Available Online: 3 November 2026 DOI: 10.54254/2977-5701/2026.38640

Research on sponsorship strategies of sports brands in sporting events: a case study of the 2026 FIFA World Cup in Canada, Mexico, and the United States

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Abstract. With the continued globalization of the sports industry, major sporting events have become a primary marketing tool for sports brands to enhance their brand image and expand their markets. To examine the selection and implementation effectiveness of sponsorship strategies adopted by sports brands with different levels of resources, this study takes Nike, Adidas, and Puma, three leading international sports brands, as examples and examines their sponsorship of the FIFA World Cup. Using public information collected from platforms such as Baidu and Google, including corporate annual reports, official announcements, and industry reports, this study analyzes the differences among the three brands in their strategies for sponsoring the World Cup from the perspectives of industry resources and market positioning. The findings show that a company's financial strength, brand identity, and market objectives directly determine its choice of event sponsorship strategy. Without official sponsorship rights, Nike adopted an ambush marketing strategy combining star athletes with national teams. Adidas, by contrast, adopted a comprehensive sponsorship model combining its status as an official FIFA World Cup partner with sponsorship of leading national teams. With a limited budget, Puma focused on promising underdog teams and the emerging African market to achieve low-cost market penetration and broaden its brand reach. The effectiveness of event sponsorship is not necessarily proportional to the scale of investment. The ultimate returns are also influenced by the alignment between sponsorship and the brand's own positioning, the performance of sponsored teams during the tournament, and the overall supporting marketing activities. Nevertheless, different types of event sponsorship are all accompanied by corresponding risks.

Keywords: sponsorship strategies, sports brands, sporting events, 2026 FIFA World Cup

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the globalization and commercialization of sporting events, top-level sporting events have become a core means for sports brands to overcome market barriers and enhance brand awareness. As the sporting event with the broadest global audience and the highest commercial value, the FIFA World Cup, with its enormous traffic and remarkable speed of information dissemination, has become a key battleground for major sports brands seeking to expand their global presence. The scale, event structure, and commercial model

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of the 2026 FIFA World Cup in Canada, Mexico, and the United States demonstrate the maturity of the North American market. For the first time, the number of participating teams in the World Cup increased from 32 to 48. Total commercial revenue exceeded approximately USD 15 billion, representing an increase of approximately USD 7.4 billion compared with the previous FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Sponsorship revenue for the tournament reached approximately USD 2.7 billion, setting a new record for commercial sponsorship revenue in the history of the FIFA World Cup. Compared with previous tournaments, the 2026 World Cup also introduced a halftime show during the final for the first time, inviting top global artists to perform, thereby breaking away from the traditional standardized model of event sponsorship.

Against the backdrop of intensifying industry competition and the rapid growth of marketing communications, many teams are no longer blindly pursuing sponsorship through large financial investments, but instead are seeking more refined marketing approaches based on the principle of achieving greater results with smaller investments. Existing research has primarily focused on the exposure and brand benefits generated by sponsorship. However, in the context of the expansion of the 2026 FIFA World Cup in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, it is necessary to examine how sports brands can adapt their sponsorship strategies, appropriately control investment costs, and enhance brand value. Taking the 2026 FIFA World Cup in Canada, Mexico, and the United States as a case study, this paper examines the sponsorship strategies adopted by sports brands in the new World Cup format and analyzes the outcomes generated by different levels of sponsorship.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on sports brands

Sports brands are commercial brands that provide products such as apparel, footwear, and sports bags for the sports and daily leisure and fitness consumer markets. They possess both functional product attributes and brand-cultural attributes and compete in the market by relying on brand image and brand value. Existing research on sports brands mainly falls into three areas. The first is research on sports brand image. Wang Yilei et al. primarily examined Anta and constructed an evaluation model based on six dimensions: product image, corporate image, service image, promotional image, corporate–customer relationships, and brand symbols. They then conducted an empirical study using the analytic hierarchy process. The study found that Anta received a comprehensive brand image evaluation score of 81.153, corresponding to an overall rating of "very satisfactory". However, its corporate–customer relationships were relatively weak, and the brand had a high degree of substitutability [1]. The second is research on the globalization of sports brands. Fu Huifen et al. used a multiple-case study to examine how sports brands that entered the market later than international competitors can achieve global brand building through sponsorship. Their research suggests that international brands' sponsorship models cannot simply be copied and replicated. Instead, brands need to focus on specific product categories and markets and select sponsorships and endorsements with a high degree of fit [2]. The third is research on sports brand value. Wang Zhao's feasibility study report analyzed the value of foreign sports brands from a cultural perspective. It argues that cultural value constitutes an important asset for sports brands. Nike, for example, incorporates the core sports value of "challenging oneself through sport" into its brand symbols and advertising, thereby creating brand differentiation and enhancing brand prestige and consumers' sense of identification with the brand [3].

