



INFLUENCE OF PRODUCT QUALITY ON CONSUMER PERCEPTION WHEN CHOOSING A SPORTS BRAND

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of product quality on shaping consumer perception when selecting a sports brand. The research investigates three key aspects: the intrinsic quality of the product, its origin, and the innovation incorporated into its design. A quantitative survey was conducted with 174 valid responses, collected between January and March 2024 in the Republic of North Macedonia, providing a detailed analysis of consumer perceptions of various sports brands in the market. The results, validated through applying the Kruskal-Wallis test, reveal statistically significant differences in brand evaluations. Notably, brands that maintain consistent quality and integrate innovative features are more likely to secure consumer trust and foster loyalty. Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of authentic brand presentation and high product standards as drivers of positive consumer experiences. This research significantly contributes to brand management theory and provides practical recommendations for market positioning strategies. Its insights are valuable for academics and practitioners, aiming to enhance competitiveness in today's dynamic business environment. These findings underscore the need for sports brands to innovate while maintaining high quality, ensuring they meet consumer demands in a competitive marketplace. This overview establishes the theoretical foundation for the research, which will examine in detail the key aspects of product quality and its impact on consumer perception.

Keywords: Quality evaluation, Brand awareness, Product, Consumer perceptions, Sport brand

1 INTRODUCTION

Product quality is a key factor in shaping consumer perceptions and influencing purchasing decisions, particularly when choosing sports brands (Keller, 2013). High-quality products are

often associated with trust, reliability, and satisfaction. That strongly impacts consumer preferences. When consumers perceive a brand's products as high-quality, they are more inclined to choose the specific brand over competitors. This perception is influenced by product performance, durability, and overall value. In the sports market, brand recognition and reputation play a significant role in consumer behavior. A brand with consistent

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high-quality product offers will likely establish strong consumer loyalty and increase its market share. Consumers are more inclined to trust and choose familiar, high-quality brands, which leads to repeated purchases and positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). As research shows (Cheng-Han, Chien-Lung, & Kuo-Kuang, 2016; Ching-Jui, Wen-Hua, Chin-Hua, & Ya-Yi, 2016), the implementation of integrated branding strategies that combine product quality with virtual experience and consumer perceptions is confirmed by examples from leading brands such as Clinique (2021), Covergirl (2021), and Eucerin (2021), while further analyses of brand associations and positioning (Delgado-Ballester & Hernández-Espallardo, 2008; Distility, 2021; Dubey & George, 2012; Gomoescu, 2016; Guettler, 2017; Hamerman & Johar, 2013; Junghyun & Eun Ah, 2016) underscore the complexity of branding strategies that are crucial for fostering positive consumer perceptions in today's competitive business landscape. Ultimately, product quality helps shape consumer attitudes, forming the foundation for favorable perceptions and preferences. By consistently offering high-quality products, sports brands can build lasting relationships with consumers and secure their position in a competitive market.

Quality - is a cornerstone of consumer satisfaction and loyalty. It encompasses tangible and intangible aspects, such as durability, functionality, and user experience (Aaker, 2016).

Perceived Quality: Zeithaml (1988) highlights that perceived quality influences consumer preferences more significantly than objective quality measures. When products meet or exceed expectations, they create positive associations that encourage repeat purchases (Ching-Jui et al., 2016).

Consistency: Consistent quality across product lines and customer interactions reinforces reliability and trust. Brands that maintain ambitious standards are more likely to build loyal customer bases.

Innovation: In competitive markets, quality is often linked to innovation. Products incorporating new features or technologies stand out and are

perceived as superior, further enhancing reputation. In conclusion, understanding and effectively managing the quality of the product is essential for influencing consumer perceptions. Businesses integrating these elements into their strategies are better positioned to attract, satisfy, and retain customers in a competitive marketplace.

