# Chapter 3
# Brand Attachment and Agile Marketing:
## Responses to the (Post-)Pandemic Context in the Sports Fashion Context

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## ABSTRACT

*This research seeks to understand the impact of the pandemic on online sales of sports brands and their relationship with consumers. The results obtained showed that the brands adapted to the pandemic period, they managed to preserve and even strengthen the relationship and communication with their consumers due to their online platforms, in which their sports products were found due to the high demand during the pandemic, especially in the period of confinement. In addition to realizing the importance of contact with companies during the period of confinement, which helped maintain the connection and loyalty between brand and consumer. The present study represents an important contribution regarding digital and agile marketing and the importance of the relationship between brand-consumer, namely the consumer's attachment to the brand.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Agile marketing represents a new marketing management approach based on an array of practices aimed at solving the rigidities of traditional marketing (Gera, Gera, & Mishra, 2019). According to Moi and Cabiddu (2021), notably, agile marketing encourages a firm's teams to work together on common objectives centered around (e.g. sports fashion) customers' needs. For instance, social networks have already been perceived by companies as a great mechanism to help them reach their marketing goals and goals, especially in aspects such as customer engagement, customer relationship management and communication. In this context, agile marketing is an approach to marketing that utilizes the principles and practices of agile methodologies. This includes having self-organizing, cross-functional teams doing work in frequent iterations with continuous feedback. It requires a strategic vision, as well as short, medium, and long-term marketing planning (Ferreira & Sousa, 2020). According to Moi and Cabiddu (2021), the current literature does not well elucidate the advantages and benefits of adopting agile practices in marketing and their impact on improving current marketing capabilities. Agile marketing refers to an approach to marketing, where marketing teams work together to come up with high-quality projects that will foster group efforts. Agile marketing allows marketing teams to quickly publish content and modify it based on performance. Agile marketing is a trans-departmental activity that brings together members of different departments to take advantage of marketing opportunities and change marketing plans based on a dynamic environment (Sachdeva & Kumar, 2022).

This study aims to clarify to managers and practitioners how they could become more agile, improving their marketing performance in the sports fashion industry. A qualitative study was carried out, in which two types of interviews were developed, in which both had a previously prepared questionnaire. The first applied to the physical stores of the sports brands: Nike, Adidas, Puma, Reebok at the Vila de Conde Outlet – Portugal and at Decathlon in Guimarães - Portugal, where those responsible for the stores were interviewed, seeking to understand the impact of the pandemic on brand communication with your consumers. For the consumer survey, a focus group was selected with 8 participants, who were divided into 2 groups, 4 Brazilians and 4 Portuguese. The interview was conducted in an online meeting room, being recorded to maintain the veracity of opinions, choices and preferences of products and their brands. The main point of this research arises as an investigation into the behavior established between consumers and brands, the affective relationship and loyalty to their preferred brand. The purchases that at the time were no longer in person and, now through websites, as it turned out, there was an increase in purchases, there was a change in terms of values or the consumer's relationship with the brand remained in loyalty. Therefore, this research seeks to understand the impact of the pandemic on online sales of sports brands and their relationship with consumers. Agile marketing capabilities are cross-disciplinary across people, roles, and departments that strive to continually update, improve, and innovate resources and skills to bring greater profits to customers through constant awareness of and response to market changes. The results obtained showed that the brands adapted to the pandemic period, they managed to preserve and even strengthen the relationship and communication with their consumers due to their online platforms, in which their sports products were found due to the high demand during the pandemic, especially in the period of confinement. In addition to realizing the importance of contact with companies during the period of confinement, which helped maintain the connection and loyalty between brand and consumer. The present study represents an important contribution regarding digital and agile marketing and the importance of the relationship between brand-consumer, namely the consumer's attachment to the brand.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Technological change is the major cause of most of the changes that have taken place, from cultural, social, political, economic, personal, and even psychological changes, all of them worldwide. The environment and the relationships that are built in it ceased to occur only in physical space, happening also in a space without defined location: the virtual space. The development of technology and agile marketing have brought with it many positive aspects: the global communication that is fundamental today; the democratization of knowledge throughout the world, which has become possible through the connections that the information systems (ISs) have acquired; the medicine that has witnessed great evolutions; the world that has become a small village where everyone is connected, and an endless number of other advantages (Boas & Sousa, 2022). This scenario also allowed society itself, on an economic level, to attend to numerous developments as the business community began to take advantage of them, particularly in the commercial sector.

