

## CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF A SPORT BRAND. STUDY CASE AT THE SPORT CLUB MUNICIPAL CRAIOVA

**BARBU MIHAI CONSTANTIN RĂZVAN**

ASSOC. PROF. PHD. UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA, ROMÂNIA

e-mail: mihai\_rc@yahoo.co.uk

**DIACONESCU DRAGOȘ LAURENȚIU**

LECTURER PHD. UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA, ROMÂNIA

e-mail: dragosdiaconescu31@yahoo.com

**UMUT ALICAN**

LECTURER PHD. NISANTASI UNIVERSITY, ISTANBUL, TURKEY

e-mail: alican.umut@nisantasi.edu.tr

**POPESCU MARIUS CĂTĂLIN**

LECTURER PHD. UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA, ROMÂNIA

e-mail: cpopescu@yahoo.com

### **Abstract**

*Branding has always been a complex topic. Everyone uses the term "brand", but very few manage to define it clearly. The brand has its distinct personality. Companies create products and register trademarks, but consumers build brands. The products can be copied and replaced, but the brands remain unique. They can get old but the authentic brand is eternal. Products become instantly useful, but brands become appreciated over time. A brand must be clear, reliable, and credible to both consumers and team members. When it comes to a brand we have to think about the following aspects: what are the physical and psychological attributes through which they express their personality? The paper aims to present theoretical aspects regarding the notions of the brand and the consumers' perception of sports products and services, with practical examples from the activity of Sport Club Municipal Craiova.*

**Keywords:** Brand, Perception, Marketing Strategy, Sport Brand, SCM Craiova.

**JEL classification:** M30, M31, M37.

### **1. Introduction**

In the whole market of an industry there are only a few registered trademarks that manage to become brands and directly assume the relationship with the final consumers. They are the brands of organizations focused on vision, ethics and innovation, which have proven by results that they inspire employees, suppliers and consumers alike.

These are the ones that stand the test of time and build a whole culture around them, capable of influencing social behaviours, generating communities and establishing referrals. Another part of the organizations, generally those motivated by the financial prospects of some opportunities, seeks to imitate the appearances of the brands thus hoping to obtain a quick profit. Depending on the industry, there may be short-term results, but consumer manipulation has never proven to be a sustainable economic multiplier.

Society through social relations as a whole is the only mechanism capable of producing brands. We use products and services, we visit places, we know people. We evaluate their qualities, flaws, goals, add emotions, live positive or negative experiences and then decide what to take with us and what we leave behind. The experiences of each of us are the ones that, once communicated, build the reputation that will influence the decisions of others.

The brand is therefore a holistic result whose value is permanently influenced by people's experiences. It is the immaterial dimension that establishes value in people's perceptions. It is a confirmation, a status gained through the consistency of keeping promises over time [1].

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Theoretical notions about the brand**

For a brand of an organization, a product or a place, the brand is the most valuable status it can wish for. It is confirmation that people not only appreciate the way they solve a rational need, but also the fact that the brand becomes their reference that they will love, return to and recommend to others. It thus becomes the multiplier vector for the size of the market and for maintaining its loyalty.

What exactly is a brand and what is a brand identity? Branding is an easily recognizable name, which immediately tells people something about a company in a particular field. Brand identity is the way people recognize the brand. It can be through the logo and other elements associated with it. For example, the Nike logo, which is very simple, is immediately recognized around the world with the slogan "Just Do It".

Brand image is the idea that people develop in their mind about your company. It also dictates their expectations from the brand. For example, if a luxury brand with a well-defined target would sell cheap products, its image might be affected by the perception of its consumers about the brand [9].

Positioning is the way a product is placed on the market. In principle, it defines which market segments the brand wants to target. For example, Virginia Slims are cigarettes for women, the brand being positioned to attract this segment through the thin appearance of cigarettes and the package [2].

The personality of the brand is exactly like the personality of a person. It involves emotional or personal qualities that we associate with a particular brand. Each element of branding, from logo, colours, website, tone of voice, name etc. is an ingredient added to his personality.

The system of values and principles that underpin the brand's behaviour. Culture is the direct link between the brand and the organization. The relationship established by the brand with its audience is sustainable in the long run only if the organization acquires its value system and transfers the culture of the brand.

