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## **Sports Marketing as a Tool for Creating an Image of Leading European Football Clubs**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the article was to describe the sports marketing tools used by leading European football clubs. As the topic was complex, the paper also included a description of the most popular marketing tools in sport. The essence of the article was to present how the image was created by four selected football clubs. The analysis of the above-mentioned activities allowed the author to confirm that the sports marketing tools they use are an effective way to achieve the intended image goals. The main thesis put forward in the paper is that sports marketing is an effective tool for creating a brand image for European sports clubs. Thanks to the availability of contents in literature, internet materials and reports, the said thesis has been proven. When used correctly, sports marketing can create a positive image of a football club in many ways, mainly thanks to modern technology and the development of social media. However, a significant function is still performed by traditional forms of advertising which cannot be replaced by modern marketing. Each football club builds a promotional strategy in a different way, and therefore the topic is complex.

**Keywords:** marketing, sports marketing, brand, image, advertising, sport, football, football clubs.

### **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, there are many factors that determine the competitiveness of a brand, as well as its value and reputation. Among them, an important role is played by advertising and marketing activities through which the company strives to achieve specific goals. In the case of sports clubs, the challenge for entities responsible for advertising is enormous.

The key to starting the creation of the company's image is marketing, which, thanks to more and more numerous forms, is able to distinguish the brand from others. In classical terms, it is defined as planning, coordinating and controlling all the company's activities aimed at the sales markets (Altkorn, 2000). Marketing is one of the most important business areas on which brands focus more and more. It has also developed very strongly in the world of politics, in which we cannot imagine the pre-election period without a large dose of political marketing campaigns. Thus, the marketing market is not indifferent to the world of sport as well (Sznajder, 2008, p. 13). The term "sports marketing" has become part of the everyday language and refers to the relationship between sports and marketing. The term is defined as

a set of marketing activities that are strictly aimed at sport and the customer who expects sport-related services (Sznajder, 2008, p. 13). Within this type of marketing, three forms of activities are distinguished: 1) marketing of sports products and services that focuses on promoting the participation of consumers in all kinds of sporting events; 2) marketing that does not directly promote sports products, but uses associations with sport; 3) marketing to promote a sports organization to attract viewers and motivate companies to sponsor the organization and financially cooperate (Michatek, b.d.). The process of creating the image of a sports club begins with creating a specific identity of the brand in the mind of the fan (consumer). A bold thesis was put forward by Lindstrom, who found common features of sports and religious organizations in terms of creating an emotional image. According to the author, these planes are: sense of belonging (common clothing, singing); unifying common enemy (opposing club); myths, legends (achievements, traditions); majesty (club elitism, exclusivity); recommendation (recommending a club, athlete, event); symbols (club logo, colors, symbolic players) and rituals (songs, hymns). These factors form the basis for building the identity of a sports club in such a way that it is correctly and unambiguously identified (Rak, 2012, pp. 178, 179).

The aim of the article is to describe the basic tools for brand promotion through sports marketing, with particular emphasis on the presentation of advertising instruments of selected major European football clubs. The emphasis was placed on the analysis of the way tools are used, their effectiveness and examples of application in specific campaigns.

In this paper, the descriptive research method was used, which in this case was based on the analysis of information available in the literature and other sources, which made it possible to describe the practical application of sports marketing tools in sports clubs.

## **2. Forms of marketing of sports clubs**

### **2.1. Traditional forms of marketing of football clubs**

The role of marketing in sport has changed significantly over the years. Valdano, who was the coach and later chairman of the Real Madrid sports team, makes it clear that the sports club is not just a team these days, but above all it is a "trademark". He also believes that the only goal of the football club is no longer a high-quality spectacle on the pitch, but how much the company is able to earn from it (Sznajder, 2008, p. 41). In practice, sport marketing activities are usually: a) segmentation through which the requirements and expectations of the sports market can be distinguished, b) selection of target requirements (market selection), c) shaping a product or service adapted to the market, d) distribution, e) implementation of promotion (Żurawik B. & Żurawik W., 1996, p. 56). The last action, i.e., promotion, is implemented by football clubs in both traditional and modern ways.