According to Moi and Cabiddu (2021), marketing capabilities epitomize the means through which organizations increase their ability to learn and exploit market knowledge to respond to customer changes promptly and efficiently (Bruni & Verona, 2009; Xu, Guo, Zhang, & Dang, 2018). In the tourism industry, this is a critical issue. The complexity of diverse stakeholder interests to be coordinated and satisfied and the need to constantly be responsive to internal and external stimuli yield difficulties in coordinating organizations' marketing effort. The marketing concept has great relevance in scientific research and market practices. Kotler and Armstrong (2007) are responsible for clarifying that there is not only one concept for marketing and that it is not focused only on advertising. This is filled with strategies and tools that seek to satisfy the needs and desires of consumers in the most varied sectors. Marketing itself has undergone many changes since it began to be studied. Cavanaugh (2017) explains that technology is responsible for providing the ideal resources to improve the way customers are served, enabling the discovery of new formats to increase relationships. Kotler (2012) explains that digital marketing has the function of promoting the brand, focusing on results and customer engagement in the defense of the brand. Technology enables automation and miniaturization, which lower product costs and enable companies to serve new emerging markets. From the 2000s onwards, the transformation of technology related to the way people (Consumers) and companies relate to each other is remarkable. But digital marketing is not intended to replace traditional marketing. On the contrary, both must coexist, with interchangeable roles, along the consumer's path. Since the 20th century, trade has undergone great changes and faced new challenges, which are reflected in the economy of the country. In a short space of time, commerce in the city has passed from the fairs to the hypermarkets, to the shopping centers, and now it has spread through the digital media, ceasing to belong to a place. This global transformation has forced companies to adapt to this new era and create new strategies so that their communication, dissemination, and differentiation translate into benefits for their business, such as customer satisfaction and loyalty, and of course, the growth of sales and prosperity of companies (Atulkar & Kesari, 2017; Boas & Sousa, 2022; Pappas, 2016). In the last 30 years, consumption habits have evolved considerably. Consumers are now considerably more active, intensely sharing their shopping experiences, debating changes and transformations in society, or simply analyzing, sometimes quite critically, the attitudes of a company, or the way in which a particular product or service is made available (Ahmed et al., 2017). With the impact of new technological developments and the growth of the Internet, consumer behavior has changed from a passive position to more active and interactive ways, starting to express their opinions and feelings. For potential buyers, e-commerce platforms are used to search for products, add them to a shopping cart

and, at the end, complete the purchase by checking out. These platforms, for sellers, are services that encompasses e-Commerce website builders where online stores can be created, equipped with customer service infrastructure and stock management and accounting systems.

Ruão (2017), clarifies that brands, contrary to what many people may believe, are not a 20th century discovery. Santos (2016) explains that since the dawn of civilization, artists have developed the habit of signing their works through specific characteristics, as a way of differentiating them from others. Over the centuries, merchants adapted and created striking and easy ways to attract their customers, such as the Romans, who realized that the method of painting was very useful for identifying themselves and their goods, particularly in the face of a population of illiterate majority (Pinho, 1999).

