

# **Nike: Becoming the #1 Soccer Brand**

## Written Assignment

submitted to

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## **List of Abbreviations**

|      |   |
|------|---|
| DFB  | Germany Soccer Association                        |
| DFL  | German Soccer League                              |
| ESPN | Empire and Sports Programming Network             |
| FIFA | International Federation of Association Football  |
| Inc. | Incorporated                                      |
| MLS  | Major League Soccer                               |
| SWOT | Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats |
| US   | United States                                     |

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Problem Statement

The majority of the population loves sports and the numbers do not lie. “The global sports market reached a value of nearly \$489 billion in 2018, having grown at an annual growth rate of more than 4% since 2014, and is expected to grow at an annual growth rate of about 6% to almost \$614 billion by 2022.”<sup>1</sup> Nike Inc. plays a leading role in the sports industry by being “the world’s largest supplier of athletic shoes and apparel and a major manufacturer of sports equipment and the biggest sports brand in the world by far.”<sup>2</sup>

Although Nike is arguably one of the most recognized brands in the world, there are a fair share of competitors in the sports industry.<sup>3</sup> Since its origin, Nike has undoubtedly been successful in their home market and with their strategy of expanding internationally; however, in terms of international expansion, there is still room for improvement.<sup>4</sup> The world’s most popular sport is soccer, and although Nike has achieved much sporting success, the company has not dominated the soccer sportswear and equipment market.<sup>5</sup> According to Ranker.com (among other sources), Adidas is the best soccer brand on the planet with Nike being second closely followed by Puma.<sup>6</sup> In order to continue strengthening and improving their brand image and sales on a global scale, Nike will have to find a solution to take over the number 1 position and become the best brand in the soccer sportswear and equipment industry.

## 1.2 Approach and Limitations

In order to understand Nike’s operations in the soccer industry, this research paper starts by investigating deeper into Nike’s brand in general and previous soccer-related operations. This can be better understood by examining Nike’s brand personality as

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<sup>1</sup> PRESS Release PR Newsire 2019.

<sup>2</sup> PledgeSports 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Casella 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hopwood 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Das 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ranker 2020.

well as their marketing strategy with endorsements of professional soccer players. This is followed by a comparison of Nike's soccer operations with a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis.

Following this theoretical framework, an application is presented exploring deeper into Nike's possible opportunities in soccer as well as looking at possible marketing tactics Nike can use to aid them with future company success. To conclude, a summary of this research paper is granted as well as a recommendation as to what Nike should consider going forward.

## **2 The Nike Brand**

### **2.1 Brand Personality**

Brand personality can be defined as "the set of human traits/characteristics assigned to the brand".<sup>7</sup> By resonating brand personality to a diverse audience, a company is able to insert a positive brand image into the minds of consumers. In addition, intelligent integration of brand personality into one's branding strategy and tactics is valuable because it creates consistent brand messaging. "According to Forbes, consistent brand presentation across all platforms increases revenue by up to 23 percent."<sup>8</sup>

Nike attempts to use its brand personality to inspire and encourage every individual who is exposed to their brand. This is demonstrated throughout the advertisements that Nike launches before each major soccer tournament. An example of such an advertisement is Nike's "Write the Future" campaign. "Within the first week of its release, the three-minute spot broke previous viral records with an unprecedented 7.8 million views, and it seemed Nike had perfected the art of ambush marketing."<sup>9</sup> It is apparent that Nike's marketing videos contain traits that are in line with its brand personality: inspirational, exciting, provocative, spirited, cool, and aggressive.<sup>10</sup>

Nike's logo, the swoosh, belongs to the brand personality as well. It is its uniqueness that differentiates it from competitors as it may have many different connotations. For

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<sup>7</sup> Pahwa 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Gomes 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Haddow 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Dvornechuck 2019.

example, one can view the logo as a metaphor for growth. As the logo goes up from left to right, it is also seen as an upward climb similar to a successful performance in the stock market. Phil Knight, co-founder of Nike, was not completely convinced of the logo<sup>11</sup> at first but over time the Nike Swoosh, even without the word Nike beside it, has become a symbol of strength.

