

UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA  
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

MASTER'S THESIS

**SPORTS MARKETING IN THE US AND EUROPE: COMPARISON  
OF THE NBA AND THE EUROLEAGUE**

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## AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

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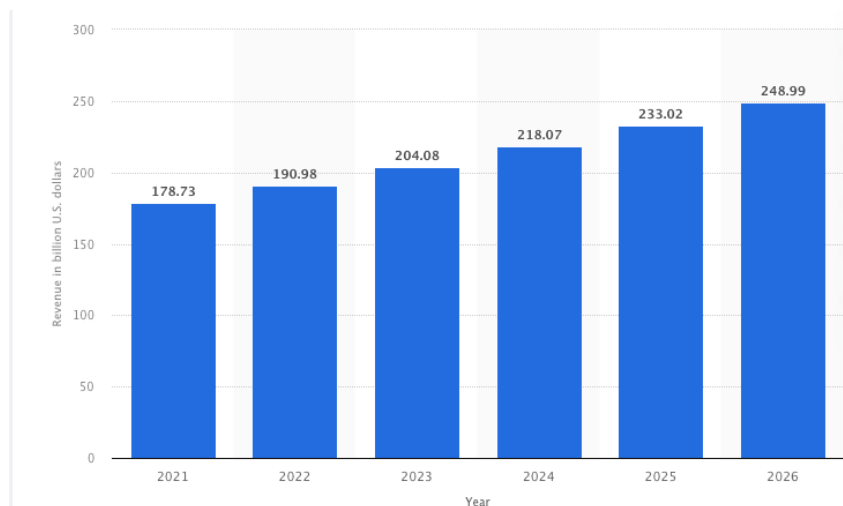
## INTRODUCTION

The field of sports marketing is getting more recognition from researchers every year. Investments in professional sports are growing rapidly on a yearly basis and as a result, sports marketing is growing rapidly as well.

According to Kahle and Riley (2008), sports marketing differs from »regular« marketing in 3 main points: live marketing, passionate conversation, and personal identity. First, sports marketers must manage their campaigns during live events, which can be very challenging. Second, sport is a highly passionate topic for fans, and therefore sports marketing campaigns need to be planned very carefully to not get any negative emotions from the audience. Third, because of the personal attachment of the fans towards the clubs or athletes, a very well-executed campaign can result in great success for the sponsors (Sporjo, 2020). Due to differences between sports fans, cultures, and sports in general, every marketing strategy is shaped by its context and as a result, is unique.

Basketball is one of the most popular sports in the world. According to Bhwardaj (2022), basketball is the third most popular sport in the world. Only soccer and cricket have more followers than basketball. The aggregate sports market in the world, in general, is worth around \$440.77 billion and is expected to grow up to \$599.99 billion in 2025 (Kumar & Bhalla, 2021). Sports fans are consistently increasing their spending on the merchandise of their favorite teams and players. (Smith, 2022)

*Figure 1: Total revenue of the global sports apparel market from 2021 to 2026*



*Source: Statista (n. d.).*

The above graph is showing how the global sports apparel market is growing through the years. By the year 2026, it will reach almost \$250 billion. This makes the basketball market in general an appealing market to invest in. When comparing different basketball markets, we find out that there are different basketball cultures, markets, fans, and marketing

strategies. In this thesis, I comparatively study the marketing strategies of the two biggest and most popular basketball leagues in the world: the NBA and the Euroleague.

The NBA is the most popular and most profitable professional basketball league in the world. It is among the top 4 biggest leagues in North America. It was founded in 1946 in New York City. Its present commissioner is Adam Silver (Britannica, 2021). The Euroleague, since 2010 called the Turkish Airlines Euroleague (sponsorship reasons) is the highest-level European basketball competition, held ever since 2000. The competition had been run by FIBA since 1958 and the Euroleague took over the competition in 2000. It is also known as the “NBA of Europe” (Pearson, 2019). Today, the NBA is the 3rd most profitable sports league in the world. With a revenue of \$7.4 billion, they only trail behind the other two remarkable North American sports associations – the NFL (national football league) and the MLB (major league baseball) (Randjelović, 2020). NBA’s success seems particularly outstanding when compared to its European counterpart, the Euroleague – the biggest and the most elite European basketball league. Although it is the biggest basketball stage in Europe, bringing together the best clubs from the European area, the Euroleague is not even close to the NBA in terms of popularity and revenues. When comparing the revenue data between the Euroleague and the NBA, we can see that they are 7x smaller compared to the NBA. Their projection is, to reach \$1.1 billion by the 2025/26 season (Eurohoops, 2019). NBA’s sponsorship revenues in 2021 were almost \$1.5 billion (Young, 2021) while Euroleague’s were around \$600 million (Eurohoops, 2019).

*Table 1: A brief comparison of both leagues*

	Founded in	Revenue	No. of teams in the league	Sponsorship revenues
NBA	1946	\$7.4 billion	30	\$1.5 billion
Euroleague	2000	Aprox. \$1 billion	18	\$600 million

*Sources: Brittanica (2021); Pearson (2019); Eurohoops (2019) and Young (2021).*

The main purpose of this master's thesis is to understand and analyze the marketing approach of the NBA league in comparison to that of the Euroleague. This research will focus on the fields of marketing and sports business in general, where the NBA is considered superior to the Euroleague. The goal of this research will be to identify similarities and differences between these two marketing approaches and formulate actionable recommendations that could help the Euroleague in catching up with the NBA. In doing so, the thesis helps us better understand why the NBA is such a global phenomenon when it comes to the sports industry and enriches the theoretical knowledge of different sports marketing approaches.

I selected this topic because I am an avid basketball and sports enthusiast in general. During my MA studies at the University of Ljubljana, I had the opportunity to complete an internship in the marketing department of the NBA club Dallas Mavericks. The internship took place from December 2021 to June 2022 in Dallas, Texas. I was a member of the marketing team responsible for all marketing initiatives for each individual game, in addition to other projects. Importantly, I was able to gain first-hand knowledge of the industry and of the NBA's well-oiled business machine supported by thousands of individuals throughout the league who are liable for their own duties. Therefore, my methodology, in addition to digital ethnography and interviews, also includes participant observation conducted while interning with the Dallas Mavericks.

The guiding research goals and the research questions in the thesis are:

1. Comparison of the sports marketing strategies of the NBA and Euroleague (US market vs European market)

RQ 1.1: What are the key pillars of the respective marketing strategies of the NBA and Euroleague?

RQ 1.2: What are the strengths and weaknesses of their respective strategies?

2. Understanding the context and factors that shape the different strategies

RQ 2.1: What are the different socio-cultural factors that have shaped different strategies?

RQ 2.2: What are the roles of teams and players in the marketing strategies of both leagues?

RQ 2.3: What role does the format of the competition (open vs closed) play in the formation of marketing strategies?

3. Provide a list of recommendations and best practices in basketball marketing based on the insights from the NBA-Euroleague comparison

RQ 3.1: What are the best practices in basketball marketing in general?

RQ 3.2: What lessons can the Euroleague draw from the NBA in particular?

Recent Covid-19 events have had a major impact on the business operations of both leagues as well. Restrictions of in-person attendance, cancellation of events, and game suspensions have resulted in significant revenue losses.

One of the first major sports leagues in the world to suspend its competition was the NBA, resulting in an almost \$650 million loss in revenues (Statista, 2020). The league had to cancel its annual All-star Weekend which represents a huge revenue stream, especially through the gate, sponsorship, and media revenues (Reuters, 2020).

The Euroleague faced Covid-19 revenue losses as well. They had to cancel their competition in March 2020 and later, postpone the start of the 2020/21 season as well (Reuters, 2020).

In the following season, they had to implement various safety protocols, such as playing in front of empty arenas and regular Covid-19 testing for all the staff and players, which resulted in significant revenue losses (Euroleague Basketball, 2020).

However, after COVID-19 both the NBA and the Euroleague rebounded, NBA in 2023 has record playoff viewership, and Euroleague's numbers are growing rapidly. The NBA is securing the biggest media rights deal in its history (Paulsen, 2023). The Euroleague has seen a growth in popularity as well (Eurohoops, 2021).

## **Outline of the thesis**

In the next chapter, the thesis focuses on the basic concepts and principles of sports marketing and marketing in general. It explains the main characteristics of sports marketing and how both the NBA and the Euroleague are taking advantage of those characteristics. This chapter describes what is a sports marketing strategy and which concepts it includes.

The following chapter then discusses the key marketing strategies of both leagues and at the end summarizes the financial superiority of the NBA over the Euroleague.

The thesis then discusses the methodology, unpacks its research objectives, and elaborates on the research questions in depth. It describes the data and methods used, zooming in on the process of primary and secondary data collection, and the methods used in this thesis to gather information. At the end of this chapter, it also summarizes the thematic analysis which is conducted in the following chapters.

It then proceeds with the analysis of the three key research themes, which are 1) the role of culture, 2) the distinction between player-oriented and team-oriented marketing, and 3) the distinction between open and closed formats of the competition. After this, the thesis critically compares the findings about the NBA and the Euroleague, summarizes the findings, and concludes with a list of recommendations.

## **1 CONCEPTS OF SPORTS MARKETING**

Sports marketing is one of many marketing ways that combine sports culture and brand culture through sports activities. Sports marketing has two possible explanations, one regards sports as a commodity, and the other is to regard sports activities as the carrier of brand marketing (Sun, 2015).

Marketing in general is a set of rules and institutions for delivering, communicating, and creating offerings that have a certain value for customers, partners, and society in general (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2010). When talking about sports marketing, there are things similar to general marketing, but there are special things that need to be considered while doing sports marketing. »Sports marketing can be defined as the use of marketing for

creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging sports experiences that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society« (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2018). There are two distinct aspects of sports marketing: 1) marketing of sports and 2) marketing through sports. This thesis mostly discusses the *marketing of sports*. The second part, which is marketing through sports is discussed in a small part in the section about the marketing strategies of both leagues. When thinking about the marketing of sports we think about the marketing efforts of sports teams, franchises, leagues, and marketing of marketing goods. An example of marketing of sports is when the clubs organize a charity event to raise money for a good cause and therefore cast a good light on the team (Venturoli, 2023).

On the other hand, marketing through sports is the practice of companies forming partnerships with sports entities for commercial benefit (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2018). A list of marketing benefits includes increased brand awareness, generating traffic, increased revenue, building trust in a brand, and tracking the metrics, which broadens the market (Shivani, 2022). A prime example of using sports to achieve certain marketing and business goals is the sponsorship of a team, athlete, or event. The definition of a sponsor is: » *a partner with the properties being sponsored as well as being their customers, seeking to achieve certain outcomes from their association with the property*« (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2018). For example, in the NBA, there are multiple sponsorships with different fast-food chains, financial institutions, sports gear, etc.

The basics of sports marketing are the same as the basics of general marketing. The basics of general marketing are product, price, promotion, place, people, process, and physical evidence (Santo, 2023). However, there are three characteristics that distinguish sports marketing from other fields and present unique opportunities for sports organizations. Those characteristics are an affinity advantage, a positioning challenge, and experience-based relationships, which will be elaborated on in depth below.

## **1.1 Affinity advantage**

Affinity marketing is a type of marketing that involves a mutually beneficial partnership between two brands (Huhn, 2022). Sports brands tend to experience a higher affinity advantage than other brands in other industries. People usually have deeper emotional connections to sports brands than they do to other brands. There were multiple kinds of research done to explore why sports fans have such an emotional attachment to sports brands. For example, Arakaki (2017) studied the impact of marketing strategies on the fans' emotional attachment to the sports club, proving that the stronger the fans' emotional connection to the team, the stronger their perception of the team as a brand (Arakaki, 2017). The source of this affinity can be for different reasons, it can be because they want to be a part of a certain group of people, family influence, or just support a certain team or athlete. One of the positive sides of the affinity advantage is that sports brands could potentially be

immune to the threats that usually other brands face, because of the above-mentioned reasons.

Affinity advantage is also shown through the consumption of licensed products of the teams and athletes. That way, fans show other people their affection and support for the team they belong to. Licensed products represent a significant revenue stream for brands and teams/companies that work together. It's hard for other, non-sport brands to create such value with licensed products. (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2018). The affinity advantage of the NBA is its global reach and popularity. The NBA attracts all the best players in the world which is a huge factor in the affinity advantage.

Euroleague, on the other hand, finds its advantage in its cultural diversity and different game strategies which makes it interesting to watch.

## 1.2 Positioning challenge

The positioning challenge arises when sports clubs and franchises position themselves as entertainment options and therefore increase not only their potential audience but also the competition from other non-sport businesses. Non-sporting brands are usually not familiar with this challenge. In other industries, a firm's competitors usually have similar products, pricing, and marketing strategies. Within the sports industry, it may initially appear that a particular team has a monopoly on merchandise sales; however, this is not the case as there is indeed competition present. To expand the target market, spectator sports are not just sporting events but entertainment events as well.

For example, in the NBA, not all fans came to the game just because of the game itself. Some of them came because they want to buy merchandise, and others came to socialize and for entertainment at the halftime show.<sup>1</sup> In the interview with Mark Cuban, he argued: *“What we changed is that we made it clear that anyone could afford to come to a game with ticket prices as low as \$10 in 2000 and now as low as \$18 and that going to a Mavs game was not only affordable but it was one of the few ways to have fun yelling and screaming at the top of your lungs. We really sold the in-game experience and that was a big change. People in the NBA laughed at me when I told them we don't sell basketball. Now it's common across all sports. And of course, David Stern (the NBA commissioner between the years 1984 and 2014) took the NBA around the world. Probably his great accomplishment among many. Only soccer is more global than the NBA and that is a credit to David.”* In one of his other interviews, he told a similar thing. After he purchased the franchise in 2000, he wanted to be

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1 Insight based on participant observation in the context of working for a marketing department for an NBA team.

actively involved in bringing the fans back to the Mavs games. He would cold call old clients and tell them: *“Do you realize now that it’s less expensive to come to a Mavericks game than to take your family to McDonald’s?”* or *“The first game’s free on me”* (Sauer, 2022).

The positioning challenge is important because once the team decides to dabble in the »entertainment« business they not only gain additional customers but will also face new competition in this field (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2018). The biggest positioning challenge of the Euroleague is how to position themselves in the market that is occupied by all the best soccer leagues in the world. On the list of the 10 most watched leagues in the world, there is no Euroleague but there are all the best European soccer leagues (Bundesliga, Serie A, Ligue 1, Premier League, UEFA Champions League, and La Liga). The Euroleague must realize how to draw more attention to the top-tier European basketball league (Jha, 2023).

### **1.3 Experience-based relationship**

Sporting goods and paraphernalia, such as a basketball ball or jersey, are tangible goods. However, there is a significant intangible, service aspect of the sports business. Fans »consume« sports in the form of experiences, either attending a game with all the shows and promotions included or watching games through streaming apps. A great example of selling the experience is the Nike brand. Nike developed an app called Nike+, that enables customers to have meaningful experiences with the brand. In addition to this app, they have also launched the Nike+ Run Club app, Nike+ training club app, and Nike SNKRS app. Those apps give customers and fans of the brand a chance to connect with it on a deeper level other than just wearing their shoes and clothes. (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2018).

