

The Role of Media in Sponsorship Decision Making During Covid-19: A Malaysian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has impacted not only human lives, but also business organisations. The repercussions of the pandemic on global businesses include sustaining the value of a firm that could benefit stakeholders, such as the challenge for sponsored properties to attain sponsorship through a period of financial struggles and the capacity of a sponsor to provide it. It is imperative for business-to-business (B2B) communities to evaluate criteria and risks of sponsorship to instil public trust and consequently result in value creation for firms. At the same time, the role of the media is pivotal to create visibility of this partnership and achieve set sponsorship aims. With that said, the objective of this study is to explore the role of sponsorship decision making by Malaysian organisations during the pandemic and how the media have strengthened relationship marketing between businesses and their stakeholders; by examining the determinant factors of using media as an activation in sponsorship and the criteria of using media in sponsorship. The qualitative study conducted interviews with 13 corporate communication and marketing managers in Malaysia that are involved directly with sponsorship activation. The findings highlight the sponsorship ecosystem through the Malaysian media and B2B perspectives that would guide practitioners in making strategic decisions on B2B sponsorship matters, particularly on the relational approaches and media engagement should be seen as part of good business conduct. Future recommendation of this research is to seek the perceptions of consumers on the congruence of relationship marketing through sponsor-sponsored properties collaboration in Malaysian media.

Keywords: *Media, marketing communication, sponsorship activation, business-to-business, Covid-19.*

INTRODUCTION

There have been progressively rapid improvements in the field of sponsorship in the last 30 years and is one of the fastest growing areas of marketing (Mazodier, Henderson, & Beck, 2018; Woisetschläger, Backhaus, & Cornwell, 2017), whilst rapidly becoming a popular form of marketing communication (Dens, De Pelsmacker, & Verhellen, 2018; Dickenson & Souchon, 2020; Mazodier & Rezaee, 2013). Sponsorship growth is at a rate of 4.9 percent globally -

higher than the other marketing communication tools such as advertising and promotion (International Event Group, 2018), and projected to reach USD89.6 billion in 2027 (Statista, 2021).

The Covid-19 panic caused a major impact on firms' financial systems which hamper its operations. The annual profit for the firms is also severely affected due to the economic turbulence resulting from the pandemic. This includes giant corporations such as Hertz Global Holdings Inc., one of the nation's largest car-rental companies reported to have filed for bankruptcy and forced to terminate 16,000 employees (Kelly, 2020). In addition, AirAsia, one of the largest low-cost carrier airlines in Asia has terminated more than 300 employees that include flight attendants, pilots, and engineers in regards to Covid-19 (Aroff, 2020). Besides that, firms have experiences on financial survival since most of the country's borders were closed due to Covid-19 (Sigala, 2020). Hence, it might contribute to the lack of future budget in sponsorship.

Originating as a part of sponsorship leverage, activation entails "communications that promote the engagement, involvement or participation of the sponsorship audience with the sponsor" (Weeks, Cornwell, & Drennan, 2008). Activation has been thoroughly researched and proven to be effective in supporting companies in producing positive reactions (e.g. sponsor loyalty, attitude), particularly in the context of sponsorship (Dreisbach, Woisetschläger, Backhaus, & Cornwell, 2021; Mazodier & Quester, 2014; Olson & Thjømmøe, 2011). Thompson and Speed (2007) mentioned that the advantages of communicating with the media may reach both event attendees and non-attendees. It could be argued that the media appears to be a valuable instrument for promoting and conveying events (Zyglidopoulos, Georgiadis, Carroll, & Siegel, 2012). Media also help sponsors expand their businesses and grow their own audiences and fan bases (Kelly & Van der Leij, 2021). Recently, a number of studies discovered the use of sponsorship activation in sponsorship transferred favourable attitudes, experiences, intention, positive word of mouth, and brand equity among consumers (Burton & Schlieman, 2021; Goebert & Greenhalgh, 2020; Hsiao, Tang, & Su, 2021). Taking these factors into account, the current study intends to explore the role of media as a communication tool in sponsorship programmes, particularly in the business-to-business (B2B) setting. The study would like to understand how a sponsor employs media as an activation channel in sponsorship programmes. Therefore, our study aims to address these research questions, namely; what are the determinant factors of using media as an activation in sponsorship? And what are the criteria of using media in sponsorship?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sponsorship and Challenges in Malaysia