Nike's mission is to "bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete\* in the world" (if you have a body, you are an athlete).<sup>12</sup> The mission along with their brand slogan "Just Do It" is consistent with its brand personality as provocative and inspirational. With this, Nike leaves no one out as anyone who is into achievement can be influenced by Nike's brand personality.<sup>13</sup>

## **2.2 Endorsement Marketing**

In order to elaborate on this idea of inspiration and achievement, Nike promotes its products by using some of the world's most elite athletes in its sponsorship agreements.<sup>14</sup> This strategy is used because the effectiveness of such deals is high. "Celebrity endorsements are a well-established marketing strategy [that have been] used since the late nineteenth century."<sup>15</sup> As a United States company, it is understandable that Nike's most prominent endorsement tactics were not related to soccer originally. It was the signing of basketball's Michael Jordan that set the standard for Nike's future marketing strategy.

Having various successes in American sports, it was not until 1982 with the signing of legendary Welsh goal-scorer Ian Rush that soccer became a part of Nike's endorsement strategy. In addition, "Steve Archibald [from Scotland] becomes the first player in Nike boots to score a goal in football's (soccer's) biggest tournament (The World Cup)"<sup>16</sup> in the same year, placing Nike on the global stage. Soccer has a significant place in the hearts of Europeans as European teams have won the FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) World Cup 12 out of the last 21 times.<sup>17</sup> Today, Cristiano Ronaldo is at the pinnacle of Nike Soccer's endorsement strategy,

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Brettman 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Nike, Inc. 2020b.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dvornechuck 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Keller 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Knoll/Matthes 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Nike, Inc 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. FOX Sports 2018.



but their range of overall portfolio of soccer players is wide.<sup>18</sup> Big-name soccer players like Neymar Jr., Kylian Mbappé, and Megan Rapinoe are just a few names of players who have shown all of those around the world who are influenced by soccer what it means to be represented by Nike.

Investing in soccer players is continuing to prove beneficial especially as the landscape of the marketing game has changed significantly. With the rise of the internet and social media, talented and marketable soccer players themselves are reaching a broader audience. According to Opendorse Inc, 4 of the top 10 soccer players with the most followers on social media are current or former Nike athletes with 323.2 million followers altogether. LeBron James (basketball) is also included in Nike's endorsement portfolio.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3 Comparison to Major Competitors

Being the top-rated sports brand in the world, Nike's main goal will be to analyze and apply their global sports success to upgrade their position in the soccer industry from #2 to #1. Having a unique brand personality and powerful endorsement strategy alone will not be enough. Major competitors like Adidas and Puma also use their brand personalities and endorsement strategies in an attempt to persuade consumers to use their products. The following is a SWOT analysis used to present Nikes strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats<sup>20</sup> when attempting to improve their brand image and gain global market share in the soccer apparel and equipment industry.<sup>21</sup>

*Strengths.* The Nike "Swoosh" is a symbol of strength seen in over 170 countries and arguably has the most recognized brand in the sports sector.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Forbes ranked Nike as 14<sup>th</sup> in their list of The World's Most Valuable Brands in 2019.<sup>23</sup> Within their soccer operations specifically, Nike has a diverse range of products and the elite players who are constantly in the spotlight are suited to help them elevate sales. Cristiano Ronaldo is the "top star" in world sports and was ranked #1 in the World Fame 100 by ESPN (Empire and Sports Programming Network).<sup>24</sup> This is an advantage for Nike

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix 5.1, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix 5.2, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Huber 2016, p. 65.

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix 5.3, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Nike, Inc. 2020a.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Forbes 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. ESPN 2020.

because not only the company arguably the #1 sports brand in the world, it also has **the best athlete**. This is in line with their company because US (United States) brands in general are seen as being among the best in the world. Although Nike mainly targets aspiring young athletes with this strategy, soccer is a sport that attracts people of all ages and diverse backgrounds. Therefore, these standards elevate the brand reputation overall.

