

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON SPONSORSHIP ACTIVATION

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ABSTRACT. Globally, sponsorship has grown impressive over the last 30 years, receiving an increased importance in the communication mix of companies. Sport organizations have understood the importance and the role sponsorship it plays for the financial support they need. Sponsorship is the material support of an event, activity or organization by an unaffiliated partner. It is a good way to increase brand awareness, which helps to generate consumer preferences and promote brand loyalty and also improves the brand image. Brands play an important role in the development of companies because they bring a number of benefits to them. The paper "Innovation's impact on sponsorship activation" aims to present a series of theoretical elements of activating sponsorship, as well as the element of innovation in this process, an element represented by the social media presence in our lives and in the last part of the paper is presented a study based on a survey on our topic.

Keywords: *Brand, Sponsorship activation, Social Media, Athlete.*

REZUMAT. Rolul social-media în activarea sponsorizării. La nivel global, sponsorizarea a crescut impresionant în ultimii 30 de ani, primind o importanță crescută în mixul de comunicare al companiilor. Organizațiile sportive au înțeles importanța și rolul de sponsorizare pe care îl joacă pentru sprijinul financiar de care au nevoie. Sponsorizarea este sprijinul material al unui eveniment, activitate sau organizație de către un partener neafiliat. Este o modalitate bună de a crește gradul de conștientizare a mărcii, care ajută la generarea preferințelor consumatorilor și la promovarea loialității mărcii și, de asemenea, îmbunătățește imaginea mărcii. Mărcile joacă un rol important în dezvoltarea companiilor, deoarece le aduc o serie de beneficii. Lucrearea „Impactul inovației asupra activării

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sponsorizării” își propune să prezinte o serie de elemente teoretice ale activării sponsorizării, precum și elementul de inovație în acest proces, element reprezentat de prezența social media în viețile noastre și în ultima parte a lucrării este prezentat un studiu bazat pe un sondaj pe tema noastră.

Cuvinte cheie: *Marcă, Activare Sponsorizare, Rețele Sociale, Sportiv*

INTRODUCTION

Sports sponsorship is considered as an investment in a sports entity that captures the capital of the commercial potential of this sports property. The International Chamber of Commerce sets out a general definition and states that sponsorship is: "Every communication action in which a sponsor contractually undertakes to financially support (or otherwise) to positively associate the image, identity, brands, products or services of the event, activity, organization or person it supports".

From the late 1930s, sports fans began to listen, and soon after, they began to see how athletes and their teams preferred to compete live. It was only a matter of time before the big television and marketing companies realized the impact that sport has on social influence and consumer choice.

Sports activities have been very attractive to sponsors, in part due to the special attention they attract. Sport is the main type of sponsorship, mainly for the following reasons: the inclination to attract the general public not only to each event, but also through the media associated with these activities (Aaker, 2002). In addition, it offers a simplistic segmentation measure and increased visibility opportunities for the sponsor, due to the duration of each event.

Successful sponsorship requires a "total marketing package", not just used as a single marketing tool. To maximize the benefits of sponsorship, it is recommended that all four elements of the traditional promotional mix (advertising, public relations, sales and personal sales promotions), as well as other promotional tools be implemented in conjunction with sponsorship (Aaker, 2013). This is sponsorship activation — taking a sponsorship and “activating” it by making the most of it through the right kinds of corresponding marketing activities to truly connect with your desired audience. Sponsorship activation is successful when a brand finds mutual value for the audience, the organization seeking sponsorships and the sponsors themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical considerations regarding the sponsorship activation

Sponsorship activation is the intention of independently promote and advertise, from a sponsors' point of view, towards a specific marketing opportunity. Such process is formed by the tactical activities that the sponsors devise to exploit to the fullest and by the marketing rights derived from the sponsorship. Think of it like a way to "switch on" your sponsorship.

Sponsorship activation is perceived as a good thing or if not, better, a special way of promotion. When you sponsor an event, a community or a cause, the chances are that the target audience will like you rather than not trust you. And the biggest advantage is that there is no need for texts, captivating headlines and melodic slogans. Through sponsorship, a less rectilinear message is transmitted indirectly, with an average propagation speed, but with maximum impact. For this reason, this type of partnership is an innovative method of marketing (Armstrong, Delia and Giardina, 2016).