In terms of mass sports, the NBA is a great example of how to bring the game closer to fans all around the world. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, the NBA stayed ahead of the competition with its »That's Game « brand campaign. All their efforts resulted in multiple innovative experiences for fans. They have gotten into a partnership with Microsoft and their NBA CourtOptix Powered by Microsoft Azure (Schlosser, 2022) leverages AI and cloud computing to track and analyze the on-court action and turn it into an insightful video on players’ stats and performance. The NBA recently announced the partnership with Sportradar, starting in the 2023/24 season. This partnership will focus on the development of new data products to enrich fan engagement and revolutionize betting data processing. This is all part of the NBA's plan for their personalized streaming service (NBA, 2021).

The NBA has been investing a lot of its resources in VR and NFTs and collectibles. The NBA Top Shot is NBA's first-ever initiative focused on NFTs and collectibles (Escamilla, 2022). The Utah Jazz team was the first to participate in this project, offering an NFT program that allowed fans to get access to the VR locker room tour and even a virtual meet and greet with the NBA legend Dwayne Wade, now a co-owner of the team (Escamilla, 2022)

While the NBA has already begun implementing its ambitious plans, the Euroleague is still in the process of determining its optimal course of action. Recently, Euroleague basketball launched a new Digital Transformation Fund which will aim to support clubs in projects that allow them to make a step forward in their digital transformation (Euroleague Basketball, 2020). Unlike the NBA, which is performing all its projects and innovations in-house, the Euroleague has outsourced its projects and innovations to a company called N3XT Sports – a sports consulting firm specializing in innovation, technology, and investment strategy (Euroleague Basketball, 2020). They will try to assist clubs in the development of projects in the field of data collection, data analysis, data monetization, and game experience. Some of the improvements that clubs want to put into action are customer relationship management (CRM) and fan loyalty programs, mobile app development with the integration of third-party services, ticketing, and access control systems, and the development of partner activations (Euroleague Basketball, 2020).

#### **1.4 What is a (sports) marketing strategy?**

A marketing strategy at the broadest level could be described as an organization's pattern of decisions that specify its choices concerning the company's products, markets, and marketing activities in the creation, communication, and delivery of products that offer value to customers in exchanges with the organization and therefore enable the organization to achieve specific objectives (Varadarajan, 2010).

The marketing strategy helps the company to concentrate its resources and energy in those fields that will increase the opportunity to increase sales. It is designed in two segments: choosing the target market and gathering the marketing mix. By defining the target market, the organization basically decides to whom they want to sell the products. There are different market segments out there that can have different impacts on the company. Some segments might offer quick profits while others might be more prospective in a long run, but they have higher barriers to entry. That is why companies must conduct in-depth market research before starting their marketing campaign.

According to Makovec Brenčič, Pfajfar, & Rašković (2012), the marketing orientation of a company is a central philosophy of marketing. On the one hand, marketing as a business aspect tries to achieve long-term profitability by focusing organizational activities towards satisfying the needs of a certain market segment. On the other hand, market orientation deals with market intelligence about current and future customer needs and the organization's response to market opportunities. Market orientation reflects the extent to which a firm's actions are consistent with marketing philosophy, and because of that the operationalization of marketing is closely connected to the market orientation of a company (Makovec Brenčič, Pfajfar, & Rašković, 2012).

In gathering the most appropriate marketing mix the company must decide how they want to sell its products. The organization must think about the 4 Ps of marketing strategy:



product, price, promotion, and placement, and the appropriate combination of those (Singh, 2012). At this stage, there are several decisions that must be made, such as: what is the most appropriate mix of the 4 Ps in each situation, what distribution channels should a company use, what development strategy should be used in a target market, how should we structure the price strategy, and so on (Singh, 2012).

Just like any other company also sports clubs and organizations need to determine what are their product, price, place, and promotion. Each of the clubs will most likely have different criteria for the above-mentioned 4Ps, depending on what kind of audience they want to attract. Sports organizations do not want to focus entirely on product quality. What they want to do is to focus on product extensions. That means that the more they can market their brand to a given segment, the more consumers will be able to interact with that brand. The goal of most sports brands is to create brand loyalty (Kane, 2021).

*Table 2: 4Ps of marketing strategy*

<b>Price</b>	<b>Product</b>	<b>Promotion</b>	<b>Place</b>
Retail	Design	Strategies	Special offers
Wholesale	Technology	Skimming	Endorsement
Internet	Usefulness	Penetration	Advertising
Direct sales	Value	Psychological	User trails
Peer to peer	Convenience	Cost-plus	Direct mailing
Multi-Channel	Quality	Loss leader	Leaflets/posters
	Packaging		Free gifts
	Branding		Competitors

*Source: Singh (2012).*

The above table shows all the various marketing tools in the marketing mix that the marketing manager can choose from and create a strategy with a certain budget (Singh, 2012).

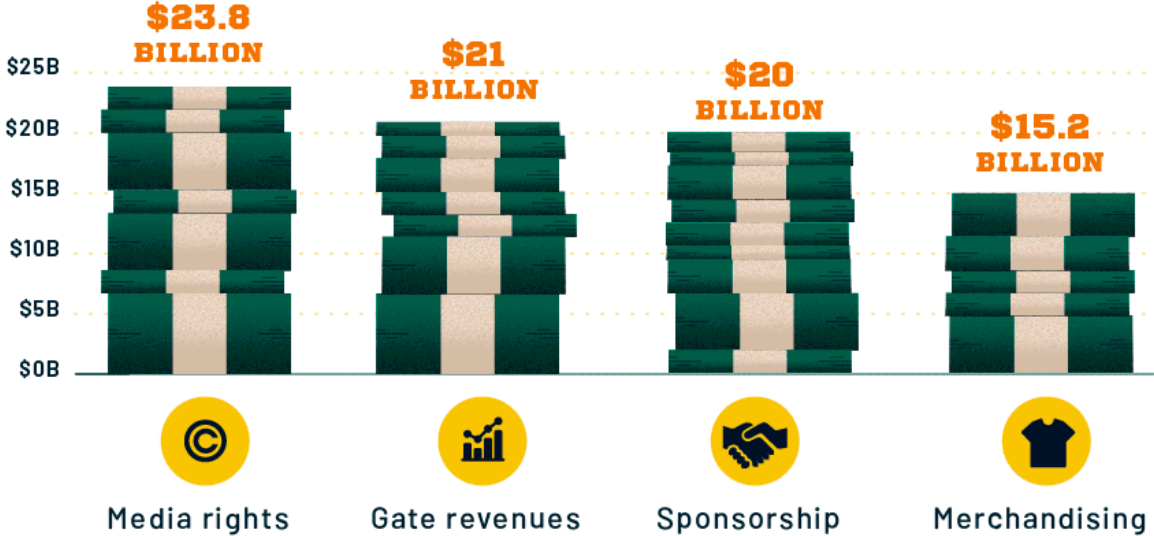
According to Schnaars (2019), the word strategy is widely used in business to describe an endless number of marketing activities. In today's world, everything seems to be strategic and well thought out before going to the market, although there is no official consensus on

what marketing strategy means in theory. One review states that the term strategy has been widely used with at least three types of marketing issues:

- 1) “At the most macro level, marketing strategies focus on manipulation of the marketing mix variables – product, price, place, and promotion. According to that definition, setting a strategy consists of selecting a price for a product, designing an advertising campaign, then deciding on a plan of distribution. “
- 2) “There are also marketing element strategies, a narrower concept that applies to individual elements of the marketing mix. There are “push vs pull” promotional strategies, “intensive, selective or inclusive” distribution strategies, and “skimming vs penetration” pricing strategies. “
- 3) “Finally, there are product-market-entry strategies, which include strategies for building, defending, or harvesting market share. “

While sports marketing strategies share certain similarities with conventional marketing approaches, there are notable distinctions that set them apart. In sports marketing, there are 4 main pillars: media rights, gate/ticket revenues, sponsorship, and merchandising (Ohio University, 2021). The next graph shows how much money have these 4 segments generated in the last year.

Figure 2: Money generated by 4 key segments of the sports industry



Source: OhioUniversity (2021).

Below, there is a brief overview of these four concepts:

- Media rights: Media or broadcasting rights of an intellectual property object sold to a certain broadcasting company. In practice, this means if a certain company wants the media rights to a sporting event, they contact the club/franchise and make a contract with them which gives them limited media rights for a certain event (We Play Holding, 2021).

- Gate revenues are primarily market ticket sales for live sporting events. Gate revenues do not include non-recurring seat premiums and license costs (PWC, 2017).
- Sponsorship revenues are fees that were paid to have a brand associated with a team, league, facility, or certain event. This includes also naming and category rights (PWC, 2017).
- Merchandising revenues include the sales of licensed products with team and league logos, players' names, and other intellectual property. This does not include food concession revenues (PWC, 2017).

Just like in general marketing, there are 4 different strategies to market sports products and services: theme-based strategies, product-based strategies, alignment-based strategies, and sports-based strategies. In the first one, the marketer is using traditional marketing methods to incorporate a sports element into the marketing program, not necessarily for sports products or services.

In the second strategy, the actual sports products are marketed in a traditional marketing method. In this case, an official partnership with a sports property is not required.

In the alignment-based strategy, the marketers of a non-sport product partner with a sports property through one or more different forms of sponsorships. In this case, sports are very integrated into the whole marketing campaign. An example of that kind of strategy would be a fast-food chain doing time-out or halftime activations. Real-life example: Whataburger, a fast-food chain from Texas, is having a partnership with the Dallas Mavericks to do different fan engagement activities throughout the whole game.

In the last strategy, the sports-based one, the marketers of a sports company or a brand are also recognized as the official sponsor of a certain sporting event. These kinds of marketing strategies are appealing especially to customers that have a strong connection to sports in general. For example, when a marketer of sports products is sponsoring a certain sporting event or a certain sports team (Ohio University, 2021).

## **1.5 A short summary of the NBA's financial superiority**

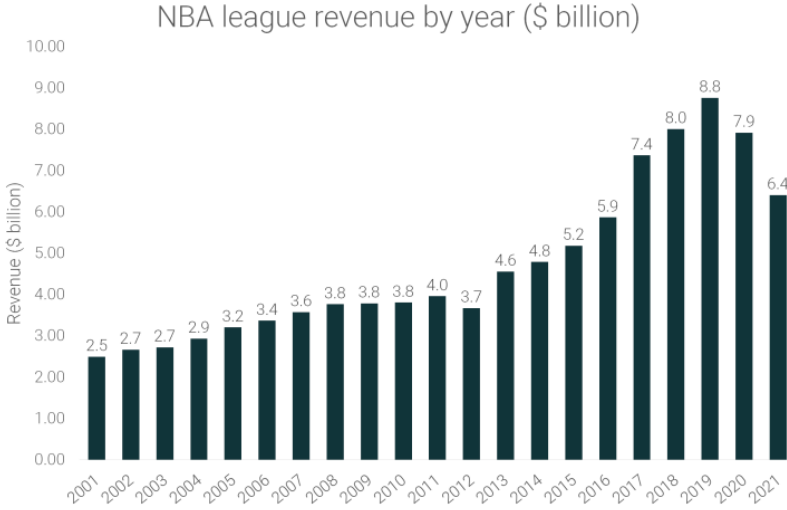
A lot of the data about the finances of the Euroleague clubs is not publicly available. What is publicly known is the fact that most European clubs are losing money every season (Basketnews, 2022). Breaking even or having a marginal profit is already considered a great success. The so-called »football clubs« such as Real Madrid, Barcelona, and CSKA Moscow have the highest yearly budgets in the Euroleague. Those budgets are around €45 million per season. For comparison, the highest-spending NBA team Golden State Warriors has spent more than \$750 million just for salaries in the last 5 seasons (Urbonas, 2022a). The question arises as to whether the Euroleague clubs, which experience annual financial deficits, can remain operational and prosper. Because the Euroleague clubs are mostly financed by their wealthy »football parents« the losses or profits generated are peanuts compared to their

whole financial structure. For example, the operating revenues of Real Madrid F. C. in the 2017/18 season have been €750 million. Another example is Fenerbahce. The club announced a total loss of €621 million of which only €8.5 million was the basketball debt (Barkas, 2019).

A very popular way of financing such loss-making franchises is through private ownership. Presidents and owners of the clubs, especially the ones without football capital behind them, like to pay all the salaries and other expenses from their own pockets. The negative side of that is if the president goes bankrupt, they are forced to sell the club.

The salaries of the top European players can be compared with those of lower NBA contracts. The highest salary in the Euroleague in the 2021/22 season is \$4.5 million, which can be translated to around \$10 million in the NBA because of different tax policies. The problem is that only a few players in Europe can get such deals, everyone else is playing for »change« compared to the NBA when the highest salary of the 2021/22 season is almost \$ 50 million, not including endorsement deals of the player. It is also nothing new if some players don't get paid on time. Because of all the financial struggles of the clubs, players often get their salaries later than agreed. It is obvious that the financial challenges of the European basketball clubs are getting bigger and bigger by the year, also because of the NBA's global growth (Barkas, 2019).

Figure 3: NBA league revenue by year



Source: Čurčić (2021).

The above picture shows the progression and the sum of the NBA's revenues through the last seasons. The average revenue of the NBA franchise in the 2020/21 season was \$213.5 million (Čurčić, 2021). This data itself shows how superior NBA teams are in comparison to the Euroleague teams which as said above make losses almost every year.

Table 3: Comparison of the 4 revenue streams of both leagues

	Media rights	Gate revenues	Sponsorship revenues	Merchandising revenues
<b>NBA</b>	\$2.7 billion/year	\$46.4 million/year	\$1.6 billion/year	\$1.46 billion/year
<b>Euroleague</b>	\$32.3 million/year	Team's revenue, not league's	\$6 million/year	Team's revenue, not league's

Source: Own work

The above table is a comparison of the 4 revenue streams of both leagues. While the NBA is ahead in each of those streams, the size of the discrepancy between the two is staggering. The NBA is currently having a media rights deal with Disney and AT&T for approximately \$2.7 billion per year and is looking at another \$7.5 billion deal in the next season (Paulsen, 2021). Euroleague's media rights deal is currently worth \$32.3 million per season (Sports Business Journal, 2023). The biggest difference between the teams is the gate and merchandising revenues. While the NBA has resolved this issue, the Euroleague is confronted with a predicament. My interview with Rok Bizjak, title, provided further insight into this matter: "Ticketing revenue during the regular season is in the domain of every team separately, so the league does not get any money from the ticket sales, until the Final Four tournament. In terms of merchandise, he said that it is even tougher because the league has a partnership with Adidas, but every team has its own merchandising partner, and the league gets nothing from those sales."