*Weaknesses.* The best soccer is played in Europe.<sup>25</sup> Some of Nike's biggest competitors in the soccer business are European (Adidas, Puma and Umbro). As Nike has its headquarters in the United States, the brand could be seen as less relatable to consumers who are attracted to a European standard. In addition, Nike has historically been known for marketing that is controversial which includes advertisements with strong differing opinions and obvious ambush marketing strategies.<sup>26</sup> Because Nike is always attempting to advertise in an extravagant way, the company runs the risk of not appearing as serious to an older target group, for example

*Opportunities.* "Nike spends over \$6 billion per year in athlete sponsorship and endorsements."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, their budget is substantial when looking for athletes to add to their portfolio. There will always be players retiring but also new faces will join the game. Nike can continue to look for extraordinary, outspoken and provocative players to help build brand image and reputation. Not only does Nike help these players extend their personal brand, but also the personal brands of the players also helps Nike's brand. In addition, the contract extension of youngster Kylian Mbappe<sup>28</sup> and the signing of Ronaldinho's son, Joao Mendes (14 years old), are examples of Nike's future aspirations.<sup>29</sup> The premier league is also an opportunity for Nike. Using the top-rated league in the world as a platform, Nike now sponsors 15% of Barclays Premier League teams.<sup>30</sup> To reach a more diverse crowd, Nike could consider sponsoring more players and teams in leagues around the globe.

*Threats.* The biggest threat for Nike Adidas who currently have the #1 global soccer brand and have a longer history in the world and in Europe (soccer's hotspot). Even in the United States where Nike's company is located, the top soccer league of the

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Tansey 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Spruce 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Enoch 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. SoccerBible 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Forrester 2019.

<sup>30</sup> See Appendix 5.4, p. 13.

MLS (Major League Soccer) is sponsored by Adidas.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Nike may be a 15% sponsor in The Premier League but Adidas owns 30%.<sup>32</sup> With regards to players, Nike must also keep in mind that as the company is closely linked to the players, the proper behavior of endorsed players in pinnacle as they represent the brand image of Nike.<sup>33</sup> An example of this is the rumor of Neymar who reportedly cheated on his ex-girlfriend Bruna Marquezine.<sup>34</sup> This does obviously is not what Nike wants to reflect in its values. Overall, Nike will have to carefully monitor its players and allocate resources adequately and efficiently in order to prevent a decreasing brand image quality especially in a crowded market for soccer sponsoring.

### 3 Application Going Forward

#### 3.1 Main Marketing Opportunities

As an already reputable brand, Nike has a deep customer base. However, the opportunities lie in expansion and resonance with their audience. Big markets for soccer include those in Europe and South and Central America.<sup>35</sup> In order for Nike to become the number #1 soccer brand in the world, the marketing strategy in these core locations will need to be not only more effective but also more efficient than their competitors.

Adaptability is an important aspect for a company especially when attempting to gain market share within international markets. For Nike soccer, this may refer to adjust their products to the specific market (shoes, shin guards, jerseys etc.). One way to differentiate themselves from their competitors with more investments in research and development and adapt these products so that they fit to the specific location (different geographies, continents and countries). An important thing to note is that Nike cannot change their products and will have to ensure that their brand image stay intact. The products can be adjusted but the heart of the brand must stay the same.

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<sup>31</sup> Spain 2019.

<sup>32</sup> See Appendix 5.4, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Cristiano example

<sup>34</sup> Gannon 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Open Goaaal USA 2019.

In order to know what these specific markets desire, Nike must better understand the specific markets. Preferences of consumers are different in every geographic region. This will require market research asking questions such as “What is the worth of an endorsed soccer player in certain countries for specific products?”.

### **3.2 “No-Name” Marketing**

The marketing tactic of endorsing professional athletes in soccer has proven to work well for Nike because the players are easily recognized worldwide. As mentioned, this works especially well for aspiring professional athletes. However, Nike must also make an attempt to relate to the average, less-passionate athlete.

One tactic that Nike already uses is creating second- and third-rate versions of the soccer cleats and jerseys that professional soccer players wear.<sup>36</sup> This is effective because not only do they look similar, but they are enough for the casual soccer-fan. Nevertheless, Nike can take their marketing one step further.

