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FROM THINKING TO FEELING - HEURISTICS IN SPORTS MEDIA MARKETING¹

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Abstract: In this paper, we take a closer look at heuristics, especially the affective and fast decision-making shortcuts that play a role in how consumers select sports media. Our aim is to unravel how different emotional and cognitive shortcuts in the minds of consumers influence their interaction with sports content and advertising. By combining the Psychological Continuum Model, Uses and Gratifications theory, and heuristic processing, we create a comprehensive framework to explore how consumers behave in the sports media world. Such an integrated strategy provides insights for the sports sector, which can contribute to more effective and adequate creation of emotionally compelling and tailored media strategies. By combining theoretical analysis with practical examples, this paper highlights how emotionally impactful messages and straightforward visual signals can boost consumers' brand recall, strengthen loyalty, and sway their purchasing decisions.

Keywords: heuristics, consumer engagement, affective decision-making, media strategy, sports marketing

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Introduction

Instead of applying a methodical approach to each decision, people use heuristics to make it easier to retrieve and store information in their memories (Dale, 2015). Heuristics work best when individuals have to make decisions quickly, when probabilities or utilities are uncertain, or when poorly stated problems make it impossible for logic or probability theory to provide the best answer. Similar to the hammers and screwdrivers in a handyman's toolbox, people's minds function similarly in this situation, drawing from a variety of heuristics designed for particular kinds of issues (Gigerenzer, 2008).

When our present mood or emotional state affects our decision-making, it's known as the affect heuristic. We act on our instincts and react in accordance with our emotions rather than assessing the issue impartially. The affective heuristic may therefore result in less-than-ideal choices (Nikolopoulou, 2022). Simple, task-specific decision-making techniques known as "fast-and-frugal heuristics" are a component of a decision maker's cognitive toolkit for accomplishing judgement and decision-making tasks. In a variety of domains (such as business and management), fast-and-frugal heuristics have a track record of producing precise decision-making outcomes in the face of ambiguity (Love et al., 2023).

Marketers have long understood that appealing to emotions rather than just intellect is necessary if they wish to establish a connection with their target audience (Baltezarević, Milić, 2021). Professional and amateur athletes are now so popular that their appeal extends beyond the field of play to the realm of popular culture and celebrity. Modern sports coverage of these sportsmen has increased dramatically as a result of growing media saturation.

Heuristic and emotional mechanisms are an important factor that can influence consumer behavior in sports marketing. In the sports environment, consumers are very often exposed to information that is charged with emotions that make them make quick decisions. This can be explained by affective heuristics, which precisely defines emotions as the main motivator in decision-making, that is, in the case of fast-and-frugal heuristics, when the consumer uses simple cues, such as slogans, symbols, logos or famous personalities, which help him in the process of quick judgment.

Affective and Fast and Frugal Heuristics in Sports Media and Advertising

When time, information, and processing capabilities are limited, heuristics are commonly used (Guercini, Milanese, 2020). Heuristics, to put it simply, are rules of thumb or mental shortcuts (Kahneman, 2013). Because of recent advancements over the past few decades, researchers are beginning to recognise the importance of affective states in human decision-making (Västfjäll et al., 2016). Experience-based thinking is characterised by its emotive foundation. Even though deliberative analyses are undoubtedly crucial in many situations involving decision-making, depending on affect and emotion as information sources is typically a faster, simpler, and more effective method to get by in a world that is complicated, ambiguous, and occasionally deadly (Schwarz, Clore, 1988).

When people form judgements about things or situations that are characterised by valenced affect, this is known as the affect heuristic. An effective way to save time and effort in many situations for both humans and animals is to consult the emotive impression with which something is tagged rather than doing tedious computations and utility maximisations (Slovic et al., 2007). To verify the stability of the relationship between risk perception and affect beyond correlations of explicit self-reported ratings, Dohle et al. (2010) developed a novel approach to examine the affective component of risk perception by establishing this link using a version of the implicit association test (Dohle et al., 2010).