The principles that underpin the relationships of the brand with different audiences have major influences on the social spectrum. The solid business relationships of the organization must be strongly reflected in the PR. In the virtual social media, the brand must offer non-intrusive, answers to the needs of the public. The way the brand manages to establish honest relationships with the public determines how consumers (or partners) feel about the brand. The frequency and intensity of using the various means of communication of the brand establish the solidity of the relations with the public and build in its memory the necessary associations for the brand experience [6].

Both the products and their brand must reflect the characteristics of the public. Product attributes must address clear needs of an audience. The brand identity must contain elements of language existing in the culture of the public to which it is intended [10]. The extent to which the public is in the features of the brand, determines its desire to associate its image with it. Audience reflection directly influences the perceived image.

The way the consumer assumes the brand identity and transfers it holistically. When a product honestly addresses clear needs and the brand transfers desirable values and personality traits, the public becomes through the brand experience, the most powerful communication vector [11].

In many situations, the features of a brand are those with which the consumer completes his personality. Understanding what determines the consumer to associate with the brand, significantly eases the context of long-term brand communication (brand insight). The perceived image is basically the vector that determines how much the public is willing to pay above the average value of that product due to the brand. It is therefore a fundamental indicator in the economic evaluation of the brand and should be the main goal pursued in the management of the brand experience.

## *2.2 The connection between consumers and the perception of sports products, services and clubs*

The commercial efforts of the sport club can be better emphasized when they are grouped under an umbrella of the sport brand and targeted to a specific group of people [7]. The access to information, the ability to spread information and the compulsive need to share information online make the consumer either the best lawyer of a brand, or the worst nightmare. Shared on social networks, personal experiences become expertise and influence the attitude and behaviour of other consumers towards brands. Strengthening the image and trust in the brand implies a major change in the way the brand communicates.

It is already known that sport has become an industry. The largest clubs in the world have revenues of hundreds of millions of euros from television rights, sponsorships and marketing.

All these sources of income are proportional to the number of fans who come to the stadium, who watch the matches on the TV "free" or in the system "pay-per-view" and who buy T-shirts or other promotional items.

From a commercial point of view, the success of a team is directly proportional to the number of people watching its matches. When choosing to sponsor a sports club, brands are primarily concerned with the size of the audience they are targeting through that club [12].

In the formation of attitudes many external and internal factors are taken into account that shape and create the attitudes towards an object. Thus, the main way of forming attitudes towards products and services is the observation of one's own behaviours or, in other words, direct experience. Another extremely important factor in the formation of attitudes is the family and reference groups. According to Brătucu and Dima (2002) attitudes formation is a complex process comprising two sets of factors: individual factors (age, sex, intelligence, emotional stability and instability, conative dispositions) and social factors (family, school, social and cultural organizations, political, economic conditions) [5]. Other important factors in the formation of attitudes are the mass media (newspapers, magazines, television, internet) and the personality of the consumer.

In the specialty literature [14] attitude is a multidimensional variable made up of three components:

- cognitive component (to learn) reflects the opinion and knowledge of a person related to a product or its qualities;
- the affective component (of feeling) refers to a person's feelings or feelings towards a product whether he is good, bad, pleasant or unpleasant;
- the behavioral or conative component (to do) refers to a person's tendencies or intentions to act in a certain way.

Today's consumers rely on the expertise of colleagues, friends and even strangers with whom they interact in the online environment through social media.

Anyone who has purchased a product and subsequently posted a review or comment on their experience with that product is credited as an expert if the opinion / comment is relevant to their own perception of that product. Their expertise is, most of the times, more important and credible than the messages transmitted by the brands in the same communication media. Millennium III buyers carefully review reviews before embarking on a purchase and are increasingly likely to leave their own feedback after purchase.

Brand perception results from the consumers experiences with a brand. Companies must pay the same attention to brand perception as to marketing strategies and creating new brands [10].

There are many stages of a brand, starting with awareness and ending with brand loyalty. As a consumer first becomes aware of a brand, their experiences and interactions with it ultimately culminate into brand perception. If the right experiences take place, it could establish a lifetime of brand equity [8].

Perception, on the other hand, is defined as a mental impression of something as a result of its interpretation through the senses. Combined with our understanding of what a brand is, brand perception is how consumers interpret a brand based on sensory information gathered through interactions with it. Put a little more simply, it's how consumers think, feel, and react to a brand based on their experiences with it.