Nike should consider investing more money into its casual “no-name” endorsing. With the rise of social media, influencers do not have to be those who are constantly on the television. On YouTube in particular, “sponsors pay YouTube influencers with 100,000 to 500,000 channel subscribers \$1000 to \$3000 per dedicated video” (a small fee for a company with a large budget like Nike).<sup>37</sup> Consumers often resonate more with influencers and may trust their opinion more than the opinion of a professional athletes.

### **3.3 Relocation**

To become the best soccer brand, Nike must consider developing new home markets. The company has already expanded its digital commerce platforms to over 45 countries which is a crucial step to being more recognized in soccer dominated countries. However, that step alone is not enough. Nike should consider developing new hotspot locations.

Nike has been known to make controversial decisions as well as decisions that go against the norm. One of these examples is Nike’s recent decisions in Germany. The

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. RunRepeat 2020.

<sup>37</sup> 99 Firms 2020.

decision was made to move marketing and sales operations in Frankfurt to Berlin.<sup>38</sup> Frankfurt is the home of the DFB (German Soccer Association) and the DFL (German Soccer League). Therefore, it is unimaginable at first glance why this decision would even be considered.

However, Berlin is the one of the creative capitols of the world.<sup>39</sup> Creativity is important when a company wants to create a separation from competitors. Therefore, making decisions such as relocations can be crucial to Nike's marketing strategy. Now these operations will be closer to inspiration, which could be the difference maker for marketing and possibly product development as long as it continues to be successful. This is something that Nike could consider replicating in other countries within and outside of the Europe. Doing so just might tip the scale in their favor.

## 4 Conclusion

### 4.1 Summary

Nike is the #1 sports brand in the world. Although the brand image is reputable, the company has not been able to take the ultimate top spot in the mind of consumers as a soccer brand. Adidas, their biggest competitor, has roots in soccer and Europe which is the hotspot of international soccer.

Nike is a United States' company with its specialty in American sports historically. Therefore, Nike has and continues to use several tactics to increase its brand awareness internationally. By endorsing elite athletes with strong personalities, the company continue to reach and pertain to a vast and diverse audience. In addition, Nike also sponsors elite teams and developed and developing competitions. "Inspiration" is among several of Nike's goals and the company effectively executes this emotion using their endorsed athletes, teams and competitions. Although their advertising budgets are proportionally higher, other companies are using similar strategies.

There are many opportunities for Nike to excel on the global soccer stage. Before executing on possible opportunities, an evaluation of strengths, weaknesses and

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Sporting Goods Intelligence Europe 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. National Geographic Traveler (UK) 2019.

threats must be made. The competition is fierce, and Adidas will constantly battle to avoid being overtaken.

## **4.2 Recommendation**

Nike undoubtedly already has a plan in place. With so many expert employees, it is unreasonable to believe that together the company have not already come up with a strategy that will increase their chances of becoming the #1 soccer brand in the world. However, it is apparent from the outside that something has to change if Nike wants to decrease and overcome the current gap.

As a result, there are several recommendations that Nike could consider in order to make their brand undeniably #1 in the soccer apparel and equipment industry. Location plays a definitive role in branding. Therefore, expanding to more countries should be within their objectives. If quality in soccer was represented by Nike within all regions (especially in soccer-dominated regions) then the brand image would elevate. Deciding where to have locations within these regions is important to get the proper influences for future operations. Regions such as Europe and Central and South America are important regions to consider when increasing marketing activities as these locations are soccer hotspots. However, Nike should continually monitor developing soccer regions (such as India) in order increase brand reputation and trust. Being consistent with these activities alone, should see already-dominant Nike increase their bid to be the #1 brand in soccer.