Sponsorship as a marketing method means more than achieving typical goals, in that it also refers to the ability to strengthen the brand and create value for consumers in a way that can lead to behaviour change. This can be achieved by creating unique opportunities for new experiences, self-expression, entertainment, connection or contribution to the social good. And all this, if done correctly, conveys value to consumers and can cause them to click, visit, test or even purchase.

In order to meet the criteria of efficiency, sponsorship must be seen differently than a simple charitable act. The amounts allocated are in fact an investment from which measurable results are expected, in addition to increasing the degree of knowledge / recognition of a company, or brands, products or services. To be able to say that it is part of a profitable marketing, participating in an event (sports, music, awards gala, etc.) from the position of sponsor, will go beyond the increase of notoriety, directly generating additional sales. As an option, sponsorship will be chosen when it is the most profitable option available as part of a profitable marketing (Barbu, 2010).

Sponsorship activation propels a brand one step further than other competitors and helps create a connection with the target audience. One of the most important criteria is who to focus on for this beneficial partnership. It can be a non-profit organization, a community event or even individuals. Whatever the choice, this is a way of self-expression and should have something in common with the brand's mission and market position.

The activation process is where both audience and sponsor goals come together to achieve common goals.

To understand better, such process can be brought down to three easy steps.

Step 1: Negotiate beneficial contracts for brand sponsors.

-Ask your audience what they like and don't like about your event, space program etc...

-Ask them what their expectations are towards the campaign and what they wish to have more or less of

Step 2: Build creative brand activation programs to excite and engage consumers

Be sure to use activity communicate with your prospective sponsors about what you have heard from your audience

Step 3: Leverage all benefits and elements of a partnership to optimise program spend

Ask your sponsors what outcomes they are hoping to achieve.

Creating positive feelings towards the issuing brand is one of the keys to successful sponsorship. Perhaps some of the greatest partnerships of all time, which fit perfectly in terms of connections, are those between clothing brands and large-scale sporting events.

Premier League 2019-2020 was sponsored by eight different brands, which have chosen one or more teams. In terms of sponsoring t-shirts, brands like ManBetX, SportPesa, W88 or M88 do their best to attract attention. Another successful sports partnership was announced in December 2018 between the UFC and PokerStars. There are also situations where a permanent merger takes place between the two parties involved, such as the Red Bull Rampage event. It was first organized in 2001, and is now one of the largest mountain biking events in the world.

Sponsorship can become an important element in marketing activities for any brand. This can provide an opportunity if expectations are clear in terms of results and motivation. In addition to helping the brand by increasing its credibility in the market, it also improves its public image and builds prestige.

Effective sponsorship activation creates a positive impact on brand's image, strengthening customer relationships and trust in the brand (Crăciun and Barbu, 2014). Sponsorship can help resurrected brands of sport organizations to gain financial resources and the brands to be associated to renewed and updated sports organisations (Florea et al., 2018). Even small companies can benefit from sponsorship to gain awareness and to build a respectable image (Barbu et al., 2010). Sponsorship can be successfully combined with CSR activities to sustain a strong corporate reputation (Sitnikov and Bocean, 2015; Bocean et al., 2018).

Promotion and activation of sponsorships - and maximising all assets available - are crucial factors in magnifying a sponsorship's impact (Carrillat, d'Astous and Couture, 2015). Sponsorship activation, done in a meaningful way, has the potential to build a brand's identity which in turn increases brand strength and delivers increased revenues.

SPONSORSHIP ACTIVATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

After defining what the activation of sponsorship is, we present what is the element of innovation, the element that differentiates it from the simple process of sponsorship. And this element is represented by the presence of social media which has a great power over brand awareness and brand image.

Social media are essential in all communication campaigns. They can also be used to activate sponsorship campaigns, to create a relationship and engage an audience during an event.

Social media has changed the way we live our lives. From the way we receive and read the news to the way we interact with our loved ones. Social media is everywhere and about everything (Eagleman, 2013). It is an inevitable environment, it is a strong environment and it is constantly growing and developing. All major companies, aware of the trend and direction in which most users turn their attention, choose to communicate, promote and run marketing campaigns using social networks.