Sports brands prioritize two key components of brand awareness: (Keller, 2013)

1. **Brand Recognition:** The ability of consumers to identify the product through its visual or auditory elements, such as the Nike swoosh or Adidas's three stripes. This recognition is often driven by consistent exposure across multiple brand retail displays.
2. **Brand Recall:** The consumer's ability to remember the product when thinking about sports-related products like running shoes, jerseys, or gym equipment. This is influenced by how well a brand's marketing efforts resonate with its audience and the emotional connections it fosters.

When these elements are strong, sports brands enjoy a competitive edge, as consumers naturally gravitate toward them for their reliability and association with athletic excellence.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study, research was conducted to compare the sport Brand **D** (in the following text **D**), with its competing brands, Brands **A** (in the following text **A**), Brand **B** (in the following text **B**), Brand **C** (in the following text **C**), Brand **E** (in the following text **E**), and Brand **F** (in the following text **F**). All these brands are present in the sports market in North Macedonia. A questionnaire was distributed to 190 respondents, 183 of whom were qualified to answer the questionnaire, and 174 provided valid responses. The respondents were asked to rank these brands based on their level of satisfaction.

Respondents rated them using 1-to-5 scale (1 = unsatisfactory, 5 = excellent). The analysis is supported by a stacked bar chart that visually compares the percentage ratings across key satisfaction categories.