## 5 Appendix

### 5.1 General Nike Information

Tab. 1: Nike Soccer Player Portfolio<sup>40</sup>

| Player                    | Nationality | Team              |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Riyad Mahrez              | Algeria     | Manchester City   |
| Gonzalo Higuaín           | Argentina   | Juventus          |
| Mauro Icardi              | Argentina   | Inter Milan       |
| Carlos Tevez              | Argentina   | Boca Juniors      |
| Thibaut Courtois          | Belgium     | Real Madrid       |
| Kevin De Bruyne           | Belgium     | Manchester City   |
| Eden Hazard               | Belgium     | Real Madrid       |
| Philippe Coutinho         | Brazil      | FC Bayern         |
| Dani Alves, Brazil        | Brazil      | São Paulo FC      |
| Neymar, Brazil            | Brazil      | PSG               |
| Thiago Silva              | Brazil      | PSG               |
| Alexis Sánchez            | Chile       | Inter Milan       |
| Arturo Vidal              | Chile       | FC Barcelona      |
| Luka Modrić               | Croatia     | Real Madrid       |
| Christian Eriksen         | Denmark     | Inter Milan       |
| Harry Kane                | England     | Tottenham         |
| Marcus Rashford           | England     | Manchester United |
| Raheem Sterling           | England     | Manchester City   |
| Jamie Vardy               | England     | Leicester City    |
| Ousmane Dembélé           | France      | FC Barcelona      |
| Lauren Koscielny          | France      | Bordeaux          |
| Alexandre Lacazette       | France      | Arsenal           |
| Hugo Lloris               | France      | Tottenham         |
| Anthony Martial           | France      | Manchester United |
| Kylian Mbappé             | France      | PSG               |
| Raphaël Varane            | France      | Real Madrid       |
| Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang | Gabon       | Arsenal           |
| Jérôme Boateng            | Germany     | FC Bayern         |
| Emre Can                  | Germany     | Borussia Dortmund |
| Mario Götze               | Germany     | Borussia Dortmund |
| Sami Khedira              | Germany     | Juventus          |

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Yoesting 2018.

|                    |          |              |
|--------------------|----------|--------------|
| Shkodran Mustafi   | Germany  | Arenal       |
| Leonardo Bonucci   | Italy    | Juventus     |
| Alex Iwobi         | Nigeria  | Everton      |
| Robert Lewandowski | Poland   | FC Bayern    |
| Cristiano Ronaldo  | Portugal | Juventus     |
| Andrés Iniesta     | Spain    | Vissel Kobe  |
| Marco Asensio      | Spain    | Real Madrid  |
| Isco, Spain        | Spain    | Real Madrid  |
| Gerard Piqué       | Spain    | FC Barcelona |
| Sergio Ramos       | Spain    | Real Madrid  |
| Zlatan Ibrahimović | Sweden   | AC Milan     |
| Edinson Cavani     | Uruguay  | PSG          |
| Christian Pulisic  | US       | Chelsea FC   |