In today's world, social media is a real "gold mine", virtual networks offer the perfect, if not vital, way in which people can assert themselves and be successful. Marketing is largely supported by advertising, but a simple newspaper ad, a poster or a flyer are no longer enough to convince people to buy the product, the online world has a much wider range and is much more effective. Why? We can say that the virtual environment is based on a certain manipulation: it takes into account our preferences, our searches, what we follow, why we appreciate, these being ultimately used to suggest a product „what do they think that it would suit us". Therefore, with the help of a "click", generated by people's curiosity, corporations, companies, brands come to benefit. As an example we can take Instagram, which is one of the largest and most profitable social networks at the moment, which uses the things mentioned above to "give us the best experience". In the online environment, through increasingly diverse social networks, new companies and brands can become known quickly and gain immediate notoriety. Reputation is built and prepared today by communicating in this way; any business must adapt and use the benefits offered by these promotion channels (Kotler, Wong, Saunders and Armstrong, 2005).

Social networks provide intelligent support to quickly transmit information about news, products, campaigns and brand values and get the best conversion rates.

In this sense, the development of personalized and complex marketing strategies, created especially for social media, focused on original images, messages or videos, designed for the long term, with an adequate budget, contributes a lot to increasing the reputation and notoriety of online businesses (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

The evolution of social media has changed the way we interact and communicate with each other. Nowadays social media are considered the most consumed medium of attention of fans among all other traditional medium outlets such as TV and Radio.

On average, 142 minutes are spent daily on social networks. Whether you're flipping through dozens of endless Facebook feeds, or posting your favourite image on Instagram, there's no doubt that you're accessing your social media accounts every day. But how much time is spent on these platforms?

In an analysis made by the Global World Index, it was found that individuals spend an average of 2 hours and 22 minutes on social media. For business owners, this means you can use your social media accounts to market your brand, gain more followers, and ultimately enjoy the profits that come with it.

If you give customers a positive experience on social networks, they are likely to recommend it to others. According to HubSpot research, at least 71% of customers who receive a good experience with a brand through social networks are likely to recommend it.

That's why athletes, teams and sport organizations are trying to benefit as much as possible from using them.

Building a social media presence is an important part of any athlete's brand building plan because it allows them to:

- Build a fan base and connect with fans from all over the globe.
- Increase their sphere of influence and sponsorship potential, by reaching fans that may never get the chance of seeing them compete live in a pitch or court.
- Share content directly to traditional media, as journalists now rely mostly on social media for story ideas and sources.
- Tell their story the way they want to, directly to fans, without a middleman.

One of the biggest reasons why athletes invest time and energy in building a favourable image in this environment is closely linked to popularity. Having the opportunity to be in contact with a large audience and from any

corner of the world is definitely an advantage. Fans of an athlete can not only be constantly informed about their activity, but can even interact with them with the help of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram (Pegoraro, 2010).

When it comes to social networks, their great advantage is that all users have the opportunity to communicate with anyone, regardless of location in the world. In the case of some athletes, their messages can be read by tens of millions of fans, with information and news spreading with incredible speed (Barbu et al., 2019).

Moreover, these aspects represent a benefit not only for celebrities, but also for fans and sponsors. Users who follow personalities from the world of sports in the virtual environment have the opportunity to be informed at any time about the various competitions and the companies with which the athletes are affiliated advertise themselves through the image of athletes.

But advertising can take another form, as celebrities choose to promote products and services they trust. Like sponsored ads, a star's personal opinions can reach a large audience that can later share the information (Barbu and Popescu, 2018).

Another aspect related to the visibility gained through social networks concerns humanitarian causes.

Celebrities campaigning for noble causes have managed to make a positive impact in fundraising campaigns due to the influence of the online environment (Witkemper, Lim and Waldburger, 2012).

The number of "followers" on online networks also depends on the popularity of the sport, so the top athletes with the most fans is dominated by footballers.

But among them are professional NBA players like LeBron James or Stephen Curry. Also in this top is one of the most famous boxers in the world, the undefeated Floyd Mayweather.

The presence of athletes in the online environment was noticed not only on social networks, but also on live streaming sites such as Twitch.tv. A good example of this is professional poker player Jason Somerville. Over the years, he has managed to gather a significant number of fans to interact with and explain his ideas about the game throughout the broadcasts.

In addition to those who personally choose to appear live on the Twitch site, more and more companies are struggling to obtain rights to broadcast major sporting events. Thus, to the delight of microbes from all over the world, the matches of this year's World Cup were broadcast live on various specialized sites.