Any activities that do not require modern devices or consumer access to the Internet can be considered traditional forms of marketing of football clubs. They are used all the time by sports organizations to attract football fans to the show, gadgets, services offered by the club or simply attract attention in a positive way. There is no doubt that all kinds of events are an inseparable element of sports marketing. In addition to their obvious goal, i.e., matches between football teams, they are an opportunity to strengthen the marketing aspects of both participants, organizations (such as FIFA, UEFA), but also sponsoring companies.

There are many such events that are loved all over the world due to the popularity of soccer, but the most popular ones are worth taking a look at. This element of sports activity is very important due to the growing possibilities of spending free time, through which sports organizations try to attract the largest group of consumers with their activities (Nessel, 2016). An important element of the field of marketing has become the increase in the importance of services, i.e., the so-called servicisation of consumption (Mazurek-Łopacińska, 2003, p. 18). It is not only about basic service needs related to the household, but also services that enable selffulfillment and satisfaction of emotional needs, such as participation in sports events. There are no more prestigious and popular football tournaments than the FIFA World Cup which has been held every four years since 1930. The next event is the UEFA European Championship which has also attracted the eyes of fans not only from Europe since 1960, every four years. America's Cup (known as the Copa America) is the oldest tournament of this type in the world, since 1916. However, when it comes to league matches – the UEFA Champions League is a clear favourite among viewers due to its prestige and high level of competition. The duels of the best football clubs in the world have been admired since the 1992–1993 season. Leagues of individual countries also have their connoisseurs, such as the Premier League (England), La Ligue (Spain), Serie A (Italy) or Bundesliga (Germany).

Events are one of the occasions when fans have a growing demand for accessories related to their favourite club. There is no doubt that football shirts are a very popular gadget regardless of the sports club. It is worth looking at how big profits from the sale of T-shirts were achieved by key sports clubs in Europe. The leader in the sale of shirts is definitely the Bayern Munich team, which sold as many as 3.25 million pieces in 2021 (Statista, 2022). Club mascots are an inseparable element of many sports fields, which evoke rather positive emotions and give a family character to various professions. Figures present both at sports events and other activities with the presence of fans stimulate fans to doping. In some cases, mascots have become an integral part of the marketing strategy of a sports club and have important tasks such as: building relationships with a young audience, building consumer loyalty, engaging new fans, but of course also generating income. According to the head marketing of Girona FC Aran Navarro, the club's main goal is to create a different, new way of contact between the club and the fan.

These types of advertisements have been known for years and undoubtedly attract the eyes of some people passing through the city. It cannot be denied that with the development of the Internet, traditional forms of marketing are noticed less and less. It is certain, however, that supporters of such forms as club gadgets or events do not have to be afraid of competition from modern marketing. Although the aforementioned traditional forms of sports marketing are an integral part of the promotional activities of football clubs, the current times and changes related to technology, the increasingly easier access to the Internet in mobile devices and the fierce competition in the field mean that sports clubs decide to use modern forms of marketing.

## 2.2. Modern forms of marketing of football clubs

Over the years, the Internet has become a business environment and quite a demanding distribution channel that is constantly developing. Therefore, internet marketing, which consists in using the Internet in advertising activities, is gaining more and more popularity (Świtała & Kieźel, 2017).

There is no doubt that the development of social media had a great influence on the changes in the nature of marketing used by football clubs. A study by Euromerica Sport Marketing showed that approximately 82% of the most remembered ads in social media are those with athletes (Iglesias, 2021). On the other hand, Statista (n.d.) reports that three of the top 10 most popular posts belong to footballers (Fig. 1).

