

Consumer Behaviour and Sports Merchandise: Emerging Trends in Sports Marketing

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Abstract: *Sports merchandise has evolved from a supplementary source of revenue into an important component of contemporary sports marketing and fan relationship management. Jerseys, footwear, accessories, collectibles, digital products, and licensed products increasingly function not only as commercial goods but also as symbols of team identification, social identity, lifestyle, and emotional attachment. This conceptual research article examines emerging trends in consumer behaviour related to sports merchandise and explores their implications for sports marketing. The study is based on secondary sources, including scholarly literature on sport consumer behaviour, team identification, fan engagement, brand loyalty, e-commerce, social media, and digital consumption. The review indicates that sports merchandise purchasing is influenced by psychological attachment, perceived consumer value, symbolic consumption, team performance, fan engagement, product characteristics, price, convenience, and social influence. Recent developments have further transformed purchasing behaviour through online fan shops, social media marketing, influencer promotion, personalized products, mobile commerce, limited-edition releases, and emerging digital assets. Evidence suggests that team identification has a substantial relationship with merchandise purchase intentions, while fan engagement and symbolic consumption can strengthen consumer loyalty. The article argues that sports organizations should move from product-centred merchandising toward consumer-centred and relationship-oriented strategies. Personalization, digital integration, authentic storytelling, community building, data-driven marketing, and responsible commercialization are identified as major strategic priorities. The study concludes that understanding the emotional, social, symbolic, and digital dimensions of sports consumption is essential for developing sustainable merchandise strategies and strengthening long-term relationships between sports brands and consumers.*

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Introduction: The commercialization of contemporary sport has transformed sports organizations into sophisticated entertainment and marketing enterprises. Professional clubs, leagues, athletes, and sporting events generate revenues not only through broadcasting, sponsorship, ticketing, and licensing but also through the sale of sports merchandise. Merchandise such as jerseys, caps, scarves, footwear, collectibles,

training apparel, and accessories has become an important mechanism through which consumers establish and communicate relationships with sports teams and athletes (Chadwick et al., 2017; Smith & Stewart, 2015). Consequently, understanding consumer behaviour has become increasingly important for sports marketers seeking to develop effective merchandising strategies.

Sports merchandise differs from many conventional consumer products because its value is frequently connected to emotional and social meanings. Consumers may purchase a team jersey not simply because of its functional characteristics but because it represents loyalty, identity, belonging, achievement, or affiliation with a particular sporting community. Research on team identification demonstrates that psychological attachment to a team is significantly associated with intentions to purchase licensed merchandise. Kwon et al. (2022) found a meaningful relationship between team identification and intention to purchase licensed merchandise, highlighting the importance of psychological attachment in sports consumption.

The consumption of sports merchandise is therefore influenced by both rational and emotional factors. Price, quality, convenience, design, availability, and product functionality remain important, but consumers also respond to symbolic value, social identity, fan engagement, team performance, and relationships with athletes and clubs (Kwon & Kwak, 2014; Huettermann & Kunkel, 2022). Kwon and Kwak (2014) found that functional, emotional, and social consumer values, together with team identification, influence attitudes toward team-licensed merchandise and purchase intentions.

Concept of Sports Merchandise and Consumer Behaviour: Sports merchandise refers to products associated with sports teams, leagues, athletes, sporting events, or sports brands and sold through licensed or authorized commercial channels. It may include clothing, footwear, equipment, accessories, collectibles, memorabilia, toys, lifestyle products, and increasingly digital products (Chadwick et al., 2017).

Consumer behaviour in sports encompasses the psychological, social, cultural, and economic processes through which individuals select, purchase, use, display, and evaluate sports-related products and experiences. Sports consumers are distinctive because their consumption can involve strong emotional attachment and group identification (Kwon et al., 2022).

Unlike ordinary consumer goods, sports merchandise can possess **symbolic value**. A jersey, for example, may communicate a consumer's affiliation with a team or athlete. Wearing team merchandise can therefore operate as a form of identity expression and social communication. Research has shown that symbolic consumption is positively related to brand loyalty in the football-club context, indicating that merchandise and sports brands can acquire meaning beyond their functional utility (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). Team identification and psychological attachment can consequently strengthen consumers' intentions to purchase licensed merchandise and maintain relationships with sports brands (Kwon et al., 2022; Kwon & Kwak, 2014).

