



Comparative analysis of the impact of marketing strategies on sports documentary series

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Abstract: Over time, sport has ceased to be merely entertainment and has become a significant factor influencing the economy. Several important themes related to sports marketing include various tools and strategies, sponsorship and partnerships, and media and digital transformation. Consumer behaviors and the economics of sports and trends also differ. The research area of this paper was to investigate the impact of documentary series about athletes on viewers from a marketing perspective as a new trend in marketing strategies. The study examined how documentary series affect the popularity of athletes and how viewers perceive the emergence of documentary series about athletes as their promotion, whether the audience's perception changes after watching the series, and whether they prefer watching documentary series about individual athletes or sports teams. The effects of different marketing strategies of two documentary series about an individual athlete and a sports team were comparatively analyzed. The research was conducted using a quantitative method, a survey technique with an online questionnaire. The sample was selected by simple random sampling within online sports communities, and the target group consisted of active and former athletes in Croatia.

Keywords: sports marketing, athlete branding, documentary series

JEL classification: M31

Primerjalna analiza učinkov marketinških strategij dokumentarnih serij o športnikih

Povzetek: Šport je skozi čas prenehal biti zgolj zabava in je postal pomemben dejavnik, ki vpliva na gospodarstvo. Obstaja več pomembnih tem, povezanih s športnim marketingom, kot so različna orodja in strategije, sponzorstva in partnerstva ter mediji in digitalna transformacija. Prav tako se razlikujejo vedenjski vzorci potrošnikov, ekonomika športa in trendi. Raziskovalno področje tega dela je bilo proučiti vpliv dokumentarnih serij o športnikih na gledalce z vidika marketinga kot novega trenda v marketinških strategijah. Proučujemo, kako dokumentarne serije vplivajo na priljubljenost športnikov ter kako gledalci dojemajo pojav dokumentarnih serij o športnikih kot obliko njihove promocije, ali se njihova percepcija spremeni po ogledu serije ter ali raje gledajo dokumentarne serije o posameznih športnikih ali o športnih ekipah. Komparativno so bili analizirani učinki različnih marketinških strategij dveh dokumentarnih serij - ene o posameznem športniku in druge o športni ekipi. Raziskava je bila izvedena s kvantitativno metodo, s tehniko anketiranja s spletnim vprašalnikom. Vzorec je bil izbran z enostavnim naključnim vzorčenjem znotraj spletnih športnih skupnosti, ciljna skupina pa so bili aktivni in nekdanji športniki na Hrvaškem.

Ključne besede: športni marketing, blagovna znamka športnika, dokumentarne serije

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INTRODUCTION

Documentary series about athletes represent an innovative approach in modern sports marketing, connecting the emotional appeal of stories with branding strategies for athletes and teams. In an era where media is crucial for building recognition and connecting with the audience, such content is becoming an increasingly important tool for creating a unique image and increasing the popularity of sports. Sport is no longer just entertainment. It has become an industry that shapes the economy, culture and identities of individuals and communities. Documentary series about athletes represent a new and innovative marketing strategy within the sports industry.

The research is focused on analyzing how these media contents shape the image of athletes and sports organizations and how they influence viewer behavior and attitudes, creating an emotional connection between the brand and the audience through stories. Additionally, the interest lies in exploring how marketing strategies, through documentary series, develop using emotional and personalized connections with the audience and how these series increase viewer engagement.

This article investigates the impact of marketing strategies of documentary series on audience perception, by analyzing two examples - a series about an individual athlete and a series about a sports team. The goal is to understand how different promotional approaches contribute to building the athlete's brand, increasing viewer engagement and expanding the popularity of sports in the digital age. The research is based on viewership analysis, survey data and a comparison between the series "Simone Biles Rising" and "Sunderland 'Til I Die." In addition, analyzing the impact on the audience, the article addresses the broader context, including the evolution of sports marketing, the role of media and the significance of personalized and team narratives in sports documentaries.

1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sport evolves to better meet the needs of the audience and media, in the way it is presented, with emotional appeal and personalization becoming key elements of media dramaturgy. This development enhances the social significance of sport, where sport and media become inseparably connected, leading to changes, increasingly present in contemporary sociology of sport research (Rodek, 2020; Jagodič, Milfelner, 2020). Sports marketing is specifically focused on analyzing consumer behavior, strategic product positioning, developing promotional activities and sponsorships, and managing relationships with media and business partners (Shank, Lyberger, 2014; Jagodič, Milfelner, 2022). Documentary series about athletes are becoming more frequent and popular as a new marketing method. There are two types: series about individual athletes and series about teams. It is considered necessary to investigate how this marketing approach and strategies are accepted by the audience and their impact.

Documentary films cover a wide range of topics and styles. The creators face challenges such as how to present reality in a subjective yet informative way for the audience, with each story being unique. Documentaries often serve as tools for political and social commentary, giving a voice to groups and issues. It can be powerful instruments for change and raising awareness. Documentaries use sport as a means to explore broader social and cultural themes. Sport provides rich content for analyzing identity, nationalism, politics and even personal struggles and victories. Sports documentaries often create stories about heroes, rivalries and challenges, further contributing to the popularization of sports and their impact on society, both locally and globally, using sport to depict social tensions, economic inequalities, or cultural changes (Aufderheide, 2007).

Novak (2006) explains how marketing has become a crucial element in modern sport. Sport has become an industry, generating significant revenue and marketing strategies help position sports organizations and athletes in the market. He highlights how collaboration between sports organizations and media can increase the visibility and attractiveness of

sports to a broader audience. Globalization and media have transformed sports marketing, enabling sports organizations to access a global market. There has also been an evolution in consumers. Today's sports consumers are becoming more demanding, seeking more than traditional sports event coverage. Novak emphasizes the importance of innovative marketing strategies that meet the needs of the modern audience.