According to a recent study by Kusev et al. (2020), the choice options that respondents had influenced their risk preferences. The authors contend that preferences are essentially unstable for each individual and that risk preferences are created "on the fly" during risk elicitation. As a result, context and available options have an impact on risk preferences. Therefore, the affective heuristic is a form of cognitive bias that influences judgement. When assessing a situation, we use our feelings rather than objective facts. For speedy issue solving, this can also be used as a shortcut. Affect can be understood in this context as a) a human emotional state, like joy or sorrow. b) a characteristic linked to a stimulus, which is anything that motivates us to take action, such as words, sounds, or temperature variations. People often feel compelled to be efficient or just choose the alternative that seems the greatest when they are under a time constraint to make a decision. They consequently turn to mental shortcuts or heuristics. When faced with making a decision but without the knowledge or time to think more thoroughly, the affect heuristic leads us to turn to our feelings and emotions (Nikolopoulou, 2022).

Emotions impact our decision-making, which in turn impacts our lives. It has been demonstrated that when we are feeling good, we are more inclined to think that an activity has additional benefits and fewer hazards (Skagerlund et al., 2020). On the other side, we are more likely to see an activity as having high danger and little to no advantages if we are in a bad emotional state (Brush, 2011). Fast-and-frugal heuristics are straightforward, task-specific decision-making techniques that are a component of a decision-maker's cognitive toolkit for resolving judgement and decision-making challenges. In situations that are complex and unclear or when there is a limited sample size from which to draw conclusions, they have been demonstrated to produce superior decision results than statistical methods, including probabilistic and stochastic approaches (Love et al., 2023). The fast-and-frugal-heuristics program is unique in that it outlines formal models of heuristics and makes an effort to ascertain when people apply them and what kind of results they get. These models are based on a small number of data points that are handled in straightforward computational manners. Because the information and processing are accessible to humans, people use basic operations like adding up or comparing numbers and rely on information that is rather easy to obtain (Katsikopoulos, 2020). Fast and frugal heuristics significantly reduce the quantity of data taken into account while making decisions. "Overfitting" is the term used to describe treating every detail as significant. This can improve a model's fit to the data, but it can also make it less effective at generalisation, or forecasting new data. By disregarding less important information, which frequently contains more noise, a fast and frugal analysis can be more reliable (Broken Science, 2023).

Sport advertising in both traditional and modern media has significantly increased as a result of the growing collaborations between the media and the sports business (Kim, Cheong, 2011). Sports products (such as sneakers, swimming goggles, or badminton rackets) are perceived differently by consumers than other products (like laptops and pharmaceuticals), which can be a useful tool for influencing a purchase. Sports products therefore appear to have a distinctive quality that makes them useful for persuasive advertising. Sports merchandise is also known for its capacity to shape people's outward identities (Ohl, Taks, 2007).

The literature on marketing and advertising has extensively examined the emotional/rational framework. Advertising stimuli that clearly and rationally present accurate, precise, and reasonably trustworthy information (price, quantity) about the brand and the product are known as rational appeals (Bansal, Gupta, 2014). Emotional appeals, on the other hand, trigger one's emotions and subtly and implicitly address brands and product marketing by using various psychological traits to set one brand apart from another (Okazaki et al., 2013). According to Teichert et

al. (2018), emotional appeals mostly focus on love, humour, joy, etc., and they motivate consumers to behave in ways that advertisers desire. Given that a brand has the capacity to pique the consumer's interest through innovation, it is imperative that the experience it provides be unique and memorable in order to develop an emotional bond (Baltezarević, 2016).

Sports events in a large number of cases cause great excitement and emotional charge among consumers. This is the main reason why they just remember those experiences while watching sports commercials. It can be said that consumer attitudes, as well as future choices, can be influenced by many different emotions that sports events or activities cause in people (Siani et al., 2021). As far as fast-and-frugal advertising is concerned, these are situations when advertising messages are simplified and recognizable symbols, visual and emotional signals are used. This is recommended in the world of marketing and advertising precisely because the audience in sports environments most often makes quick decisions while their attention is limited (Hauser, 2011).