Objectives of the Study: The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the major determinants of consumer behaviour toward sports merchandise.
2. To analyse the relationship between team identification and merchandise consumption.
3. To examine the emerging influence of e-commerce and digital platforms on sports merchandise purchasing.
4. To explore the role of social media, influencers, and fan engagement in sports merchandise marketing.
5. To identify emerging trends in sports merchandise consumption.

Methodology: The study adopts a conceptual and analytical research design based entirely on secondary sources. Relevant academic literature was reviewed concerning sports consumer behaviour, team identification, merchandise consumption, fan engagement, brand loyalty, sports branding, e-commerce, social media marketing, and digital consumption.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, research studies, scholarly publications, and relevant contemporary literature. Particular attention was given to empirical studies examining merchandise purchase intention, online sports-product purchasing, fan engagement, symbolic consumption, and team identification.

Determinants of Consumer Behaviour Toward Sports Merchandise: Team Identification: Team identification is a major psychological determinant of sports consumption because highly identified fans perceive the team as an important part of their personal and social identity. Consequently, they are more likely to follow team-related media, attend games, communicate about the team, and purchase licensed merchandise. A meta-analysis found a correlation of approximately 0.42 between team identification and intention to purchase licensed merchandise, demonstrating the strong connection between psychological attachment and commercial consumption (Kwon et al., 2022). Thus, merchandise can serve not only as a commercial product but also as a means of strengthening the psychological relationship between fans and their teams (Kwon & Kwak, 2014).

Emotional and Symbolic Value: Sports merchandise carries considerable emotional and symbolic value, as consumers may associate products with memorable victories, favourite athletes, sporting events, and personal experiences. Kwon and Kwak (2014) found that functional, emotional, and social values influence consumer attitudes towards licensed merchandise, indicating that purchasing decisions extend beyond price and utility. Merchandise can also communicate identity, lifestyle, group membership, and social affiliation. In this context, symbolic consumption has been found to be positively associated with sports-brand loyalty (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

Fan Engagement: Fan engagement extends beyond purchasing and includes interactions through social media, online communities, events, contests, digital content, and discussions. Such non-transactional engagement can create psychological conditions that encourage subsequent merchandise consumption. Huettermann and Kunkel (2022) found that non-transactional fan engagement explained substantial variation in merchandise purchase intentions among professional sports fans. Therefore, merchandise marketing should be integrated with broader fan-engagement strategies rather than treated as an isolated retail activity.

Brand Image and Loyalty: Brand image, athlete reputation, sporting success, historical tradition, and organizational values can shape consumer attitudes towards sports merchandise. Research indicates that team identification and satisfaction are associated with consumption behaviour and loyalty (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012), while professional sports brand communities are strengthened through relationships among fans, teams, management, and products (Toder Alon & Shuv-Ami, 2021). A strong sports brand can consequently enhance the perceived value of merchandise and reduce consumers' dependence on purely functional considerations (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

Price and Perceived Value: Although sports merchandise has strong emotional associations, price remains an important determinant of purchasing behaviour. Research on online football jersey purchases found price to be the most important attribute examined, followed by factors such as supplier and additional purchase benefits (Yoo & Lee, 2021). Sports marketers therefore need to balance pricing with perceived value through exclusive designs, personalization, superior quality, limited editions, and athlete associations (Kwon & Kwak, 2014; Yoo & Lee, 2021).

Team and Athlete Performance: Team and athlete performance can influence merchandise demand, particularly following championships, successful seasons, major transfers, or outstanding player performances. However, strong team identification can make consumers less sensitive to fluctuations in sporting performance. Shtudiner (2022) found that both team identification and perceived team performance influence consumption, while stronger identification can weaken the relationship between performance and expected spending. Thus, strong fan relationships may provide sports organizations with greater commercial stability during periods of weaker sporting performance (Kwon et al., 2022).

Emerging Trends in Sports Merchandise Marketing

Growth of E-Commerce: E-commerce has transformed sports merchandise marketing by enabling organizations to reach consumers beyond geographical boundaries and operate continuously. Online fan shops also provide opportunities to understand purchasing preferences and behaviour. Research on online jersey purchases shows that price, supplier, shipping, and additional benefits influence consumer decisions (Yoo & Lee, 2021). Sports organizations should therefore integrate e-commerce with customer relationship management, loyalty programmes, digital communication, and personalized marketing.