We are familiar with various aspects of sports marketing, but currently, media-related strategies, such as documentary films, are the most relevant. Sports media have evolved throughout history, leading to the trend of documentary series about athletes as a marketing tool. This marketing approach influences public perception of athletes (Schultz & Arke, 2016). Documentary series about athletes are often used to build and strengthen the personal brand of the athlete. Using the narrative of the series, marketing strategies focus on portraying the athlete, not only as a top sports professional, but also as a person with a unique story, values and personality, which emotionally engages the audience. According to Rodriguez (2020), "storytelling" can be a key component in brand building. Stories about the athlete's ups and downs and personal challenges can strongly affect viewers and increase their connection with the film and the athlete. Gobé (2001) explores the concept of emotional branding, including the claim that documentary films about athletes can create emotional bonds between the brand and the audience.

2 RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The research design includes an analysis of selected documentary series from a marketing perspective, one documentary series about an individual athlete ("Simone Biles: Rising") and one documentary series about a sports team ("Sunderland 'Til I Die"). Following this is the measurement of viewership using collected data on the viewership of the selected series on the Netflix platform. A quantitative research strategy was used. Data were collected using a survey technique, with a questionnaire. Probabilistic sampling - simple random sampling - was used. The target group consisted of active and former athletes in Croatia. The target group was reached through online sports communities on social media. The survey was conducted anonymously and online using Google tools. The survey involved 100 respondents who are active and former athletes in Croatia. The interpretation of the results includes the analysis of survey data and viewership measurements, along with their comparative analysis. Additionally, an independent T-test was used in the analysis of quantitative data to check if there is a significant difference between the averages of two groups (former and active athletes), comparing the averages of two independent groups.

2.1 Analysis of Selected Documentary Series

The analysis of both series with a focus on their marketing strategies is presented below (Table 1).

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of the Series

Source: Author

Analysis	Simone Biles: Rising	Sunderland 'Til I Die
Target Audience	Demographics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary Audience: Sports enthusiasts, especially gymnastics fans. Secondary Audience: Parents of young athletes, young girls seeking inspiration, women who identify with athletic strength and perseverance. 	Demographics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary Audience: Football fans, especially fans of English football and Sunderland AFC. Secondary Audience: People interested in stories about struggle, community, and sports drama. Psychographics:

	<p>Psychographics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals who appreciate stories of success, overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. • Audience interested in personal stories of celebrities and motivational themes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audience that values emotional stories about sports and community. • People interested in insights into the business aspects of sports and the challenges of managing football clubs.
Positioning and Differentiation	<p>Unique Value - The story of Simone Biles provides insight into the life of one of the greatest gymnasts of all time, not only through the lens of sports but also her personal development, challenges and successes.</p> <p>Inspirational Aspect - A story that transcends sports and becomes a symbol of strength, resilience and achieving goals despite challenges.</p> <p>Emotional Impact - A story that can spark conversations about mental health, family values and the strength of women in society.</p>	<p>Unique Value:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the authenticity and real life of the club, its fans and management. • Documentary format that shows not only the successes but also the challenges and failures of the club, providing emotional depth. <p>Theme of community - emphasizes the connection of the football club with the local community and the significance of the club for the city's identity.</p>
Branding and image	<p>The brand of Simone Biles is already established as a symbol of sports excellence, but the series further expands her perception on a human level - as someone who faces challenges just like the rest of us.</p> <p>Message of the series - Adults can see how to support young talents while young viewers can be inspired to achieve their dreams.</p>	<p>Emotional storytelling - The story of Sunderland is not just about sports; it is a story of hope, passion, loyalty, and struggle, which is crucial for the branding of the series.</p> <p>Visual identity - Footage of the stadium, fans, and the city of Sunderland creates a strong connection between the club and the local identity.</p> <p>Connection with football as a global phenomenon - Although the story is specific to Sunderland, the themes are universal and resonate with sports lovers around the world.</p>
Promotion strategy	<p>Platforms: The series can be promoted through sports channels, social media (especially Instagram and TikTok where Simone has a strong influence) and via Netflix.</p> <p>Social Media Campaigns:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hashtag campaigns such as #RisingWithSimone. 	<p>Digital Promotion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The series is promoted on streaming platforms (Netflix) which allow for a global reach. • User-generated content, such as fan posts on social media with the series hashtag (#SunderlandTilIDie). <p>English Football as a Brand - Leveraging the popularity of</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interactions with the audience through Q&A sessions or live streams with the series team. Partnerships and Sponsorships - Potential for collaboration with brands that Simone already supports or with companies related to wellness and mental health.	English football to promote the series in international markets. Collaboration with Football Communities - Promotion through fan groups and sports media.
Audience engagement	Community Building - Encourage viewers to share their stories of overcoming obstacles inspired by the series. Creative Content - Share video clips with inspirational messages or emotional moments from the series.	Social Media Interactions - Fans and football enthusiasts actively share their reactions to the series, creating additional visibility. Fandom - The series has increased awareness of Sunderland AFC and created a new fan base outside of England. Reviews and Critiques - Positive reviews have further strengthened the perception of the series as an emotional and authentic depiction of football.
Monetization	Story Extension Content - Written biographies, thematic workshops for young athletes. Merchandising - Motivational quotes from the series on t-shirts, water bottles, or sports bags.	Subscriptions on Streaming Platforms - The main source of revenue comes from Netflix subscribers. Sunderland AFC Brand - Increased sales of club merchandise and tickets following the series' popularity. Licensing and Rights - Potential for further distribution of the series on other platforms or markets.
Social and cultural influence	Mental Health - Promoting open discussions about the mental health of athletes and youth, which Simone strongly supports. Empowerment of Women - Highlighting the role of women in sports and the importance of supporting female talents.	Connection Between Sport and Community - The series shows how clubs have a deeper role than just sports competition - they are the heart of the community. Raising Awareness of Challenges in Sports Management - Focus on issues of finance, management and pressures in professional football. Global Reach of English Football - Broadens awareness of the lower tiers of English football, which often remain in the shadow of the Premier League.