Brand attachment studies have a vital importance for marketing and tourism. There are few empirical studies that explicitly focus on the relation of brand attachment to other concepts, such as brand confidence, brand satisfaction, commitment, and brand loyalty (Belaid & Behi, 2011; Sousa & Magalhães, 2019). With the growth of the market, it was in the past that merchants saw the need to adopt the use of "trademarks" as a way of controlling the production and commercialization of certain goods. Thus, the mandatory use of a symbol appeared, which allowed the quick identification of the craftsman. From that moment on, the brands started to have a true commercial meaning, making the consumer/buyer no longer have a direct relationship with the seller, and the brand started to ensure the link between the producer center and the consumer in the city (Bassat, 1999).

Ruão (2003) highlights that brand only became a priority for the top management of organizations from the end of the 20th century, with the recognition of their economic value by the financial sector, insofar as it was verified that a brand was capable of to produce real monetary returns for their owners. It is extremely important to define the brand and its identity, as it will be possible to determine the identity of the consumer. Bilou (2014) explains that the brand is a globalized concept, where the activities of the company (Input) and the knowledge of consumers (Output) establish their limits, "the brand is a continuous process where the values and expectations that are embedded, by the company, in the object-brand (product/service) they are interpreted and refined by the consumer" (Bilou, 2014, p. 17).

The main purpose of the brand is differentiation, so that it is possible to achieve the desired success in a market that is increasingly competitive. Over the decades, brand managers learned that they needed to consider their ability to evolve to survive in the market. With the arrival on the internet in the 90s, it was necessary to adapt to the current situation. Bronnenberg (1997) predicted that the use and utility of the internet would be worldwide and that it would be a way of replacing traditional means of communication, emphasizing that the purpose of the internet could be seen as a tactic to increase sales. The possibility of exchanging information that the Internet provides creates another value of crucial importance in the new business scenario: the relationship with customers (Cardoso & Sousa, 2020). The intensity with which this connection is established determines the strength of the brand and, consequently, the representation of the affective component of the brand, better known as brand attachment. Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1907-1982) pioneered the study of attachment theory.

Bowlby (1982) considered attachment as a basic mechanism of human beings, being an integrated set of behavioral systems, which seek personal security, and which has its origins in childhood. This bond is also responsible for carrying emotions between a person and an object. Attachment theory has undergone a series of adaptations over the years, in addition to serving as a study base for several areas. As for example, psychology, which focuses on the attachments that are established between two individuals, for marketing, this theory expands to other areas, especially between consumers and the ability to create emotional bonds between them and brands. Park (2010) states that brand attachment is born as well as

attachment to objects, people, places, and others. For Silva (2015), brand love from the marketing point of view is a phenomenon that allows us to understand how consumption, and attachment to a brand, is used to meet the emotional needs of the consumer.

We define attachment as the cognitive and affective bond strength between a consumer and a brand. This denotes a psychological state of mind, in which a strong cognitive and affective bond connects a brand to an individual in such a way that the brand is an extension of the self (Priester, 2007). For Park (2010), there are two factors that constitute brand attachment: "brand-individual" connection and brand awareness. The idea of attachment proposes that the critical part of attachment is confronted with the emotional connection between the brand and the individual, called "brand-individual". With this, the consumer creates a unique bond with the brand, this connection is born, because brands can represent who individuals really are (Vieira & Sousa, 2020).

## SPORTS FASHION CONTEXT AND AGILE MARKETING

Sport is a current worldwide phenomenon of immense importance, enabling a multi-million dollar industry of clothing, equipment and accessories. But it's hard to say when the sport really came into being. Anthropologists such as Guttmann (1978), claim that the most primitive peoples already practiced sport to please gods and compete with each other. Some sports that exist, such as archery, jumping, running and fighting, were methods used by the ancestors to survive and hunt.

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Therefore, agile marketing has become increasingly important in the sports fashion industry in recent years. In the specifics industries (e.g., sports fashion industry, tourism context), the complexity of diverse stakeholder interests to be coordinated and satisfied and the need to constantly be responsive to internal and external stimuli yield difficulties in coordinating organizations' marketing efforts (Moi & Cabiddu, 2021). Indeed, to adapt to changing conditions rapidly (fashion) marketers are forced to be more agile and, hence, capable of reacting quickly and easily to fashion market changes.

