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## Mental associations of sports brands among Djiboutian athletes: Exploratory approach

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This exploratory research aims to identify the mental associations of sports brands among Djiboutian sports practitioners in order to better adapt the marketing strategy in order to position themselves firmly in the sports market.

**Methodology/Approach:** The study used thematic content analysis based on the technique of individual semi-structured interviews that we conducted with sports brands consumers.

**Results:** The results of the verbatim analyzes made it possible to identify seven main themes regarding the subject of sports brands. The complementary results concerning the impact of age show that two themes are stable at all age levels, three themes increase with age and two themes decrease with age.

**Practical implications:** The information from the mental associations of sports brands among sports enthusiasts, consumers of the brands reveal (to marketers) on which dimensions to position themselves the most and which age target for this or that offer. The results of this study will contribute to innovating or consolidating the marketing strategy to be put in place.

**Originality/Value:** This study proposes another method, certainly qualitative, but explorable in an emergency situation, in a time-saving situation and in the event of a limited number of research participants (subjects) to be solicited. It could therefore be of interest in filling a methodological gap that is often slow and constraining.

**Keywords:** Athletes, mental associations, sports brands

### Introduction

As in other sectors, the brands are also very well-known and very present in the sports world. The origin of the brand goes back of course to a distant past (1000 years before J.-C.), the first logotype is created by craftsmen who impregnated on the bottom of the vases of the initials symbolizing their names <sup>[1]</sup>.

Since then, the brand has continued to evolve, often propelled by the development of trade and industry. Today, it is almost inconceivable to see a product without the brand <sup>[2]</sup>. What originally seemed like a “product-brand” duality is now becoming a symbiotic unit because the brand gives meaning to the products with which it is associated <sup>[3]</sup>. In this sense, brand consumers acquire, transmit and develop technical and theoretical information on the products associated with the brand. From the outset, it is thanks to the brand that consumers can authenticate products whose properties and provenance they know. After having experienced the brand, consumers will end up evaluating it either positively or negatively <sup>[4, 5]</sup>. If the experience remains disappointing, consumers may adopt negative word-of-mouth behavior. On the other hand, if the experience with the brand is positive, the behavioral responses would be preference and purchase intention <sup>[6, 7]</sup>.

In short, practitioners and academics precisely need to know what is said about branded products and how this social knowledge is developing. To access these universes of knowledge, it would be interesting to access the mental associations of consumers with brands. In other words, it is necessary to identify in the consumer's speech, the thoughts that come to mind when he thinks or when he talks about a brand.

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## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participant

The target population was composed mainly of Djiboutian athletes and more specifically those who practice football or athletics. The choice of footballers and athletes is justified on the one hand because of the popularity of these two sports in the Republic of Djibouti, and on the other hand because of the ease of finding these athletes in sufficient numbers in Djibouti. This investigation took place as close as possible to the athletes and in particular at the training sites. A total of 12 athletes aged 18 to 31 responded to our requests. The average age of the sample is 24.66 years. In addition to the sport practiced, the participants provided additional information, in particular on their professional status and level of study.

### 2.2 Design

Information on the mental associations of sports brands was obtained through interviews with sportsmen (footballers and athletes) in Djibouti. The interview is a method commonly used in research on social representation<sup>[8, 9, 10]</sup>, and can have various functions depending on the objectives sought. It is essentially based on a report involving two people, namely the researcher and the respondent. It can be used on an exploratory basis to identify the global characteristics of the representations of a certain number of people. It can also be used for the main purpose and finally it is possible to use it as a supplement or as a control<sup>[8]</sup>.