Although the experience cannot be compared to that in the stands, the fact that there is the possibility not to miss the favourite events is considered a step forward in the evolution of our society.

Regardless of the reason why the athletes took the social networks by storm, their presence certainly does not go unnoticed. Thanks to millions of fans around the world, the information, pictures and videos of sports celebrities can be appreciated by as many users as possible.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Regarding the practical part of this work, we used a survey in order to gather information and to draw conclusions regarding the advantages and disadvantages that they believe that sponsorship brings on the sports market, the importance of social media in sponsorship and the most used social networks by athletes. Due to insufficient in-depth examinations in this area, our paper must be a starting point and a prelude to future investigations that can be based on the existing study.

In order to identify the people's opinion about the topic presented, we conducted a research on a sample of 250 people, by completing an online questionnaire, on 01 December 2020-05 January 2021.

The questionnaire included 11 questions, the first four questions aimed at presenting some general data about the respondents, and the next seven questions, all with evaluation scales from 1 to 5 (total disagreement, disagreement, indifferent, agreement, total agreement), in order to find out the respondents' opinions.

The questionnaire was conducted in pursuit of the objectives of this research. The data obtained were subjected to univariate, bivariate and multivariate analyses, supported by the Microsoft Office Excel program.

The participation was performed on a voluntary basis and the verbal agreement of the participants was requested. The participants were assured about the confidentiality of the results but also about the possibility to request the results personally from the researcher. All people participated in the research under the conditions of informed consent.

Analysing the data regarding the respondents who were part of our study we notice that a percentage of 54% are females, and 46% are males.

The next question was about age, so between 20-30 years were 80 people equivalent to 32%, 50 respondents were aged 30 - 40 years, respectively 20%, 45 respondents were aged between 40 - 50 years, and 25 respondents the equivalent of 10% are over 50 years old.

The distribution of respondents after the last absolute studies highlighted the fact that 64 respondents have secondary education, 38 respondents have higher education, and the rest have postgraduate studies.

The analysis of jobs showed that a large part of people are still students without any activity in the field of work, and the rest fall into one of the following categories: officials, computer scientists, accountants, teachers, trade workers or have another occupation.

The first question aimed to highlight the main benefits of brand sponsorship. As we can see in the figure 1 for the 4 answer variants, we have the number of respondents, but also the number given within the evaluation scale from 1 to 5.

Thus, brand loyalty is considered the ultimate benefit, which means total agreement from the respondents, followed by the brand awareness about which people are indifferent, generate revenue-driving leads and brand loyalty they are on the last places, but they have received total agreement and agreement, which means that they are also an important part of the benefits.

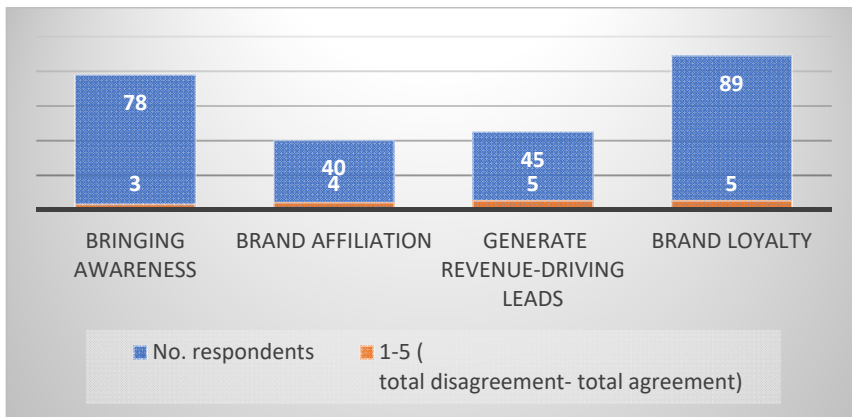


Figure 1. Distribution by main benefits of sponsorship for the brands

Next, we wanted to see what the respondents think to the activation of sponsorship. Thus, the vast majority agreed that now the brands must connect with the audience, but 67 people agreed that all the proposed options are true, so sponsorship activation also adds that brands now have to tack on additional marketing touch points, now have to actually connect with audiences and brand have to find mutual value for the audience, the organization seeking sponsorships and the sponsors themselves (figure 2).