Figure 4: % change year on year of the North American sports market

% change year on year									
Media rights	5.5%	19.0%	11.7%	12.7%	3.8%	5.6%	4.1%	3.8%	4.2%
Gate revenues	8.4%	1.8%	3.0%	3.8%	2.7%	2.1%	2.3%	2.3%	2.1%
Sponsorship	4.9%	5.7%	5.4%	5.3%	2.2%	5.7%	4.4%	5.2%	2.8%
Merchandising	2.9%	2.7%	2.3%	1.2%	3.0%	1.1%	1.2%	1.4%	1.0%
Total	5.6%	6.7%	5.5%	5.9%	3.0%	3.7%	3.1%	3.3%	2.6%

CAGR - compound annual growth rate

Source: PWC (2017).

Despite all the above-mentioned differences between the leagues it needs to be acknowledged that the NBA and the Euroleague are two completely different business organizations. They have a lot in common and are the first and second best and most popular basketball leagues in the world which offers a solid ground for a comparative study. Each of the leagues has its own unique context of sports marketing strategies and these differences between the leagues drive me to learn more about them and compare them. At first sight, the differences between the leagues might look immense, which is due to how things are organized in both leagues. The NBA had a centralized organization, while in the Euroleague it is decentralized. Teams in Europe must play in their domestic leagues and cups as well, while NBA teams play only in the NBA. Because of the complex structure of the European

competitions, the Euroleague has a lot of opportunities for expansion and growth in the future seasons (NBA, n. d.).

## **2 KEY PILLARS OF NBA'S AND EUROLEAGUE'S MARKETING STRATEGIES**

This chapter will investigate and analyze how both leagues are conducting their marketing strategies based on a secondary literature review. Every marketing strategy is assembled from different stages and pillars, and sports marketing strategy is no different. First, the chapter will analyze all the aspects of the NBA marketing strategies and then it will compare it with the Euroleague's strategies.

### **2.1 Marketing strategy of the NBA**

Today, different sports are developing at a very fast pace, and they have reached certain heights through their own development and marketing strategy, with the help of their leagues, and national associations. The NBA is still a unique example in terms of global popularity and its marketing strategy, using all the league stars and surrounding products. The NBA is also the most rapidly growing sports league in the USA and is growing globally as well, thanks to its unique marketing strategies (Oberai, 2017).

#### **2.1.1 International stars**

The NBA's marketing strategy could easily be named *the global promotion strategy* (Sun, 2015). One of the first things that contribute to the development of the global marketing strategy was the introduction of international basketball stars. In the past few years, the league introduced several players from abroad, such as Yao Ming, Dirk Nowitzki, and recently Giannis Antetokounmpo, Nikola Jokić, and Luka Dončić. Especially » The Chinese giant« Yao Ming, was the first big name among many international superstars that followed (Larmer, 2006). After he came into the league, more and more people in China and from all over the world started following the NBA. One of the most interesting statistics was collected by China Central Television (CCTV) when they recorded 39 Rockets' regular games and there were about 200 million viewers that watched the games through TV and the internet. That occupied almost a third of the audience in the league at that time. Another interesting piece of data about Yao Ming's impact is that Houston Rockets' commercial value raised from \$85 million to \$439 million after his arrival in the league. And the same impact, if not even bigger has all the above-mentioned international stars (Sun, 2015).

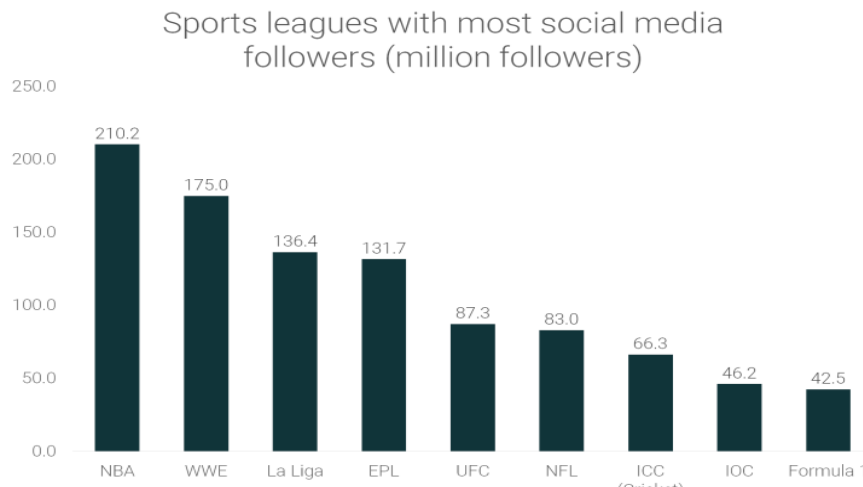
### 2.1.2 Broadcast development

In the seasons before 1998, the NBA was free to send content and the signal to different providers, only adding a few commercials during the broadcast. After the »Yao Ming boom« in the early 2000s, the NBA started exploring the Asian market and offering exclusive broadcasts to CCTV. Things after that happened quickly; the official NBA report from the 2005/06 season is showing that the games were broadcasted to 215 different countries and regions in 43 languages and 163 different televisions, engaging a total audience of 3.1 billion (Sun, 2015). Around that season, the NBA started playing some games around the world, particularly in Japan and China, boosting their fan engagement and popularity. The NBA shows its development in the broadcast of the All-Star event every year. NBA All-Star game is a game held annually by the NBA featuring all the biggest NBA stars and celebrities. Every year it is hosted in a different location, and it always attracts tens of thousands of fans. It has been first hosted in 1951 and it was held every season since then, except for the 1999 season when it was canceled due to the league lockout (Molski, 2023). There are 3 important eras in the NBA's viewership throughout the last 30 years. They are "The Jordan era", "The post-Jordan Slide", and "The Heatles era". In the Jordan era, viewership ratings were the highest, and since then they are constantly decreasing. Decreasing viewership does not mean that the popularity is decreasing as well. The first drop happened in the 1999/2000 season after Michael Jordan retired. When the NBA decided to switch from NBC and TBS to ABC and ESPN (these are all US television networks) in 2002/03, the viewership suffered another drop. Over the 20-plus years of the current rights deal, the NBA viewership has ranged from 1.5 to 1.9 million viewers per season. Another jump happened in the "Heatles era" when LeBron James decided to join Miami Heat in 2010. The whole interest in James leaving the Cleveland Cavaliers for Miami made the viewership of that season jump by 35%. Despite all the viewership drops the NBA remains on top of its league compared to its competitors (Paulsen, 2023). And with the new media rights deal around the corner, which will be reportedly worth \$75 billion, things will only get better for the NBA (Paulsen, 2023).

### 2.1.3 Marketing partners

NBA's marketing strategic approach is one of the most efficient ones in the world, not just in the sports business. Because of their ever-increasing fanbase around the globe, they have managed to become one of the most desired markets to invest in. According to Dimitrije Čurčić (2021), the NBA has more than 210 million followers on social media, which makes them the most popular league in the world.

Figure 5: Sport leagues



Source: Dimitrije Čurčić (2021).

Consequently, the NBA has partnerships with all the biggest brands in the world. They have partnerships with sports apparel brands like Nike and its Air Jordan brand, Mitchell&Ness, and New Era. In terms of sponsorship, they are collaborating with all kinds of different brands, from McDonald's to Chime (bank) (Sun, 2015). Marketing work with an NBA team, for example, includes partnerships with Nike, Air Jordan, Chime, Voyager (cryptocurrency company), and Whataburger (fast food chain), to name a few<sup>2</sup>. These kinds of companies are investing millions of dollars every year just to be seen on the biggest basketball and arguably sports stage in the world.

#### 2.1.4 A bright future ahead

The NBA's global expansion is attributable not only to its exceptional marketing strategy, but also to its integration with popular culture. The league's prominence in the music industry is evident through its indirect promotion by internationally renowned musicians such as Canadian hip-hop artist, Drake. In addition, the league's impact on fashion, particularly in the luxury sneaker market, is noteworthy, with Air Jordan shoes achieving iconic status as a symbol of high-end sneaker brands worldwide. The NBA's impressive operational proficiency positions it as a leading candidate for recognition as the preeminent professional sports league on a global scale (Oberai, 2017).

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2 Based on participant observation

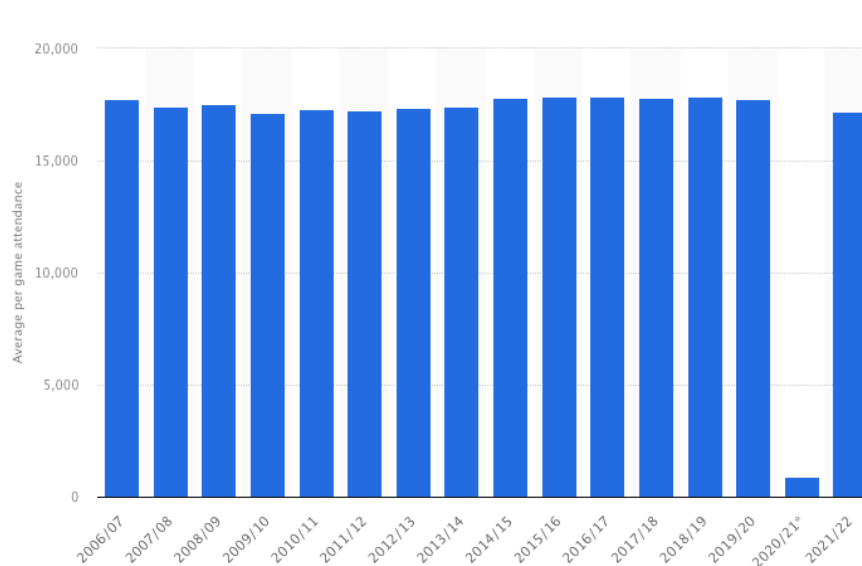


## 2.2 Marketing strategy of the Euroleague

If the NBA is having its marketing strategy and protocols very well defined and they are one of the biggest sports leagues in the world, the Euroleague is still the league »in development«. Although according to Fran Fraschilla (ESPN, 2017), the Euroleague is considered the second-best basketball league in the world in terms of budget, revenues, and players playing there, they are still far behind the NBA in terms of sports marketing. During our interview, Igor Kokoskov, the Assistant Coach of the Brooklyn Nets with significant experience in Europe, argued that “the Euroleague is still 15, to 20 years behind the NBA in every aspect”.

The Euroleague was established in 1958 by FIBA (international basketball federation). It was managed by FIBA till 2000, and from there on The Union of European Leagues of basketball took the leading role. Euroleague is a top-tier European basketball competition, comprised of 24 top clubs from 12 different European countries. The composition of the competing teams is different every season. Unlike the NBA where the teams are the same every season, Euroleague teams can get relegated or promoted from lower competitions every season. In the 2022/23 season, there are teams from 9 different European countries (Euroleague Basketball), while in the NBA all the competing teams are from the USA. The average fan attendance per game is around 5000. For comparison, in the NBA season 2021/22 this number was around 17,184, according to Statista (2022).

*Figure 6: Average NBA regular season home attendance*



*Source: Statista (2022).*

Euroleague managers defer to the NBA when it comes to sports marketing. In one of the interviews, Jordi Bartomeu (the CEO of the Euroleague) said that basketball is becoming a global sport which is all thanks to the NBA. He said that a few decades ago no one has

followed global basketball and the NBA, nowadays it's the number one sport in this country due to the NBA's influence (Chiba, 2015).

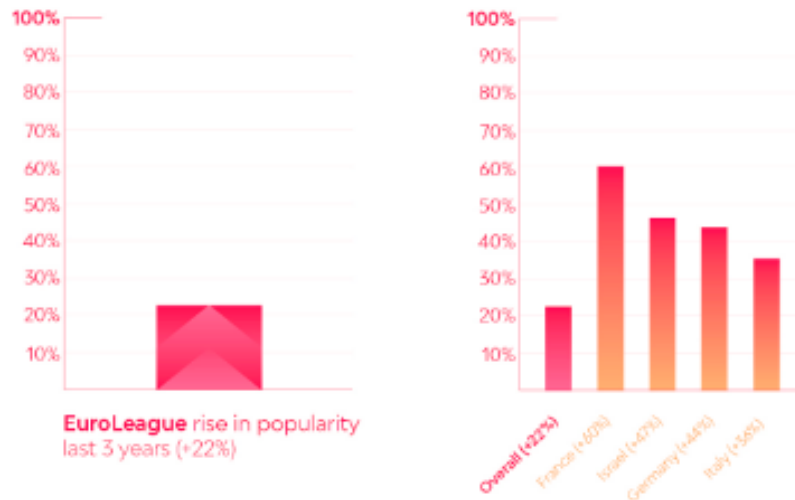
In comparison with the NBA, where there are multiple different sponsors and partners (it varies from franchise to franchise), there is one big sponsor in the Euroleague, Turkish Airlines. In 2010, Turkish Airlines and the Euroleague agreed on a €15 million partnership agreement to sponsor this top-tier European basketball competition on a global scale. Following this agreement, the competition is officially named Turkish Airlines Euroleague Basketball. They have signed a 10-year deal and the final four tournaments are named after them as well: Turkish Airlines Final Four. They later agreed that the Turkish airline giant will be the sponsor of the second-best European league, The Eurocup. With all the additional agreements, Turkish Airlines will pay the Euroleague around €37.5 million over the course of 7 years. Most of that will be paid in cash, and around 5 percent will be paid in marketing services and value-in-kind services (flights, accommodations) (Long, 2013).

For comparison, only last season the NBA had a record-high sponsorship revenue, \$1.46 billion (Young, 2021).

In recent years, the Euroleague decided to take a step toward the NBA's marketing strategy. They have hired a US sports consultancy called Elevate Sports Ventures to help them develop a new marketing strategy for the Euroleague's final four tournaments. Elevate Sports Ventures is a North-American company formed as a joint venture between the San Francisco 49ers and Harris Blitzer Sports & Entertainment in 2018. Since then, they have secured partnerships with companies such as Ticketmaster, Live Nation, and the Oak View Group. Their client portfolio includes teams, brands, and venues across the North American major sports leagues (Long, 2020). The main tasks that the company will focus on will be the global marketing strategy, premium hospitality services, and event management for the final four tournaments. The firm will also focus on in-arena and city fan engagement. This Euroleague decision can be a small step towards the integration of the NBA's marketing and business strategy (Hunt, 2021).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned evidence of the NBA's preeminence, there exists data indicating an increasing popularity of the Euroleague. Specifically, the league has experienced a notable surge in its prominence, having registered a 22% ascent over the preceding three seasons. (Eurohoops, 2021). In countries like France, Israel, Germany, and Italy, the conversion of fans reached figures from +36% to +60%.

Figure 7: Euroleague's rise in popularity



Source: Eurohoops (2021).