2.2. Research on sports event sponsorship

Sports event sponsorship refers to the support provided by sports brands or other enterprises to sporting events in the form of financial resources, materials, and other forms of assistance in exchange for opportunities to increase brand awareness, brand exposure, and marketing communication. It is a commercial investment activity with high potential returns and an important form of modern marketing communication. By leveraging sporting events, brands can achieve objectives such as building brand image and expanding market share. Research on sports event sponsorship mainly falls into three areas. The first is research on the value of event sponsorship. Liu Zhimin and Ding Yanhua conducted a questionnaire survey involving more than 800 students from 10 universities in Shanghai in the context of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The study found that sponsorship of major sporting events had a significant positive effect on the awareness of sports brands and brand associations, while the perceived quality of sports brands was also affected to some extent. The higher the degree of fit between an event and a brand, the more significant the effect of sponsorship on brand value enhancement. This indicates that consumers' involvement with and identification with an event can moderate the value of sponsorship. Among groups with a higher level of involvement and identification, sponsorship also produces significant gains in brand value. The same case also demonstrates that even brands that are not official sponsors can achieve substantial promotional benefits by leveraging the popularity of sporting events, as illustrated by the Li Ning torchbearer incident [4]. The second is research on sponsorship strategies. Studies indicate that event sponsorship should pay attention to the functional similarity and image fit between the brand and the sporting event [5]. Sports brands naturally have a high degree of fit with sporting events, whereas non-sports brands need to use sponsorship activities to strengthen their associations with sporting events. Sponsorship should not be limited to the financial investment made by sports brands; it also needs to incorporate marketing communication strategies based on the characteristics and needs of target audiences [6]. Brands should pay attention to differences among consumers in terms of gender, age, and consumption patterns, while developing a comprehensive understanding of the brand's knowledge base and background. In this way, they can maximize the exposure generated by sponsorship and strengthen consumers' brand associations, thereby achieving multidimensional improvements in brand awareness and brand perceptions [4]. The third is research on sponsorship risks. Liu Zhimin and Ding Yanhua argue that sports event sponsorship has a competitive and strategic nature and that sponsorship does not necessarily guarantee success. According to their data, only approximately 30% of Olympic partners successfully benefited from sponsorship, while a considerable number of companies also considered withdrawing from the Olympic TOP Programme. If enterprises merely invest sponsorship funds without developing supporting marketing activities, or overlook the degree of fit between the brand and the sporting event and differences among target audiences, their sponsorship investment may fail to be converted into brand equity, resulting in a waste of resources [4].

3. Research design

Research Cases: This study focuses on Adidas, PUMA, and NIKE as the three cases for analysis. First, all three are leading global sports brands, with their primary businesses consisting of sports footwear, sports apparel, sports accessories, and related products. Thus, they share the same industry characteristics. Second, all three have publicly available information and data. As companies listed outside China, they publish annual reports, sustainability reports, information on marketing expenditures, major sponsorship announcements, and other publicly available materials. Third, the three brands differ in terms of market scale, brand positioning, and sponsorship approaches. All three have engaged in large-scale sports event sponsorship and athlete endorsements over an extended period and have accumulated a substantial number of comprehensive

sponsorship cases. This study collected publicly available information, including corporate annual reports, official announcements, and industry reports, through platforms such as Baidu and Google. On Baidu, the study mainly used Baidu Academic and related channels to search for keywords including research on sports brand image, research on the globalization of sports brands, research on sports brand value, and research on the value of event sponsorship. On Google, the study mainly used Google Search and overseas news reports, with keywords including Nike, Adidas, PUMA, FIFA, and FIFA World Cup 2026.