## 5.2 Social Media Following

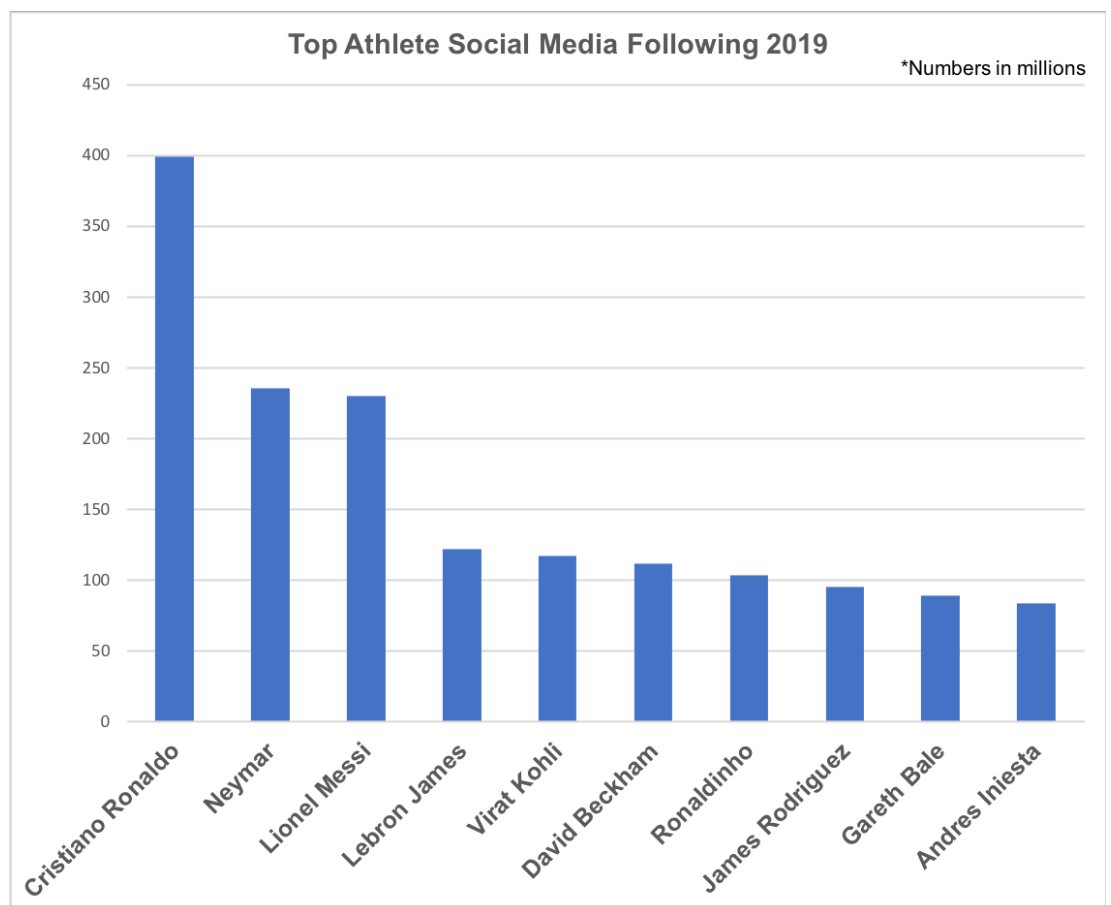


Fig. 1: Top Athlete Social Media Following 2019<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Weber 2020.



### 5.3 SWOT Analysis

According to Professor Andreas Huber, “The SWOT analysis is a strategic planning and analysis instrument of marketing, which is based on a holistic and regular examination of the internal, influenceable (strengths/weaknesses) and external, non-directly influenceable (opportunities/risks) determining factors of a company.”<sup>42</sup>

Tab. 2: SWOT Analysis Nike Soccer

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognized logo and brand</li> <li>• Cristiano Ronaldo (#1 athlete)</li> <li>• US Brand</li> <li>• controversial and ambush marketing</li> <li>• substantial budget</li> </ul> | <p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-European brand</li> <li>• Controversial strategies</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young players</li> <li>• Non-professional influencers</li> <li>• Additional global sponsoring</li> </ul>   | <p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggressive competitors</li> <li>• Endorsed player behavior</li> </ul> |

In the following chart, the SWOT analysis is rated in order to show the impact of the different sections of the SWOT analysis.