The escalation in the Euroleague's popularity is directly linked to the upsurge in television viewership of its games, with the most significant spike observed in Germany, where the audience figures exhibited a remarkable increase of 871% between the seasons of 2018/19 and 2020/2021. (Eurohoops, 2021).

Furthermore, the amplification in the Euroleague's prominence can be attributed to its augmented social media presence, particularly following the Final Four tournament hosted in Cologne. The tournament experienced a substantial surge in its social media following as compared to the preceding year, with a 15% increase in followers and a notable rise of 70% in the level of engagement (Eurohoops, 2021).

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to compare and contrast the marketing strategies of the NBA and the Euroleague, two of the most prominent basketball leagues in the world. The goal of this research will be to identify similarities and differences between these two marketing approaches, and address where the Euroleague could catch up with the NBA. In doing so, the thesis helps us better understand why the NBA is such a global phenomenon when it comes to the sports industry, it uncovers the trajectory of the Euroleague en route to growing popularity, and enriches the theoretical knowledge of different sports marketing approaches.

### 3.1 Data and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative approach, building upon an eclectic body of secondary literature, and using a combination of digital ethnography, participant observation, and interviews as original data collection methods.

#### 3.1.1 Secondary sources

To conceptualize and implement a comparative analytical framework for NBA's and Euroleague's marketing strategy, the thesis used ample secondary literature coming from scholarly books, articles, and business and policy reports on sports marketing. Literature on general sports marketing and cultural characteristics, as well as diverse approaches to sports marketing across countries and cultures, were employed. In addition, literature specifically related to the NBA and their past 20 years of marketing approaches and business growth, as well as literature concerning the Euroleague's marketing and business approaches in past seasons, were also utilized.

#### 3.1.2 Primary data collection

Original primary data was gathered through digital ethnography, participant observation, and interviews.

*Digital ethnography* involves observing and interacting with online communities and platforms related to the NBA and the Euroleague, such as social media, websites, blogs, podcasts, and forums (Hjorth, Horst, Galloway, & Bell, 2017). Digital ethnography is a particularly suitable method for studying the marketing practices of sports organizations as well as sports teams and fans' cultures, as they are accompanied by dense online interactions, and is well established as a method in sport management and sports marketing studies. Over a period of one year, I systematically collected and analyzed data on how the leagues and their teams communicate and engage with their fans, sponsors, media, and other stakeholders online. I captured data using bookmarks, and screenshots and made digital field notes.

*Participant observation* involves daily work and social interaction in the field of sports, attending, and observing games and events in person, as an intern with the NBA club Dallas Mavericks in the period from December 2021 to June 2022. Participant observation is a suitable method for obtaining deep analytical insight into the lived experience of sports events, as it allows the researcher to fully immerse themselves in the actual setting and context of the phenomenon studied, and to gain an insider perspective and obtain other insiders' perspectives.

The process of immersion and active participation in a specific context enables the researcher to establish a connection with fundamental human experiences and unravel the underlying reasons and mechanisms governing human behavior (Jorgensen, 1990). During my period

with the Dallas Mavericks, I collected and analyzed data on the atmosphere, experience, and emotions of the game and related events, as well as the marketing activities and materials that were produced and distributed during the game. I had dense meaningful interactions with employees of the club, other clubs and the League, volunteers, and fans on matters pertinent to the research objectives of this thesis. I used a notebook and digital tools to collect and document the data in real time, which I later organized and systematically analyzed. I followed ethical guidelines for fieldwork research. I obtained informed consent from the organization and my interlocutors, and I ensure confidentiality and anonymity (unless having an explicit agreement to reveal the identity of the interlocutors) and avoided causing harm or deception to the participants.

I also conducted 3 *semi-structured interviews* with experts and insiders in both the NBA and the Euroleague managers and coaches. Interviews are a suitable method for obtaining detailed critical information and insight, explanations, and perspectives, of key actors and stakeholders in sports marketing (Kvale, 2007). I used a purposive sampling technique, i.e. I contacted interviewees that I identified as crucial to my research objectives. With the help of the interviews, I collected and analyzed data on the marketing goals, strategies, challenges, and opportunities of both the NBA and the Euroleague. I also asked the interviewees to compare the marketing strategies of the NBA and the Euroleague, their strengths and weaknesses, and to suggest ideas for improvement and collaboration. The interview with Igor Kokoskov, the assistant coach of the Brooklyn Nets, was conducted in person, while interviews with Marc Cuban, the team owner of the Dallas Mavericks and world-famous entrepreneur and investor, and Rok Bizjak, the competitions manager at the Euroleague, were conducted virtually, via email, and online call respectively. Interview notes were systematically organized and analyzed. Interviews were done in accordance with all ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent, dignified treatment of the respondents, and offering them the option of anonymity (the interviewees' identity is revealed only upon explicit consent).

The primary data obtained is systematically integrated and triangulated to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the marketing strategies of the NBA and the Euroleague considering the research objective and the research questions. In particular, the project employs thematic analysis, identifying the key themes of comparison and contrast of the two leagues and their marketing strategies.

### **3.2 Themes**

Thematic analysis is an analytical method that involves the uncovering of the main themes and patterns that emerge from the primary data and organizing them into conceptual clusters that relate to the research questions and objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Upon collecting and organizing the original qualitative data, I embarked on manually analyzing key themes

and patterns, which helped me formulate three key conceptual clusters that are central in the comparison of NBA's and Euroleague's marketing strategies:

1) Cultural differences. The distinctive cultural characteristics of the US and European players, fans, coaches, etc. define the marketing and business approach of the NBA and Euroleague. Cultural difference is important to understand because it determines a wide range of marketing approaches in both leagues.

2) Player vs team centrism. Basketball is a team sport, but star players are not only key to success on the court but also in the marketing domain. Basketball marketing strategies and in general, the business approaches of both leagues, in that sense, are trying to find the right balance when considering teams and players as focal points of their strategies. It is important to understand this to analyze what marketing strategies are both leagues focusing on.

3) Open vs closed competition. There are 2 different formats of competitions – open, in which teams can be relegated out of the competition, such as in the Euroleague, and closed, where the status of the team as a participant in the competition is secure, such as in the NBA. Both leagues' distinctive structures impact their marketing strategies.

In the following chapters, I contextualize and deepen the insights into these three themes obtained through my primary research, with insights from secondary literature.

#### **4        THEME 1: THE US VS EUROPEAN CULTURES**

The significance of culture and cultural disparities in the sports industry has emerged as a pertinent area of investigation. My tenure with the Dallas Mavericks provided a platform to witness firsthand the implications of cultural differences in distinct environments. The outcomes of interviews conducted, specifically with Igor Kokoskov and Rok Bizjak, further corroborate this observation. The present research is supported by digital sources that underscore the impact of culture on business models, traditions, fan bases, and other key aspects. The role of culture in differentiating the two leagues and, more broadly, the sports business, assumes paramount importance.

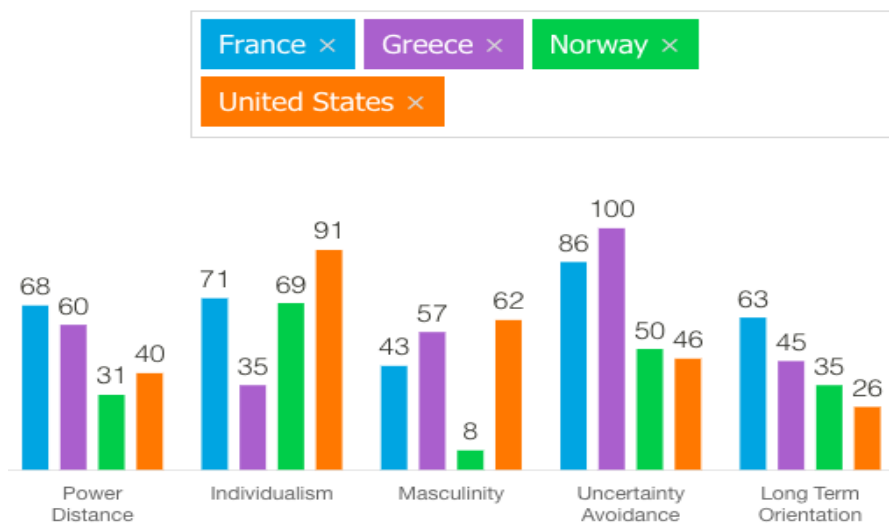
In sports, culture is one of the most important factors when shaping a team's performance, and focus, and establishes norms of acceptable behavior and relationships among the team players and coaches. It has been proved that in sports, culture has a strong influence on an athlete's ability to prepare for and perform in tournaments and games (The Sport Information Resource Centre, 2021). According to the Council of Europe, sports and culture go hand in hand. Sport is a universal element in all cultures, particularly with young people. For example, football is for many a never-ending source of conversation, people feel deeply connected to their favorite teams and players, who are often presented as role models and therefore great marketing assets for brands (Council of Europe, n. d.). Another example of culture affecting marketing and sports marketing can be how people with different social

statuses perceive different marketing campaigns. People in the upper social class can be more partial to sports such as tennis and golf which stress individualism and are more expensive to play. On the other hand, people from the lower classes can favor basketball or boxing because it stresses teamwork and physical strength. Marketers must be careful what kind of message they want to present to certain cultural groups (Keshkar et al., 2019).

#### 4.1 Contextualizing cultural differences

Further context on the role of cultural differences can be obtained by referring to Hofstede. Geert Hofstede is a Dutch academic who became known for pioneering research on national and organizational cultures (British Library, n. d.).

Figure 8: Comparison of Hofstede dimensions



Source: Hofstede-insights.com (n. d.).

The above graph shows different Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and how they differ in different parts of the world. It compares data for the USA and countries from different parts of Europe. Europe is historically a culturally diverse continent, so there are some deviations in cultural characteristics between countries. Nevertheless, European countries still have more things in common than they do with the US culture. While insights from the Hofstede study should be taken with some reserve (Fang, 2003), the comparative framework is useful in understanding the general parameters of differences in sports management and sports marketing approaches.

In the next paragraphs, I will discuss the above-mentioned cultural dimensions and compare US and European cultures and how they differ in greater depth.

#### 4.1.1 Power distance

This dimension is about how the less powerful members of the society accept the relatively unequal distribution of power. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles the inequalities among people. The data is showing that the US power distance index is the lowest of them all. The prevailing sentiment among individuals in the United States is a notable resistance towards the notion of power distribution, and a general reluctance to comply with directives issued by those in positions of authority (HofstedeInsights, 2022). This shows often on the basketball court and within basketball organizations. In the Euroleague, coaches are the leaders of a team, and all the players must obey their rules and philosophy. A different story is in the US sports industry where superstars run the team and coaches do not have much authority.

More importantly, the difference in power distance attitudes is strongly reflected in marketing implications as well. Euroleague marketing campaigns are mostly focused on the league as a whole and its teams. Although they are trying to switch towards player-oriented marketing, because of the traditions and fan cultures it will always be more about the team than about the player (Hunt, 2021). NBA, on the other hand, focuses all its campaigns on superstars and individual achievement reflected in the end-of-year awards (regular season MVP, Playoffs MVP,) (Colman, 2020). By comparing the salary differences between the NBA players and coaches and the Euroleague players and coaches it is obvious that the coaches have a bigger status in Europe. The highest-paid Euroleague coach is a legendary Željko Obradović who is earning around 2.000.000€ per season and the highest player salary is 4.000.000€ (Barkas, 2015). For comparison, the highest-paid coach in the NBA is Gregg Popovich with \$11.5 million per season, and the highest-paid player, Steph Curry is earning almost \$50 million per season (Rudder, 2022).

#### 4.1.2 Individualism

This dimension refers to the preference for a loosely – or tightly-knit social framework; in a loosely-knit framework, individuals primarily take care of their own individual interests, while in a tightly-knit, collectivistic framework, individuals are also seen as having obligations towards their families and societies. The US is known to have one of the highest indexes in this category. Generally, North American, and Western European cultures can be labeled as more individualistic than collectivistic (Cherry, 2020). Europe's Eastern and Southern cultures (Poland, Turkey, Greece) are more collectivistically oriented (Darwish & Huber, 2003). In the world of sports, this shows. In the NBA, publicity, and sports marketing is superstar oriented, while in Euroleague or in Europe in general, teams are the center of attention. An interview with a Slovenian manager that works in the Euroleague (Rok Bizjak – Competition manager at the Euroleague) revealed that Euroleague's mission is to find a way to promote superstars and to balance away the team-centric approach: *»Superstars are more interesting from the marketing perspective and people can easier identify with players*



*than with teams. Because of the heritage of European clubs, European basketball marketing will never completely get away from team-oriented marketing in Europe*«. This also involves sponsorship logic and fan engagement styles – all of which are further developed in Chapter 5, which deals with player- vs team-centrism.

#### 4.1.3 Masculinity

This dimension is about society's desire for achievement, success, heroism, and material rewards. This dimension can also be identified as the »tough vs tender« cultures. The graph shows that the countries are somehow similar in this aspect, the last one here is Norway. But this dimension is least relevant from the sports perspective because everybody is highly competitive (HofstedeInsights, 2022). However, it is to be noted that marketing narratives also become a bit softer when it comes to things like mental health and community contribution. In the past few years, the mental well-being of athletes and coaches has become one of the top priorities of clubs and leagues, not just in basketball but in the whole industry. Both, the Euroleague and the NBA are working very hard by ensuring mental health for their employees and players, and they are all trying to give back to the community. The Euroleague is having a program called “One Team” through which they want to address targets of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 10 on reduced inequalities (Euroleague Basketball, 2023). Based on participant observation, the NBA clubs are all doing their best to give back to the community. The Dallas Mavericks are hosting multiple events throughout the year to help those in need, such as Thanksgiving giveaways, Books for young students, School supplies, and fundraisers for schools. During my time with the franchise, I was able to experience events when players try to visit local schools and give speeches to kids, and lots of giveaways.

European fans might seem aggressive at times, compared to the US fans. There is a cultural and historical factor involved in Europe and therefore the fans supporting their teams feel loyalty and pride to cheer on their teams for their whole lives. The higher masculinity, especially in Eastern-Southeastern European countries is shown through sports fans and their passion and loyalty for their teams (Reddit, 2022).

#### 4.1.4 Uncertainty avoidance

This dimension deals with the degree to which the members of the society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty, or rather, how society deals with the fact that the future can't be known (HofstedeInsights, 2022). From the graphic, we can see, that the European countries have higher indexes than the US. The American sports culture is low uncertainty avoidance culture while European countries are considered high. American athletes face a lot of uncertainties during their careers. They are usually not planning their careers a few years ahead, but rather just a year or two (Gao & Liu, 2018).

#### 4.1.5 Long-term vs. Short-term orientation

This dimension describes how every society must maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future (HofstedeInsights, 2022). From the graph above we can see that the United States scores relatively low, compared to European countries. This can also be linked to the formats of the competitions. In the US they have closed-type competitions, which means there are the same teams and the same numbers of teams every year. On the other hand, in Europe, there are only open-typed leagues. Teams can get relegated and promoted every season.

