in the locker-room, when at the same time Nike launched an advertising campaign with other NBA players with the slogan: "I'll do whatever it takes to win games. I don't leave anything in the chamber". Umbro cut with the footballer John Terry after his racial insults, but Adidas signed the singer Noel Gallagher in spite of his several insults to other musicians.

Sometimes brands are linked "accidentally" with non-desired associations, as when Abercrombie & Fitch offered to pay a character of a MTV reality show for him not to wear their clothes. However, the shoe brand Bruno Magli increased its sales by 30% when people knew that the American footballer O. J. Simpson wore a pair of them when he was accused of the crime of his wife.

Therefore when villains have some charm, the hypothesized negative effect of linking a brand to them is not clear. Maybe this is the reason why brands sometimes break-up with them but other times continue with the relationship, in a paradoxical game that again could be viewed as a cynical exercise. In fact, charming bad boys sell, but the brands seems lost about the limits of this mantra.

In sum, employing an analogy with the Michael J. Fox's movies released in 1985, I have briefly tried to illustrate some paradoxes about the marketing of sports equipment brands, that almost 30 years later, remain unresolved. Therefore, and back to the future, brands and sport marketing have something to fix.

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