4. Research findings

Based on their respective corporate resources, budgets, and market positioning, Nike, Adidas, and PUMA adopted differentiated sponsorship strategies for the FIFA World Cup. Nike primarily focused on an ambush sponsorship strategy centered on high-profile athletes and national teams. Adidas mainly built its sponsorship strategy around its status as an official FIFA partner, while PUMA adopted a multidimensional matrix model combining sports and streetwear culture.

4.1. Analysis of Nike's sponsorship strategy

Nike is a leading American sports brand headquartered in Beaverton, Oregon, United States. Its main businesses include professional sports footwear, sports apparel, and sports accessories. Its flagship products cover a full range of sports categories, including football, basketball, and running. Its core markets are North America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region, where it has a strong consumer base in the global high-end sports market. Nike did not obtain official sponsorship rights from FIFA. However, leveraging its strong capabilities in managing athlete intellectual property, it adopted an ambush sponsorship strategy that bypassed official tournament sponsorship and instead focused on national teams and sponsorship of individual elite athletes [7]. The underlying logic was that, since Nike could not obtain official event-related promotional materials or on-site sponsorship benefits, it could instead sign sponsorship agreements with multiple national teams that were strong contenders for the title, such as France, Brazil, and England. At the same time, Nike signed high-value endorsement agreements with top individual athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo. By relying on players' performances on the field, their exposure in televised tournament coverage, close-up shots of football boots and jerseys, and social media promotion, Nike sought to transform the individual influence of star athletes into brand exposure during the World Cup. This exposure was further supported by advertising and the brand's own social media channels to enhance overall brand communication. From a sponsorship perspective, this strategy generated substantial media exposure. However, it also involved significant risks. Once a sponsored national team was eliminated at an early stage, its exposure would decline substantially. During the World Cup, Nike's football-related sales were significantly stimulated, but due to the influence of team performance, increases in market share remained subject to fluctuations [6].

4.2. Analysis of Adidas's sponsorship strategy

Adidas was founded in Herzogenaurach, Germany, and is a long-established German sports brand. Its business is mainly divided into two core segments: professional sports and sports fashion. The professional sports segment primarily covers football, running, basketball, and other sports, while the sports fashion segment mainly includes Originals, sportswear and leisurewear, and high-end collaborations. Its core markets are mainly distributed across Europe, Latin America, and the Asia-Pacific region. Football is the foundation of the brand's business, and Adidas has a history of nearly 56 years of cooperation with the FIFA World Cup. Relying on its accumulated historical presence and financial strength, Adidas adopted a dual-track sponsorship strategy

combining its position as a top official FIFA partner with sponsorship of multiple national teams. As an official World Cup equipment partner, Adidas served as the exclusive supplier of official match balls. At the same time, during the 2026 FIFA World Cup in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, it sponsored national teams including Argentina, Spain, and host nation Mexico, thereby covering several traditional football powerhouses. Adidas also made extensive use of its status as a top official FIFA partner to obtain a comprehensive range of intellectual property rights, including pitch-side advertising, official promotional materials, and licensed event merchandise. Combined with its sponsorship of jerseys for leading national teams, this strategy created a mutually reinforcing effect between exposure through the official tournament and exposure on the national-team stage. Through offline fan festivals and themed advertising campaigns, Adidas further integrated the culture of the World Cup with its iconic three-stripe brand identity. Following the implementation of the sponsorship strategy, the brand achieved substantial exposure, with its marketing content accumulating more than 900 million views across the internet. In terms of commercial returns, sales of football-related products increased significantly during the World Cup cycle, while sales of jerseys, football boots, match-related products, and related merchandise reached record levels. Financial reports confirmed a 14% increase in revenue for the quarter, with sales reaching EUR 6.7 billion. However, this model also has clear disadvantages. Securing an official sponsorship position requires enormous long-term sponsorship expenditures, placing considerable pressure on marketing investment.