Emotional advertising messages, in contrast to rational ones, had a significantly greater influence on the attitude towards the intention to purchase the advertisement itself, according to Siana et al. (2021), who conducted a study on a sample of 160 young consumers of sports products. Also, this study showed that emotional appeals work better with hedonic products, but in cases where the products were utilitarian, rational appeals proved to be more successful. In an earlier study involving 324 participants, researchers examined three different categories of advertising appeals (rational, emotional, and combined). The results showed that emotional ads were at the top of the list, and they proved to be excellent for influencing consumers in situations such as buying sports equipment or brand perception. Ads that were a mix of emotional and rational elements received more views than ads that only contained rational elements, but they were still far from the power of emotional ads (Lee & Heere, 2018). According to a study conducted by Richardson et al. (2023), human emotions (such as uncertainty and surprise) have a measurable and significant influence on the number of spectators of UCL matches in some European countries (such as Great Britain and Spain). It can be concluded that moments of strong affective stimulation of consumers can increase audience reach, which marketing experts can of course take advantage of. One example could be placing ads right after key sports surprises or after the most interesting situations from the game.

As for specific examples from practice, one of the most famous campaigns of the Gatorade company is "Be Like Mike", in which the famous American basketball player Michael Jordan symbolizes the sports ideal, but also success and desirability.

Through the emotion of admiration (and the desire for identification), consumers quickly recognize the brand, which represents a strong emotional sign. A marketing strategy uses an affective response, such as pride, motivation or desire in combination with a famous person (as a heuristic signal). In this way, a quick emotional connection is made possible and, in such cases, there is no need for consumers to analyze the product in an additional rational way (Prime vs Gatorade, 2024).

Another example in this area that is definitely worth mentioning comes from Under Armour, their “Rule Yourself” campaign successfully created an emotional story focused on perseverance and self-discipline. This campaign, with the help of minimalist content (to highlight the athletes in training), strengthened and simplified the message that reads: “You are the sum of all your training.” With this approach, they helped the audience, i.e. consumers, to understand the message more precisely without burdening them. On the other hand, the emotional and visual aspects helped create a strong bond with the athletes (Chandrasekhar, 2018).

People give the outcomes they conceive of initially the highest value or likelihood, according to Yocco (2016). Juventus post features images that serve as a reminder of “the best skills in the UEFA Champions League.” This portrays top-notch football and seeks to establish (and maintain) the Juventus name as the first thing that comes to mind when people think about top-notch football (Mereu, 2017).

Finally, one must not forget the significant example of Nike's “The Winner Remains” campaign. She connected well-known football figures and legendary details from matches, thus creating a strong sense of excitement and rivalry. For consumers, athletes represent cues, which further evokes in them emotions such as passion and excitement, which ultimately contributes to the creation of a favorable impression of the brand (Newman, 2014).

After a theoretical review and consideration of examples from practice, it becomes clear that sports advertising effectively combines quick (instinctive reactions) with emotional connections. In this way, it enables the messages to be understood quickly without a large cognitive load, while at the same time affecting our emotions. By using these marketing strategies in a sports context, it is possible to increase brand recognition, influence consumer loyalty and make purchasing decisions. In the end, all this can contribute positively to the return on investment (ROI).

Consumer Engagement in Sports Media through Uses and Gratifications, Psychological Continuum and Heuristic Influence

According to the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, sports media not only provide consumers with information and experiences but also offer enjoyment, a sense of identity, and a chance for social interaction. Based on a recent study that analyzed football fans from Switzerland, the results showed that information, entertainment and positive emotions are among the most sought-after pleasures in all segments. However, the priority and intensity of these motivations change depending on the profile of the fans, i.e. they depend on how they interact, how often they follow sports events on the media and to what extent they identify with their sports (soccer) club (Gächter et al., 2024). Sports fans watch events on streaming services 62% of the time, while roughly 75% watch on cable or broadcast TV (Advanced-television, 2025). Which implies that the factors that satisfy sports consumers are speed, type of media and ease of use.