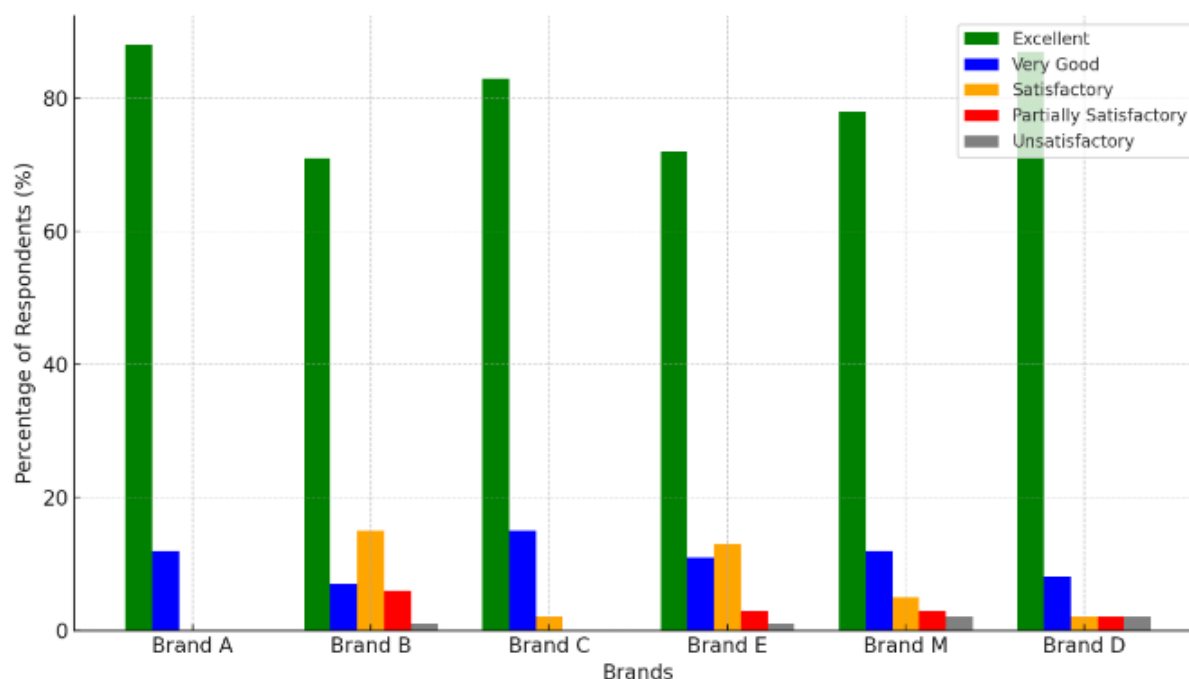


Fig. 1 Consumer Rating of Different Sports Brands

Source: Author's research

A was rated as excellent by 88% of the respondents, and 12% rated it as particularly good. No respondents rated it as satisfactory, partially satisfactory, or unsatisfactory, indicating an elevated level of trust in this brand. **B** was rated as excellent by 71% of the respondents, 7% rated it as particularly good, 15% as satisfactory, 6% as partially satisfactory, and 1% as unsatisfactory. **C** was rated as excellent by 83% of the respondents, 15% as particularly good, 2% as satisfactory, and no one rated it as partially or unsatisfactory. **D** was rated as excellent by 72% of the respondents, 11% as particularly good, 13% as satisfactory, 3% as partially satisfactory, and 1% as unsatisfactory. **E** was rated as excellent by 78%, 12% as very good, 5% as satisfactory, 3% as partially satisfactory, and 2% as unsatisfactory. **F** was rated as excellent by 87% of the respondents, 8% as particularly good, 2% as satisfactory, 2% as partially satisfactory, and 2% as unsatisfactory. As a starting point for this study, primary quantitative data were used, which were obtained through a structured questionnaire. The respondents were contacted electronically and asked to complete the online questionnaire. The respondents expressed their views and opinions about selected sports in comparison to the competing brands in

the sports market of the Republic of North Macedonia. The research was conducted from January 2024 to March 2024. The questionnaire used in the survey included questions about three quality factors, (such as product quality, product origin, and product design) that are explained through the activities they encompass. First, the respondents were asked to rank these criteria on a scale from 1 to 5 based on their importance, and then they were asked to rate each sports brand on those criteria. Afterward, using the Kruskal-Wallis test, an analysis was made to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the respondent's perceptions regarding the six brands for each group (factor) individually (Kruskal, & Wallis, 1952).

In Table 1 it can be seen that the majority of respondents are female, i.e., 79% of the respondents, and only 21% are male. In terms of age, it can be seen that 64% of the respondents are between the ages of 18 and 30, 21% are between the ages of 31 and 60, and only 15% are over the age of 61. Regarding the financial situation of the respondents, 41% have an income of up to 40,000 dens, 35% have an income of 40,001 to 60,000 dens and 24% have a monthly income of over 60,000 dens.

Table 1. Sample Structure

Gender	Number of Respondents	% of Respondents
Male	37	21%
Female	137	79%
Age		
18-30	111	64%
31-60	37	21%
60+	26	15%
Monthly Income MKD		
Up to 40 000	71	41%
40001 to 60000	61	35%
Over 60000	42	24%
Total Number	174	100%

Source: Author's research

Table 2. Respondents' perceptions of the importance of factors when deciding on a sports brand

	Questions	Importance
	Quality factors	4.485
1	Product quality (composition)	4.715
2	Product origin	4.353
3	Product design	4.387

Source: Author's research

The research was conducted based on 2 groups of factors: Situational and communication satisfaction factors and their influence on consumer perceptions when choosing sports brand. Consumers first rated the importance of

factors when deciding on a sports brand on a scale of 1 to 5, with one being the least important and five being the most important. The most important factor for sports users from quality factor is product quality (composition) with an average importance of 4.485. The next are Product design and Product origin with an average importance of 4.387 and 4.353 respectively.

According to data on the positions, **A** is best positioned in terms of product origin with an average value of 4.493 followed by product quality with an average value of 4.398, and product design with an average value of 4.327. **B** is best positioned in terms of product origin with an average value of 4.198 followed by product quality with an average value of 4.099, and product design with an average value of 4.368. **C** is best positioned in terms of product origin with an average value of 4.387, followed by product design with an average value of 4.368, and product quality with an average value of 4.298. **D** is best positioned in terms of product quality with an average value of 4.376 followed by product origin with an average value of 4.352, and product design with an average of 4.343. **E** is best positioned in terms of product quality with an average value of 4.103 followed by product origin with an average value of 4.017, and product design with an average value of 4.016. **F** is best positioned in terms of product design with an average value of 4.601, followed by product origin with an average value of 4.31, and product quality with an average value of 4.159.