Agile marketing represents a new marketing management approach based on an array of practices aimed at solving the rigidities of traditional marketing (Accardi-Petersen, 2011; Gera et al., 2019). Sachdeva and Kumar (2022) argues that agile marketing refers to an approach to marketing, where marketing teams work together to come up with high-quality projects that will foster group efforts. Agile marketing allows marketing teams to quickly publish content and modify it based on performance. Agile marketing is a trans-departmental activity that brings together members of different departments to take advantage of marketing opportunities and change marketing plans based on a dynamic environment. This is a process focused on finding, testing, and running a set of targeted projects related to an organization's marketing.

According to Moi and Cabiddu (2021), notably, agile marketing encourages a firm's teams to work together on common objectives centered around (e.g. sports fashion) customers' needs and regularly verify the presence of weak or unnecessary steps to adjust and optimize operations accordingly. For instance, Moi and Cabiddu (2021) contributed to extending the prior literature by proposing a framework in the marketing field to understand progressive behaviors and practices representative of different maturity levels in developing and managing agile marketing capabilities in the tourism industry. Hence, greater customer engagement and value, greater speed toward fashion market demand, and a greater ability to adapt to change are achieved. Such dimensions increase the understanding, from a business perspective, of the practical advantages and benefits that could derive from employing agile approaches and capabilities in marketing by explaining how their employment could enhance the existing marketing capabilities, particularly in turbulent and fast-changing contexts (e.g. sports fashion industry).

## METHODOLOGY

Demo (1985) contextualizes that methodology is an instrumental concern. It deals with ways of doing science. Take care of procedures, tools, paths. The purpose of science is to deal with theoretical and practical reality. To achieve this goal, there are several paths. This is what the methodology is about. Seeking to understand the impact of the pandemic on the relationship of brands with their consumers and how they kept their affection and loyalty active. For this, the project followed a qualitative approach, where an interview and a questionnaire, the method of data collection and analysis were presented. Neves (1996) argues that the expression "qualitative research" takes on different meanings in the field of social sciences. This defines a set of different interpretive techniques that seek to describe in detail the components of a system full of meanings. The data collection used for this qualitative research was given through semi-structured online interviews directed to the consumers of sports brands and face-to-face interviews directed to the traders of these sports brands.

From the interviews carried out with those responsible for the physical stores of the chosen sports brands, it was possible to gather data that explain the transition process of communications carried out during the pandemic period. How the brand had to deal with its competitors so that it could maintain the loyalty of its customers, what are the changes in the communication of sports brands in view of the high dispute between its old and new competitors. In addition to its consumers, it sought to understand the main differences detected during the pandemic between Brazil/Portugal, taking into account the differences of its consumers in each country, and how these changes were made in each without losing the brand's personality from the perspective of the customers. The investigation referred to the Portuguese-Brazilian population, since the author is Brazilian and is currently residing in Portugal.

The first semi-structured interview was conducted online, in which it was directed to a focus group, containing 8 people. This group was divided into 2, the first group was composed by 4 Brazilians and the second group by 4 Portuguese. The two groups answered 12 questions that sought to analyze whether they already practiced sports before and during the pandemic, if with the closing of physical stores due to confinement, they joined online shopping and if the habit lasted. In order to apply the planned study, 5 brands were selected that are widely used by sports practitioners. The selected companies are: Adidas, Puma, Reebok, Nike and Decathlon.

As for the interview aimed at merchants, 4 questions were developed and applied to 5 world-renowned brands, they are: Adidas, Nike, Puma, Reebok and Decathlon. The questions were asked in person at the Vila do Conde Outlet, on October 8, 2021, where the interviewees were the managers and responsible for dealing with the changes caused by the pandemic and during the two confinements. These multinationals were chosen because each one has a history of evolution and tradition related to their products, having a high representation in the current market. In addition to all of them already having online sales platforms.