The general parameters within which a relationship between an athlete, sport, or individual is mediated are specified by the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM). The object-related link (such as a team or sport) is seen as replaceable inside the PCM framework. The model is an example of a cognitive method that unifies current theories and research on fan behaviour under a single conceptual heading. To describe the many psychological bonds that supporters and spectators of sports may develop with particular teams and games, four broad limits that run along a vertical continuum are conceptualised. The four stages of psychology that sports customers go through are awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance, according to PCM. The emotional and behavioural dedication to the sport as a whole (either to the team or to the sport content) improves with each of these levels (Funk, James, 2001).

To encourage gradual advancement up the PCM, managerial levers created through relationship marketing could be put into practice. The four levels that are typically linked to relationship marketing offer suggestions for promoting progression along the spectrum. Financial bonding, the initial stage of relationship marketing, focusses on offering monetary advantages like reduced costs. Moving from attraction to attachment may be facilitated by the second level, social connection. Recognising sports fans and giving them a sense of importance helps foster social and interpersonal ties. Customisation and structural bonding, the third and fourth layers of relationship marketing, may facilitate the transition from attachment to allegiance. Customising experiences and services for each person is the main goal of customisation bonding. When it comes to sports or teams, the goal is to find out what supporters want from their bond with the team and then try to meet those needs.

Social connection fosters customisation, which aims to personalise experiences for each person. Offering services that are tailored to a particular client or consumer (such as venue kiosks or fan loyalty programs), frequently utilising technology, is known as structural bonding (Ziethaml, Bitner, 2000).

Media exposure plays a key role in helping consumers move up this continuum. However, as less popular sports (such as parkour or longboarding) often do not receive enough media attention, they largely opt for online video content to attract supporters and raise consumer awareness. According to research results, most of the content created by niche sports organizations serves primarily to inform and attract before deeper engagement occurs (Mahoney et al., 2014).

As we have already discussed in this paper, heuristic influences are present when consumers (viewers) choose which content to interact with based on simple and quick indications. Emotive stories, material that is visually enriched with images and video content, a famous (favorite) athlete or sports team, but also online likes, comments and sharing content are just some examples of heuristic cues. Consumers will more easily interact with sports content when it highlights their favorite athlete or in some way inspires loyalty to the team. A good example of heuristics enabling fast decision-making is demonstrated in the field of live sports broadcasting. In such circumstances, consumers' intention to use or pay for such services is significantly conditioned by perceived enjoyment, viewing quality, social benefits, and of course convenience (Li et al., 2024).

Sports consumers can better understand the reasons why they interact with sports content if an integrated approach is used that includes the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM), Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) and of course heuristic processing. The stages of psychological connection are described by PCM, the motivations that lead consumers through the levels (such as the desire for fun, identity or social interaction) are explained by U&G theory, and fast (automatic) signals that encourage engagement (especially when attention or involvement is low) are described by heuristics. Such a combination would be particularly effective and useful for marketing experts in creating customized media strategies, which would be aligned with the goals of sports consumers, which would correspond to their current psychological state and which would take advantage of their quick decision-making processes. Also, sports organizations could, for example, provide emotionally engaging content that meets certain requirements, matches the level of consumer engagement, and includes strong heuristic cues (such as famous athletes, images, etc.). In any case, this integrated model is proposed as a future strategic framework in the field of sports media, in order to enable more successful interaction with the audience in the digital sports media space. This model certainly has great potential, despite the fact that it is still not widely implemented in practice.