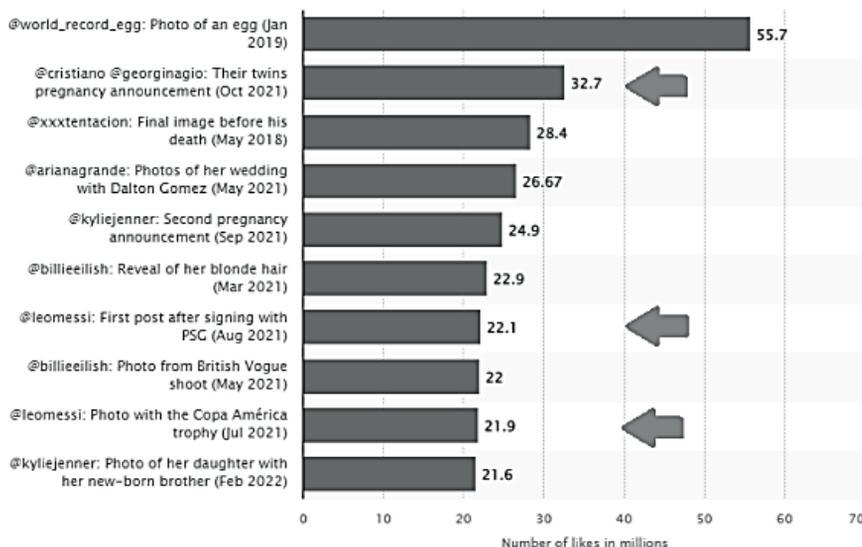
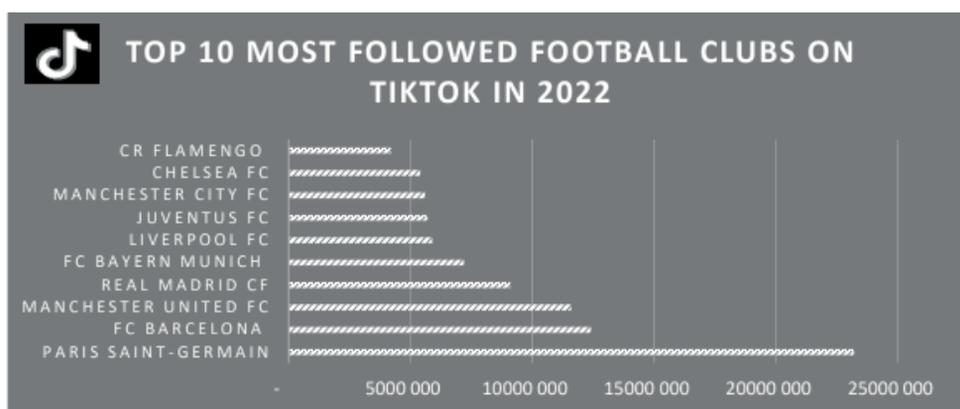


Fig. 1. Most popular posts on Instagram as of February 2022 by number of “likes”

Source: (Statista, n.d.).

Cristiano Ronaldo's post is already in 2nd place, while those of Leo Messi are in 7th and 9th place. This may be surprising due to the fact that until recently athletes were not associated with the media to the same extent as music stars or influencers. It should not be forgotten that the popularity of a footballer can strongly build the popularity of the football club in which he is playing. When Instagram, Facebook and Twitter took over the virtual world of advertising – a great competitor appeared. The TikTok application has become a relatively new marketing tool used by football clubs. Marketing departments quickly realized how much popularity this platform has gained in the world, so they do not limit themselves to publishing live matches, behind-the-scenes videos or interviews.

The obvious leader in popularity among TikTok users is the club from Paris. Over 23.2 million followers are a real marketing success (Fig. 2). These statistics show that the top 10 clubs in this ranking almost completely overlap with the top 10 clubs selling club shirts. This shows that they are strongly focused on marketing success and achieve it on many levels.



**Fig. 2.** Top 10 most followed football clubs on TikTok in 2022

Source: own elaboration based on (Foot Goal, n.d.).

Another modern form of marketing that is becoming more and more popular among football clubs is display advertising. Thanks to it, companies are able to reach the target group that is necessary to define in advance. Then, by placing relevant ads on websites of various companies, they are able to draw attention to their brand. Placing a link on external websites is an ideal method for a potential customer to become interested in a product or service of a football club or simply to draw attention to the company itself. A very popular tool for introducing this type of solution is Google Ads which allows for great flexibility in conducting an advertising campaign in terms of the size of the advertisement, the type of multimedia presented or the way of displaying, which can adjust to the size of the

website, which means that the advertisement is not of a naughty character, and it becomes only an addition to the currently viewed page (*Reklamy displayowe...*, n.d.). An example of such an action may be the activity of a consumer interested in football, who is currently browsing a website with recommended attractions in the vicinity of the city in which he is planning his vacation. This is the right time to place a display ad with a short message regarding the sale of tickets for a sports event in that area. In the case of a local club the consumer is a fan of advertising may be effective with the offer of a promotional opportunity to watch the match of his local team in good quality or to follow the current situation even during the trip by purchasing access to the club's live streaming such as FC Bayern.tv (Bayern Munich) or Barça TV Live (FC Barcelona).