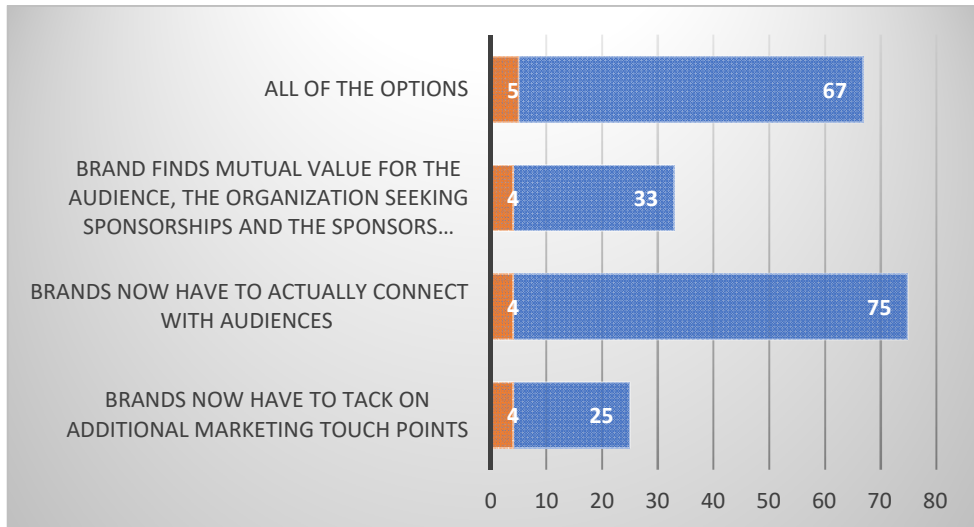


Figure 2. Distribution according to what brings the activation of sponsorship in addition

The question How sponsorship helps athletes or sports teams, and why these associations are becoming more popular, both in real life and in social media? highlighted what we already knew, namely that social media and sports are compatible because the evolution of social media has changed the way we interact and communicate with each other. Nowadays social media are considered the most important medium of attention of fans. Then another way how the sponsorship helps the athletes it's because live sport means a lot of brand exposure and also sponsorship monitoring makes it easy to track. Having sponsorship funding allows athletes to focus more on the training and production of their sports and reduces stress when it comes to finding money to train and put on events. Sport sponsorship is also beneficial for the brand's employees as it is connected very strongly with health and well-being, which means the brand becomes the beneficiary of positive sentiments by association (figure 3).

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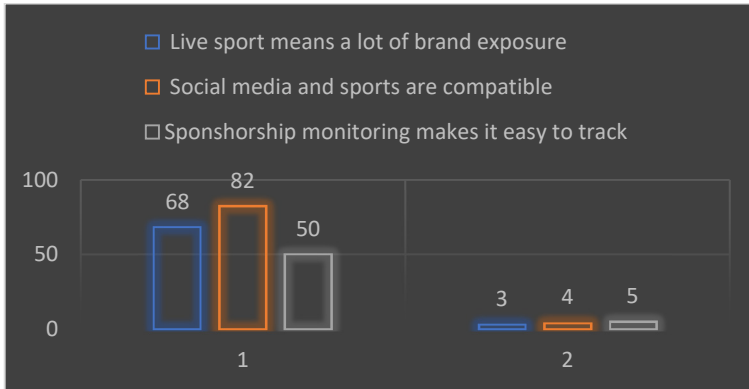


Figure 3. Distribution according to the means how sponsorship helps athletes or sports teams

Regarding the disadvantages of activating sponsorship on the sports market, our respondents considered that the implementation of activities in this process involves the addition of new funds, and also it is a more complex process to manage. Sponsorship activation is perceived as a good thing or even better, a special way of promotion. When a company sponsors an event, a community or a cause, the chances are that the target audience will like the company rather than not trust the company. And the biggest advantage is that there is no need for texts, captivating headlines and melodic slogans. Through sponsorship, a less rectilinear message is transmitted indirectly, with an average propagation speed, but with maximum impact. For this reason, this type of partnership is an innovative method of marketing (figure 4).