Sponsorship is defined as a cash or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically in sports, arts, entertainment, or social) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential of that property (International Event Group, 2017). Cornwell and Maignan (1998) asserted that sponsorship involves two activities: (1) an exchange between a sponsor and a sponsee whereby the latter receives a fee, and the former obtains the right to associate itself with the activity sponsored and (2) the marketing of the association by the sponsor. Hence, this current study defines a relationship between a brand (i.e. sponsor or firm) and an event (i.e. a sponsee), whether financial or non-financial in nature, that allows the brand to associate and capitalise on sponsorship of the event in order to achieve its commercial marketing objectives. Meanwhile, Lin and Bruning (2021) developed a sponsorship typology that

includes general and specific types of sponsorship such as sports, prosocial cause, culture and community sponsorship, and media and programming content sponsorship.

Sports sponsorship has contributed to 70% of sponsorship expenditure as compared to other types of sponsorship (International Event Group, 2018). However, due to Covid-19, most sporting events throughout the world have been postponed or cancelled. For instance, the Tokyo Summer Olympics, which were expected to take place in July 2020, have been postponed to the following year. In the case of football, the majority of major football competitions were suspended or postponed in 2020, and some competitions were held without spectators. As a result of the Covid-19, about 38 percent of sponsorship fees, or \$10 billion, were affected (International Event Group, 2020).

In Malaysia, sports organisations have experienced financial problems in organising events due to lack of sponsorship from the industries. To mitigate this, the Malaysian government in its 2018 Budget has announced an increase in tax deduction to RM700,000 to encourage individuals and companies' participation in sponsorship endeavours (Malek, 2017). Besides, the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Malaysia implemented the sports transformation programme called "Perfect 10" to encourage potential sponsors' involvement in sports sponsorship. However, Covid-19 created an impact on the sponsorship industry and posed a huge challenge to its resilience. For instance, a number of Football Associations also experienced financial constraints for the 2021 Malaysian Super League season, and many of sponsors reconsidered to be involved in the sponsorship programme (Fai, 2020).

Business-to-Business Relationship in Sponsorship

Current consumer trends, as well as the current global financial crisis, provide brands with difficult conditions in order to stay competitive (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010; Meenaghan, 2013; Randle & Dolnicar, 2011). In addition, Covid-19 crisis has an impact on profit, financial and survival of brands (Kadirov, Tjiptono, & Sharipudin, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Verma & Gustafsson, 2020). As a result of these challenges, brands are becoming more cautious with their marketing budget allocations in order to reach target consumers. Sponsorship is more complicated in terms of relationship as compared to other marketing communication tools (e.g. advertising) since it involves tripartite relationship that consist of sponsors, sponsored properties and consumers (Madill & O'Reilly, 2010; Sherry, Schulenkorf, & Phillips, 2016).

Sponsors may be firms or brands; this study generally refers to brands (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002). Besides, sponsored properties refer to sport events or charitable organisations (Woisetschläger et al., 2017). Sponsorships improve a sponsors' reputation, image, and brand equity (Lin & Bruning, 2021; Woisetschläger et al., 2017). Despite the widespread usage of sponsorship in marketing, few studies have investigated the role of media in sponsorship from a business-to-business (B2B) perspective, especially in Malaysia.

It could be argued that when it comes to sponsorship, marketing managers still depend on their instinct rather than market research (Woisetschläger et al., 2017), and the influence of sponsors on sponsored properties is both largely overlooked and important in practise (Dickenson & Souchon, 2020). As a result, our study intends to understand the role of media in sponsorship from a B2B perspective (i.e. sponsors and sponsored properties).