It is evident that diversified marketing activities are the key to the success of football clubs. The use of traditional advertising forms such as events, posters, gadgets is an integral part of the sports market, however, nowadays it is necessary to focus just as much on modern forms of advertising. Combination of these two completely different forms of marketing is the best chance to achieve the intended promotional goal.

### **3. Characteristics of the marketing activities of selected football clubs**

#### **3.1. Paris Saint-Germain**

In order to understand the enormity of activities implemented by sports clubs, it is worth looking at the most powerful ones and analyzing their behavior in the world of business and marketing separately. Each of the leading football brands has its own characteristic features of activities aimed at effectively creating the best possible image.

Compared to other top football clubs Paris Saint-Germain FC is a relatively young brand. The club was founded in 1970, and until 2011 was one of the many French clubs that did not stand out too much in the French arena, and even more so internationally. When PSG was acquired by Qatar Sports Investments in 2011, the new president of Nasser Al Khelaïfi had only one vision for the club's future – turning it into a global strong brand (*Paris Saint-Germain FC*, n.d.), and he has achieved it. According to Deloitte (2022), the club earned EUR 556.2 million in 2021.

PSG is a club that, by buying a player, is able to do a huge marketing campaign at the same time. An example was the transfer of Lionel Messi, which, apart from the beginning of business cooperation on the FC Barcelona-Paris Saint-Germain line, attracted the eyes of millions of football fans around the world. It was related to connected with many rumors, assumptions and sudden changes in the statements of club leaders. All these activities took place several weeks before the official signing of the contract between Messi and PSG. A similar pile of speculation and

understatement took place before the purchase of Kylian Mbappé from AS Monaco or Neymar from FC Barcelona. All these transactions were very much publicized, thanks to which the club gained not only one of the leading footballers, but also an incredible marketing success and media recognition. Of course, PSG has typical forms of traditional marketing, such as the club shop or stadium tours. As the brand likes to stand out in the store, apart from typical club souvenirs, you can find, among others, inflatable paddle (#PSGLIMITED..., 2020). The accessory was created in cooperation with the French company Surf Pistols and was available as a limited product. There is no doubt that when it comes to club products, the clothing makes the greatest impression – not only on football fans. A huge project was the club's cooperation with Christelle Kocher – a fashion designer whose clothes related to PSG were worn by celebrities (Madhi, n.d.).

This kind of collaboration is very unusual in the soccer world, but Paris Saint-Germain is not a company like any other. Overall, PSG wants to make its brand a bit luxurious. The club's clothing has become popular not only among fans in loose-fitting shirts or caps, but also on the catwalks and in exclusive Parisian boutiques. The fact that the club has become a symbol of interest in the artistic community is also confirmed by the fact that the VIP lounge at Parc des Princes (club stadium) is owned by the greatest famous designers and gallery owners, such as Kamel Mennour, who invite their artist friends there (Mantoux, 2020). An unusual undertaking on the part of the club's management was the idea of opening a boutique with a restaurant in Japan. By showing the residents the French way of life, the brand has gained both recognition and fans on another continent. It is due to, among other things, such activities and a perfectly matched sports marketing strategy that Paris Saint-Germain, purchased in 2011 for EUR 70 million, is currently worth several billion euros.

### **3.2. Manchester City**

The club with the highest revenue in 2021 is Manchester City which has been in existence since 1880. After the ups and downs, the biggest triumphant period began with the club's takeover by Abu Dhabi United Group, whose majority shareholder is Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan (Manchester City, n.d.). Manchester City turned out to be the highest earning football club in Europe, with revenues of EUR 644.9 million (Deloitte, 2022).

Manchester City reacts very quickly to changing conditions. When, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, matches were played without audience participation, the club immediately decided to use the empty spaces to place advertising banners there. As a result, the chance of making a profit became higher, and the club set an example for other competitors. Thanks to this idea, the club was able to expand the advertising offer of its numerous business partners such as Puma, Nissan, Nestle, Unilever and many others (Manchester City, n.d.). One of the most famous

collaborations in the world of football has been the contract between Manchester City and Tinder – the company responsible for the most popular application for connecting people into relationships. It was the first multi-million cooperation of this type.