Social Media Commerce: Social media has transformed merchandise promotion into an interactive process in which teams and athletes can showcase products, launch collections, conduct promotions, and encourage user-generated content. Research among Indian consumers indicates that sports-influencer characteristics can influence follower attitudes and purchase behaviour (De Araujo et al., 2026). Social media should therefore be viewed not only as a promotional channel but also as a platform for community building and relationship management.

Sports Influencer Marketing: Athletes and sports influencers possess considerable symbolic influence because their credibility, authenticity, expertise, popularity, and perceived closeness to followers can shape consumer responses. Recent evidence from India confirms that influencer attributes can affect consumer attitudes and purchasing behaviour (De Araujo et al., 2026). Effective influencer marketing should therefore emphasize authenticity, credibility, and meaningful connections with followers rather than purely commercial promotion.

Personalization and Customization: Personalized jerseys, names and numbers, customized designs, and event-specific products allow consumers to express individual preferences and strengthen emotional attachment to merchandise. Such approaches can enhance perceived uniqueness and consumer value (Kwon & Kwak, 2014). Consequently, the future of sports merchandise is likely to involve greater integration of consumer data, customization technologies, and direct-to-consumer marketing.

Limited-Edition and Scarcity Marketing: Limited-edition jerseys, championship collections, anniversary products, player-specific merchandise, and special collaborations can create urgency and exclusivity. Such products may also possess greater symbolic value because ownership communicates uniqueness and group membership (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023). However, excessive or artificial scarcity may negatively affect consumer trust.

Merchandise as Lifestyle Consumption: Sports merchandise increasingly extends beyond stadiums and sporting events into everyday fashion and lifestyle consumption. Jerseys, sneakers, caps, jackets, and accessories may be purchased for fashion, cultural trends, athlete influence, or streetwear appeal. Merchandise usage can also strengthen team identification, satisfaction, and loyalty (Stroebe et al., 2019). This expansion enables sports organizations to target both core fans and lifestyle consumers.

Fan and Brand Communities: Sports brands increasingly function as communities in which fans exchange opinions, share experiences, display merchandise, and reinforce collective identities. Research on

professional sports-team brand communities highlights relationships among fans, teams, management, and products (Toder Alon & Shuv-Ami, 2021). Merchandise therefore becomes a visible symbol through which community membership and fan identity are communicated.

Experiential Merchandise Marketing: Merchandise consumption can be integrated with match-day events, player appearances, fan meetings, ceremonies, and other memorable experiences. Research on sports fan rituals indicates that engagement surrounding sporting events can strengthen behavioural loyalty and deepen relationships between fans and sports organizations (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2022). Merchandise strategies should therefore connect products with experiences rather than treating them as independent retail offerings.

Esports and Digital Merchandise: The growth of esports has created new consumer segments and expanded merchandise from physical apparel to digital and virtual products. Recent research shows that innovativeness can influence esports fans' licensed merchandise consumption, with fan knowledge and psychological connection helping explain this relationship (Wang & Ming, 2026). Emerging research on sports-related NFTs further indicates that ownership, enjoyment, socialization, financial motives, and team or athlete identification can influence digital-product consumption. Sports merchandise is consequently moving towards increasingly hybrid physical-digital consumption.

Social Comparison and Impulse Purchasing: Social comparison can encourage impulse purchases of team-licensed merchandise, as consumers may compare themselves with other fans and respond emotionally to visible displays of team affiliation. Recent research on team-licensed merchandise indicates that social comparison can contribute to impulse-buying tendencies. This highlights the importance of social visibility, fan communities, and match-day environments in shaping spontaneous merchandise consumption.