#### 4.1.6 Indulgence vs. restraint

This dimension can be defined as the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses, based on the way they were raised (HofstedeInsights, 2022). This dimension can be related to the fan experience and fan cultures in the US and Europe. In this dimension the US scores very high, compared to Europe. This shows in their fan experience, which is relaxed, people have fun and come to games to hang out with their family and friends. On the other hand, European countries are restrained, people grow up with certain mindsets and rules and that can be seen at games as well. European fan cultures are more traditional, they come to games strictly to support their teams, and they are so-called die-hard fans.

### 4.2 Insider insights

During my time with the Dallas Mavericks, I've had an opportunity to conduct a short interview with Mark Cuban. Mr. Cuban is an American billionaire entrepreneur and the owner of the Dallas Mavericks franchise (Forbes, 2022). His response to whether the cultural distances between the European and American players impact the game was:

*“[Cultural differences between Americans and Europeans do not matter] nearly as much as they used to. Social Media has changed everything. Now every top athlete globally is a brand and has a direct relationship with fans. That is a huge change.”*

Furthermore, the interview with Rok Bizjak revealed that the cultural differences between the European clubs are some of the biggest challenges for the marketing strategy in the Euroleague. Because of the many different languages and cultural characteristics, it is hard to come up with one, unitary, general marketing and promotion strategy. The Euroleague must be very careful in how they approach the issue of promoting strategy.

When it comes to the marketing strategies of both leagues, history, the importance of the team/player, and culture play a big role. While the culture in the NBA is overall uniform (i.e., the shared national culture of the US, with the caveat that the US itself has some level of diversity), there is a huge mix of those in the Euroleague. In the NBA, every team is doing its marketing campaigns adapted to local markets' needs, but from a cultural point of view,

all the campaigns are similar. Nevertheless, market size does play a big role in running the marketing strategy for the team. There are several advantages when running an NBA team in a big market, plus the NBA's local TV deals revenues are growing with a wider audience. Other advantages are local advertising and sponsorship opportunities, free agent lures, and partnerships with famous local celebrities (Burns, 2022). In Euroleague, the situation is a bit different. Because there are teams from all over Europe, we must understand that people and cultures differ from team to team. Jordi Bartomeu emphasized exactly that, they must understand how different teams are led, how different fans perceive their teams, and what is the cultural orientation in a certain country, and they must give the prototypes of the business and marketing strategy to each one of them (Chiba, 2015).

The players that have experienced both, the NBA and the Euroleague will tell the same. Bogdan Bogdanović is currently playing for the NBA team Atlanta Hawks but has lots of European experience as well. In one of the interviews, he said:

*“Here (in the NBA), there are lots of fans of individual players. Over there, it's more about the teams. There are different cultures in every league in every country there. It's unbelievable. The fans there really take it personally, like they are in the games. They are nervous and mad in the games like the players.”* (Casciaro, 2020).

Goran Dragić, who is playing for the NBA team Milwaukee Bucks has told:

*“I've played a lot of games in Belgrade and other places where if you're not careful, you can get hurt. They throw crazy stuff. I've been a part of one game in Olympiacos (Greece) where they threw oranges on the court. I never found out why. In Belgrade, they just throw coins and lighters. In Europe, in most of the arenas, they put protection, like a tunnel, behind the benches, so players don't get hit. When you're sitting on the road bench in Europe, all you hear is 'tick tick tick' - things hitting the tunnel. It's part of it. You get used to it.”*

*“One game I played in Croatia, in Zadar, and they have this organization of fans, called Tornado Zadar, that is crazy. We had an incident where one of our players got in a fight with a Zadar player, and these fans broke onto the court, and we just took off, we had to run (away) to the locker room in the middle of the game. I was only 16 at the time.”*

*“It's funny you know, over there, when you're on the road, you don't know if the security guys are with them or if they are going to protect you.”* (Casciaro, 2020).

Given the prevalence of passionate and distinctive fan cultures across various regions, the Euroleague faces significant challenges in expanding its outreach efforts, as each fanbase tends to be highly invested in its respective local team and country (especially in the context of national team competitions). European fan culture is so much different than North American. They are way more passionate and there is a dimension of national pride involved

in the Euroleague. People live for their clubs and ticket prices are way more affordable for true, passionate fans. On the other hand, the NBA games are more of a show instead of a pure sports event. This might be a blessing and a curse for the Euroleague because teams don't have as many fans in other countries as the NBA teams have (NBA, n. d.).

### 4.3 Culture and sports consumer typologies

In the past decades, there were multiple studies around the world about the different sports fan typologies. They display an array of values, behaviors, and attitudes (Meir, 2000). They all differ from one another. Some of them are following what happening with their teams and favorite players daily and attend all the games, while others don't attend games on a regular basis and only use those events as social gatherings. Everybody experiences sports in different ways, but they all use them to fulfill their needs (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001).

Lewis (2001) has also come up with a dualistic approach where he focused on how the individuals identified with their teams. He did this examination on a sample of North American professional sports consumers. He found out that one group (Type 1 fans) aligned itself with the city the team represented, and the other group (Type 2 fans) aligned with the team itself.

*Table 4: Comparison of different fan types*

<i>Type 1 fans</i>	<i>Type 2 fans</i>
<i>Old</i>	<i>New</i>
<i>Genuine</i>	<i>Corporate</i>
<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Modern</i>
<i>Expressive</i>	<i>Submissive</i>
<i>Irrational</i>	<i>Rational</i>
<i>Symbolic</i>	<i>Civic</i>
<i>Die-hard fans</i>	<i>Less loyal</i>

*Source: Wann et al. (2001).*

The table below shows a comparison of three common sports consumer types. In Tier 1 there are fans that have an emotional connection to the team and are overall very invested in it. In the middle tier are fans who attend most of the games but are there mostly for the big experience and show. In the lowest tier are fans who use sports events as an opportunity for socializing and entertainment. This study was conducted by Branscombe and Wann (1993).

Table 5: Comparison of 3 different sports consumer types

<b>Tier</b>	<b>Primary focus of a fan</b>	<b>Secondary focus of a fan</b>	<b>Type</b>
<b>1</b>	Emotional connection to team	Excitement and special experience	Internalized, focused, vested
<b>2</b>	Excitement and entertainment, the big experience	Emotional connection to team	Self-expressive, committed, casual
<b>3</b>	Social interaction, entertainment	Team identification	Camaraderie, care-free casual, social

Sources: Branscombe and Wann (1993)

The above 2 tables can be used to describe the US and European fans. Table 1 can be split into US fans being tier 2 fans and European fans being tier 1 fans. In table number 2 US fans can be described as tier 2 and 3 fans while European fans are tier 1 fans with a bigger emotional connection and loyalty to the team. This is what Rok Bizjak said during our interview: “In terms of the cultural aspect, in Europe, they must work on superstars more than on the teams. But this is hard because there is a culture and history part involved and the fans love their clubs«.

With the above description of the typology of the fans, it is easier to understand the difference in fan cultures between the leagues. Euroleague fans often come from their soccer parent teams that already have established fan groups. There is an emotional connection to the team and people go to games to actually be involved in the game by supporting their favorite teams and players. On the other hand, in the NBA you don't hear any special chants during the games. In my time with the Dallas Mavericks, I have had the opportunity to watch 39 home games and the only chants they had were “Let's go Mavs“ and “Defense!.“ Fans in the NBA mostly attend the games to see their favorite player and to socialize with their friends and family (Reddit, 2022).

All the NBA players that come to the Euroleague are shocked at first when they see what is happening in the European basketball games. Dante Exum, an Australian basketball player has spent 7 years in the NBA before joining the Euroleague. He explained that in their first-ever ABA league (Top regional Balkan league) game fans started to throw objects on the floor. He said that playing in Europe for him is first and foremost a chance to see *“how different cultures celebrate the game of basketball.”* He also stressed that fan engagement is what makes the Euroleague so fun and unique (Kyriakidis, 2022).

## 5 THEME 2: PLAYER-CENTRIC VS TEAM-CENTRIC STRATEGY

This paragraph focuses on the distinction between the marketing approaches of both leagues. On one side there is a player-centric approach and on the other side a team-centric approach. These two approaches have been referred to already in the previous section but in this one, they will be analyzed more in-depth. In the player-centric strategy the main objects of marketing strategies are the players themselves while in the team-centric, the emphasis is on the team.

In the previous chapters, it was already mentioned that the NBA teams often rebrand, in terms of their jersey designs, logo designs, and court designs, they change sponsors very often and they are funded by private owners. In the Euroleague, things are a bit different. As specified by Mr. Rok Bizjak during our interview, teams in Europe are bigger brands than the players. The biggest teams are also funded by their big soccer parents and therefore it is easier for those teams to have bigger fanbases, more attractive players in terms of style of play, and so on. He also said that he prefers the NBA's way of doing marketing (players are the main figures) because people can more easily identify with the player than with the whole franchise, especially if they are not from the same city/country as the team. In the Euroleague, they have a problem with what to market. Should they market strictly the teams, only the players, or a mix of both? In the NBA, everything is clear. The players are the main brands, and everything is focused on them.

*Table 6: Player-centric vs Team-centric*

	<b>Player-centric</b>	<b>Team-centric</b>
<b><i>Characteristics</i></b>	Players are the brands; superstar players are the main figures in every franchise.	Not exactly clear who is the main brand (the player or the club), players switch clubs more often than in the NBA.
<b><i>Marketing strategy framework</i></b>	Market the players instead of the franchise. If a certain superstar changes the club, a lot of the fans follow him and start supporting the other club.	The main pillars of this marketing are the clubs and their brands. Also, coaches stay with one club longer than the players, so they are a lot of times bigger stars than the players.
<b><i>Sponsorship logic</i></b>	Sponsors associate themselves with a single player.	Sponsors associate themselves with a certain team.
<b><i>Fan engagement</i></b>	Fan engagement centered around the player's skills, personal life, and social media presence.	Fan engagement centered around the team's games, events, and merchandise.

*Source: Own work*

When Jordi Bartomeu, the CEO of the Euroleague was asked what the biggest difference in terms of the game between the two leagues is, he said: *»It's a different game. [...] This is more sport than show. So, we have both as they have both. But here it's more about the*

sport, winning and losing games. That is more spectacular. [...] It's much more technical. It's much more of a team game. That is the most important difference between European basketball and the NBA. Our game is much more of a team game. It's not based on the one-on-one style of the players. « (Chiba, 2015) He also emphasized that Euroleague basketball is way more team-oriented, while the NBA is player-oriented. In the NBA, star players are the ones who run the whole show, while in Europe culture and tradition of the clubs often play a decisive role.

Table 7: Team identity and player's celebrity of both leagues

	<b>Team identity</b>	<b>Player's celebrity</b>
<b>NBA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Teams often rebrand.</li> <li>– Lots of private sponsors</li> <li>– Diffused fan bases of individuals, no organized fan groups</li> <li>– Privately owned franchises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Players are the brands.</li> <li>– Constant communication of superstars with their fans</li> <li>– Players are the main reason why people support a certain team</li> </ul>
<b>Euroleague</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Teams have a long history.</li> <li>– Traditional fan bases and organized fan groups</li> <li>– Biggest clubs funded by their big soccer parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– It is hard to market a player.</li> <li>– No communication on player-fans relation</li> <li>– Often, the coaches are bigger stars than the players</li> </ul>

Source: Own work

## 5.1 Marketing strategy framework

The CEO of the Euroleague Jordi Bartomeu had said, that the main differences are especially in how the NBA and the Euroleague treat their superstars. In Europe, players follow the coaches' orders much more closely. In Europe, the coach is »the boss«, you should always obey his rules. In the NBA, there are certain players that run the league or at least their own teams. For example, it is now a publicly known fact that LeBron James has been given more control over the Los Angeles Lakers organization than Kobe Bryant (arguably the biggest player in the franchise's history) ever had. James and his agent were the driving forces behind the team's roster selection in the off-season (Goldberg, 2022). The main figures in the NBA are not teams but the superstars on those teams.

In Europe, the model of »NBA's superstars« cannot happen because of the different values of the teams, their owners, and coaches. Some European clubs are over 100 years old. Because of that, the player can never be more important than the team. For example, Michael Jordan was way more important than the Chicago Bulls franchise, but if he would have come to play for Real Madrid, which is a 100-year-old institution, the club would be above him. It is a question of culture as well (Chiba, 2015).

## **5.2 Logic of sponsorship**

The sponsorship strategies and logic of both leagues are somewhat different. In the NBA, most of the sponsorship is player-centered and the marketing revolves around personal branding. While team and league sponsorship deals represent great exposure for the brands and a big revenue stream for the league and teams, the player's endorsement deals are what distinguish NBA from the Euroleague. For example, in 2015 LeBron James signed a lifetime offer from Nike, reportedly worth \$1 billion (Roshni, 2023). Just recently, Nike offered the same deal to the Phoenix Suns superstar Kevin Durant (Fox Business, 2023). On the other side, Euroleague players don't get much exposure and endorsement deals. All the sponsorship agreements happen with the teams and teams usually change their names, according to their main sponsor. On the league level, the main sponsor is Turkish Airlines, and the league is therefore called the Turkish Airlines Euroleague (Euroleague Basketball, n. d.).

## **5.3 Fan engagement**

As Rok Bizjak said, players in the Euroleague are not brands and they do not communicate on social media not nearly as much as the NBA players do. Because of this, the fan engagement of both leagues is different.

The NBA is pursuing a player-centric strategy that makes sure to link the players with the fans. For example, when LeBron James went from Cleveland to Miami in 2010, all the fans and attention shifted from one franchise to another. The NBA and its players and coaches are among the most active participants in social media, especially Twitter. NBA's official account is the most followed account of all major pro sports leagues in the world. More than 90 percent of the league's players are active on social media which makes it very easy to engage with fans daily and conduct sponsorship deals (Martin, 2017).

In Euroleague, they have a team-centric approach and as Rok Bizjak said, teams are bigger brands than players. As he told me, the Euroleague must work on superstars more, to increase fan engagement, but because of the culture and history part of the teams this will be hard. Player-centered marketing is one of the biggest challenges of the Euroleague, according to him.

# **6 THEME 3: FORMAT OF THE COMPETITION (OPEN VS CLOSED)**

## **6.1 Concept of the Competitions**

In the world of sports, there are two types of leagues: open and closed. Most North American sports leagues are using the closed format of their competitions. What this means in practice



is that there is always the same number of teams every season and that there are, in fact, the same teams every year. In other words, teams cannot get relegated even if they finish last. In fact, they even get rewarded with higher picks at the draft (Noll, 2003). Closed leagues also ensure that the clubs are more stable in terms of finances. The downside of the closed leagues is that they only have a limited number of teams, and the others cannot enter (SportsBite, 2017).