Our study uses relationship marketing as our theoretical framework. Relationship marketing is defined as all marketing activities aimed at establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the sponsorship

context, relationship marketing refers to collaboration and agreement between sponsors and sponsored properties in sponsorship activities (Jensen & Cornwell, 2017; van Rijn, Kristal, & Henseler, 2019). The relationship marketing provides a theoretical perspective through investigating the relationship between sponsors and sponsored properties (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021). Besides, sponsors should collaborate with sponsored properties to achieve their goals based on the cost of the partnership, the consumer category they want to reach, and the message they want to communicate to consumers (Lin & Bruning, 2021).

A number of studies found that the importance of relationship between sponsors and sponsored properties in sponsorship for B2B decision making such as sponsorship discontinuation, sponsorship dissolution, successful and effective sponsorship management (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021; A. Morgan, Taylor, & Adair, 2020; van Rijn et al., 2019). As a result, relationship between sponsors and sponsored properties are important to ensure both parties achieve their sponsorship objectives.

Sponsorship and Media as Sponsorship Activation

Activation has been thoroughly researched and proven to be effective in supporting companies in producing favourable outcomes (e.g. perceived congruence, brand and sponsorship attitude), particularly in sponsorship context (e.g. Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Mazodier & Quester, 2014; Olson & Thjømøe, 2011; Thjømøe, Olson, & Brønn, 2002; Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010). Several studies testified that effective activation contributed to positive consumer perceived congruence, involvement and image, as well as brand and sponsorship attitudes (Hassim, Hasmadi, & Sharipudin, 2020; Kuo & Rice, 2015; Mazodier & Quester, 2014; Yong Seok, Jin, & Sung-Hack, 2012; Zdravkovic et al., 2010).

Media is one of the important tools in promoting and communicating events. Sponsors are interested in engaging with their audiences through media exposure sponsorship (Woisetschläger et al., 2017). It has been proven that incorporating media into events results in positive favourable responses from a consumer perspective such as sponsorship congruence (Kuo & Rice, 2015; Yong Seok et al., 2012), and purchase intention (Jeong & Lee, 2013; Lii, Wu, & Ding, 2013). Furthermore, sponsors will boost consumer understanding and awareness of sponsorship programmes since consumers receive information through the media (Cornwell, 2008). Taking these factors into account, our study uses media as an activation tool in sponsorship from a B2B perspective (i.e. sponsors and sponsored properties).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews that were conducted individually among brand managers and company representatives that handle corporate communication, namely marketing matters. To answer the research questions at hand, purposive sampling was deployed where the informants were selected from small medium enterprises, corporate organisations as well as government linked companies based on the criteria of their job scope that communicate with various stakeholders and are directly possible in the consultation and decision-making of sponsorship approaches of their organisation. The selection of informants was pertinent to compare the differences of sponsorship practice among organisations with varying objectives and stakeholders. Henceforth, the data would provide varied frames of reference and units of analysis in approaching the same issue. The informants were recruited and approached through the use

of social networking sites and networking by the researchers of the study. Meanwhile, the sampling evolved through the process of snowballing and gathered informants with the necessary criteria as the researches add on sampling based on the data at hand (Foley et al., 2018).

A total of thirteen informants were approached, following the recommendation of Francis et al. (2010) where the sample size of $n=10$ was determined to be representative of the population, in which Saunders et al. (2018) further highlighted that saturation would be achieved after studying the breadth and depth of information and that no further data can be added on to the grown categories and that similar patterns of data are observed during the coding and analysis.

The interviews began with an overview of participants' backgrounds, personal interest, careers as well as involvement in the organization that they are affiliated with. McCracken (1988) recommended these to create a more comfortable environment to enable fruitful responses. All participants were generally resourceful in their opinions on company sponsorship policies and provided a holistic view of their experiences as public relations practitioners and conveyors of corporate social responsibility. All interviews were recorded using a smartphone and later, the recordings which were in .mp4 formats were transcribed by an appointed transcriber in Microsoft Word. In concern of the mostly Malay-language medium of the collected materials, the materials were coded first, and then the selected nodes were translated to English concurrently during the data analysis.