Table 3. Consumer perceptions of individual groups of factors by brands

Questions	Brand A	Brand B	Brand C	Brand D	Brand E	Brand F
Product quality	4.398	4.099	4.298	4.376	4.103	4.159
Product origin	4.493	4.198	4.387	4.352	4.017	4.313
Product design	4.327	4.023	4.368	4.343	4.016	4.601
Quality factors	4.406	4.107	4.351	4.357	4.045	4.358

Source: Data from the conducted research

All six brands are well-perceived in terms of the quality factors of their products. The Kruskal-Wallis test was applied for each factor individually to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in perceptions between the six brands. The results of the calculations are shown in Table 3.

Positioning is determined based on three key factors: (1) product quality, (2) product origin, and (3) product design. According to product quality (Composition), **A** is positioned in first place with an average value of 4.398, followed by D in second place with an average value of 4.376. In third place is **C**, which has an average value of 4.298, and in fourth is **F**, with an average value of 4.159. **E** is

positioned in fifth place with an average value of 4.103 and then follows the last, in position number six, **B** with an average of 4.099.

According to product origin (Table 3), **A** is positioned in first place with an average value of 4.493, followed by **C** in second place with an

average of 4.387. In third place is **D** with an average value of 4.352. In fourth place, with an average value of 4.313, is **F**. **B** is positioned in fifth place with an average value of 4.198, and then follows the last, in position number six, **E** with an average value of 4.017.

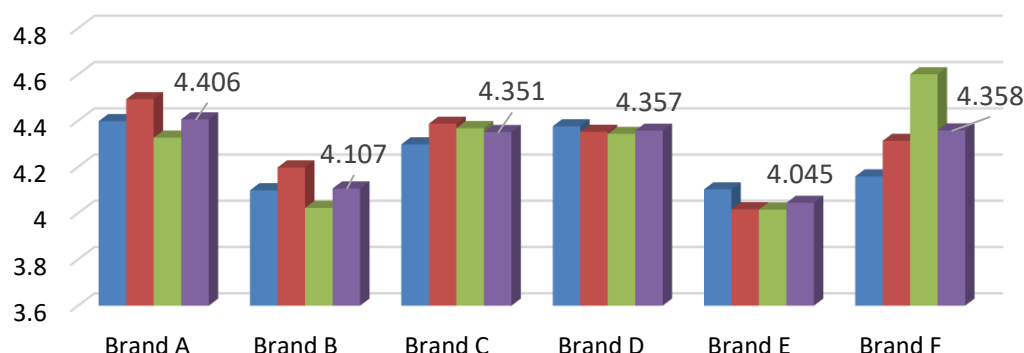


Fig. 2 Rating for Different Sports Brands

Source: Author's own research

According to product design as the third factor (Table 3), **F** is positioned in first place with an average value of 4.601, followed by **C** in second place with an average value of 4.368, in third place is **D** with an average value of 4.343, in fourth place

is **A** with an average value of 4.327. **B** is in fifth place with an average value of 4.023, followed by the last, in position number six, **E**, with an average value of 4.016.

Table 4. Differences in perceptions of quality factors – Kruskal-Wallis test results

	Brand	Mean value for all companies	Mean value	Mean rank	Kruskal-Wallis test
1	A	4.271	4.406	387.4	0.01113
2	B		4.107	322.3	
3	C		4.351	367.4	
4	D		4.357	387.4	
5	E		4.045	325.5	
6	F		4.358	383.7	

Source: Author's research

Furthermore, the test results indicate an absence of statistically significant differences in consumers' perceptions regarding the quality factors of individual brands (Table 4). The significance threshold should be explicitly stated to provide clarity regarding statistical relevance. In this study, the Kruskal-Wallis test yielded a p-value of 0.01113. Given that the commonly accepted threshold for statistical significance is $p < 0.05$, this result indicates that the differences in consumer perceptions across the analyzed brands are statistically significant and unlikely to have occurred by chance.