4.3. Analysis of PUMA's sponsorship strategy

PUMA is a German multinational company headquartered in Herzogenaurach, Germany, which is also the location of its competitor Adidas. Its product portfolio covers football, running, and casual sports footwear and apparel. Its major markets are distributed across Europe, Africa, and Latin America. Its overall marketing budget is lower than those of the two major competitors, Nike and Adidas, making it difficult for the company to afford the extremely expensive contracts associated with top national teams. Constrained by its budget, PUMA adopted a differentiated multidimensional matrix strategy combining sports and streetwear culture. Rather than directly competing with the two major brands for the strongest title contenders, it prioritized national teams in mid-tier positions in Africa and Europe. At the same time, it sought to secure sponsorship agreements with several teams possessing strong potential, such as Portugal, Switzerland, and Austria, relying on the breakthrough performances of underdog teams to achieve high exposure at a relatively low cost [8]. The logic behind this strategy was that, under the constraint of a limited marketing budget, PUMA did not blindly pursue popular teams with the highest potential audience reach. Instead, it selected national teams with the potential to become dark horses and with strong regional influence, using relatively lower sponsorship fees to obtain substantial exposure. Once a sponsored team achieved strong results in the tournament, PUMA could achieve the effect of "achieving more with less" and obtain explosive communication effects through relatively limited investment, while simultaneously strengthening brand awareness in the African and Middle Eastern markets. In terms of sponsorship effectiveness, when a sponsored national team delivered a dark-horse performance, brand search interest and jersey sales could increase sharply in the short term. For example, when the Moroccan national team once again emerged as a "super dark horse" at the 2026 FIFA World Cup in Canada, Mexico, and the United States and advanced to the semifinals, PUMA's jerseys reportedly sold out rapidly, driving a substantial increase in PUMA's sales during the period . However, this strategy also has a significant disadvantage: if a sponsored team is eliminated at an early stage, the resulting increase in exposure is limited. Overall, this strategy has helped PUMA steadily increase its market share in football-related events, although the company's overall scale still differs considerably from that of Nike and Adidas.

5. Discussion

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches case-based research on sports brand sponsorship of sporting events by combining the development and positioning of brands themselves with their World Cup sponsorship strategies, thereby examining the applicability of different sponsorship approaches in major sporting events. Previous studies have primarily focused on the effectiveness of sponsorship by individual brands. In contrast, this study makes a horizontal comparison of three leading sports brands and distinguishes among different types of sponsorship, including national team sponsorship, official event sponsorship, and athlete endorsements, examining the conditions under which each type may be adopted and its corresponding effects. It also supplements existing research on the selection of sports event sponsorship strategies by sports brands in the context of globalization.

At the level of corporate practice, different sports brands should formulate sports event sponsorship strategies based on their own brand identity, financial strength, target markets, and future development plans, rather than blindly pursuing official sponsorship positions in top-level sporting events. Brands with strong financial resources and a deep history in football culture can choose to establish close ties with official event organizers and achieve comprehensive brand exposure. Sports brands that focus on fashion and athlete culture can sign popular athletes and national teams and leverage the individual influence of athletes or the performance of national teams in sporting events to attract younger consumer groups. Brands with limited resources can select less prominent countries or regions with higher cost-effectiveness, or make early investments in markets or countries that have not yet been extensively developed by other sports brands, thereby obtaining greater exposure at a lower cost.

For other enterprises, this study also provides relevant practical implications. Before participating in sponsorship of major international sporting events, brands need to assess sponsorship risks in advance and develop long-term marketing plans rather than focusing solely on short-term exposure and traffic. Brands need to integrate event sponsorship with product development and brand building, transform the popularity generated by sporting events into sustainable growth in market share, and avoid situations in which high sponsorship investments fail to translate into tangible commercial returns.

6. Conclusion

This study takes the World Cup sponsorship activities of three major sports brands—Nike, Adidas, and PUMA—in Canada, Mexico, and the United States as cases. It examines how each brand developed differentiated sponsorship strategies based on its regional foundations, product positioning, and market presence, and analyzes changes in brand exposure, product sales, and market performance following the implementation of these sponsorship strategies. The study finds that sponsorship during the FIFA World Cup in Canada, Mexico, and the United States does not follow a universal template. Instead, brands need to select an appropriate sponsorship model according to their own resources and capabilities. Nike focused on sponsoring star athletes and national teams to build individual athlete IPs; Adidas leveraged its strong football heritage to deepen its official event partnership model; and PUMA achieved low-cost brand exposure through targeted sponsorship of less prominent national teams with the potential to become dark horses. The effectiveness of event sponsorship depends not only on the scale of sponsorship investment, but also, to a greater extent, on the degree of fit between the sponsorship content and the brand's positioning. At the same time, sponsorship may involve potential risks to brand image, product sales, and other aspects of business performance.

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