This study draws upon the logical flow of consequences of the issues discussed in the research background and literature review. Once data related with the issue were collected, each transcript was reviewed to see its fit in criteria of the study. This means that the data should, (a) engage with the practice of sponsorship by Malaysian small media enterprises (SME) or corporate organisations to the public; (b) related to issues concerning sponsorship or corporate social responsibility on a district or national level. Once the search is finalised, the study cleaned up the data by inspecting each transcript or article based on its keywords to allow breadth of the subject to be explored. The coding frames used to categorise all the data collected were based on the themes identified from analysis. The coding process started once the data were transcribed from the interviews.

The most common findings or categories were analysed using the ATLAS.ti9 software to further examine the words and allow visualisation of the common themes. The coding process deployed in the analysis looked at experiences and structures at a macro level, of which would be extended into larger meanings. From here the interpretation moved to a more explicit process of relating the data analysed to cultural definitions and studies by identifying constructs that interplay between the multiplicities of texts. Therefore, various new insights are uncovered and taken into consideration in problematising the issues being examined in this thesis. Based on existing literature, a list of key themes was drawn up around which the interviews built up varying degrees of structure and standardisation. This study used thematic analysis to analyse the data from the spoken conversations to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) and to organise and describe the data. Emergent codes were also integrated into the totality of the coding frames. During each coding session, observations of the researchers were confirmed and enhanced.

The following are the list of informants that were contacted and henceforth will be referred to throughout the study from their informant numbering as follows and tagged based on their affiliation.

Table 1: The list of Informants

No	Category	Informant ID	No	Category	Informant ID
1.	Corporate	ID1	8.	GLC	ID8
2.	Corporate	ID2	9.	GLC	ID9
3.	Corporate	ID3	10.	GLC	ID10
4.	Corporate	ID4	11.	GLC	ID11
5.	SME	ID5	12.	GLC	ID12
6.	SME	ID6	13.	GLC	ID13
7.	SME	ID7			

RESULTS

Prior to the thematic analysis, descriptive data from 718 quotations or excerpts gathered from the coding process was derived from the 13 interview transcripts. The excerpts were coded carefully based on the available and emergent coding frames through the Atlas.ti9 software. This coding process was to ascertain how Malaysian organisations decide the criterion of their participation in sponsorship as well as issues or factors that determine their final say. The raw excerpts were then filtered for duplicates as well as relevancy to the research objective at hand. The software exported the code groups and corresponding excerpts into an Excel format, in which the researchers further filtered redundant and weak number of frequencies for several code groups. This resulted in the remainder 270 valid excerpts for further examination. In doing so, the analysis then identified six (6) main coding frames that saw scores achieving more than 10% for validity further examination as highlighted in the table below:

Table 2: Frequency of codes on sponsorship elements

Sponsorship Elements	Frequency (%)
Publicity	22%
Marketing Needs	18.1%
Engagement	16.2%
Return of Investment	12.6%
Social Responsibility	10.7%
Profiling of Organisation	10.4%
Social Media Presence	10%

In so doing, our study found the three major themes as the determinants factors of using media namely; *publicity*, *marketing needs* and *engagement* had the most excerpts that were related to the objectives of this study.

Publicity

For SMEs, any form of publicity would be useful for sponsorship-seeking opportunities. This section will combine all three codes of publicity, media and social media as each of these are interrelated. For the business nature of Informant ID7, the publicity would depend on the number of matches that are played to gather potential sponsors due to coverage on radio, television and other forms of media that create exposure for potential stakeholders.

Yes, matches give impact to sponsorship as big matches have media coverage on television, radio and in major cities. I am not sure but every time we play at Liga Rakyat at Kajang Stadium not less than 300-500 spectators show up. That is enough for a community club. But we fail to keep the momentum, hence affecting the sponsorship strategy (Informant ID7).