Brand perception can be formed as the results of a large set of interactions. An experience with a brand can be subsequent to a discussion with relatives, checking online posts, viewing an advertisement. All of this sensory stimulus can be translated into a mental impression of a brand and determines perceptions of the quality, value, and reputation of that brand for the consumer [13].

How the information gathered on a brand is interpreted by a consumer determines the sentiment or what type of brand perception is likely to result:

Positive: experiences have improved the perception of a brand, and that brand is more likely to become a favourite or top choice for the consumer;

Negative: general dislike or avoidance of a brand as a result of a negative experience with it;

Neutral: no form of an emotional experience has resulted, leading to a consumer to not have feelings one way or another about a brand.

A neutral brand perception can be just as dangerous as a negative one. The goal of any brand is to create a positive, emotional bond with a consumer—only then will brand loyalty result—just one reason that leads us to why brand perception is so important.

Nothing is seemingly more important than what consumers think of your brand, but it's even more than that. In fact, brand perception heavily factors into a consumer's choices in the marketplace. Consumer perceptions of your brand, in addition to your competitor's brand, can heavily influence their purchase intent one way or another. Further, with today's world of social media, it takes on even more significance. Luckily, brand perception, like any relationship, is fluid and can evolve over time. The more experiences and interactions a consumer has with a brand, the greater the potential for their brand perception to change.

Consumers are actually able to appreciate this sentiment and see the change and engage with it. The same can be done for any brand if an understanding of consumers perceptions is present. But brands need to understand the reality of brand perception and stop projecting what they believe to be how consumers perceive without actually asking them.

### **3. Case study on Sport Club Municipal Craiova and its connection with the fans**

The history of Sport Club Municipal Craiova – women handball section begun in 2007 when the section was added in the club portfolio. The team promoted in the National League in the 2009/10 season from Division A. Now Sport Club Municipal Craiova, commonly referred to as S.C.M. Craiova plays in the National League – “Flowers League”, the first competitive league of the Romanian women's handball [4].

SCM Handball Club Craiova use to communicates with its fans through several media, printers including the online media. The club has created a Facebook page where it informs its fans about all sports competitions, but also you can find more pictures and videos from the sports competitions and from the various events that the team does.

Also, on the club's website there is a section for fans with various items to buy, from t-shirts, key chains, hats, mugs, scarves and calendars, badges and wallets or pans and refrigerator magnets, all personalized with the logo. On the main page of the club you can also see the sponsors of the handball team.

On the club's official site we also find events and their calendar, as well as various announcements and decisions about the club as a company, more than the hands-on game itself. Also on the official website we find a page dedicated to the results of the competitions, news about

the club, press releases, conferences and a ranking with the club's position at the time. We can say that through the official website provide a more formal framework to communicate with fans and other media (televisions, newspapers, forums).

Although the club offers to the fans a number of modern methods through which efficient communication can be achieved, it still has work to do with improving the existing web page and facebook page, in order to be able to retain existing fans and increase the number of them. Sport clubs need to use modern technologies to communicate with their fans in a comprehensive manner [3].

#### 4. Research methodology

Regarding the practical part of this work, we used a survey in order to gather information and to draw conclusions regarding the perception that the fans of the Municipal Sports Club Craiova have regarding the brand represented by their favourite team. Due to insufficient in-depth examinations in this area, our paper can be a starting point and a prelude to future investigations that can be based on the existing study. As research methods in this paper we used bibliographic study, where we concentrate on the analysis of specialized literature, and statistic-mathematical method in data processing. This study was conducted between June 25 and August 10 on a sample of 87 people. The questionnaire contained 12 questions that first aimed at creating a profile of people questioned and then followed various aspects of consumers perception and Sport Club Municipal Craiova.