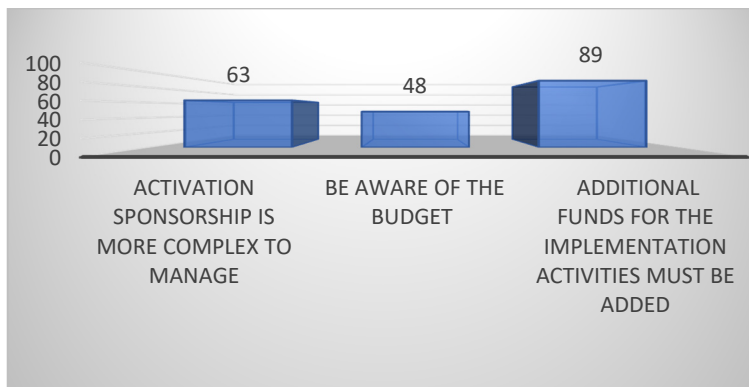


Figure 4. Distribution according to the disadvantages of activation sponsorship in sports market

In this graphic are presented for the first time the grades from the evaluation scale given by the respondents for each answer variant, and the following columns present the number of people who chose the respective variant. Thus, 95 people totally agreed that social media is today one of the main channels used to activate sponsorship, in second place with a smaller number of respondents, but all giving the same grade 5, believe that through social media is successful reaching the maximum audience, at the right place and time. Also, just over 10% of respondents agreed that social media involves quite low costs, another reason why it is an important element in sponsorship (figure 5).

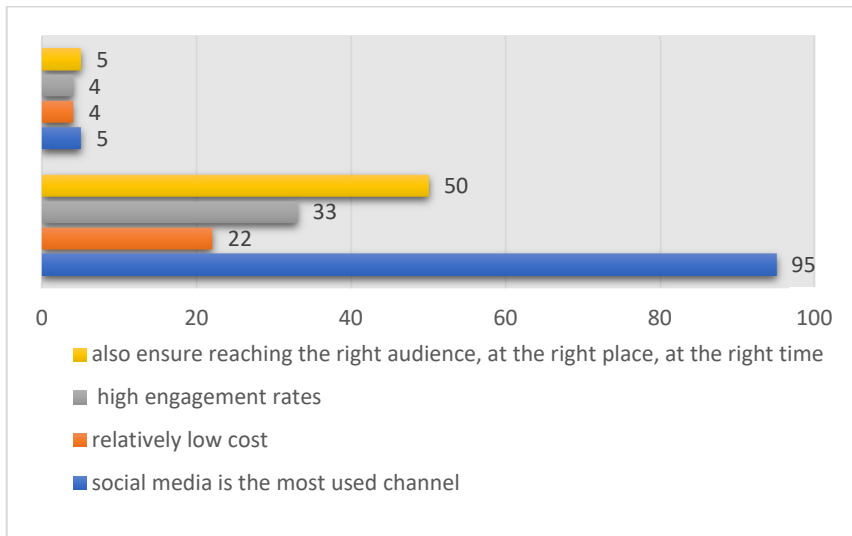


Figure 5. Distribution according to the role of social media

In the next question, respondents were asked to say the first association that comes to mind between a brand and an athlete. Although different answers have been provided, in the chart below you can see which paths have been repeated most often. The first association is that between Cristiano Ronaldo, who needs no introduction, even people who are not interested in football, know who this athlete is and the Tag Heuer company, the two collaborating to make a watch with the athlete's name. As TAG Heuer is by far the best at what they have been doing for 150 years, and there is no other luxury brand with so many close ties to the highest level of sport, they have decided to choose Ronaldo as their brand ambassador.

The next partnership was between Adidas and Michael Jordan. Throughout the history of sneakers, no other collaboration between a sneaker brand and an athlete could have been more successful than in the case of Nike and Michael Jordan. The combination of these two concepts gave birth in 1984 to the legend of Air Jordan (figure 6).

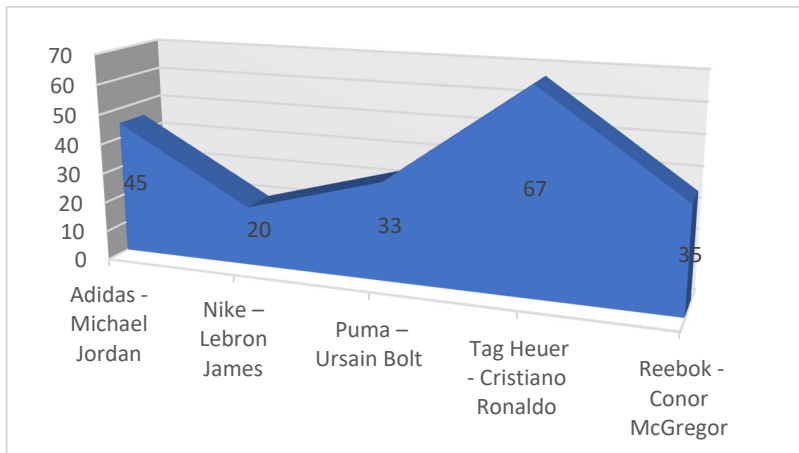


Figure 6. Distribution according to a brand's most famous associations with an athlete