In terms of these factors, consumers perceive **A** best (4.406). Immediately after it, with a minimal

difference, are **F** (4.358) and **D** (4.357). Then comes **C** with a score of 4.351, and finally, the worst-rated are **E** (4.045) and **B** (4.107). The respondents' perceptions regarding the quality factors for **A**, **F**, **D**, and **C** are higher than the average perception of these factors for all brands (4.271). According to the data on quality factor positioning, **A** holds the top spot, indicating it is perceived as having the highest quality among the six brands. **C** and **D** closely follow; however, **D** is rated slightly higher than **C**, suggesting that consumers have marginally greater confidence in its quality attributes. **F** is positioned at a level comparable to **C** and **D**, reflecting a similar overall quality performance.

In contrast, **E** and **B** are evaluated as the lowest, which implies that they are seen as having inferior quality relative to the others. This evaluation delineates a clear hierarchy in consumer perceptions: while several brands perform well, **A** emerges as the leader, whereas **E** and **B** lag, indicating significant opportunities for quality improvement. The analysis results set the stage for the next section, which will present the main conclusions and offer target recommendations for enhancing market strategy.

Table 4 encapsulates the quality perceptions for six sports brands, assessed through three key parameters:

- *Mean Value* parameter represents the arithmetic average of the ratings given for each brand. For instance, **A** has a mean value of 4.406, indicating a high average quality rating.
- Based on the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test, the mean rank summarizes all individual ratings assigned to the brands. A higher mean rank (e.g., 387.4 for **A**) suggests that the ratings are consistently higher than those of others. Conversely, **B**, with a mean rank of 322.3 is perceived as having lower quality.
- *Kruskal-Wallis Test* ($p = 0.01113$, as shown for **C**) indicates statistically significant differences in quality perceptions among the brands.

Respondents perceive some brands (such as **A**, **D**, and **F**) as having higher quality, while others (like **B** and **E**) are rated lower. The Kruskal-Wallis test confirms that these differences are statistically significant and not due to random chance.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Companies should aggressively promote only one characteristic in the target market. Each brand should choose one attribute and position itself as "Number 1" for that attribute. Buyers tend to remember the market leader more easily, especially in a society overloaded with communication. **A** received the highest consumer preference score in our survey, with a mean rating of 4.406, positioning it as the top-performing brand in perceived quality. To maintain its leadership

position, **A** should continue reinforcing its identity through sustained marketing efforts and consistent product innovation.

The promotion efforts for the so-called "medical sports brand" may be a key factor for achieving great success in the sports market. For **D** it is recommended to apply a differentiation strategy by emphasizing its superior product quality. Because **D** ranks second in product quality perception (4.376) and third in product origin perception (4.352), the brand can strengthen its position by highlighting its consistent quality standards and superior material composition. Differentiation helps the company to compete by creating a unique identity that resonates with consumers. If the brand does not differentiate itself, it will be perceived as like competitors and will have to rely on price-based competition.

A cost-based pricing strategy could also enhance **D**'s market positioning. This approach would not require reducing prices for existing products but rather introducing a new product line with the same or slightly lower quality at a significantly reduced price point. For example, offering new products at 50% lower prices than existing premium products could expand the brand's reach to a larger segment of consumers in the Republic of North Macedonia.

This dual-branding approach, maintaining an established premium line while launching an affordable alternative, would allow the company to attract more customers while sustaining the perceived exclusivity of its high-end offerings. Brands with lower consumer perception scores, such as **E** (4.045) and **B** (4.107), need strategic improvements to enhance their market standing. These brands should focus on improving product quality, investing in stronger branding, and considering competitive pricing models to attract more customers.

Market conditions should be continuously observed, analyzed, and responded to with appropriate management strategies. A well-developed marketing communication strategy, focusing on brand credibility, reputation-building, and consumer trust, will further enhance brand loyalty and long-term market success.

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