#### 5. Findings and discussions

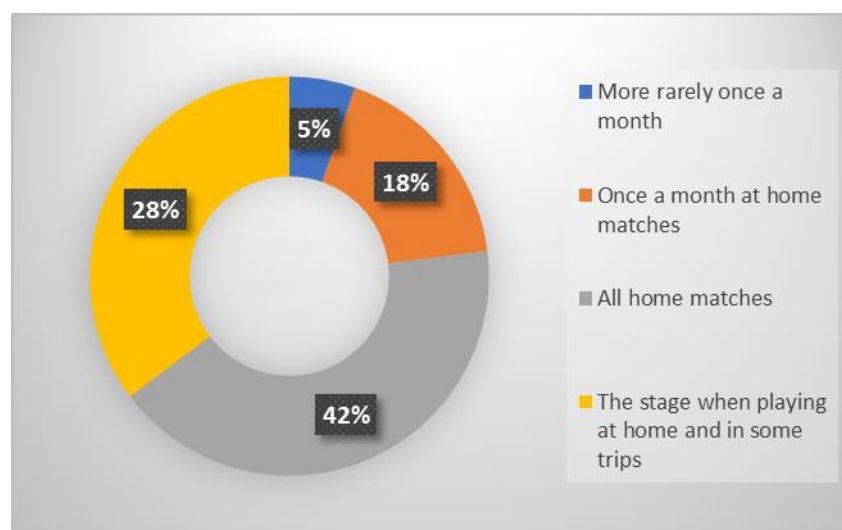
Sample structure is presented in table one. As for the sex of our respondents, we observe that 47% are female and 53% of them are male. between 20 and 30 years of age represented the equivalent of 43% of respondents, 32% of respondents were aged 30-40 years, the equivalent of 20% were aged ranging from 40 to 50 years, and 9 respondents equivalent to 5% are over 50 years of age. The distribution of respondents after the last studies highlighted that 30% of respondents have secondary education, 48% have higher education, and 22% of respondents have post-graduate studies.

**Table 1. Structure of the sample**

Variable	Classification of the variable	Percentage
Gender	Male	53%
	Female	47%
Age	20 – 30 years	43%
	30 – 40 years	32%
	40 – 50 years	20%
	Over 50 years	5%
Study	Highschool	31%
	College	48%
	Postgraduate studies	21%

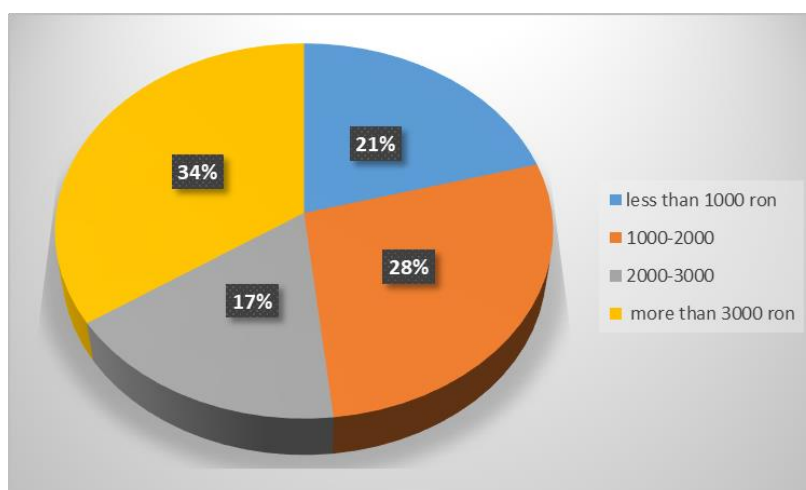
*Source: authors' research*

The next question wanted to highlight the degree of loyalty of the fans, measuring the number of participants in the team matches, so most of them participates in all the matches that take place at home, 28% participate in both the home and the ones that take place in other cities, and 18% go about once a month to the team matches, while 5% respondents go less often (figure 1).



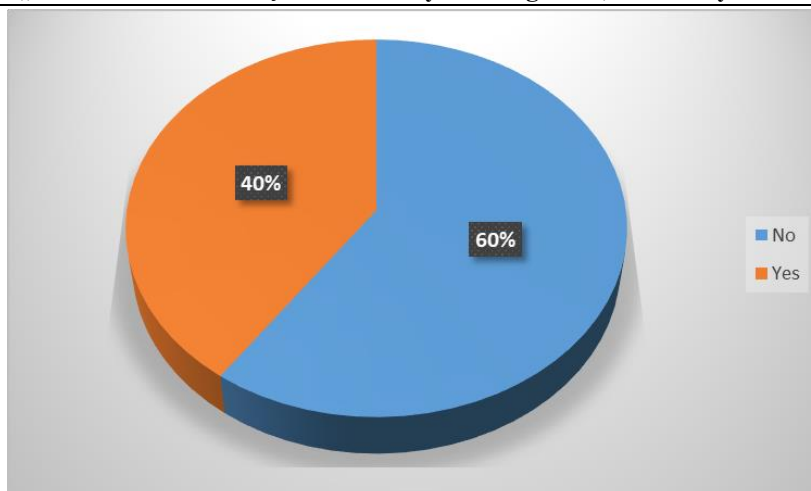
**Figure 1. Percentage frequencies regarding the degree of participation of the fans in the team matches**  
*Source: authors' research*