Changing Consumer Journey in Sports Merchandise: The traditional consumer journey in sports merchandise can be represented as –



However, digitalization has transformed this linear process into a more circular and interactive journey involving **digital exposure** → **fan engagement** → **community interaction** → **product discovery** → **purchase** → **social sharing** → **advocacy** → **repeat purchase**. Consumers may discover a jersey through an athlete's or sports influencer's social-media content, interact with other fans, compare prices and suppliers online, purchase through mobile platforms, and subsequently share their experiences through social media. Research on online jersey purchasing confirms that price, supplier choice, shipping, and fan loyalty jointly shape digital purchase decisions (Habenstein et al., 2021). Similarly, recent research on sports influencers in India shows that authenticity, credibility, follower–influencer congruence, and parasocial interaction can influence consumer attitudes and purchase behaviour (De Araujo et al., 2026). Thus, the contemporary

sports consumer is not merely a buyer but also an active participant in marketing, contributing to product visibility, social influence, and brand advocacy.

Discussion: The literature demonstrates that sports merchandise consumption differs from ordinary retail consumption because products are embedded within emotional, social, and identity-based relationships. Team identification is particularly important, as stronger psychological identification with a team is associated with greater intention to purchase licensed merchandise (Kwon et al., 2022). Consumer decisions, however, are not determined by emotional attachment alone. Price, convenience, product attributes, supplier reputation, shipping conditions, and perceived value continue to influence purchase decisions. In online jersey purchasing, for example, price was found to be the most important factor, while the identity of the online supplier also had substantial influence (Habenstein et al., 2021).

Fan engagement represents another important dimension of the contemporary consumer journey. Merchandise purchasing can emerge from an ongoing relationship between fans and sports organizations rather than from an isolated promotional stimulus. Huettermann and Kunkel (2022) found that non-transactional fan engagement explained substantial variation in merchandise purchase intentions, demonstrating that emotional and behavioural engagement can precede the actual transaction. Similarly, the symbolic character of sports merchandise allows consumers to express identity, belonging, lifestyle, and social affiliation. Such symbolic consumption can contribute to stronger relationships with sports brands and greater brand loyalty (Guzmán Rincón et al., 2023).

Digitalization is further expanding these relationships by integrating social media, influencer marketing, mobile commerce, personalization, esports, and digital forms of merchandise consumption. Recent evidence from India indicates that sports influencers can shape consumer attitudes and purchase behaviour through authenticity, credibility, congruence, and parasocial interaction (De Araujo et al., 2026). In esports, emerging research also shows that fan innovativeness can predict licensed merchandise consumption, although psychological connection with a team or esports entity can modify these relationships (Wang & Choi, 2026). These developments indicate that sports merchandise consumption is increasingly embedded in digitally mediated fan communities and interactive consumer experiences.

The central implication is that sports organizations should move from transactional merchandising to relationship-based merchandising. The objective should not simply be to increase the volume of jersey or accessory sales but to strengthen consumers' psychological, social, and digital connections with the sports brand. By integrating merchandise with fan engagement, online communities, social-media interaction, influencer communication, and personalized experiences, sports organizations can transform merchandise from a conventional retail product into an important instrument of long-term fan relationship management.

Recommendations: Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Sports organizations should develop merchandise strategies around fan identity and emotional attachment rather than product sales alone.
2. Official online stores should be strengthened to provide convenient, secure, personalized, and mobile-friendly purchasing experiences.
3. Sports organizations should integrate social media engagement with merchandise promotion.
4. Athletes and influencers should be used strategically while maintaining authenticity and credibility.
5. Personalized and limited-edition merchandise should be developed for specific consumer segments.

6. Organizations should use consumer analytics to understand purchasing patterns and forecast merchandise demand.
7. Match-day experiences, player appearances, and fan events should be integrated with merchandise campaigns.
8. Sports brands should develop lifestyle-oriented merchandise to reach consumers beyond traditional fan groups.
9. Sustainable and ethically produced merchandise should receive greater strategic attention.
10. Sports organizations should explore emerging digital merchandise while carefully evaluating consumer trust, value, regulation, and long-term demand.

Conclusion: Consumer behaviour toward sports merchandise is increasingly shaped by a combination of psychological attachment, emotional value, social identity, product characteristics, economic considerations, digital engagement, and sporting experiences. Merchandise is no longer simply a commercial extension of sport; it has become a medium through which consumers express identity, demonstrate loyalty, participate in communities, and maintain relationships with sports brands.

Future sports marketing strategies should therefore adopt a consumer-centric, digitally integrated, relationship-oriented approach. Organizations that understand the emotional and social meanings attached to merchandise, while simultaneously providing convenience, quality, personalization, and value, are likely to develop stronger and more sustainable consumer relationships.

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