For Informant ID10, all media channels are important to convey possible sponsorship opportunities to firms endowing firms, particularly because of the culture and arts background. This became even more apparent during the movement control order that affected physical movement of the public hence they are dependent on both traditional and social media.

Since the MCO, we do recordings and we spread them in mediums that are free such as Facebook and Instagram. There are plans to even do a digital festival, but it's not live. We have recorded since early August, we made two recordings and will do two more and air it for free. We try to suggest different ways to organize festivals in hopes that it will catch on (Informant ID10).

This was concurred by Informant ID12 in which non-paid advertising on social media of what the organisation does on a regular basis drives traffic to its networking platforms. Some of these updates include simple information updates and challenges for followers. Statistical data are put forth in the videos are two-prong, firstly it would create traffic to the social media content and secondly to provide enough information for potential sponsors. However, this was not entirely agreed upon by corporate organisations as argued by Informant ID1, in which some found in their practices that media coverage nowadays not necessary, depending on the types of events that are planned by the organisation.

Now, actually the measurement is sales. We try to get as often as possible during that particular event. We have a sales booth, where we can get feedback. So quality feedback is more important than hype [...]. So, we always go for the target audience. For example, let's say if we are a medical company, we went to events or that doesn't meet our target. They have millions of audience and everything, might as well you bring an artist and people come and all but it doesn't translate to sales. We'd rather go to seminar let's say with 100 doctors that we know we can get 1000 sales (Informant ID1).

Engagement

With relations to publicity and media coverage, it is important to see the role of such platforms in creating rapport with potential sponsorship and CSR collaborations. As for Informant ID2, being in real estate, donations and sponsorships foster business relationships.

We have our requirements for that. Because our budget is minimal. We also have projects with NGOs. Usually we don't vote for political parties. Similarly we have rapport with real estate associations and Malaysian surveyors associations (Informant ID2).

Engagements in seeking support for sponsorship programmes are also important for government agencies. There are a lot of negative perceptions about government servants being ineffective. Henceforth engagement programmes would provide evidence as to how dedicated they are to pursue the goals to reach stakeholders. In the case of the Ministry, engagement plays a role in creating an informed audience.

We have this public hearing presentation because we will be launching our plan. So, we make an engagement, like public engagement, that one is measured through how much feedback that we get. That one objective we aim to get 10,000 participation. At the moment we have like five thousand respondents within a week. [...] Like with our collaboration with our partner, there will of course be a positive response on social media and on the media itself (Informant ID13).

Marketing

For corporate companies, marketing is an important element to reach out to the masses and to generate branding in terms of relatability of the company to its potential stakeholders. Informant ID14 revealed that their marketing initiatives are focused on exposure “Some projects we measure by the amount of value creation, some by the number of people we managed to help and some through the mileage that we’ve gotten [...] We adopted a mix strategy. We do small projects and big projects. Sometimes we just sponsor because the programme needs financial support, sometimes we sponsor because of the mileage that programme can give”.

On the other hand, Informant ID3 finds that some of its marketing programmes include events that have convenient reach to the larger public to gain engagement. Citing some examples of other successful brand initiatives, Informant ID3 found that by replicating and implementing these programmes would be beneficial, especially for their CSR initiatives.

For example, let’s say a Telco company. Why do they spend a lot on marathons? [...] for example, they would like to show that today is their territory so they said okay Petaling Jaya (PJ) will be our territory for three days because of the marathon. So everybody would wear orange and they would do all the marketing. They will sponsor the marathon that will have ten thousand people running in the city. And then they will advertise, today PJ is our territory. That is why, it is not really because of the healthy lifestyle thing but it is more towards marketing purposes (Informant ID3).

Starting out as a smaller unit of a larger corporate company, Informant ID9 finds that their marketing initiatives are slowly developing, but are a permanent part of the brand growth. As a subsidiary company, their dependency towards the main brand is essential prior to breaking away into their own pillars of marketing initiatives. In doing so they are still able to collaborate with other brands to create visibility of their own.