2.2 Viewership Measurement

Shortly after its release, the series "Simone Biles: Rising" achieved significant success, attracting around 3.5 million viewers. In July 2024, the series reached 4,700,000 views, equating to 8,300,000 hours of viewership and was rated 16th. The documentary series

"Simone Biles: Rising" has been watched an incredible 8.2 million times since its release. On July 17th, 2024 two episodes first arrived on Netflix, garnering 4.7 million views in just four days, debuting at third place on the streamer's most-watched list. The following week, the documentary was watched 3.5 million times, dropping to fourth place on the list (Netflix, 2024).

According to data, the documentary series "Sunderland 'Til I Die" recorded viewership results on Netflix from January to June 2023, with the first season totaling 600,000 hours and the second season 500,000 hours. From July to December 2023, the first season was watched for 400,000 hours, and the second season was watched for an equal 400,000 hours. In 2024, from January to June, the first season was watched for 1,300,000 hours, the second season for 800,000 hours, and the third season for 3,100,000 hours. The total viewership up to June 2024 and extending to January 2025 is 2.3 million hours for the first season, 1.7 million hours for the second season, and 3.1 million hours for the third season. The data shows a significant increase in viewership in the first half of 2024, especially with the introduction of the third season, which achieved the highest viewership. This indicates a continued interest from the audience for the series, with an emphasis on fresh content in new seasons. Audience demand for this series is 0.5 times higher than the demand for the average TV series in the United States as of January 2025. 64.1 % of all shows on this market have this level of demand, meaning that the position of "Sunderland 'Til I Die" in distribution demand is average. According to available information, the series has a rating of 6 (Netflix, 2024a).

Out of 100 respondents who participated in the survey, 19 % watched the documentary series "Simone Biles: Rising" while only 5 % watched "Sunderland 'Til I Die." 8 % of respondents watched both series, while 66 % of respondents did not watch either of the mentioned series.

2.3 Research results

The study involved 100 respondents and one survey. The survey contained a total of 36 questions. The average time required to complete the survey was 9 minutes and 18 seconds. The survey remained open until 100 respondents were collected. The main results of the research are presented and analyzed below.

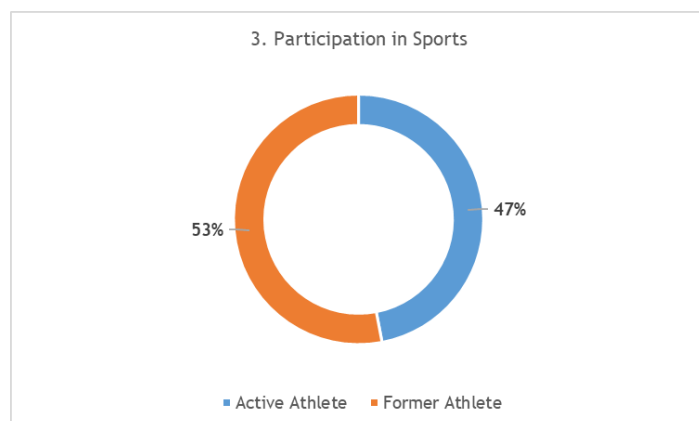


Figure 1 Participation in Sports
Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

Based on the responses to this question, it can be seen that 47 % of respondents are actively involved in sports, while 53 % identified themselves as former athletes. This was the target group and it was expected that 0 % of respondents would answer that they had never been athletes. This question was crucial for the continuation of the research, specifically the independent T-test that will compare the average difference between the groups of active and former athletes. Additionally, the percentage difference is not significant and can be considered a relatively even distribution among respondents.

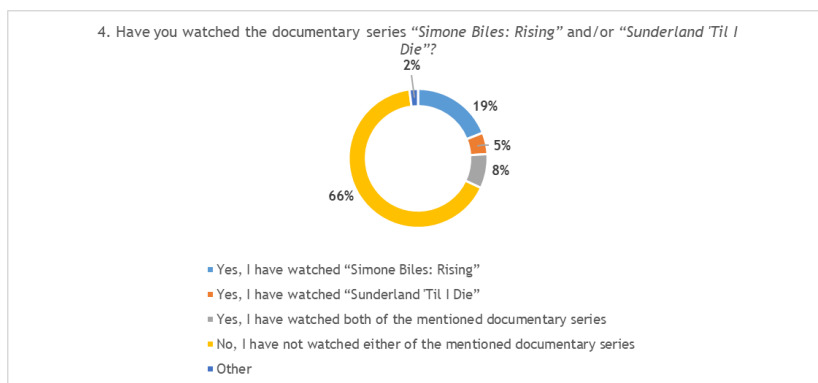


Figure 2 Viewership of the Series "Simone Biles: Rising" and/or "Sunderland 'Til I Die" Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

The responses indicate that 19 % of respondents watched the series "Simone Biles: Rising," 5 % watched the series "Sunderland 'Til I Die," and 8 % watched both series. The majority of respondents did not watch either of the mentioned series, while 2 % did not answer this question. From these data, it can be concluded that the interest among respondents for sports documentary series is limited, but there is a greater interest in the documentary series about the individual athlete.