Open leagues have a promotion/relegation system. This means that the teams that end at the bottom of the table are relegated to the lower division and the best teams are promoted to the higher one. Most of the European leagues are open (SportsBite, 2017).

The following sections will investigate and unveil how different marketing implications affect the business operations and what are the outcomes in terms of finances and popularity of both leagues and the clubs that compete inside those leagues. The next table shows a short summary of the differences between the leagues.

*Table 8: Differences between NBA and Euroleague*

	<b>Format of the competition</b>	<b>Salary cap?</b>	<b>Number of teams</b>	<b>Making profit?</b>
<b>NBA</b>	Closed	Yes	30	Yes, all of them

(Table continues)

*Table 9: Differences between NBA and Euroleague (continued)*

	<b>Format of the competition</b>	<b>Salary cap?</b>	<b>Number of teams</b>	<b>Making profit?</b>
<b>Euroleague</b>	Open	No	18	No/barely

*Source: Own work*

## **6.2 NBA's closed format of the competition**

In most North American sports, including the NBA, there are two distinct conferences and divisions within each. In all North American leagues, standings within certain divisions determine qualification and seedings for the post-season tournament (Noll, 2003).

The biggest advantage of the closed-type system is that the teams that play in those kinds of competitions tend to be way more financially stable. For example, just one look at the most valuable sports teams in the world shows, that the top 5 of them are coming from the United States. Those teams are Dallas Cowboys (NFL), New York Yankees (MLB), New York

Knicks (NBA), Los Angeles Lakers (NBA), and Golden State Warriors (NBA). On the other side, we have the biggest European clubs, such as FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, and Manchester United that all have nine-figure debts. And they play in open-type competitions (Lee, 2021).

Another important advantage of a closed-type league is that there is a bigger balance between teams. Because of the before-mentioned salary cap, teams can only spend a certain amount on their players which means that the richest team cannot buy all the superstars. From a marketing point of view, this is a great thing, because almost every match is interesting for the viewers and fans. With so much emphasis on the salary cap, the front office, the coaching, and the team culture play a very crucial role in a team's (un)success.

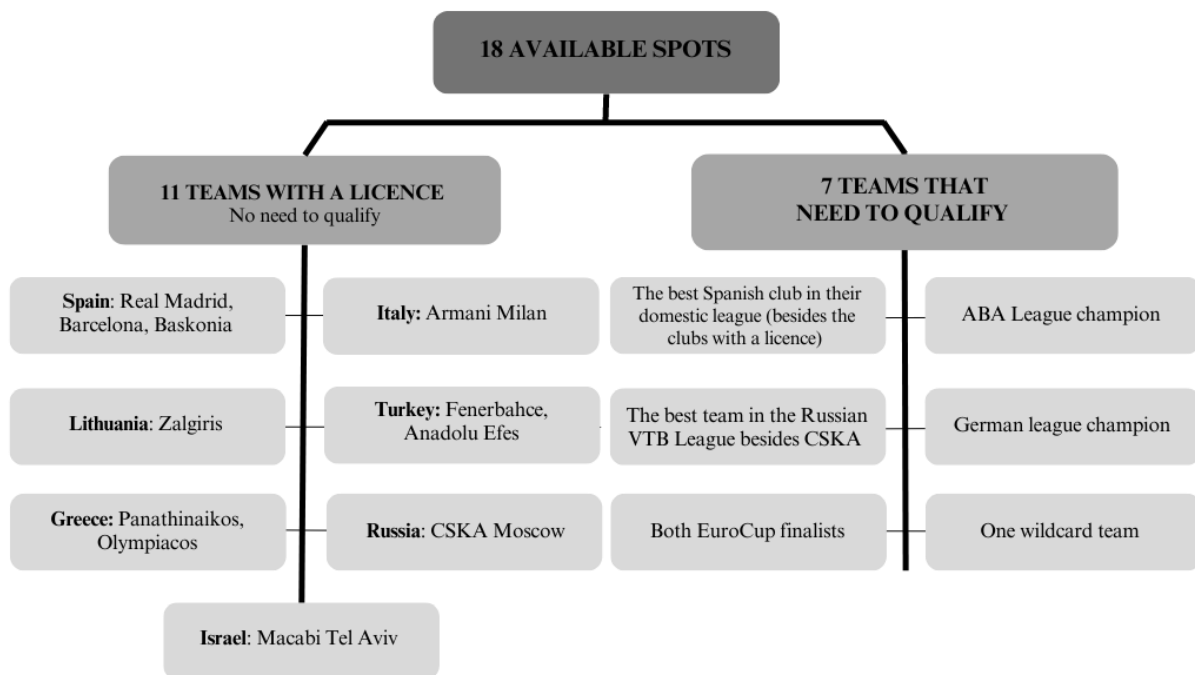
Finally, the positive side of the closed-type competition is that teams that are in the middle of the table have basically an equal chance of winning the championship as the top teams. Of course, if they make it to the post-season tournament. The combination of the above-mentioned facts makes the NBA in this case such an appealing league to watch and follow, and one of the most investable businesses in the world (Lee, 2021).

### **6.3 Euroleague's open format of the competition**

If the United States sports leagues usually have a closed-type competition format, the European sports competitions use open-type leagues or »promotion and relegation« systems. A similar goes for the Euroleague. In this competition, there are 18 teams competing. 12 of those teams have a long-term license and have a reserved spot for every season. The remaining 6 spots are filled with teams that are given wild cards and for finalists of the EuroCup competition.

Figure 9: How the Euroleague is formed

## How the Euroleague teams get selected



Source: Own work.

The above diagram shows a short summary of how the Euroleague is assembled. But this year, the Euroleague had to do certain adjustments linked to Russian teams because of well-known reasons. They have decided to suspend the two Russian participants and give out two more wildcards. Only time will tell how this situation will resolve (Urbonas, 2022b).

These rules, technically make the Euroleague a semi-closed league but it is still a very much different system than the NBA (Di Mattia & Krumer, 2023). The main challenge with this system is that while it does promote competitive play, the result is that the leagues are strongly unbalanced. Because of the »no-salary-cap« policy and the super-rich clubs, smaller clubs usually don't stand a chance against them. In the past 20 seasons, we had 8 different winners of the Euroleague, but all those clubs are the best in their own leagues as well. There were no »underdogs« winning a title (Euroleague basketball, 2022). The same goes for other European sports leagues that are using this system. For example, the most reputable European soccer league, the Premier League has only had 8 different champions in the 28 seasons since its inception. Except for the two seasons, where the »underdog« won the league, »the big 6« clubs have won most of the titles (Lee, 2021).

The financial well-being of the system represents an additional concern, as previously indicated. NBA teams, for example, are making revenue every year, because they play on the big stage every season, and they are getting sponsorship and marketing money. On the

other side, we have top European clubs that are super rich, but soon after the smaller clubs are struggling financially. Especially the clubs that are fighting to stay in the top league every year or are being relegated. Even though the smaller clubs are getting so-called “parachute payments” from the league, this is not an optimal solution because it presents a financial burden for the league (Lee, 2021).

The next problem is linked to the financial health of the clubs as well. Because there is no salary cap policy, clubs can spend as much as they want and can buy and pay the best superstars in the world. In Euroleague, there are a few super-rich clubs, such as Real Madrid, Barcelona, CSKA Moscow, Panathinaikos, and Olympiacos, that can put together super teams and pay them lots of money (Lee, 2021).

While there are pros and cons to both systems, the NBA's closed-type system probably has more positive sides. One critique might be, that the clubs that don't fight for the championship don't have a fear of being relegated, which is true. But this system, where the teams that end up towards the bottom of the table, get the chance to pick higher-ranked players on the annual draft, makes it interesting in a unique way. Teams might get lucky on a draft and get a great rookie player for free, that becomes the face of the franchise. The Dallas Mavericks are a good example of that, with Luka Dončić. They drafted him back in 2018 and have never paid a single cent for him. And it is the same with all the clubs in the NBA.

#### **6.4 Impact of the competition format on marketing strategy**

This section discusses how the format of the competition (Open vs. Closed) defines the marketing strategies of the leagues. In the following paragraphs, the thoughts that my interviewees had on this will be shared. What they all have in common is that closed competitions allow for stable, long-term planning, both from business and marketing perspectives.

The interview with Mr. Cuban dealt with the question of the impact of competition format on sports business and marketing. His response was:

*“It comes down to the economics. When every franchise is worth billions of dollars, you can't really relegate. Plus, we want a competitive balance in the NBA. When you have relegation, there are always going to be teams that come into the league that doesn't yet have access to the capital, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage, which I think is an issue for European sports.”*

Rok Bizjak discussed the shift that the Euroleague has made, towards the more closed-like league and the consequence that had on their marketing strategies:

*“In 2016 the Euroleague shifted from the old system to the new one. This means that now, they have a league system with 18 teams, that are more or less the same every year. Before that, they had groups, and now each team plays with everybody already in the regular season (like the NBA). From a marketing perspective, this system is great, because you know in advance the exact dates of the derby games and they can prepare sponsor and marketing campaigns well in advance. This helps with a better engagement of the fans, and ticket sales [...].”*

Igor Kokoskov agreed that the NBA is the best in terms of organization and that the Euroleague should follow its business model:

*“The NBA is the best league in the world and the world leader in terms of organization and I think the Euroleague should follow the whole NBA’s concept. The fact that it is a closed league makes the most sense since teams invest so much money they can’t imagine getting relegated out of that league. Pretty soon, I think this will be happening in Europe too. They are 15, to 20 years behind the NBA in every aspect, so slowly but surely even the Euroleague will become a closed one.”*

As stated in the above text numerous times, the Euroleague is trying to address all the problems they are facing compared to the NBA. The Euroleague has changed its competition system to work a bit closer to the one in the NBA. While expecting that the Euroleague will ever resemble the NBA is impossible, they are increasingly taking the US basketball league as a model to follow. Recently, the Euroleague saw a change in the CEO role. Jordi Bartomeu, the founder of the Euroleague, got his successor. The Euroleague hired former Portland Trail Blazers president Marshall Glickman as its action CEO. He believes that he can increase the revenues of the league by bringing some of the »pizzazz and the entertainment« practiced in the US sports leagues. His plan is to redistribute the licenses to the clubs located in diverse, world-class European cities. For those plans to be realized, the new CEO will need to raise a meaningful amount of money, which can be a tough challenge.

In Europe projections are that they will have to raise a few hundred million Euros. He said: »We need more resources and the way to get there is to [help] develop a new roadmap for global basketball«. This new roadmap includes a plan to reestablish their collaboration with FIBA, various domestic European leagues, and the NBA (Yahoo, 2022). The new CEO is expected to reach new commercial heights for the Euroleague. He hasn't been in the position for long and already pointed out the biggest mistake of the Euroleague; no big basketball clubs in some of the biggest European cities. To quote him, he said: »You have a league where the strongest basketball markets are in the weakest business markets, and the greatest business potential is in places that are not considered traditional basketball markets«. The Euroleague's best-performing markets right now are Vilnius (Lithuania), Athens (Greece), Belgrade (Serbia), Istanbul (Turkey), and Tel Aviv (Israel). The league's proprietary research indicates that there is space for growth in the cities that drive European's economy, especially cities in countries like Germany, France, and the greater London area.

Glickman understands this challenge will be far from an easy one. Especially London will be tough to »unlock« because basketball is now only the eighth most popular sport. However, when the NBA comes to London for its exhibition games, they sell out the arena immediately. Even the NFL and MLB (Major league baseball) are very popular in London, so he believes that a quality Euroleague team might be interesting as well. Glickman believes that those growth markets are the ones where they must seek new interest from potential partners and new broadcasting and digital opportunities. He is thinking about establishing more youth Euroleague academies in new cities to bring the league closer to the people.

Glickman's vision is clear – bring the Euroleague closer to the NBA's closed system. He wants to distribute 16 long-term league licenses to its shareholders and leave the remaining 2 spots open for the teams competing in the Eurocup. Unless they will decide to increase the number of the teams again since they want to penetrate new markets and add new teams to the league. The CEO wants to bring the American approach to Euroleague content and production. He said: »I want to see our games, in terms of the audio and visual, become more of a show; become more fun to watch,» he said. «I [also] want us to do [more storytelling] through our digital platforms, our social platforms, and through our more traditional [media] channels. That’s a big part of this and what attracts a lot of people» (Yahoo, 2022).

**7 ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the following paragraph, the thesis will analyze the comparison conducted to this point and give out recommendations for both leagues. The analysis will be conducted with the help of the SWOT analysis of both leagues according to the comparison. After the conducted SWOT analysis, the thesis will give out recommendations on the marketing practices of both leagues.

*Table 10: SWOT analysis of both leagues*

	<b>NBA</b>	<b>Euroleague</b>
<b>Strengths</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Global brand recognition</li> <li>– High-profile players who are brands in themselves</li> <li>– Closed competition allows long-term planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The cultural diversity of the competing teams</li> <li>– Historical rivalries among the biggest teams</li> <li>– Strong regional presence</li> <li>– Identity-based loyalty</li> </ul>
<b>Weaknesses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Market the brand in other markets (Asia and Europe)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Fragmented European market.</li> </ul>

(Table continues)

*Table 11: SWOT analysis of both leagues (continued)*

	<b>NBA</b>	<b>Euroleague</b>

<b>Weaknesses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Over-reliance on star players</li> <li>– Limited expansion potential as it has already peaked</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Less developed social media presence</li> <li>– Lack of global presence</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Presence in emerging markets</li> <li>– Youth academies around the world.</li> <li>– NBA’s global games</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The format of the Final 4 tournament</li> <li>– Loyal fan bases</li> <li>– Youth Academy</li> <li>– The semi-closed competition allows flexibility.</li> <li>– Europe’s diversity offers the opportunity to collaborate with national basketball federations and localize the Euroleague brand</li> </ul>
<b>Threats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– NFL, MLB, MLS, NHL</li> <li>– Emerging European sports leagues</li> <li>– Economic and health crisis</li> <li>– Changing consumer preferences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Political crises in Europe</li> <li>– Changing consumer preferences</li> <li>– Football is the most popular sport in Europe.</li> </ul>

*Source: Own work*

The above table includes a short summary of the differences in SWOT comparison between both leagues. In the next paragraphs, this will be analyzed more in-depth.

In undertaking a SWOT analysis of the marketing strategies employed by each league, it is imperative to consider a variety of factors. These factors include but are not limited to, divergent league formats, dissimilar league sizes, varying fan bases, and discrepant numbers of participating clubs. Owing to these disparities, it is necessary to incorporate distinct elements into the respective analyses of each league.