At the question On average, how much do you spend for sports equipment per year, as shown in the graph below, the two limits are owned by fans who spend less than 1000 ron per year in a proportion of 21% and by those who spend over 3000 ron being represented by 34% of the respondents of our study (figure 2).



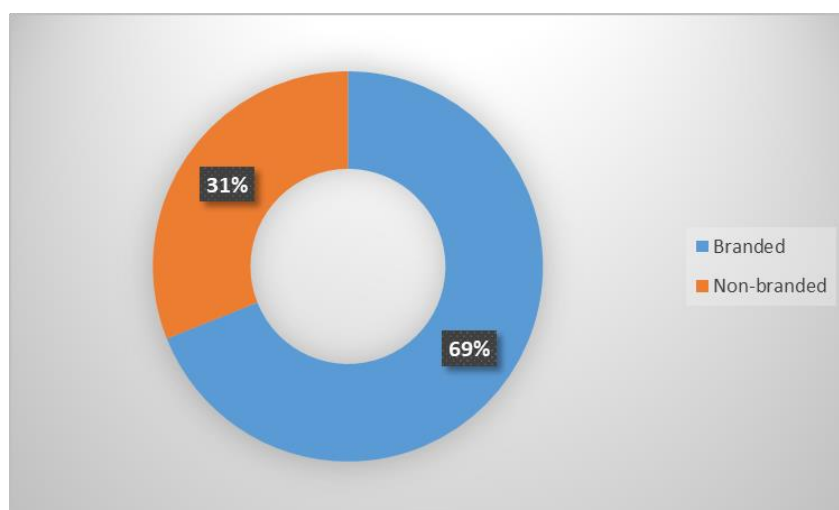
**Figure 2. Percentage frequencies of amount spent per year for sport equipment**  
*Source: authors' research*

Next, we wanted to find out if the fan preferences for a particular brand change over time due to the intervention of elements such as team composition, number of matches won or the communication channels used by the club. Thus, our fans are not easily influenced by these aspects, 60% of them remaining loyal to the sports team (figure 3).



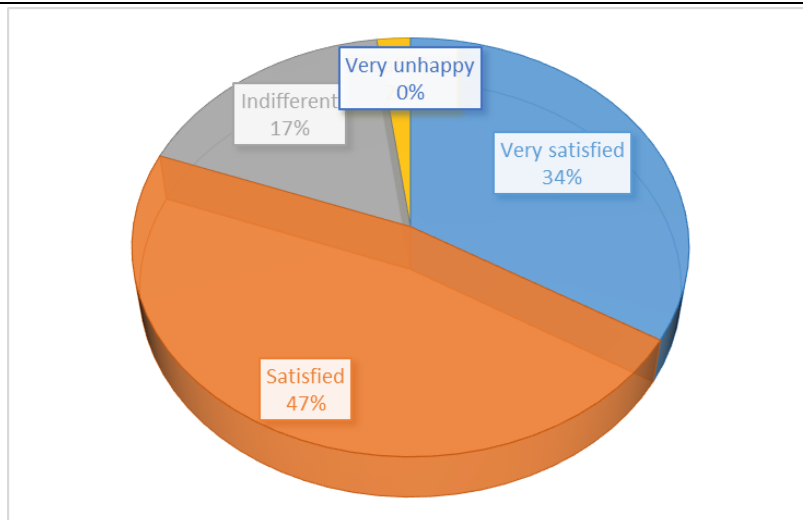
**Figure 3. Percentage frequencies of the fan preferences for a particular brand**  
*Source: authors' research*

When it comes to purchasing sports products/services, the participants in our study, all fans of the club SCM Craiova, prefer the articles branded with SCM Craiova logo, in a proportion of 69%, an aspect that supports the theoretical notions presented above (figure 4).