#### 2.2.1 Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview remains the most widely used in research in management sciences. It is carried out using an interview guide (or grid or Canvas), a sort of list of themes/subjects to be discussed with all the respondents<sup>[11]</sup>. The semi-structured interview is neither fully open nor fully closed. Typically, the researcher has a number of relatively open-ended themes or guiding questions that they want the interviewee to answer. But he does not necessarily ask all the questions in the order in which he wrote them down and in their exact wording. There is more freedom for the researcher but also for the respondent. As much as possible, the researcher lets the interviewee come so that he can speak openly, in the words he wants and in the order that suits him. The researcher simply tries to refocus the interview on the themes that interest him when the interview deviates from them, he must intervene so that the interviewee addresses the planned themes without him feeling under pressure from of the interviewer. For Quivy and Campenhoudt<sup>[12]</sup>. It is the form which is certainly the most used in research.

#### 2.2.2 Interview

The interview grid was developed according to the semi-structured interview process, i.e. an interview guide including the different themes was designed to then make it possible to implement the survey. According to Moliner *et al.*<sup>[8]</sup>, it is not necessary to carry out a very large number of exploratory interviews "experience shows that, most of the time, ten to fifteen interviews are sufficient to achieve the objectives pursued". Creswell<sup>[13]</sup> also recommends interviewing about ten people in phenomenological research and twenty to thirty people in grounded theory. As for the conduct of the interview, the guide will provide support since the topic of the interview is defined beforehand and the reminders will be structured according to the circumstances of the engagement of the speech. Thus, we have made sure that all the themes of the guide are covered in order to collect a wide range of information.

### 2.3 Statistical Analyzes

The interviews were carried out over a period of three weeks in September 2017, and were recorded using a Dictaphone. The interviews were carried out on the training grounds of footballers and athletes. Subsequently, the contents of the interviews were transcribed in writing.

The exploitation of the corpus was carried out with the textual data analysis software TROPES V.845 which makes it possible to carry out an in-depth analysis of the content by distributing the words in different universes of references ("lexical worlds") identified by the researchers<sup>[11]</sup>. In fact, this software allows us to categorize and identify words of various origins as well as their ranks and frequencies of appearance. Clearly, we will rely on the different reference universes to identify the latent themes in the entire corpus.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The reading of the entire corpus made it possible to identify seven main themes. The results in Table 1 show that the points of view of the subjects questioned are primarily focused on the theme of "sports and leisure" (35.5%), followed respectively by the themes "characteristics of brands" (23.4%), "people and social groups" (13.96%), "merchandising" (8.26%), "behaviors and feelings" (8%), "clothing" (6.73%), and finally "communications and media" (4.08%). To better understand the organizational logic of these different themes and to see more clearly the different mental associations of respondents, we also tried to capture the moderating variable "age" which is likely to change the final results.

**Table 1:** Themes and keywords obtained from content analysis.

Classes	Classes of associated words	Themes
Class 1	Games (15), player (14), athletics (16), competition (8), running (4), adidas (59), Nike (55), athletics (25), soccer (17), brand (63), sports (43)	Sports and recreation
Class 2	Expensive (4), color (7), difference (6), big (5), existence (5), fame (6), idol (4), quality (21)	Brand Features
Class 3	Family (5), people (25), clubs (32), group (4), Usain bolt (4)	People & Social Groups
Class 4	Funding (14), sponsor (14), store (5) market (9), price (11), product (21)	Merchandising
Class 5	Rivalry (5), value judgment (16), visibility (9), taste (5), friendship (13)	Behaviors & Feelings
Class 6	Footwear (15), jersey (24), shorts (4), garment (13)	Clothing
Class 7	Communication (25), advertising (13), television (7)	Communications & Media

### Theme n°1: Sports and Leisure

This theme seems to be the most dominant because a good number of references with strong repetition are classified within it. Among these references, we can mainly identify four, which are as follows: "brand" cited 63 times, "Adidas" 59 times, "Nike" 55 times and "sport" 43 times.

