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Cristiano Ronaldo's decision to remove two Coca-Cola bottles from view at a press conference, and dent the value of the fizzy drink maker's sponsorship of the European Championship, has highlighted the risks brands face associating with sports stars made powerful by the social media era.

The Portugal captain, a renowned health fanatic who eschews carbonated drinks and alcohol, underlined his point by holding a bottle of water while saying "água", Portuguese and Spanish for water. The water brand in question happened to be owned by Coca-Cola too, but the damage by a major sports star with 550 million social media followers was done.

It's obviously a big moment for any brand when the world's most followed footballer on social media does something like that, says Tim Crow, a sports marketing consultant who advised Coca-Cola on football sponsorship for two decades. "Coke pays tens of millions to be a Uefa sponsor and as part of that there are contractual obligations for federations and teams, including taking part in press conferences with logos and products. But there are always risks. Major brands have never been able to control the actions of their star signings. Nike decided, stoically, to stand by Tiger Woods as the golfing prodigy lost sponsors including Gillette and Gatorade after a 2009 sex scandal. However, Ronaldo's public snub signifies a different kind of threat to the once cosy commercial balance of power between stars and brands, one born of the social media era.

Ronaldo is right at the top of social media earners, says PR expert Mark Borkowski. It is about the rise of the personal brand, the personal channel, it gives so much bloody power. That's what has allowed Ronaldo to make a point [about a healthy lifestyle].

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