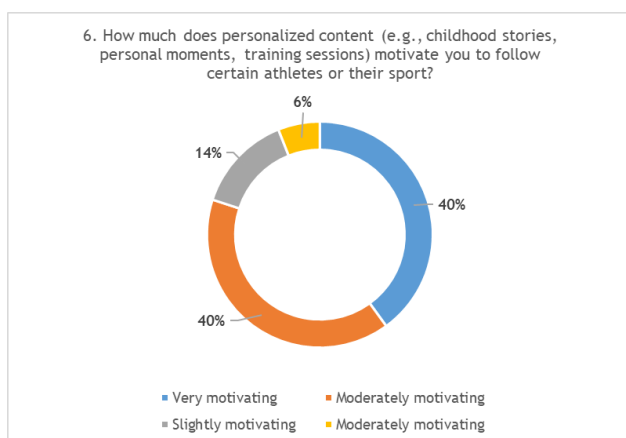


Figure 3 Impact of Personalized Content on Following Athletes or Sports Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

The majority of respondents (80 %) show some degree of motivation, with an equal distribution (40 %) between those who are highly motivated and those who are moderately motivated. A smaller percentage of respondents (14 %) show weaker motivation, while 6 % of respondents are not motivated by personalized content at all. The data suggest that personalized marketing is a crucial tool for audience engagement, but there is also a segment of the audience that is not significantly influenced by such content.

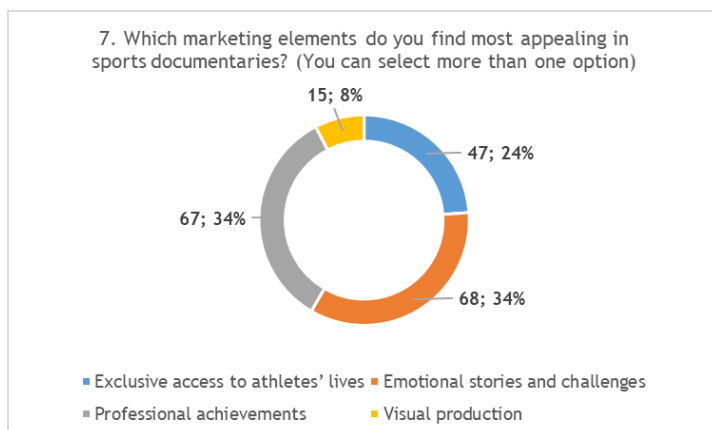


Figure 4 Appeal of Marketing Elements in Sports Documentaries
Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

Based on the responses to the question, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 24 % of respondents find exclusive access to the athlete's life appealing.
- 34 % of respondents find emotional stories and challenges appealing.
- 34 % of respondents find professional achievements appealing.
- 8 % of respondents find visual production appealing.

It was possible to select multiple answers for this question and it can be concluded that marketing elements related to emotions and challenges, as well as the professional achievements of athletes, are the most appealing to respondents. The least appealing is visual production, while nearly half of the respondents find exclusive access to the athlete's life appealing.

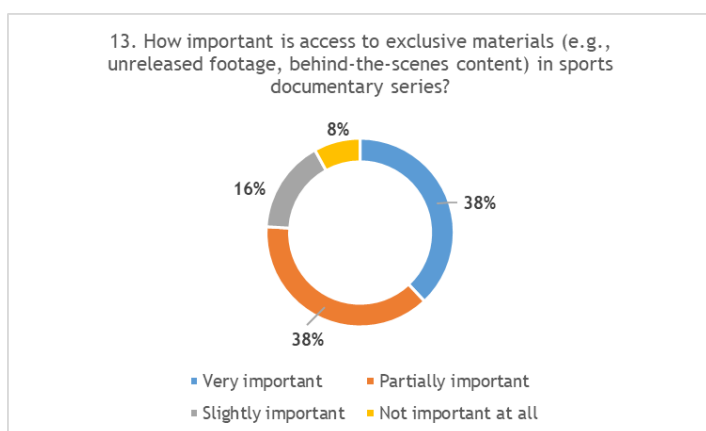


Figure 5 Importance of Access to Exclusive Materials in Sports Documentary Series
Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

Based on the responses to the question, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents consider access to exclusive materials in sports documentary series important. Specifically, 38 % of respondents indicate that this access is very important to them, while another 38 % consider it important to some extent. A smaller percentage (16 %) believe it is slightly important, and only 8 % of respondents state that access to exclusive materials is not important to them at all. This indicates that most of the audience values additional content such as unpublished footage and behind-the-scenes materials.

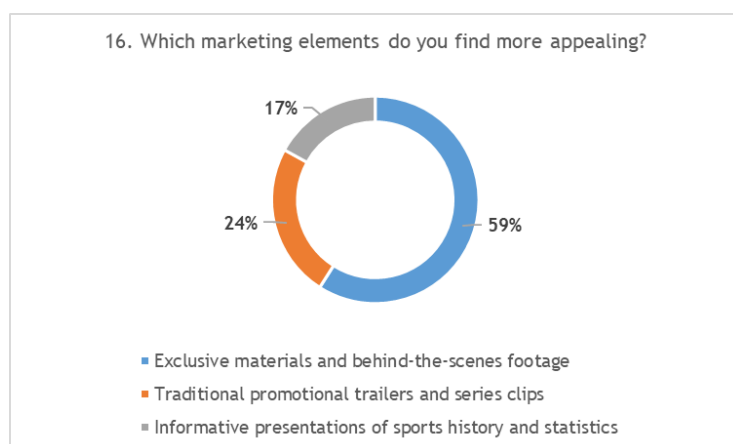


Figure 6 Appeal of Marketing Elements

Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

Based on the responses to the question, it can be concluded that the participants find exclusive materials and behind-the-scenes footage to be the most appealing marketing elements. This is confirmed by the fact that 59 % of respondents prefer such content. Traditional promotional trailers and series clips attract 24 % of respondents, while only 17 % find informative presentations of sports history and statistics appealing. This suggests that the audience prefers content that offers insight into the personal and exclusive aspects of sports series, rather than classic promotional or informational materials.