The word "brand" comes up the most because it is on the one hand the central theme of the research interviews that we conducted, but also it is the generic term that brings together several types of sports article. The words "Adidas" and "Nike" represent the names of the brands that are the most well-known. First of all, "adidas" is the most cited because the

convenience sample includes nearly 60% of footballers and when we know that the national football federation is sponsored by Adidas, it goes without saying that the name Adidas is the most cited compared to the names of the other brands. The word "Nike" comes just after because 40% of the sample questioned are athletes and it should be remembered that the national athletics federation is sponsored by the Nike

brand. The word "sport" is also well represented because it is about athletes who express themselves in the world of sports brands. Figure 1 shows that the "sports and leisure" dimension remains almost unchanged at all age levels. In other words, athletes first equate sports brands with sports and leisure. Over the years, their judgments continue to be confirmed gradually.

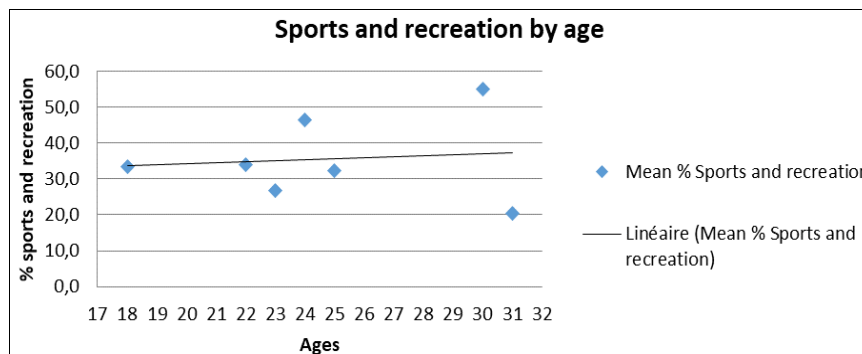


Fig 1: Evolution of the sports and leisure dimension of athletes

**Theme n°2: Characteristics of brands**

The subjects questioned address several dimensions of brands. By the word "expensive" they allude to the prices of brands often deemed expensive for consumers. Rather, the word "color" describes the design side of the brand. In addition, other words such as "difference", "great", "existence", "celebrity", "idol" or even "quality" complete this descriptive theme. It is clear that the characteristics of the brand are richly

diverse and multidimensional. Like the second dimension, Figure 3 shows that the "brand characteristics" dimension remains almost unchanged at all age levels. This dimension concerns above all the descriptive aspect of sports brands. Athletes, from adolescence, produce extensive knowledge about the "brand" object. The level of brand knowledge does not change over the years.

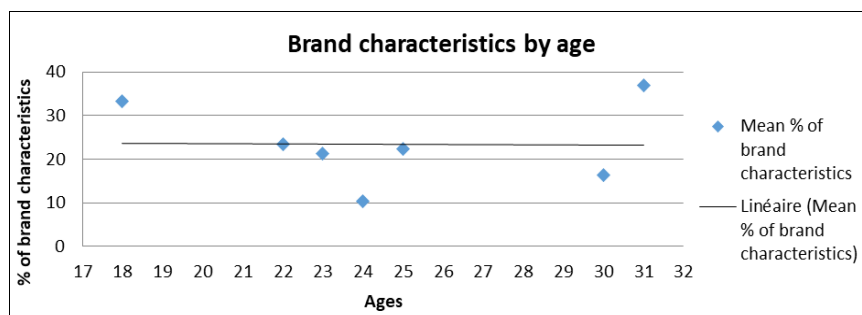


Fig 2: Evolution of sports brand characteristics among athletes.

**Theme n°3: People and social groups**

The theme "People and social groups" focuses on a specific social group, in this case, athletes. This theme mainly describes the social dimension of brands. Five reference universes are classified in this category: "club", "people", "player", "athletes" and "athlete". All these universes have in common the plural aspect of the individual. Figure 3 shows that the social dimension linked to sports brands decreases

with age. This explains why as they grow up, the subjects become more and more aware of their personal identity, but during adolescence they were much more influenced by their peers. As a result, the brand strategy would be interesting in so far as we would highlight the social nature of brands for athletes under 22 and the technical and/or personal nature of brands for athletes over 22.