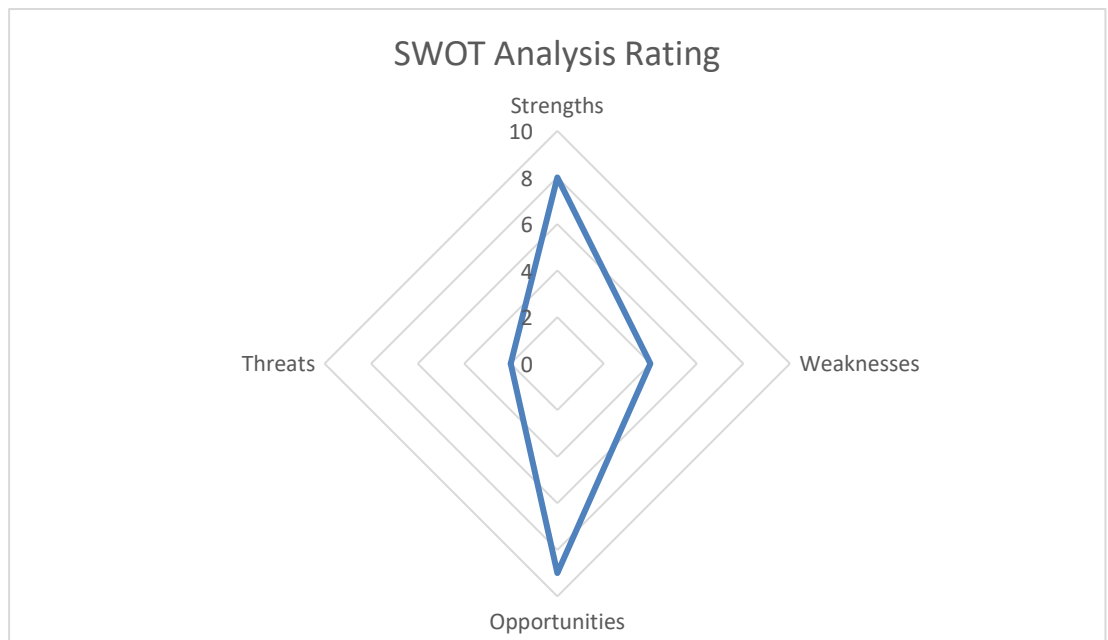


Fig. 2: Nike Soccer SWOT Analysis Rating

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Huber 2016, p. 65.

#### 5.4 Premier League Sponsorship

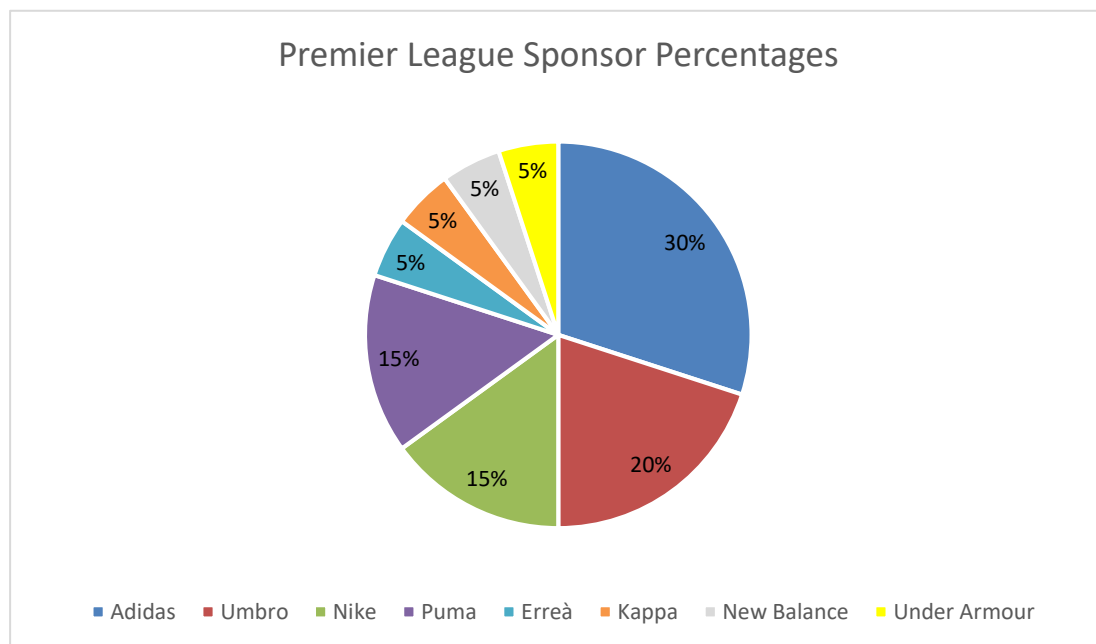


Fig. 3: Premier League Sponsors<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Cf. SCORE AND CHANGE 2019.

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## Affirmation

Affirmation

This thesis was written by me independently, and I have given indication of sources whenever content was taken directly or indirectly from other sources or media. Verbatim and analogous quotes have been indicated as such. Furthermore, I confirm that there is no factual concurrence with any dissertation, final paper or thesis that I may have submitted within the scope of any previous studies. This thesis has not been submitted to any other institution or individual within the framework of an examination.

Place, Date Frankfurt a.M., April 20, 2020    Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'C. M. Lang', written over a horizontal line.