Manchester City focuses also on communication with children and their parents by organizing many events for the youngest fans. Before each match in which the club is the host, free games for children take place. “Kids fanzone” is launched in the local football school, thanks to which children can have fun before participating in the match, and also win club gadgets for, for example, taking the best photo with a trophy. In the zone, it is also possible to improve football skills, which may result in more parents willing to enroll their children in the Manchester football school, which of course affects the additional profit for the club (Manchester City, n.d.). The brand creates its image as a family-friendly company that promotes sport among children. As the club’s commercial director Artem Riabov said, the main factors that influenced the marketing success of Manchester City are the investments of the owner (Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan), dear and famous players and the organization of club trips to America and Asia. He also mentioned that an enormously extensive marketing department watches over the proper implementation of image-shaping plans, and in addition, each player manager also puts a lot of work into personal marketing, which later translates into the entire club (Brain Tank, 2020).

### 3.3. FC Bayern München

The largest German and at the same time one of the best football clubs in the world is FC Bayern München founded in 1900, headed by the president of Herbert Hainer since 2019. The company cannot complain about financial problems – it successfully ended 2021 with revenues of EUR 611.4 million (Deloitte, 2022).

The club from Munich is heavily focused on relations with fans using primarily social media. The company runs many campaigns on Instagram that engage many fans. The company profiles are adjusted to the contact with online users and are conducted in a transparent and simple manner. *Via* social media, Bayern offers fans many free wallpapers that can be applied on smartphones or computers. Fans also have a chance to check the knowledge about the club in Quizzes shared on Instagram, as well as observe where the players are currently – where they train, spend their holidays, and generally where there is a chance to meet them (Bayern München Instagram, n.d.). The initiative of people running a profile that allows you to communicate with fans is the #FanFriday campaign, which involves fans adding photos to their profiles with an appropriate hashtag. At a certain time, Bayern shares photos sent by Instagram users on its profile. Thanks to this, ordinary Instagram users have a chance to appear on the club’s profile for one day, followed by over 30 million people. This makes the brand’s bond with the fans tighten and the club becomes a marketing success.

Another proof that Bayern's marketing strategy is based primarily on contact with fans is the profile on the Tik-Tok platform, which is followed by almost 10 million users. There you can watch the backstage of matches, highlights from the celebration of victory or fun actions such as "Goatkeeper", in which the goat plays the role of a competitor of the goalkeeper of the first team. Apart from relations with consumers through the media, the club uses classic forms of marketing, but in order to stand out from the crowd and show respect for tradition, they sometimes introduce unusual projects. An example is the T-shirt which is on sale from September 18, 2021 and refers to the German People's Festival – Oktoberfest. The clothing was created in cooperation with Adidas and was heavily advertised before the festival, which resulted in Bayern receiving great interest in the product (FC Bayern München, n.d.).

Hack Days (also called Hackathon) which takes place at the club stadium – Allianz Arena, has become a characteristic event for Bayern. The event is attended by many football and technology enthusiasts who work together on innovations helpful in marketing, primarily in the area of information technology. Ideas for prototypes, website improvement and analysis of the growing use of social media are some of the main topics discussed at the four-day event (FC Bayern München, n.d.). Participants in groups become part of a huge project, they have already developed, among others an application for the sponsor – Adidas – that allows you to get discounts on products and tickets or a "cheer counter", which engages fans to compete for the doping level during team matches (Bloom Reach, 2018). Hack Days show how innovative the club approaches its marketing strategy and how important it is to it. The Bayern authorities focus on maintaining relations with fans and this is undoubtedly the club's recipe for image success. With the help of all popular social media, they create their brand as warm and committed. Thanks to the organization of events supporting innovation, not only is improving the effectiveness of the use of new sports marketing technologies, but also the image of Bayern as a company.

### **3.4. FC Barcelona**

FC Barcelona is characterized by the long history and a very strong image created. When Joan Gamper published an advertisement in a newspaper in 1899 about the search for players, no one expected the club to be a powerhouse these days. The club has been in the hands of Joan Laporta since 2021 (previously in 2003–2010) and despite many falls in terms of sport, it still remains a football legend with a well-shaped brand and character. The company's revenue in 2021 was 582.1 million EUR, so compared to the previous year, a significant decrease of 18% was recorded (Deloitte, 2022).