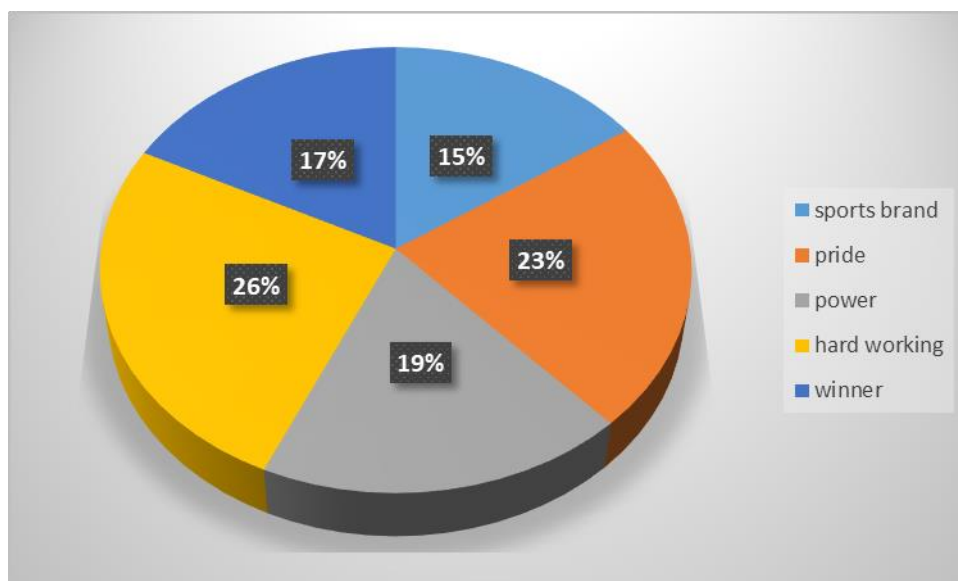
**Figure 4. Percentage frequencies of the fan preferences when it comes to sports gear**  
*Source: authors' research*

Next, we wanted to see if the club's involvement in an active communication on various social networks or communication channels, with the fans of the sports team has any influence on the perception that the fans have on the sports team that they support. Thus, the vast majority, 47% are satisfied with the degree of involvement, 34% are very satisfied (figure 5).



**Figure 5. Percentage frequencies of the involvement of the club in active communication**  
 Source: authors' research

When we asked the respondents to associate the image of the club with the first word that comes to mind, the people participating in this study had only praise words to their favorite team. Thus, most associate the handball team with hard work or pride, 19% consider it a strong team that always manages to overcome obstacles, 17% see it as always winning, and 15% consider it to be a sports brand (figure 6).

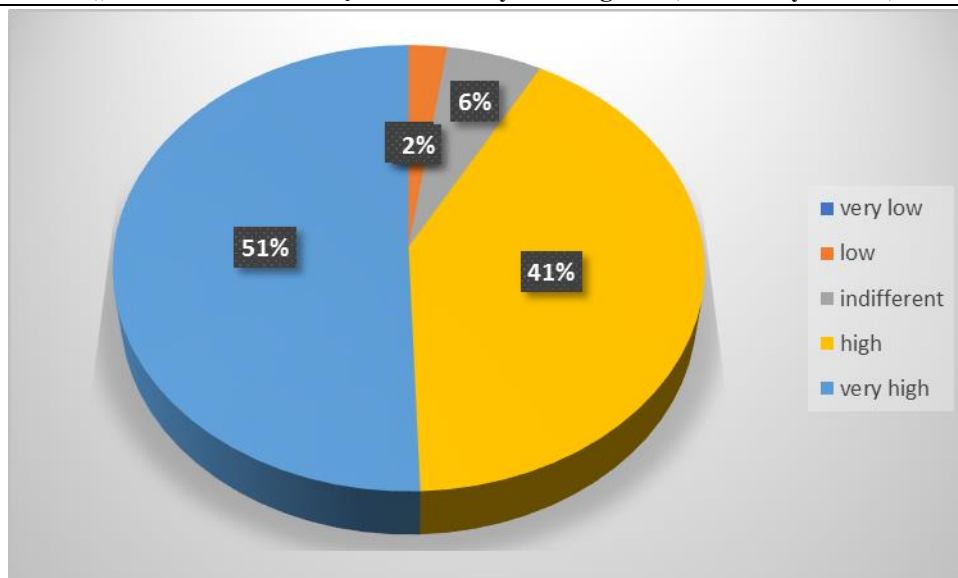


**Figure 6. Percentage frequencies based on the first word with which the respondents associate the club**  
 Source: authors' research

Regarding the degree of emotional attachment to the team of the interviewees, the respondents had the choice of attachment level on a scale from 1 to 5, 1- being the lowest grade and 5- the highest grade, their answers may be observed in the graph below.