## Focus Group

The focus group is composed of 8 participants who share the characteristic of being consumers of sports brands. These were divided into two groups. Group B had the participation of 4 Brazilians, two male and two female, whose ages ranged from 24 to 67 years and all perform different professional activities. These interviews sought to understand the impact of physical store sales during the pandemic period and how sports brands adapted to this new moment. There seems to be some consensus in the international literature, which results in the identification of five different generations. However, the limits that separate each of them are not completely coincident, which is otherwise understood, given the difficulty in establishing these boundaries precisely. The five-generation identified are: the Silent Generation (before 1945), the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1977), Generation Y (born between 1978 and 1994) and Generation Z (born between (1995 and 2009) and Generation Alpha (those born after 2010) (Chaney et al., 2017).

## RESULTS

The motivation for choosing and developing this theme was the rebirth of the Covid-19 virus at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 which, unfortunately, is present in society to this day, causing a great economic, political and social impact. With this new phase, everyone needed to make some changes so that we could achieve freedom in this world pandemic, the most drastic was when the government decreed that all establishments should close, and consumers should stay at home in confinement.

The brands at that moment found themselves in a delicate situation where they needed to find a way to remain firm in the market, maintaining their sales and seeking to minimize their economic losses. The market needed to keep its Marketing strategies stronger than ever, seeking to create, communicate and deliver offers that have added value for its consumers, affiliates, and society in general (Kotler & Armstrong, 2007). As explained throughout this article, attachment (attachment) works as a basic mechanism of human beings, being an integrated set of behavioral systems, which seek personal security, and which has its origins in childhood. And for brands it couldn't be different, Brás (2019) explains that brand attachment (Brand attachment) is a specificity of Marketing, responsible for creating and establishing

relationships between customers and the brand, making consumers not only buy products, but also the values and attributes of the brand.

To achieve the objective of finding out how sports brands maintained their customers' loyalty during the pandemic, 2 questionnaires were developed that were applied in different ways.

The first questionnaire was developed to be applied to a focus group of 8 Portuguese-Brazilian consumers of sports brands divided, where they were divided by 4 (Brazilians X Portuguese). Analyzing the testimonies, it was noted that sport was always present in the lives of the interviewees and that each of them had their preferences for a specific brand, varying the product they wanted. With the pandemic, the group was generally well divided for the new method of online shopping, some showed old experience with this function, others showed strong acceptance, while others had negative experiences.

After sharing their online shopping experiences during the pandemic, the participants agreed that the process of buying the pieces is extremely easy, but the biggest difficulty faced was the difference and doubt related to the sizes of the pieces. Thus, suggesting that the brands create a standard in their size grid, in addition to detailing the product more so that they could help the consumer understand the material of the pieces, as they claimed that often the products they buy online, when they arrive, are not according to what they imagined.

From this moment of new experiences with online shopping, the interviewees explain that the purchase process is very easy due to the variety of payment methods and objectivity for doing so. They justify that the attempt to adapt to this online shopping process during periods of confinement was nothing more than a way of trying to stay connected to the brands they consumed before the beginning of the pandemic. Participants showed that even with the preference to consume in person, the possibility given by brands to maintain this contact during a period of isolation was very healthy for the brand-consumer relationship, and that with the reopening of stores, it made this relationship got even stronger. From the point of view of consumers, it was necessary to understand how physical stores adapted to the new measures imposed by the presence of Covid-19. Representatives interviewed from Nike, Adidas, Reebok, Puma and Decathlon maintained a pattern of response when asked about the transition process due to the closing of physical stores and the intensification of online sales, in which employees even at home participated in courses, lectures to stay active and motivated. A great highlight of this interview was realizing that each of the multinationals did everything to ensure that their employees had the support they needed. Each explained that during the confinement, they realized that online sales sought to fill the lack that consumers felt to buy physically in the face of high demand for products.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This chapter aimed to clarify to managers and practitioners how they could become more agile, improving their marketing performance in the sports fashion industry. Agile marketing represents a new marketing management approach based on an array of practices aimed at solving the rigidities of traditional marketing (Gera, Gera, & Mishra, 2019). The ways and means of agile marketing support an organisation' team to engage and be accountable for common objectives, which are oriented around consumers' demands and fine tune and optimise the operations in accordance with the change needed. Therefore, better consumer engagement and worth, better pace in relation to market pressure, and a superior capability to adjust to shifts are attained (Ewel, 2013; Gera et al., 2019; Moi & Cabiddu, 2020; Sachdeva & Kumar, 2022). According to Sachdeva and Kumar (2022), agility has become a central and vital part of marketing.