Despite a fairly large drop in revenues, FC Barcelona remains a football legend. The club's crest containing the Saint George's cross will probably be worn forever on millions of clothes and associated with a story that has been written by the Catalan

club. Marketing activities still create a warm brand image that pays attention to its roots and history. One of the biggest tourist attractions in Barcelona is the Camp Nou stadium which attracts not only football fans. It is not only about being able to participate in matches, other events and visiting the stadium, but also the heart of the club – the FC Barcelona Museum, built in 1984. Ticket prices for visiting the stadium and museum start from 28 EUR and, depending on additional attractions, reach around 130 EUR. After purchasing the ticket, the first attraction for FC Barcelona fans appears, i.e., the employees taking a commemorative photo with the club's gadgets. Of course, there is also a club shop in the stadium, which attracts fans who want a T-shirt or club tableware straight from Barcelona. In the sightseeing area, apart from souvenirs, trophies and all items related to the history of the club, there are many places where the club presents its biggest sponsors directly. Major partners such as Nike, Estrella, Rakuten and Beko know that thousands of people are able to see their logo or product every week. This marketing success of the club through the opportunity to visit the stadium is directly related to the location of the company's headquarters – Catalonia, where millions of tourists come every year.

The strategy is similar when it comes to advertising and distributing match tickets. FC Barcelona places advertising banners and places ticket points also in small coastal towns, several dozen kilometers from Barcelona, to encourage tourists to take part in the event or visit the stadium and museum. The touristic nature of Barcelona undoubtedly has a large impact on the marketing success of the football club, but it is not the only element of the extensive strategy of creating the brand's image. Internet users want more and more communication channels with their favourite club and they do not only care about social media. FC Barcelona responded to this consumer need by shaping the Barca TV + platform (FC Barcelona, n.d.). Without access to television, fans have the opportunity to watch replays of matches of both the first and women's football and youth teams 24 hours a day. In addition to matches, Barca TV + also offers materials related to the private life of players, cooperation with partners or training. The club is also very involved in social media. On Facebook alone, the number of followers exceeds 1 million, and people responsible for social media add new posts almost every day. Both the meticulous organization of tours in the stadium and the adaptation to the needs of local fans as well as other fans in the world, FC Barcelona has been successful in its image for many years, creating its brand open to everyone.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Sports marketing is a very special type of general marketing and has many features that are unique to it. Identity and image are an extremely important elements in creating an image both in a sports club and in every enterprise. In order to properly take care of these values, it is worth for sports companies to undertake many specific activities related to both traditional forms of marketing, such as club

gadgets, posters or promoting events, but also a modern type of advertising, thanks to which the club is now able to become a leader in relation to marketing.

There is no doubt that in the uncertain times that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, companies should resort to unusual, original ways of creating an image, and the club should be ready for all global situations. The presented analysis of the marketing activities of the selected largest European clubs confirms that the appropriate selection of marketing activities by sports companies is able to guarantee the presentation of a positive image and allows to establish a relationship between the sports club and the consumer (fan).

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## Marketing sportowy jako narzędzie kreowania wizerunku czołowych europejskich klubów piłkarskich

**Streszczenie:** Celem niniejszego artykułu był opis narzędzi marketingu sportowego stosowanych przez czołowe piłkarskie kluby europejskie. Temat był złożony, dlatego w tekście umieszczono także opis najbardziej popularnych narzędzi marketingu w sporcie. Istotą było przedstawienie sposobu kreowania wizerunku przez cztery wybrane kluby piłkarskie. Przeanalizowanie ich działań pozwoliło potwierdzić, iż stosowane przez nie narzędzia marketingu sportowego są skutecznym sposobem na osiągnięcie zamierzonych celów wizerunkowych. Główną tezę postawioną w artykule jest to, że marketing sportowy jest skutecznym narzędziem kreowania wizerunku marki dla europejskich klubów sportowych. Dzięki dostępności treści związanej z tematem w literaturze, materiałach internetowych oraz raportach, wspomniana teza została udowodniona. Marketing sportowy stosowany w poprawny sposób jest w stanie na wiele sposobów wykreować pozytywny wizerunek klubu piłkarskiego, przede wszystkim dzięki nowoczesnej technologii oraz rozwojowi mediów społecznościowych. Jednakże wciąż istotną funkcję pełnią tradycyjne formy reklamy, których nowoczesny marketing nie jest w stanie zastąpić. Każdy klub piłkarski w inny sposób buduje strategię promocyjną, w związku z czym temat jest złożony.

**Słowa kluczowe:** marketing, marketing sportowy, marka, wizerunek, reklama, sport, piłka nożna, kluby piłkarskie.