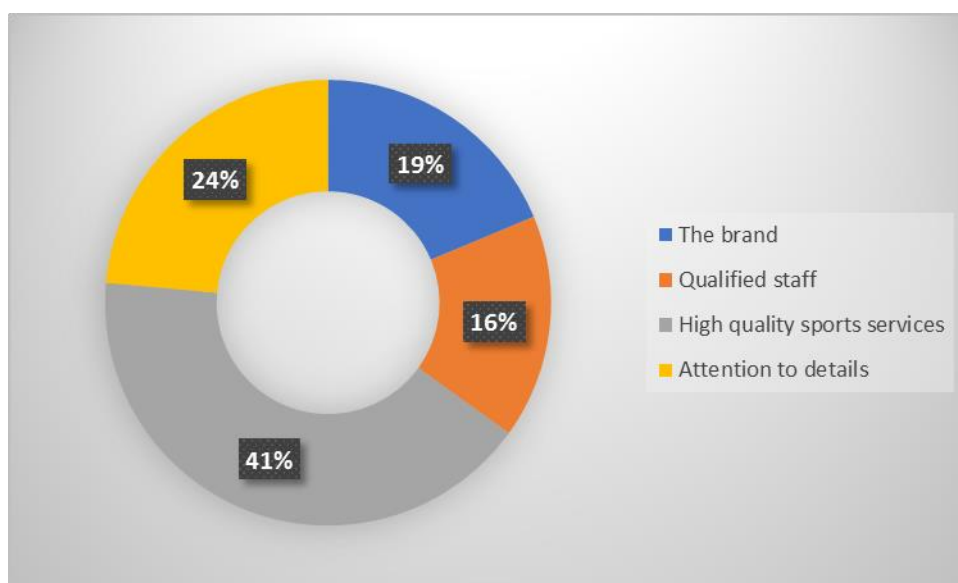
As expected the great majority have a high degree (the equivalent of 41%), or very high (the equivalent of 51%) of emotional attachment to SCM Craiova (figure 7).





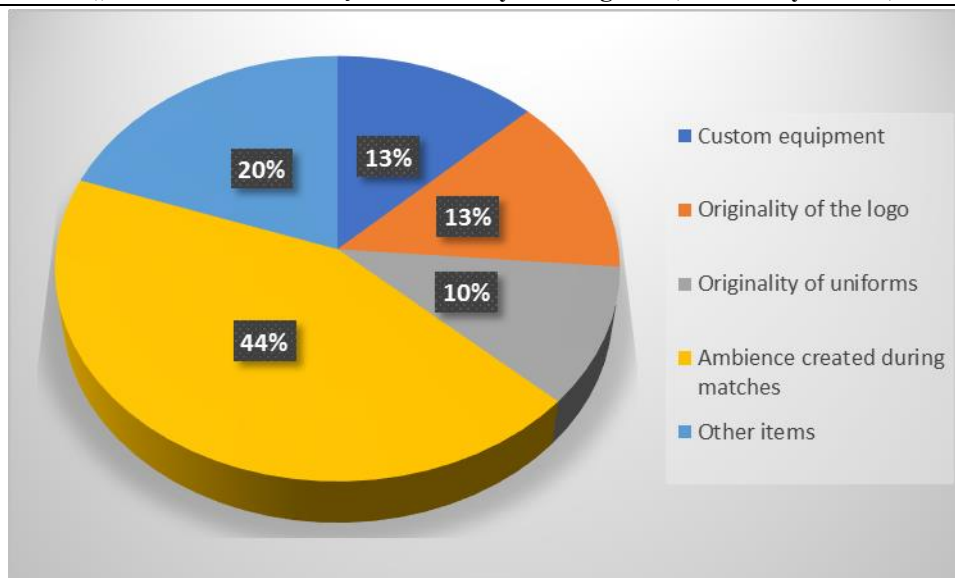
**Figure 7. Degree of emotional attachment with the team**  
 Source: authors' research

The fans who participated in this study consider that the most important assets of the SCM CRAIOVA club are represented by high quality of sports services with 41%, followed by attention to details with a share of 23% and the branding power by 19% (figure 8).