We wanted to see which of the social media platforms is the most used by athletes. Thus, in the graph we can see two circles, the first shows the proportion of each answer chosen by the respondent, and the next circle shows the grade from the evaluation scale given. Thus, the respondents considered that Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are among the most used networks and can occupy the same place in the ranking, followed by YouTube and Snapchat.

Athletes have understood how vital their presence and interaction in the virtual environment is, that's why they record fabulous numbers on their Facebook and Twitter accounts. The most watched international athlete is Cristiano Ronaldo, who enjoys over 162 million fans worldwide. The Brazilian football player, Neymar Jr, follows him in the ranking with over 102 million fans, and the star of the team from the city of Barcelona, Lionel Messi gathered over 100 million fans, and this in the conditions in which he has only one account of Facebook and none on Twitter.

Simona Halep has benefited from an exponential increase in the number of fans, she has over 830,000 fans on the social network Facebook. One of the Romanian athletes who works in Canada is Lucian Bute; the number of fans of

his Facebook page amounts to over 600,000. Equally well "seen" on social media is Gheorghe Hagi, the former great Romanian player, who has over 500,000 fans on his Facebook page (figure 7).

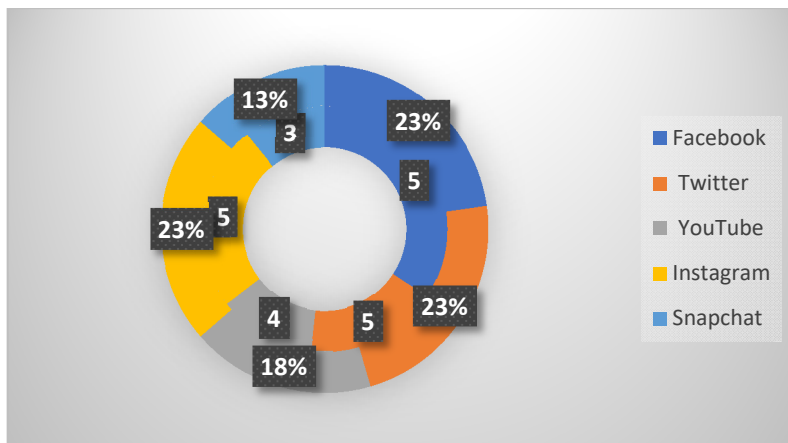


Figure 7. Distribution according to the most popular social media platforms used by athletes

CONCLUSIONS

Sponsorship activation is what a company can do with what it owns. This can take many forms, but activation is all about bringing brand to life from things as simple as booth spaces at an event to more sophisticated programs like employee engagement initiatives, virtual engagements, sales contests, once-in-a-lifetime experiences, and customer celebrations.

Sports sponsorship has been explained as the attempt to form a strategic link between a company and a sport athlete, team or event, as a means of communicating branded messages to the general public of a particular team, player or event. With the widespread expansion of the sport to a different audience, the platform has also been known to significantly differentiate a company from its competitors.

The sports activities were very attractive for the sponsors, partly due to the special attention they attract. Sport is the preferred type of sponsorship, mainly for the following reasons: the tendency to attract the general public not only to each event, but also through the media associated with these activities. In addition, it offers a simplified segmentation measure and increased visibility opportunities for the sponsor, due to the duration of each event.

Successful sponsorship requires a "total marketing package," not just used as a single marketing tool. To maximize the benefits of sponsorship, it is recommended that all four elements of the traditional promotional mix (advertising, public relations, sales and personal sales promotions), as well as other promotional tools be implemented in conjunction with sponsorship. This is sponsorship activation, taking a sponsorship and "activating" it by making the most of it through the right kinds of corresponding marketing activities to truly connect with the target audience.

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All authors of this paper contributed equally to the research.

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