18. How often do you decide to watch a documentary series because of:

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Trailers Featuring Exclusive Content

Recommendations from Friends or the Media

Familiarity with the Athlete or Team Featured

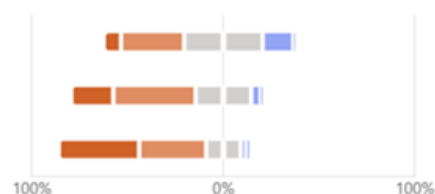


Figure 7 Motivations Behind the Decision to Watch a Sports Documentary Series

Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

Based on the responses, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the factors influencing participants' decisions to watch a documentary series:

A. Trailers Featuring Exclusive Content

A total of 9 % of respondents stated that they very often decide to watch a series based on trailers containing exclusive material, while 33 % reported doing so often, 41 % sometimes, 16 % rarely, and only 1 % never. These results suggest that while exclusive content in promotional trailers does capture viewer interest to some extent, it is not the primary deciding factor for the majority.

B. Recommendations from Friends or the Media

Recommendations appear to play a substantial role in influencing viewing decisions. Specifically, 22 % of respondents very often rely on such recommendations, 43 % often, 29 % sometimes, 5 % rarely, and only 1 % never. The data indicate that word-of-mouth and media

endorsements are significant motivators, with the majority of participants frequently or occasionally influenced by them.

C. Familiarity with the Athlete or Team Featured

Familiarity with the subject of the documentary emerged as the most influential factor. As many as 42 % of respondents reported that they very often decide to watch a series when they are familiar with the athlete or team, followed by 35 % who do so often, 18 % sometimes, 3 % rarely, and 2 % never. These findings highlight the importance of personal connection or prior interest in the featured individuals or teams in attracting viewership.

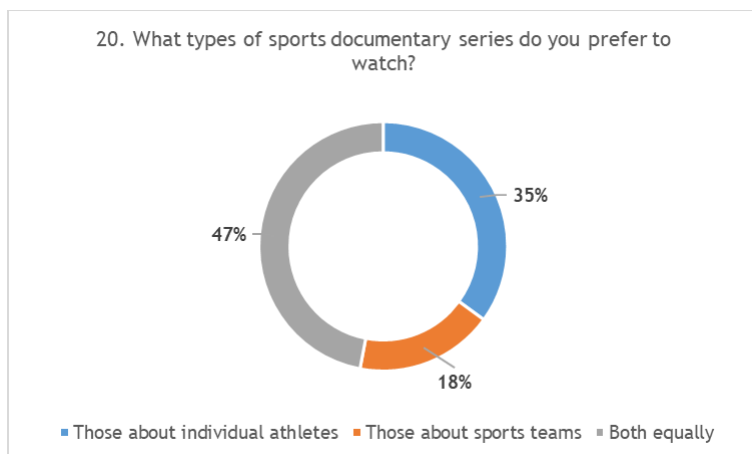


Figure 8 Preferred Types of Documentary Series

Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

The majority of respondents do not have a strong preference between documentary series focusing on individual athletes and those centered around sports teams. Specifically, 47 % of respondents enjoy both types of series equally, while 35 % prefer those about individual athletes, and 18 % favor team-based series. Based on these results, it can be concluded that both formats should be considered when creating content and marketing campaigns, with a slight emphasis on stories about individual athletes, as they tend to attract a somewhat larger audience.

21. How engaging do you find documentaries that focus on:



Figure 9 Viewer Engagement Based on the Focus Topics of Sports Documentaries

Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

Based on the responses, it can be concluded that documentaries focusing on individual athletes tend to be slightly more engaging for viewers compared to those centered around entire sports teams. Specifically, 20 % of respondents stated that such documentaries engage them very often, 44 % often, 31 % sometimes, and only 5 % rarely—none found them completely uninteresting. On the other hand, documentaries about sports teams also hold significant appeal, though to a slightly lesser extent: 14 % of respondents reported being

very often engaged, 43 % often, 35 % sometimes, 5 % rarely, and 3 % never. These findings suggest that audiences generally prefer athlete-focused documentaries, likely due to a stronger emotional connection and the appeal of personal stories. Nevertheless, team-based documentaries still maintain a high level of interest among viewers.