Discussion

This study looked into how heuristics, particularly affective and fast-and-frugal decision-making shortcuts, influence how consumers engage with sports media content. By blending the heuristic perspective with the psychological continuum model (PCM) and the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, we've developed a comprehensive framework that takes into account both the long-term psychological growth of sports fans and their immediate emotional responses. Our research reveals that emotional triggers such as pride, excitement, and identification play a major role in influencing how consumers choose and engage with sports media content. Amid the chaos of modern life, where attention spans are fleeting, consumers tend to lean on quick signals to help them make choices. Think of well-known athletes, team logos, catchy emotional slogans, or the social media buzz of likes and shares. These cues help simplify the decision-making process, allowing people to skip the lengthy, logical deliberations.

Sports are packed with emotion, and that's why the affect heuristic is so prominent in sports media. Sports marketing takes advantage of our deep emotional connections and memories, which is quite different from other advertising forms where people might take a closer look at the claims. This is further supported by fast-and-frugal heuristics, allowing people to swiftly absorb marketing messages, particularly in the digital space where we encounter information in brief, impactful snippets.

When we dive into the PCM, it really sheds light on how consumers navigate through different levels of involvement, starting from mere awareness and eventually landing at loyalty. In those early stages, heuristic cues are essential for sparking interest and fostering emotional connections. As customers dive deeper into their experiences, their motivations shift towards finding satisfaction in things like entertainment, affirming their identity, and building social connections. The interplay between heuristic mechanisms and the U&G framework suggests that for sustained engagement, content needs to emotionally resonate with what consumers are after.

Customers definitely have their own ways of reacting to these strategies. According to recent studies, the role of social, informational, and emotional factors can vary widely among different types of fans. This really emphasizes the need for tailored approaches. Likewise, niche sports that don't get as much spotlight often utilize on-line media and visually appealing content to increase consumer awareness. In these situations, the success of a campaign really depends on how well it employs quick, engaging elements to capture attention and foster loyalty.

While the proposed model offers a solid starting point for understanding customer engagement, it's important to acknowledge its limitations. To kick things off, the analysis remains largely theoretical. To truly confirm the suggested causal relationships, we would need empirical validation through methods like surveys, experiments, or longitudinal studies. Additionally, the model assumes that the PCM stages move along smoothly, but in reality, various contextual, situational, or emotional factors can lead to changes in how consumers engage. Moreover, even though the paper highlights emotional and heuristic processes, it doesn't dive deeply into the potential impact of media literacy or cognitive resistance, which could lessen the effectiveness of those heuristic cues.

The model we're suggesting should be empirically tested in a range of sports situations in upcoming studies, focusing on how the effectiveness of heuristics varies with the sport, platform, audience demographics, or the level of fan involvement. It's really important to think about how emotional and rational appeals work together, especially when it comes to sports organizations finding the right balance for effective marketing strategies. By realizing that fans often make swift emotional decisions while also catering to their deeper psychological needs, marketing experts can produce sports media content that's more captivating, precisely aimed, and truly impactful.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that the interaction between heuristic cues, psychological drivers, and emotional reactions plays a significant role in how consumers engage with sports media. We've introduced a comprehensive framework that illustrates how consumers relate to sports information and brands by merging affective and fast-and-frugal heuristics with the Uses and Gratifications theory and the Psychological Continuum Model. Heuristics are crucial during the initial stages of customer interaction, as they enable quick emotional responses and simplify decision-making. This is especially important in sports marketing, where consumers are often overwhelmed with stimuli and need to make fast decisions.

The findings suggest that emotionally charged components, including impactful visuals, renowned sports figures, and touching stories, work best when they resonate with the consumer's feelings and their main aspirations. During the awareness and attraction phases, heuristic signals should take the lead, while more personalized and structured engagement strategies should be prioritized in the deeper stages, such as attachment and loyalty. This dynamic interaction highlights the importance of a strategic and stage-sensitive approach to sports media marketing.

This study serves as a strong foundation for future empirical research and real-world applications, even though it's rooted in theory. To build lasting brand loyalty and enhance the media experience, it's crucial to focus on what consumers want and use simple decision-making shortcuts. This is particularly vital as digital platforms evolve and change the way sports fans connect with content.

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