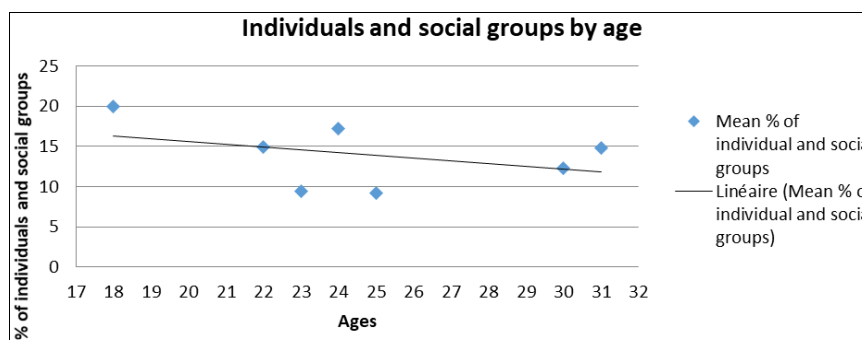
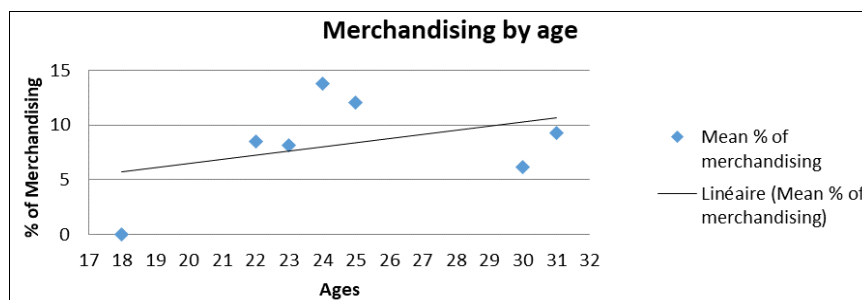


Fig 3: Evolution of the individual and social dimension of athletes

**Theme n°4: Merchandising**

This theme mainly includes the following six elements: “funding”, “sponsor”, “store”, “market”, “price”, “product”. These words translate that the sports subjects questioned need funding or a sponsor to obtain sports products or equipment. Otherwise, they can also get it themselves either from shops or from markets. The results in Figure 4 show that the

merchandising aspect increases with age. This shows that the more we grow, the more the price is part of the criteria for choosing or buying brands. Also, growing up, consumers take care of themselves because they are of working age. When is no longer under the guardianship of parents, it is quite normal that we pay attention to our wallet, even if the brands are popular, we must act with lucidity.

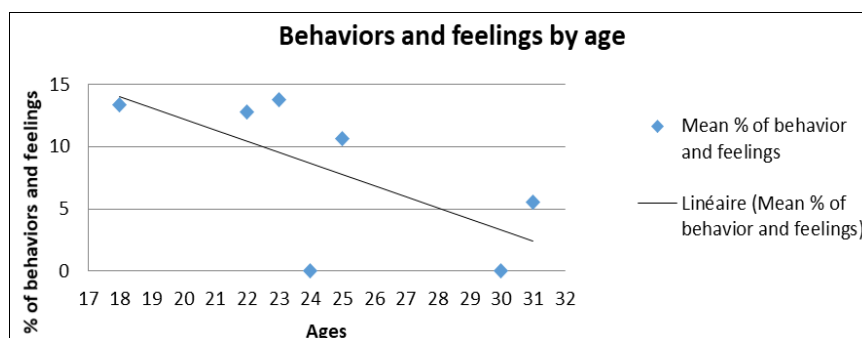


**Fig 4:** Evolution of the dimension of the “merchandising” aspect of athletes.

**Theme n°5: Behaviors & Feelings**

The “behavior and feelings” theme illustrates two dimensions in the subjects. It is on the one hand a social dimension which is expressed through behaviors such as “rivalry”, “visibility”, “friendship”, and on the other hand an individual dimension which is expressed by the feelings like “taste”. Figure 5 shows that social behaviors related to sports brands decrease

significantly with age. We know that social behavior is very important in adolescence, because the adolescent is looking for a way to break away from ties of dependency, especially family ties. He will therefore look for originality, conformity to fashions and many other means to distance himself from adults. These social behaviors eventually give way to much more personal behaviors.