24. How often do you engage in discussions, share content, or recommend series that focus on:

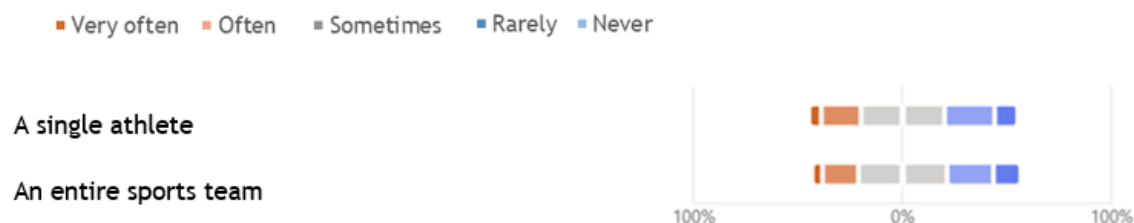


Figure 10 Engagement in Discussions, Sharing Content, or Recommending Series

Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

Based on the responses, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents occasionally engage in discussions, share content, or recommend sports documentary series, regardless of whether they focus on individual athletes or sports teams. Documentaries about individual athletes inspire engagement in 6 % of respondents very often and in 19 % often, while 40 % are engaged occasionally, 24 % rarely and 11 % never. For documentaries about sports teams, 5.1 % of respondents engage in discussions, share content, or recommend series very often, 17.2 % often, 42.4 % occasionally, 22.2 % rarely and 13.1 % never. These results suggest that viewers are somewhat more inclined to engage and recommend when it comes to series about individual athletes, but in both cases, the majority of respondents occasionally participate in activities related to promoting and discussing documentary content.

28. How often do you watch documentary series about:



Figure 11 Frequency of Watching Documentary Series

Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

Documentary series about individual athletes are somewhat more popular than those focusing on sports teams. 11 % of respondents watch documentaries about individual athletes very frequently, 22 % frequently, 52 % occasionally, 13 % rarely and only 2 % never. In comparison, documentaries about sports teams are watched very frequently by 8 % of respondents, frequently by 23 %, occasionally by 47 %, rarely by 15 % and never by 7 %. These results suggest that both types of documentary series are relatively popular, but stories about individual athletes have a slight edge, likely due to stronger emotional connections and personal stories that resonate with viewers.

31. Do you think that stories about sports teams are more appealing to:

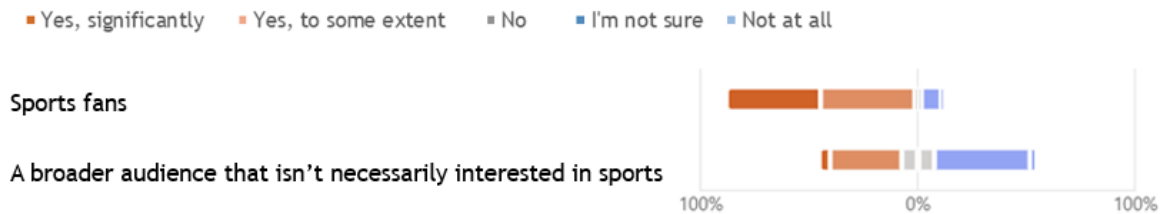


Figure 12 Audience Attracted to Stories about Sports Teams

Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

The results show that stories about sports teams are significantly more appealing to sports enthusiasts than to the general public, who may not be as interested in sports. Among sports fans, 43.4 % of respondents consider these stories highly appealing, while another 43.4 % view them as somewhat appealing. Only 3 % of respondents find them unattractive, 9.1 % are unsure and 1 % do not find them interesting at all. On the other hand, when it comes to the general public, only 5 % of respondents consider stories about sports teams highly appealing, while 33 % believe they are appealing to some extent. 15 % of respondents find them unattractive, 44 % are unsure and 3 % do not find them interesting at all. These results suggest that documentaries about sports teams resonate strongly with sports fans, but to attract a broader audience, they need to include elements beyond the sports theme, such as personal stories, drama and universal human experiences.

33. How much does each of the following motivate you to watch documentaries about a team:

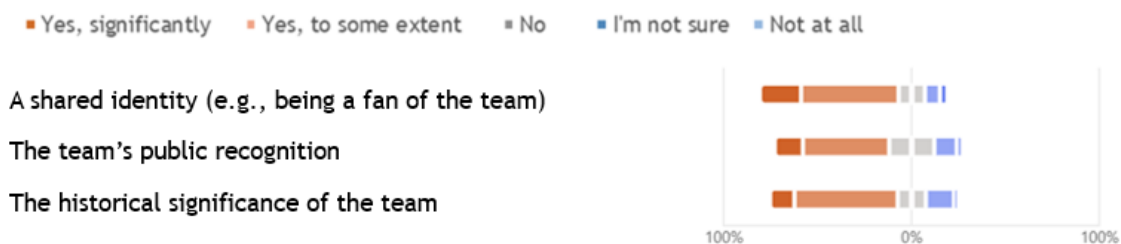


Figure 13 What the Most Motivates Viewers to Watch a Documentary about a Sports Team

Source: Author, Google Forms (2025.)

The results show that various factors influence viewers' motivation to watch documentaries about sports teams, with shared identity (fan affiliation) being the strongest motivator. Shared identity significantly motivates 22 % of respondents, while 52 % say it somewhat encourages them to watch. Only 14 % of respondents are not motivated by this factor, 8 % are unsure and 4 % do not feel connected to this element at all. Team recognition in the public eye has a slightly weaker impact—15 % of respondents report it significantly motivates them, while 46 % believe it plays a somewhat important role. 24 % do not see team recognition as a motivational factor, 12 % are unsure and 3% are not motivated by it at all. The historical significance of the team is also an important factor for viewers—13 % see it as a strong motivator, while 55 % say it somewhat encourages them to watch. 15 % of respondents do not consider the team's history as an important factor, the same percentage are unsure and 2 % do not find this aspect relevant at all. These findings suggest that the strongest emotional drive for watching documentaries about teams is the sense of belonging and identification with the team, while recognition and historical significance are additional but somewhat less influential factors.