So, if you...need to know..the bigger company, the market is limited in terms of sources, market or target audiences...and information. Our brand itself is hard to penetrate as it is a large community brand and all the help for us

needs to come from their enormous management. [...] But for under RM100,000 with some help we are able to offer other brands that want visibility on things like banner, home ground and training. So, promote social media, like Facebook, Instagram, website and all. So this promotions actually helps us annually on visibility for mid-zone areas (Informant ID9).

Similarly, in the case of government-linked companies, the public relations and marketing-related initiatives are based on collaborations that they are involved with, and are seen as a partnership of mutual gain.

The public relations we do here is focused on the programmes we have. Meaning that we will help from A to Z. We help external programmes in several aspects particularly media, press release, media kit and invitations. We are lucky in terms of all these sponsorship collaborations where we get excess media coverage with ease. Five years I have been here we never had to incur cost for any media coverage (Informant ID10).

On the contrary, the situation is significantly different for small medium enterprises (SMEs). Informant ID7 finds that their engagement with the community is a catalyst to their marketing programmes. By agreeing to sponsor community associations and clubs they are able to receive incentives from the government, but it becomes one of the most visible branding tools for the company as a small outfit. According to Informant ID7, “[...] what I understand is that they [the government] would give some form of exemption to companies that sponsor community and sports clubs from the aspect of taxes or any forms of payments to the government. Henceforth it is quite easy to get sponsorship from SMEs from their community. At the same time this allows for two-branding for both the team and the SME”.

Profiling

Another significant criteria that emerged among the informants’ responses on achieving the aims of sponsorship intentions of the respective companies is the importance of establishing a positive profiling of the company involved. For instance, Informant ID3 explained that it was important as a corporate organisation to drive the idea that the brand is aligned with the present sustainable development goals that have been determined to achieve the company vision, “[...] this department is the one that is responsible for not only having a CSR report but also introducing a sustainable report. So in the annual report there is a portion, a section for CSR which will be reported by the corporate communication department and the other side is the sustainable report will be done by the sustainable department[...] It is important to combine both initiatives so that the CSR initiative itself can be seen as more `sustainable’”. On the GLC side, the confidence towards sponsorship is also built upon how the collaboration would provide value to the amount invested. This value will be evaluated as early as the proposal stage to determine its feasibility for the future growth of the company through research.

What I apply in my two to three years in the area of sponsorship is the confidence towards sponsors, what they can give in return for our sponsorship. For example, for the value of RM100, 000 for one year, and if

what we assisted is enough, we look at the proposal strategy in what they can promote for our profiling on social media [...] we need to do research too. I mean if it's not enough, what more does the product need (Informant ID9).

As a cultural agency, Informant ID10 focuses on the related companies to ensure that those who provide sponsorship are related to their programme outcomes, "The sponsorship unit will seek brands that would be able to uplift their vision as a representative of the local music industry and relate themselves with possible ambassadors that could realise the vision that are in trend and relatable to the community". Informant ID13 also believes that it is imperative for the right platforms to carry the company objectives, profile the company as a reliable government agency and reach out to the right target audiences that would support them.

We actually came out with the idea and then we thought of several vehicles to carry the message. It's fun, because our concept is still new and abstract to the public. If we want to really deal with the very roots, it's very risky for us. We approached several animation companies in Malaysia, but why we chose that, it's because they fit the KPI, the objective and the target audience that we want to reach out to (Informant ID13).

For SME representative, Informant ID7, there are some barriers that they have to overcome such as political issues, business-to-business perception that needs small companies to implement sponsorship. In the past three years, it was imperative to profile companies through its return on investment and CSR programme.