## **7.1 SWOT Analysis of NBA’s marketing strategy**

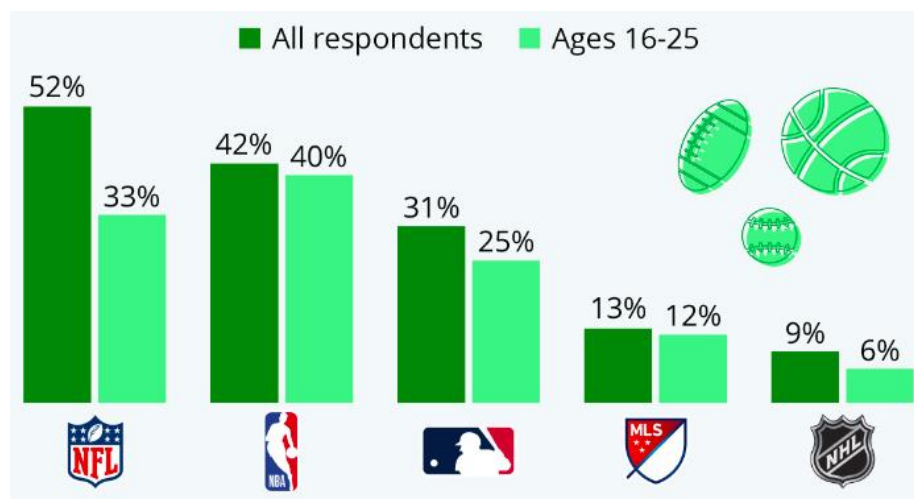
### **7.1.1 Strengths**

As discussed above, the NBA is by far the biggest, most popular, and most profitable basketball league in the world. Just this fact alone makes the NBA one of the most appealing marketing opportunities for companies and investors. The NBA has been founded already in 1946 and has since then created a strong legacy and brand. Through the years, they have acquired partners and sponsors who help the league maintain its brand recognition and funding. Its biggest strength is its brand recognition, which makes it easy to market around the globe.

### 7.1.2 Weaknesses

Even though the NBA's business model appears robust, there are still certain weaknesses that could be addressed, especially given its global orientation. First of them is the issue of how to attract even more people from the markets like Europe and Asia. Over the last few years, international superstars have played a significant role in promoting the league, yet there remains ample opportunity for further enhancement in this regard. The NBA has said that even though they are happy with the increasing interest in the NBA overseas, they still want to gain a bigger piece of the market. Giannis Antetokounmpo, Nikola Jokić, and Luka Dončić are the most responsible for the higher viewership rankings in Europe. There are increases in major markets, such as the UK (72%), Spain (17%), and Italy (32%). (Carroll, 2021) Another possible weakness of the NBA could be the US market itself. The US sports market is huge and there are other sports leagues that could potentially take away the fans. There is the NFL, NHL, and MLB and those are all the leagues that millions and millions of people watch and follow.

Figure 10: Major US leagues fan following



Source: Statista (n. d.).

From this chart, we can see that the NFL is still the main sports league in the US market. The NBA is slowly closing the gap, with the best ratio of young fans, which is important because younger fans are more susceptible to becoming long-life fans of a certain league, sport, or team. Some data shows that the most important age in boys' sports life is 8 years old (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2014).

### 7.1.3 Opportunities

Regarding identifying opportunities for marketing in the NBA, the available options may be limited. Their biggest opportunity is to use their global strategy and recognition and organize events overseas. In the past, they have done some events like that, where the NBA clubs

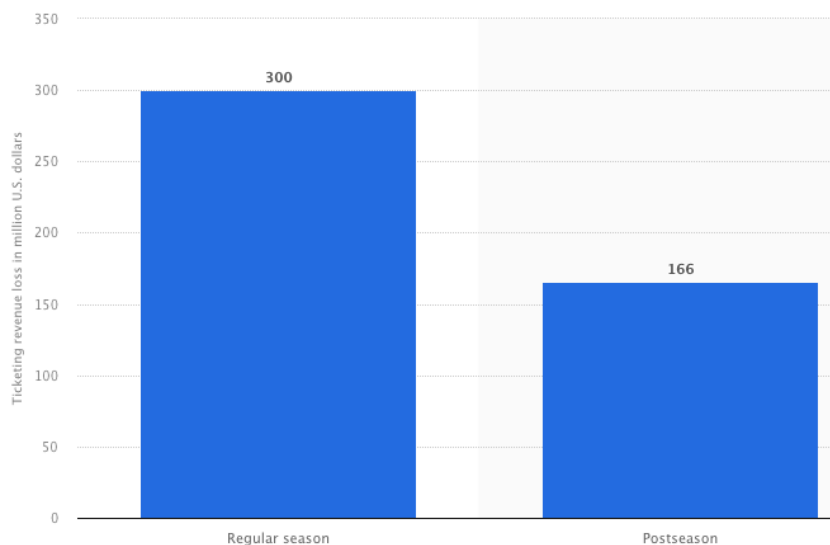


played exhibition matches against the Euroleague clubs. For this year, the NBA is organizing two games where the Golden State Warriors and the Washington Wizards will go to Tokyo and play two exhibition matches. (NBA, 2022) Another opportunity is to bring even more players from Europe, Asia, and Africa. This way, fans from those continents would watch the games even more regularly because of their home players. The NBA should also focus on making partnerships with different academies around the world. They could organize different camps and events also overseas, not just in the United States.

#### 7.1.4 Threats

There are not a lot of actual threats, at least not direct ones. One of the threats is, of course, the competition. As mentioned above, there are several other sports domestic leagues that are presenting a threat to the NBA in terms of popularity and growth. Those leagues are NFL, MLB, and NHL. Alongside the domestic leagues, there are emerging European soccer leagues that are getting more and more popular in the US, especially the England Premier League and the Spanish La Liga. Another threat is something that is basically out of the NBA's control, and that is an economic crisis and currency fluctuations, we saw a COVID-19 crisis where there were no fans allowed in the arenas for almost two full seasons.

*Figure 11: Ticketing revenue loss due to Covid-19 as of March 2020*



*Source: Statista (n. d.).*

In the graph above we can see that the NBA lost almost half a billion dollars in the Covid crisis, from ticketing alone. Covid still is one of the biggest concerns, not just in the NBA but in all the leagues globally (MBA Skool Team, 2021).

## 7.2 SWOT analysis of the Euroleague

Just like in any other field of business, certain strengths make the Euroleague one of the most competitive and popular sports competitions in the world, but there are also weaknesses that might keep the Euroleague from being even more popular.

### 7.2.1 Strengths

The first and biggest strength of the Euroleague is the diversity of the teams competing against each other. With all the best clubs from Spain, Italy, Greece, and Turkey, the Euroleague has so many different cultures. Not just among the clubs but also among fan bases. They are the second-best basketball league in the world and its games are broadcasted in 191 countries worldwide. The final four tournament is broadcasted to even more countries, 197 (Basketball Basketball, 2022). Because of the level of basketball played in this league, it is interesting for numerous basketball stars that created their names in this competition. Players like Luka Dončić, Tony Parker, and Manu Ginobili have all started in the Euroleague and went on to be very successful in the NBA. Another important strength of this league is the fact that a lot of the teams come from the most popular European cities, such as Barcelona, Madrid, Athens, and Milan, which is even more interesting for marketing projects with different companies, influencers, and corporations. Rivalries between these cities make the Euroleague even more interesting and appealing to watch. Talking about the rivalries, the fans are something that can hardly be seen anywhere else in the world. They are super loyal and create an atmosphere like the one in soccer stadiums or college games. Because of that, there is a huge opportunity for growth and an increase in ticket sales, since people are willing to spend for their clubs (Tamari, 2010).

### 7.2.2 Weaknesses

Euroleague is extended across Europe, but that does not mean that all the most critical markets are equally covered and involved in this league. For example, there are no clubs in London, in fact, there are none across the whole UK. Further, the clubs in Germany and France are usually not competitive, leading to a lack of interest among the fans of those clubs. In comparison to the NBA, where they have a clear structure of how much every team can spend for the salaries of their players (*salary cap*), there are no such rules in the Euroleague. Because of that, the financial gap between the best clubs and the others is very wide, and for them, it is hard to put together a winning team. While clubs like Barcelona, Real Madrid, and CSKA Moscow are spending millions each year. From the marketing perspective that is a huge weakness since it is hard to market games played between smaller, not-as-rich clubs (Tamari, 2010). As Igor Kokoskov told me during our interview, *“In Europe, which is not a unified country like the US, political situations affect sports in general. Now, there are 3 Russian teams out of the league because of the measures against Russia for well-known reasons. That kind of thing can happen any time in Europe, it’s*

*unstable and this affects the business as well. People that are investing money into the league don't know what will happen in 5 years. The fact that the NBA financially controls the world market, the best of the best will always come here. It is a globalization of basketball but also a centralization.*”

### 7.2.3 Opportunities

Even though there are multiple opportunities out there for the league, the biggest one is their concept of the final tournament, the Final Four. Each year, they organize this tournament in another city than the year before. This 4-day event has multiple, super-exciting basketball games, fan events, concerts, and more. Because the Euroleague is not obligated to host this event in the same city two years in a row, this presents a great marketing opportunity, to expand the league to the less basketball-developed markets. There could also be an opportunity to host these events outside of the European territory and therefore expand the Euroleague markets to other continents. As already mentioned above, one of the biggest opportunities for the Euroleague is the fan bases of the clubs. Because of their loyalty, especially of their younger fans, they are willing to spend on tickets, merchandise, and even away games. With a better, maybe even more aggressive marketing approach, the Euroleague can grow (Tamari, 2010).

### 7.2.4 Threats

Euroleague's main direct competitor is not the NBA. In fact, it might not even be another basketball league, but football. That is because football is by far the most popular sport in the world, not just in Europe. Football generates significantly higher revenues and enjoys wider popular support. All the best basketball teams are usually associated with football clubs (Real Madrid, Barcelona, Olympiakos, Red Star Belgrade, to name a few). Those clubs usually have football, basketball, and handball teams, which translates into multi-sport competitions for fans, sponsorships, and funding. Because of the importance of soccer, it is usually the main financial generator and therefore gets the most financial support, leaving all the other teams with fewer finances. Another threat is also connected to finances. Because of the »salary cap-less policy« of the Euroleague, there are growing differences between the wealthy and less wealthy clubs. The consequence of this could potentially be the lack of interest among smaller clubs and the general point of interest of the Euroleague. The league's leadership will have to do something to provide more fair conditions for all the clubs. This will lead to better and healthier competition, more fans attracted, and more money generated (Tamari, 2010).

### **7.3 What the Euroleague can learn from the NBA**

After concluding the SWOT analyses of both leagues, there are some recommendations for Euroleague for how they can improve their performance in comparison with the NBA. In the next subchapters, those recommendations will be discussed more in-depth.

#### 7.3.1 Expansion

The Euroleague should start thinking of expanding its competition outside the European borders, especially its Final Four tournament. The Final Four tournament represents the holy grail of the Euroleague season, and it is packed with exciting games, a great atmosphere, and concerts, and most importantly, the Euroleague is not obligated to host it at the same place every year. It presents a great marketing opportunity to expand it outside of the European borders.

#### 7.3.2 Superstar marketing

They should try to do more player-centered marketing instead of team-centered since people usually have a bigger affection towards the superstars instead the teams. It is easier to identify yourself with a single superstar and follow them than to identify with the whole team. With more player-centered marketing, the Euroleague would gain more “neutral” fans, not just the “die-hard” fans of the teams they have now.

#### 7.3.3 Target major European markets

Another big recommendation would be to try to penetrate the biggest European markets (UK, France, Germany) that are now occupied by soccer. It won't be easy for them, especially with the NBA growing and gaining popularity so rapidly, and with football being by far the most popular sport in Europe, but if they want to grow, they will have to do certain adjustments in their marketing and business approaches. The best way for this is through their Final Four tournaments to be hosted in that countries, preferably in their capitals (London, Berlin, Paris).

#### 7.3.4 Target global markets, including US

The US market is still heavily occupied by the domestic leagues. The Euroleague announced that the US sports broadcaster ESPN will bring the Turkish Airlines Euroleague back to the US audience. This agreement is another step towards the Euroleague's strategy to expand its reach outside of European borders. Alex Ferrer Kristjansson, Euroleague Basketball Marketing, and Communication Senior Director, stated: *"Globalization is a cornerstone for sports market growth in general and basketball in particular. We are confident that all U.S.*

*basketball fans will appreciate the diversity of our stories and the experience that the EuroLeague delivers during the whole season."* (Euroleague basketball, 2023).

### 7.3.5 Fan Engagement and fan experience

US Pro Leagues are the best in the world when it comes to fan engagement and experience. They know how to create a show out of every home game and how to elevate the whole experience. People go to the games not specifically because of the game itself, but to socialize, enjoy different shows during timeouts, and to have some food and drinks while in the Euroleague people go to games to support their favorite teams for the whole duration of the game. Nothing is wrong with supporting your teams, and this adds up to the interesting factor of the Euroleague, but if they would like to attract even more people, they would have to engage with fans even more.

### 7.3.6 Further advancing digital strategy

We live in an era of digital media when everything is instantly on the internet. Because of that, social media presence is as important as ever. The Euroleague should put more focus on building their social media brand, including their superstars in their campaign, and bring more traffic and engagement towards them. In recent years, they have done a great job in this aspect, they have increased the number of their followers on social media but there is still a lot of room for improvement.

## **CONCLUSION**

To summarize, the research for this thesis was conducted in two parts: first, the secondary data was researched and analyzed for the theoretical part of the thesis. Primary data was gathered through digital ethnography, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. I have then conducted a thematic analysis of the three key themes that emerged as central throughout my empirical research. The first theme was the comparison of the US and European cultures and how they affect the marketing strategies of both leagues. With the help of my interviewees, I realized that culture still plays a significant role in shaping of marketing strategies, especially in Europe. The second theme was on player-centric vs team-centric marketing approaches. The NBA is using predominantly a player-centric approach while the Euroleague is focusing on team-centric strategies. The third theme was the comparison of the competition systems, whether there is a closed or an open type of league. While the NBA is using a closed type of league, the Euroleague, just as most of the top European sports leagues, is using an open one. In this case, I found out that the system the NBA is using is more optimal since it is more stable and therefore safer for investors and teams to invest higher amounts of money. All the gathered data helped me understand and compare how the two biggest basketball leagues in the world are conducting their marketing

and business approaches. The thesis summarizes why the NBA is a superior league and one of the biggest and most innovative sports organizations. It is now easier to understand the challenges of the Euroleague and the next steps that they can make to scale their business. The interviews with the industry insiders and the insights I got from them allowed me to understand the mechanisms through which the NBA has risen to its globally dominant position, as well as to understand the challenges ahead of the Euroleague.

There are several research limitations to consider when interpreting the results of the analysis and the results of the whole thesis. The first limitation is the fact of how hard it is to approach influential people from the industry to get quality insight. While my findings drawn from the small sample of three in-depth interviews offer rich and original insights, their generalizability is inherently limited. This limitation was partially compensated by triangulating the insights from the interviews with rich data gathered via digital ethnography and participant observation

Another limitation that I faced during this research was the lack of quality data on the Euroleague. While most of the data on the NBA is easily publicly accessible, it is not the same for the Euroleague. While I have invested a lot of efforts in equally representing both perspectives, this asymmetry in terms of resources available may be reflected in the text of the thesis.