2.4 Comparative Analysis of the Series

The comparative analysis of the series "Simone Biles: Rising" and "Sunderland 'Til I Die" reveals how different approaches—individual vs. collective—shape marketing strategies. Biles builds a global brand through her personal story and promotes mental health, while Sunderland uses the story of club solidarity and the fight for survival to strengthen local identity and expand global reach. Both series leverage streaming platforms to connect with audiences and create a strong emotional impact, each in its own way—through the strength of the individual or the community.

"Simone Biles: Rising" achieved significant success with 8.2 million views and attracted a broader audience due to the popularity of its main protagonist. Meanwhile, "Sunderland 'Til I Die" experiences slower but steady growth in viewership across seasons, with particular appeal among football fans. According to the survey, a larger number of respondents watched the series about Simone Biles.

The comparative analysis of the research shows that documentaries about individual athletes achieve higher engagement and audience loyalty due to personalized strategies and emotional stories. In contrast, documentaries about sports teams strongly resonate with fans but have a smaller reach among the general public. Exclusive content further enhances interest in documentaries about individuals, while team-based content depends more on community and sports context. In conclusion, strategies based on personalization and exclusive content prove to be the most effective in attracting and retaining audiences.

The results of the independent t-test for two groups (active athletes and former athletes) based on the frequency of watching documentaries about sports teams are as follows.

Averages and standard deviations:

- Active athletes:
 - Mean = 3,11
 - Standard deviation = 0,96
- Former athletes:
 - Mean = 3,09
 - Standard deviation = 1,02
- T-test results:
 - t-value = 0,061
 - p-value = 0,952

Since the p-value is 0.952, which is well above the typical significance threshold of 0.05, there is no statistically significant difference between active and former athletes in the frequency of watching documentaries about sports teams. This means that both groups have similar viewing habits with no significant difference in preferences.

The results of the independent t-test for the categories of frequency of watching documentaries about individual athletes are as follows.

Averages and standard deviations:

- Active athletes:
 - Mean = 3,34
 - Standard deviation = 0,94
- Former athletes:
 - Mean = 3,21
 - Standard deviation = 0,86
- T-test results:
 - t-value = 0,734
 - p-value = 0,465

Since the p-value is 0.465, which is well above the significance threshold of 0.05, there is no statistically significant difference between active and former athletes in the frequency of watching documentaries about individual athletes. This means that both groups have similar viewing habits, with no significant difference in preferences.

To examine whether there is a significant difference between active and former athletes in their level of engagement with documentaries focusing on a single athlete, the following t-test was conducted.

Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations:

- Active athletes:
 - Mean = 36,2
 - Standard deviation = 34,11
- Former athletes:
 - Mean = 39,6
 - Standard deviation = 38,85
- T-test results:
 - t-value = -0,91
 - p-value = 0,365

Since the p-value is 0.365, which is above the significance threshold of 0.05, there is no statistically significant difference between active and former athletes in their engagement with documentaries that focus on a single athlete. This means that both groups show a similar level of engagement, with no notable difference in interest.

A t-test was also conducted to examine whether there is a significant difference between active and former athletes in their engagement with documentaries that focus on an entire sports team.

Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations:

- Active athletes:
 - Mean = 35,4
 - Standard deviation = 34,80
- Former athletes:
 - Mean = 36,6
 - Standard deviation = 36,53
- T-test Results:
 - t-value = -0,319
 - p-value = 0,750

Since the p-value is 0.750, which is well above the significance threshold of 0.05, there is no statistically significant difference between active and former athletes in their engagement with documentaries focusing on entire sports teams. This means that both groups have very similar levels of engagement, with no significant difference in interest.

The analysis of the frequency of watching sports documentaries—both about teams and individual athletes—as well as engagement with such content, showed no statistically significant differences between active and former athletes.

3 DISCUSSION

Based on the results obtained through the research, the hypotheses can be tested.

H1: Personalized marketing strategies in sports documentaries have a greater impact on the popularization of athletes than strategies using a generic marketing approach.

The research findings strongly support the hypothesis that personalized marketing strategies in sports documentaries have more effective impact on athlete popularization compared to generic marketing approaches.

Key findings include that 85 % of respondents believe that showcasing personal stories and challenges of athletes increases interest in their work. 80 % of respondents report some level of motivation to follow the athlete or the sport through personalized content. 62 % of participants prefer a focus on individual athlete stories in sports documentaries, which is significantly higher than those who prefer team achievements (17 %) or neutral content (21 %). Furthermore, 75 % of respondents consider personalized marketing campaigns to be more effective than generic ones. 91 % of participants perceive personalized storytelling as a useful tool for promoting sports and athletes, with 55 % describing its impact as very significant.

Additionally, the research shows that a majority of viewers (81 %) experience a change in perception of the athlete after watching documentaries with a personalized approach, and for 39 % of them, that change is significant. In conclusion, personalized marketing strategies that emphasize individual stories, challenges, and emotions of athletes prove to be more effective than generic approaches, confirming their crucial role in the popularization of both sports and athletes.

H2: Sports documentary series that utilize exclusive materials (e.g., unreleased footage, athlete interviews, behind-the-scenes content) in their marketing campaigns attract more attention and audience interest than traditional documentary formats.

The research results strongly support the hypothesis that sports documentary series featuring exclusive materials—such as unreleased footage, interviews, and behind-the-scenes content—in their marketing campaigns attract more attention and interest from the audience than conventional sports documentaries.