DISCUSSION

It can be surmised from the findings; indeed, organisations or in the study – sponsors; are most concerned about their return of investment (ROI), henceforth organisations are compelled to enhance visibility for their product and branding through publicity. Subsequently this would translate to sales and loyalty from consumers which are the main goals of most small medium enterprises (SMEs). Corporate and government-linked organisations have also discussed using publicity in media as a way to fulfil their social responsibilities by broadcasting their activities for the mutual benefit of their stakeholders. From the findings, it was observed that these were elements of sponsorship that all types of organisations analysed have applied for time and again. Sponsorship is considered a cost-effective marketing initiative that requires little effort. This in turn creates a meaningful profiling of each organisation from the perspectives of the consumers, where such image transfer works to create congruency of the sponsee and sponsor in the minds of the consumer and thus create the likelihood for stakeholders to invest their interests with the organisation's efforts as a logical decision (Habitzreuter & Koenigstorfer, 2021) Similarly, this pushes forth continuous engagement with the audiences, consistent with Woisetschläger et al. (2017) that posited sponsors would like to engage with their consumers through media sponsorship. That sets the tone for a successful sponsorship programme that would achieve good media coverage and consequently credible reputation among the communities they reach out to. Finally, social media plays a role in creating that bridge that brings together the firms and stakeholders.

With the attainment of the prescribed objectives, the study has succinctly understood the key determinants to motivation of the sponsors when deciding to embark on sponsorship activities. Among others, media has been found to holistically create an ecosystem which includes publicity, engagement, and marketing where it further consolidated the decision-making process among companies and individuals alike. The solicitation of B2B and the incremental perspectives on media involvements too has contributed significantly by media activation in the context of sponsorship. This goes on to highlight both parties' consensus to sharing the common objectives when it comes to sponsorship. Further in regards to this, shared values and trust demonstrate that this builds the relationship between sponsors, sponsored properties and affectively the stakeholders of their organisation and is imperative for future business of the organisation; in so doing – the extent of this relationship ultimately leads into value creation (Hessling et al., 2018).

In terms of relationship marketing perspectives, the ideal approaches align positively with related engagement between sponsors and sponsored activities. The relationship marketing provides a relational outlook to the corporate sponsorship network as a whole to ensure smooth transaction during uncertain circumstances such as COVID-19. Our findings corroborate with previous studies, for example, Jensen and Cornwell (2021) postulates that mutual understanding among sponsors and sponsored properties will decrease the likelihood of partnership disintegration. Besides, van Rijn et al. (2019) discovered the importance of the relationship between sponsors and sponsored properties in determining the successful in sponsorship. It could then be argued that the objective of relationship marketing is to establish, develop, and maintain relationships between both parties through marketing activities (i.e. sponsorship). Further, this essentially highlights the importance for sponsors to disclose the needed information such as sponsorship agreements where key determinants of decision making is concerned.

Our study continuously contributes to the expansion of knowledge by exploring the determinant factors in media activation from both parties point of view. In relation to that, the concerned parties must also be cautiously aware that past studies have also indicated that such failures would then lead to the sponsorship termination (Morgan et al., 2020; van Rijn et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

In its entirety, media has been central in the decision-making process where the tools employed in the process further assist in ensuring sustainable promotion and communication activities pursuant to any events that the sponsors undertake. To this end, our study concludes that engagement is an important factor when using media to further activate sponsorship activities during pandemic. Most essentially, the capability of an organisation is challenged to be dynamic in integrating and setting goals through changes; particularly in mastering the skills in exchanging information in digital platforms to different and diverse audiences (Narakorn, 2022; Schwartzman 2021; Tongdhamachart & Niyomsilpa, 2022).

This has been corroborated by past studies that highlight on the audiences engagement to which sponsors received favourable exposure where influence has been largely overlooked by most marketing managers (Woisetschläger et al., 2017). The significant keywords such as relationship marketing, media engagement and activation, sponsorship, and decision making are relatively interconnected to ensure a snowball effect on desired outcomes concerning sponsorship decision making. The future research from this study could

analyse perceptions of relationship marketing from the consumer and stakeholder perspective to further build a research framework of congruence between sponsor-sponsored properties and decision making for sponsorship.

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