**Figure 8. Distribution based on the main points of the club**  
 Source: authors' research

The last question is concerned on the opinion of the participants in the study regarding the main elements that make up this sports brand called SCM Craiova. As can be seen in the figure below, they have proposed various elements, printer during the matches, the team logo, team equipment or other elements. The ambiance created during the games is considered the main way of remarking the services within the SCM Craiova club, accounting for 44% (figure 9).



**Figure 9. Attachment with the brand elements of SCM Craiova**  
*Source: authors' research*

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper we presented a point of view on the impact and importance that must be given to the perceptions that are formed in relation to a certain sports brand at the level of its fans. The conclusions we have obtained from this study refer to the fact that perceptions are actually some mental connections that the fans establish as a result of the interaction with a certain brand. These perceptions are based on the information the brain gathers about how consumers think, feel or react to the interactions they have with a brand.

It is very important for any brand, not just sport brands, to know these perceptions of the fans in order to be able to improve or increase the reputation and image of the brand. Thus, this study represents only a starting point for future research on consumer perception, due to limitations on insufficient analysis in this field or due to the small number of survey participants. The study offers important findings however. Fan attachment to the club remain high even if the results are poor but the attendance rates might decrease. The club communication with the fans is appreciated that does not mean that there is no room to improve some aspects in the communication process. Fans require communication using modern technology which is both convenient and speedy. Communication with fans is used to build emotional attachment. The fans of SCM Craiova embrace a high level of emotional attachment.

Sport club must embrace creating strong brands to elicit fans involvement even when sports results are not so great. In the absence of sustainable sport results or remarkable sport history, the communication with the fans, the branded equipment, the fans-players meeting and the atmosphere during the games are the main elements that can contribute to the development of strong sport brands.

## 7. Bibliography

- [1] **Aaker, D. A.**, "Building strong brands", London, England: Simon & Schuster, 2002;
- [2] **Aaker, David A.**, Erich Joachimsthaler, "Brand Leadership, London, Free Press, 2000;
- [3] **Barbu, C.M., Șomăcescu, S.M.**, Challenges of the Organizational Communication in the Context of the New Technologies, Journal of Advanced Research in Economics and International Business 4 (5), pp. 4-8, 2016;

- [4] **Barbu, M.C.R., Popescu, S.S., Popescu, M.C.**, Sport clubs interaction with the fans using social media communications. Case study at SCM Craiova. *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai Educatio Artis Gymnasticae*, 64(1), pp. 31-43, 2019;
- [5] **Brătucu, G., Dima D.** (coordonatori) *Marketing în turism*, Editura Psihomedica, Sibiu, 2000;
- [6] **Chaudhuri, A., Holbrook M. B.**, "The chain of effects from brand trust and brand effect to brand performance: The role of brand loyalty", *Journal of Marketing* 65: pp. 81-93, 2001;
- [7] **Constantinescu, D.**, *Management. Functions. Structures. Processes*, Universitaria Publishing House, Craiova, 2008;
- [8] **Florea D.L., Barbu C. M., Barbu M. C. R.**, A model of fans' reaction to resurrected brands of sport organizations, magazine *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 19(2), pp. 127-146, 2018;
- [9] **Kapferer, J.**, "The new strategic brand management: Creating and sustaining brand equity long term (4. edition ed.)", London, England: Kogan Page, 2008;
- [10] **Kotler, P., Wong, V., Saunders, J., Armstrong, G.**, "Principles of marketing", Harlow, UK. Pearson Education Limited, 2005;
- [11] **Kotler, P.**, "A framework for marketing management", Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001;
- [12] **Nilson, T. H.**, "Competitive branding", New York, New York, United States of America: John Wiley & Sons, 2000;
- [13] **Pickton, D., Broderick, A.**, "Integrated marketing communications (2. edition ed.)", Harlow, England: Prentice Hall, 2005;
- [14] **Solomon, M.**, *Consumer Behavior: Buying, Having, and Being*. New Jersey, Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education Inc. Eight Edition, 2009.