Key findings include that 59 % of respondents prefer exclusive materials and behind-the-scenes content as the most appealing marketing elements, compared to classic promotional trailers (24 %) and informative historical overviews of sports (17 %). 67 % of respondents (37 % strongly and 30 % moderately) favor documentaries with exclusive footage and athlete interviews, while only 6 % prefer standard content publicly available. Furthermore, 65 % of respondents (27 % strongly and 38 % moderately) believe that exclusive materials in marketing campaigns increase their attention to the series. 56 % of participants state that exclusive materials moderately motivate them to start watching a documentary, while 19 % report being highly motivated by such content. Although 42 % believe that exclusive content is not a decisive factor in a campaign's appeal, a significant portion (40 %) find it somewhat appealing, and 9 % find it very appealing.

In conclusion, while exclusive content may not be an absolute determining factor, the research shows that most viewers prefer content offering a unique insight into athletes' lives. Marketing campaigns that highlight exclusive footage and behind-the-scenes materials have significantly greater potential to attract audience attention and interest compared to traditional approaches.

H3: Documentary series about individual athletes generate greater audience engagement and loyalty than series about sports teams.

The research findings partially support the hypothesis that documentary series focused on individual athletes elicit higher levels of engagement and loyalty compared to those centered on sports teams.

Key findings show that 35 % of respondents prefer series about individual athletes, while 18 % prefer team-centered series. However, 47 % of participants enjoy both formats equally, suggesting a balanced interest in both approaches. Furthermore, 64 % of respondents (20 % very often and 44 % often) report higher engagement with documentaries about individual

athletes, whereas team-focused documentaries show slightly lower engagement levels (14 % very often and 43 % often). Additionally, 47 % of respondents prefer individual athlete series due to the focus on personal development and challenges and 32 % appreciate them for their inspirational narratives. This indicates that emotional and personal storytelling is a key factor in viewer engagement.

Following the viewing of a documentary, 59 % of respondents moderately follow the athlete's future career, while 54 % moderately follow the team's future matches—indicating that both types of documentaries can stimulate continued interest, although not significantly favoring one over the other. In terms of loyalty, 23 % of respondents believe documentaries about individual athletes significantly increase audience loyalty, while 42 % perceive a moderate effect. However, 35 % see no difference in loyalty between the two types of documentaries. In conclusion, documentaries about individual athletes tend to generate slightly higher audience engagement and loyalty, primarily due to emotional connections and personal storytelling. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of the audience enjoys both formats and team-focused documentaries still hold strong appeal and influence.

H4: Documentary series about sports teams have broader appeal and reach higher overall viewership compared to series about individual athletes.

The research findings do not fully confirm the hypothesis that sports team documentaries have broader appeal and higher overall viewership compared to those about individual athletes.

Key results indicate that documentaries about individual athletes are slightly more popular—11 % of respondents watch them very often and 22 % often, compared to 8 % who watch team documentaries very often and 23 % who watch them often. A majority of 61 % prefer a combination of stories about both athletes and teams, 26 % prefer only individual stories and 13 % prefer team stories. This suggests that audiences value a balance between individual and team narratives.

Team-focused documentaries strongly appeal to sports fans, but they are less attractive to the general public—43.4 % of sports enthusiasts find them highly appealing, while only 5 % of the broader audience shares that view. Emotions and team dynamics are key elements of appeal in team documentaries—51 % prefer them for their portrayal of unity and team spirit, while 26 % appreciate the broader competitive context. Furthermore, 69 % believe that team documentaries can at least moderately attract a wider audience, but 31 % think they do not significantly influence non-sports fans. Additionally, 53 % believe that documentaries about individuals and teams are equally accessible to a broad audience, although slightly more respondents stated that individual-focused stories are more suitable for general viewers.

In conclusion, while documentaries about sports teams can attract a large audience—especially sports fans—they do not demonstrate significantly broader appeal or higher overall viewership than documentaries about individual athletes. A combination of team and individual narratives appears to be the most appealing format for viewers.

4 CONCLUSION

The media plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of sports and popularizing sports content. In today's digital age, social networks and television have become the main communication channels that create social norms and values. Sport and media are now inseparably linked and digital marketing provides sports organizations with the speed and flexibility to adapt to market changes. Personal branding of athletes has become increasingly important, especially in the context of economic uncertainty and digitalization, as a brand represents emotion, story and reputation that the audience recognizes and remembers.

This research analyzes the impact of marketing strategies in documentary series about athletes, focusing on audience engagement, preferences and the perception of marketing elements. The findings show that personalized strategies, with an emphasis on personal

stories, emotional narratives and exclusive content, increase viewer engagement. However, the repetition of the same narrative pattern can lead to audience saturation and reduced content effectiveness. Documentaries about teams primarily attract existing sports fans, while those about individuals more often evoke emotional connections.

The research indicates that documentaries about sports teams generally attract existing sports enthusiasts, while those about individuals elicit greater emotional engagement from the audience. Exclusive content increases viewer interest, though it is not necessarily a key factor for the success of the series, as archival materials can also be effective. A key challenge remains understanding the long-term impact of these strategies and adapting content to changing audience interests. The most successful approach involves a combination of personalization, quality storytelling and flexibility in response to market trends.

The results of the t-test show that an athlete's status (active or former) has no significant impact on preferences for sports documentaries. This implies that marketing campaigns do not need to be specifically tailored to these segments but can target a broader sports audience, focusing on universal engagement factors such as emotions and production quality. Exclusive content like behind-the-scenes footage and archival recordings has proven to be effective, though it is not a decisive factor for success.

In conclusion, sports documentaries represent a powerful tool in marketing communication, connecting sports with emotions and stories, thereby creating a deeper bond between the audience and athletes or teams. Future campaigns should use a combination of personalization, quality storytelling and adaptation to trends to ensure long-term relevance and broader appeal, while further research should expand the sample to an international audience to better understand global trends.

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