**Fig 5:** Evolution of the behaviors and feelings of athletes.

**Theme n°6: Clothing**

This theme identifies four most salient universes. These are: “shoe”, “shirt”, “shorts”, and “clothing”. They are all part of clothing. The word “shoe” is used because it occupies a privileged space in terms of advertising for brands that affix their own logos. On the other hand, the words “jersey” and “shorts” are used in the sports corpus because the latter are the

most fashionable clothes in the sports sphere. Figure 6 shows that the importance of clothing increases with age. In fact, it is through our clothing that we transmit messages about our preferences and our tastes. By the way we dress, we give meaning to others in particular about our socioeconomic situations and at the same time we stand out from others by revealing a personal image that we wish to communicate [14].



**Fig 6:** Evolution of the “clothing” dimension of athletes.

### Theme n°7: Communications & Media

Within this theme, we have essentially three universes which are in strong agreement with the theme and whose importance remains considerable (“communication”, “advertising”, “television”). Television is the main channel of communication and transmission. Most commercials are seen on television. This is indeed where the stars are most visible. Many people and in particular amateur sportsmen are the most attracted when a match is broadcast on a television channel regardless of the distance between the place and the existing time difference [15]. The evocation of the word

“television” generally alludes to advertising but also to mediatised sporting events [16]. Figure 7 shows that the “communications and media” dimension increases with age. In some studies, it has been indicated that half of sportspeople aged 15 or over consume sports programs through the media. It should be noted that sports enthusiasts are the biggest consumers of sports media (television broadcasts of sporting events, specialized press, etc.), especially those who practice the most publicized sports (football, rugby, tennis, cycling, basketball [17]). This trend decreases towards the age of 70. It should be noted that the age limit of our sample is 31 years.

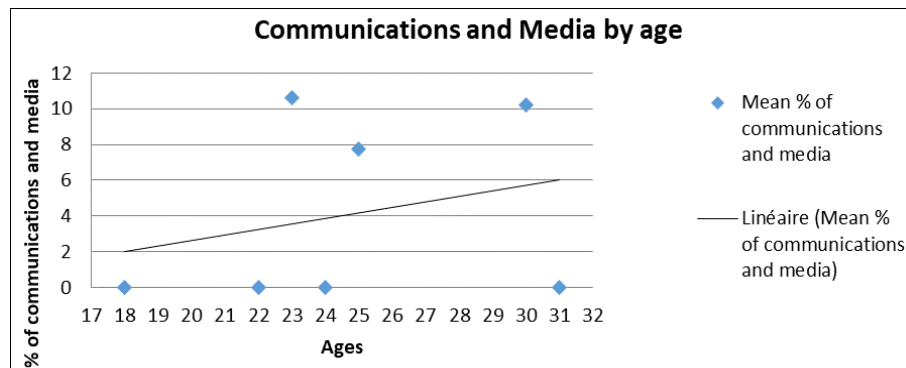


Fig 7: Evolution of the “communications and media” dimension in athletes.

### 4. Conclusions

In general, the results of this exploratory qualitative study, which focused on the analysis of verbatim, made it possible to identify seven themes regarding the mental association of sports brands among Djiboutian sports practitioners. On the other hand, the complementary results relating to the effect of age showed that the dimensions “merchandising”, “clothing” and “communications and media” increase with age, while the dimensions “people and social groups” and “behaviors and feelings” decline with age. Marketing strategies for these five dimensions must therefore be controlled according to the age parameter. In addition, the two most important dimensions, namely “sports and leisure” and “brand characteristics” are not sensitive to the “age” variable. For better perspectives, it would therefore be interesting to deepen this research by studying in particular the correlations between the different dimensions identified in the context of this study.

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