Serious global pandemic events such as the COVID-19 has raised the need for brands to adapt, access and move quickly. According to Moi and Cabiddu (2021), notably, agile marketing encourages a firm's teams to work together on common objectives centered around (e.g., sports fashion) customers' needs and regularly verify the presence of weak or unnecessary steps to adjust and optimize operations accordingly Hence, greater customer engagement and value, greater speed toward fashion market demand, and a greater ability to adapt to change are achieved. Such dimensions increase the understanding, from a business perspective, of the practical advantages and benefits that could derive from employing agile approaches and capabilities in marketing by explaining how their employment could enhance the existing marketing capabilities, particularly in turbulent and fast-changing contexts (e.g. sports fashion industry).

The problem of technology and its evolution is that its advantages and disadvantages are face of the same coin, and although it brings several amenities never before seen, the truth is that the undefined and unknown nature of this virtual space has allowed situations to take place of invasion of information, violation of fundamental rights, fraud, invasion of privacy, among many other illegal activities. Even far from the present reality, George Orwell, in 1949, described in his book entitled 1984, a scenario with a society in permanent invasion of privacy and under the control of technology. On the one hand, if one can easily perceive the potential of all this evolution, on the other, there grows a lack of confidence in everything that is behind it (Boas & Sousa, 2022). From these data, it is clear that the search for ease and the immediate need of consumers makes brands need to adapt quickly to the situation experienced, always being one step ahead. In view of all the interviews and the perspectives carried out, it was noted that the habit of buying online is growing over time and the pandemic has made this custom increasingly normal in today's society.

This chapter demonstrates the importance of brand attachment and agile marketing in the specific context of the fashion industry (i.e. sports brands). The pandemic context (covid-19) has demonstrated and highlighted the predisposition of consumers to digital solutions and in the expectation of agile and differentiating solutions. The chapter highlights the importance of technological progress and the impactful improvements of agile marketing in the context of sports brands (i.e. the fashion industry). Future studies should make it possible to deepen the results obtained in this research (of an exploratory and preliminary nature). The study was developed, in particular, the Portuguese context. Future studies may develop more rigorous methodologies (e.g. structural equation models) and understand the causal relationships between study variables. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this chapter presents insights into theory (i.e. brand attachment and agile marketing) and practice (operational marketing in the context of sports brands).

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Agile Marketing:** Is an approach to marketing that utilizes the principles and practices of agile methodologies. This includes having self-organizing, cross-functional teams doing work in frequent iterations with continuous feedback. It requires a strategic vision, as well as short, medium, and long-term marketing planning.

**Clothing Industry:** Or garment industry summarizes the types of trade and industry along the production and value chain of clothing and garments, starting with the textile industry (producers of cotton, wool, fur, and synthetic fiber), embellishment using embroidery, via the fashion industry to apparel retailers up to trade with second-hand clothes and textile recycling.

**Digital Marketing:** Is the marketing of products or services using digital technologies, mainly on the internet, but also including mobile phones, display advertising, and any other digital medium.

**E-Satisfaction:** The contentment of a consumer with respect to his or her prior purchasing experiences with a given retail-oriented website.

**E-WOM:** Is any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or a former customer which is available to a multitude of people via the internet.

**Online Relationship:** Is an integrative and multidimensional concept, such as relationship quality in an offline context.