The findings in this thesis offer a solid ground for future research. Future research could explore how the newly adopted business and marketing practices of the Euroleague work in practice. It would be interesting to research whether the Euroleague even has an interest in pursuing the NBA, or do they have a vision of their own. Furthermore, future research could be focused on how the leagues are competing with their local competitors. Of course, this thesis was mostly focused on the marketing implications of both leagues, there is much more ground to cover to fully understand in which aspects a certain league is prospecting over another. It is important to conduct additional studies to get a full perspective on how the leagues are conducting business, not just from a marketing perspective.

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## **APPENDIX**



## Appendix 1: Slovenian Summary

Šport je ena izmed dejavnosti z najdaljšo tradicijo na svetu. Začetki športa in športnih tekmovanj segajo še v čase antične Grčije (Bizjak & Makovec Brenčič, 2011). V drugi polovici 20. stoletja se je šport iz amaterske oblike preoblikoval v profesionalno panogo. Velik delež zaslug za to so imeli predvsem mediji. V zadnjih nekaj letih so se močno povečala vlaganja v športno industrijo in posledično tudi v športno trženje. Športno trženje se od tradicionalnega razlikuje v določenih lastnostih – trženje v živo, strastno dožemanje privržencev in osebna navezanost na klube ter športnike. Vse trženjske strategije morajo biti vnaprej skrbno premišljene, da ustrezajo specifičnim lastnostim navijačev, kultur in športov (Kahle & Riley, 2008). Kot omenja Bhwarday (Teal Mango, 2022) je košarka tretji najpopularnejši šport na svetu, takoj za nogometom in kriketom. Skupna vrednost športnega trga je ocenjena na približno 440,77 milijarde ameriških dolarjev in naj bi se povzpela do 599,99 milijarde ameriških dolarjev do leta 2025 (Kumar & Bhalla, 2021). Ob raziskovanju košarkarske industrije in trga ugotovimo, da je veliko različnih kultur, trgov, navijačev ter marketinških strategij. To magistrsko delo primerja dve najmočnejši košarkarski ligi na svetu – NBA in Evroligo.

NBA je najbolj priljubljena in dobičkonosna košarkarska liga na svetu, s prihodki v višini 7,4 milijarde ameriških dolarjev in zaostaja le za dvema ostalima severnoameriškima ligama – NFL (National Football Association) in MLB (Major League Baseball). Ustanovljena je bila leta 1946 v New Yorku, njen sedanji komisar pa je Adam Silver. Evroliga je najmočnejše evropsko košarkarsko tekmovanje, pravijo ji tudi evropski NBA. Tekmovanje je bilo ustanovljeno že leta 1958 pod okriljem FIBE, leta 2000 pa je tekmovanje prevzela Evroliga. Čeprav Evroliga predstavlja največji evropski košarkarski oder, pa še vedno močno zaostaja za ligo NBA, kar se tiče gledanosti in prihodkov. Evroliga ima skoraj sedemkrat nižje prihodke kot NBA, njihov cilj je do leta 2025/26 pridobiti 1,1 milijarde ameriških dolarjev.

Glavni cilj tega magistrskega dela je primerjati in razumeti trženjske pristope obeh lig, ter identifikacija podobnosti in razlik med njima. Na ta način bomo lažje razumeli, zakaj je NBA tako posebna liga v športni industriji.

Športno trženje je eden izmed načinov trženja, ki združuje športno kulturo in kulturo znamke skozi športne aktivnosti. Športno trženje ima dve možni razlagi – ena obravnava šport kot blago, druga pa obravnava športne dejavnosti kot nosilce blagovne znamke. Čeprav je športno trženje do neke mere podobno splošnemu, pa obstajajo določene posebnosti športnega trženja. Obstajata dva vidika športnega trženja, in sicer 1) trženje športa in 2) trženje prek športa. Pri razmišljanju o trženju športa razmišljamo o trženjskih prizadevanjih športnih ekip, franšiz, lig in trženju trženjskih izdelkov. Po drugi strani pa je trženje prek športa praksa podjetij, ki tvorijo partnerstva s športnimi subjekti za komercialno korist (Fetchko, Roy, & Clow, 2018). Osnove športnega trženja so enake kot osnove splošnega

trženja. Vendar pa obstajajo tri značilnosti, ki ločujejo športno trženje od drugih področij in predstavljajo edinstvene priložnosti za športne organizacije. Te značilnosti so prednost povezanosti, izziv pozicioniranja in odnosi na podlagi izkušenj.

V splošnem bi lahko trženjsko strategijo opisali kot zaporedje odločitev podjetja, ki določajo izbiro njihovih produktov, trgov in trženjskih aktivnosti v ustvarjanju, komuniciranju in dostavi produktov, ki končnemu kupcu predstavljajo neko vrednost in omogoča podjetju doseči vnaprej določene cilje. Trženjska strategija je sestavljena iz dveh segmentov – izbire ciljnega trga in določanja trženjskega mixa. Z določitvijo ciljnega trga podjetje določi, komu želi prodati izdelek. Poznamo različne tržne segmente, ki imajo na podjetja različne učinke. Zaradi vseh teh dejavnikov morajo podjetja pred vstopom na trg narediti temeljito raziskavo le-tega. Podjetje mora pri načrtovanju strategije paziti na 4P-je trženja (cena, produkt, promocija in prostor). Podjetje mora tukaj sprejeti več odločitev, da uporabijo pravilne kombinacije vsega, v upanju, da bo kampanija čim uspešnejša (Singh, 2012). Cilj večine športnih znamk je ustvariti zvestobo znamki njihovih kupcev. Čeprav sta športno in konvencionalno trženje podobna v veliko segmentih, pa je med njima vseeno veliko razlik. Športno trženje ima štiri glavne stebre – medijske pravice, prihodki od kart, sponzorstva in prodaja izdelkov ekipe/igralcev. NBA je seveda pred Evroligo, kar se tiče vseh štirih segmentov, vendar bolj zaskrbljujoča je razlika med vsemi zaslužki obeh lig. Tudi eden izmed mojih sogovorcev na intervjuju, Rok Bizjak, je dejal: »Prihodki od prodaje kart med sezono so v domeni vsake posamezne ekipe, Evroliga od kart ne dobi nič do finalnega turnirja, ki je odigran na nevtralni lokaciji. Tudi s prodajo blaga ekip je podobna težava. Evroliga sicer ima pogodbo z Adidasom, vendar ima tudi vsaka ekipa svojega blagovnega partnerja in liga od te prodaje prav tako ne dobi nič. «

Tako športno kot konvencionalno trženje vsebujeta štiri različne strategije za trženje svojih produktov. Te strategije so tematska strategija, produktna strategija, strategija usklajevanja in športna strategija. Danes se različni športi zelo hitro razvijajo in dosegajo določene dosežke skozi lastno razvojno in tržno strategijo, in sicer s pomočjo svojih lig in nacionalnih združenj. NBA ostaja edinstven primer glede globalne priljubljenosti in tržne strategije, ki vključuje vse zvezdnike lige in pripadajoče izdelke. NBA je tudi najhitreje rastoča športna liga v ZDA in se globalno hitro razvija, zahvaljujoč svojim edinstvenim tržnimi strategijam (Oberai, 2017). Tržna strategija lige NBA je lahko preprosto poimenovana »globalna trženjska strategija« (Sun Z., 2015). Ena glavnih stvari, ki so pripomogle h globalni prepoznavnosti lige, je bila predstavitev mednarodnih košarkarjev. Eden izmed prvih, ki je ligo NBA popeljal izven meja ZDA, je bil zagotovo kitajski košarkar Yao Ming. Tudi razvoj in napredek v prenosih lige NBA jim je omogočil, da jih lahko spremlja stotine milijonov po vsem svetu. Zaradi njihove neprestane težnje po inovativnosti in razvoju so postali eden izmed najbolj zaželenih trgov za investicije.

Na drugi strani ima Evroliga nemalo težav, kako dvigniti gledanost in prepoznavnost lige po svetu. Igor Kokoškov mi je v najinem intervjuju dejal: »Evroliga opravlja fantastičen posel, vendar so še vedno 15–20 let za ligo NBA. « Resda tudi sponzorske in medijske pogodbe

rastejo, vendar so v primerjavi z ligo NBA še vedno neprimerljivo nižje. Glavna težava klubov v Evroligi je ta, da v veliki večini primerov sezone zaključujejo z izgubo, medtem ko imajo klubi v NBA vsako leto milijonske dobičke. Tudi plače najboljših igralcev obeh lig niso primerljive.

Cilj te raziskave je primerjati tržne strategije košarkarske lige NBA in Evrolige, dveh najboljših košarkarskih lig na svetu. Namen te raziskave je ugotoviti podobnosti in razlike med tema dvema pristopoma k trženju ter ugotoviti, kje bi se lahko Evroliga nadgradila svoje delovanje. S tem raziskava prispeva k boljšemu razumevanju, zakaj je NBA globalni fenomen v športni industriji in bogati teoretično znanje o različnih pristopih k športnemu trženju. Študija uporablja kvalitativni pristop, ki temelji na raznolikem teoretičnem gradivu ter kombinira digitalno etnografijo, participativno opazovanje in intervjuje kot metode zbiranja izvirnih podatkov. Uporabljeni so tudi sekundarni viri za primerjavo tržnih strategij in praks obeh lig. V teoretičnem delu so bili uporabljeni viri iz različnih znanstvenih del, člankov ter poročil na temo športnega trženja. Izvirni primarni viri so uporabljeni prek digitalne etnografije, opazovanja industrije in intervjujev. Opravljeni so bili tudi trije intervjuji s trenerji in managerji iz industrije. Poleg zgoraj naštetih tehnik je bila narejena tudi tematska analiza. Tematska analiza je raziskovalna metoda, ki vključuje odkrivanje glavnih tem in vzorcev, ki izhajajo iz primarnih podatkov, in organizacija teh podatkov v celoto, ki služi namenu raziskave (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Tematska analiza je sestavljena iz treh delov, in sicer 1) kulturne razlike med obema ligama, 2) centralizacije igralca/ekipe, 3) odprtega/zaprtega tekmovanja.

Kultura je pomemben dejavnik, ko pride do vprašanja marketinga in posla v splošnem smislu. Medtem ko v ligi NBA menijo, da kulturne razlike niso več tako pomembne, kot so bile, pa v Evroligi to predstavlja enega največjih izzivov. Mark Cuban, lastnik franšize Dallas Mavericks, mi je v pisnem intervjuju dejal: »*Cultural differences between Americans and Europeans do not matter] nearly as much as they used to. Social Media has changed everything. Now every top athlete globally is a brand and has a direct relationship with fans. That is a huge change.*« Rok Bizjak, vodja tekmovanj pri Evroligi, pa mi je povedal, da so kulturne razlike eden izmed največjih izzivov lige in da morajo biti izredno pazljivi pri izbiri tržne strategije. Tudi tipologija navijačev se razlikuje. V Evropi prevladuje t. i. tip 1 navijačev, ki so starejši, ljubijo svoje klube in so tradicionalni. Na drugi strani imamo navijače tipa 2, ki so moderni, racionalni in manj zvesti – hitreje bodo menjali ekipo/igralca, za katero/katerega navijajo.

Centralizacija ekipe/igralca je izredno pomemben in zanimiv dejavnik, ki vpliva na trženjske strategije obeh lig. Medtem ko imajo v ligi NBA prednost igralci, so v Evroligi v ospredju ekipe. Tudi Jordi Bartomeu, nekdanji glavni izvršni direktor Evrolige, je dejal, da v ligi NBA vse vodijo igralci, medtem ko imajo v Evroligi glavno besedo kultura in tradicija ekipe. V ligi NBA imajo trenerji dokaj »pristransko« vlogo, v Evroligi pa je trener nesporni vodja ekipe in vsi poslušajo zgolj njega, zato je tržno strategijo težko osredotočiti na zgolj enega igralca, saj so ekipe veliko pomembnejše od posameznikov.

Zaprto oziroma odprto ligo je še zadnji aspekt, na katerega se je ta raziskava osredotočila. V ligi NBA imajo zaprt sistem tekmovanja, kar pomeni, da tudi najslabše ekipe lige ob koncu sezone niso degradirane v nižji rang tekmovanja. Večina evropskih lig pa pozna odprto sistem tekmovanja, kjer se najslabša ekipa lige po sezoni poslovi in jo nadomesti najboljša ekipa druge lige. Glavna prednost zaprtih lig je predvsem finančna stabilnost klubov, saj jim ni treba skrbeti, da bi bili izločeni v nižji rang tekmovanja. Vsi moji sogovorniki so se strinjali, da je s finančnega vidika zaprt sistem tekmovanja nedvomno boljši in učinkovitejši. Tudi Evroliga počasi prehaja na zaprt sistem tekmovanja, kjer bodo vsako sezono igrali le najboljši evropski klubi.

Opravljena je bila tudi analiza SWOT trženjskih pristopov obeh lig. Čeprav liga NBA deluje superiorna, ima še vedno določene stvari, ki jih morajo skrbeti oziroma se morajo izboljšati. Njihova največja grožnja so predvsem ostale severnoameriške športne lige. Njihova glavna priložnost pa se ponuja na tujih trgih, predvsem z njihovimi »Global Games« tekmami in akademijami za mladostnike. Na drugi strani je glavna prednost Evrolige njihova kulturna raznolikost, saj so ekipe razporejene po celotnem ozemlju Evrope. Tudi večina najboljših evropskih košarkarjev njihovo pot začne v Evroligi, preden se odpravijo v NBA. Njihova največja slabost je to, da je veliko trgov (Francija, Anglija, Nemčija) okupiranih s strani nogometa in tam ni veliko vrhunskih evropskih košarkarskih ekip. Tudi prej omenjena raznolikost v določenih segmentih dela škodi ligi. Kot mi je povedal Igor Kokoškov: »V Evropi, ki ni enotna država, kot so ZDA, politične razmere velikokrat vplivajo na šport. Trenutno so zaradi ukrepov proti Rusiji iz lige izključene tri ruske ekipe zaradi dobro znanih razlogov. Takšne stvari se lahko v Evropi zgodijo kadar koli, saj so razmere nestabilne, kar vpliva tudi na poslovanje. Ljudje, ki vlagajo denar v ligo, ne vedo, kaj se bo zgodilo v naslednjih petih letih. Dejstvo je, da NBA finančno nadzoruje svetovni trg in najboljši igralci bodo vedno prišli sem. To je globalizacija košarke, vendar tudi centralizacija. « Glavna priložnost Evrolige pa se pojavlja predvsem v prodoru na tuje trge, z njihovim konceptom finalnega turnirja je to povsem izvedljivo. Ker Evroliga ni zavezana, da je finalni turnir vsako leto v istem mestu, bi lahko ligo ponesli tudi izven meja Evrope.