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## 8. Leveraging Sport Sponsorship with Digital Marketing Communication: A Conceptual Model

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**Abstract:** Despite the demonstrated importance of social media platforms in leveraging the effects of sport sponsorship, surprisingly few studies have investigated this issue. The current study aims to broaden the knowledge of how major corporations could apply their marketing strategies related to sport sponsorship and utilise social media and digital channels for leveraging activities to meet their corporate goals through sponsorship-related digital marketing and public relations communication. This conceptual paper will contribute to the understanding of how sport sponsorship could be leveraged in social media and discuss key factors for creating a desirable leveraging effect. The main outcome of this study is a conceptual model showing how digital channels and marketing strategies could be aligned via social media's (e.g. Instagram) utilisation in sport sponsorship. The chapter concludes with managerial advice and future research ideas.

**Keywords:** digital marketing communication, sponsorship, public relations, social media, conceptual model

### Introduction

The world is more interconnected than ever, and social media platforms, which have millions of users worldwide, are becoming even more prevalent due to the rise of mobile applications (apps) and their ease of use at any place and time. Marketing firms have thus increased their online presence, making social media a significant forum for managing public relations (PR) and communications. This phenomenon in digital marketing communication is still fairly new, leaving

significant research gaps, especially in the overlapping areas of digital marketing communication, sports sponsorship and marketing strategy (Figure 8.1.). This chapter aims to give a brief overview of the current literature regarding sport sponsorship and the potential of digital marketing communication tools to leverage that sponsorship. Additionally, we propose a conceptual model for leveraging sport sponsorship strategically through digital marketing communication channels, emphasising mobile devices, mobile applications and social media.

<INSERT FIGURE 8.1. HERE>

Sponsorship is a marketing strategy employed among large corporations to achieve a competitive advantage within their respective marketplaces. According to International Events Group (IEG), a premier global consultancy in partnership strategy company, sport has become the largest sponsorship target, comprising more than two-thirds of sponsorship activity and global spending on rights fees related to sport sponsorship, which was predicted to reach \$65.8 billion by 2018 (see Further Reading, IEG, 2018b). With government-funded sport systems losing support due to recessions and economic slumps, sponsorship is becoming more pivotal for the development of sport on the national and international levels (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013). Sport sponsorship in particular is an important revenue stream for modern sports (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013), which utilise opportunities in various co-operation models to attract sponsors towards investing in single prominent athletes, clubs, leagues or organisations. Good examples are The Olympic Partner programme for the International Olympic Committee, which has high-level investors, and local-level sports clubs, whose budgets mainly consist of sponsorship and membership fees.

From the corporate perspective, sport sponsorship is a transaction between an owner of rights and another party, and the intent is a commercially advantageous outcome for both parties (McGlone and Martin, 2006). Sponsors invest money for several reasons, such as exploiting the commercial potential of an activity (Meenaghan, 1991, p. 36), specific cause-related marketing (McGlone and Martin, 2006) and sponsorship-linked internal marketing (Farrelly and Greysier, 2012).

These activities are examples of leveraging, which includes all actions taken to obtain the full benefit of co-operation between a sponsor and sponsee (Weeks *et al.*, 2008). Leveraging activities that become most visible to potential audiences is perhaps the most common approach for large-scale sponsors (Jensen and Cornwell, 2017). However, the era of digitalisation is significantly affecting the way sport sponsorship unfolds. Therefore, smaller scale sponsors are also adapting to various techniques and methods of leveraging. New digital platforms can review the form of participation for non-participants in sport and change the way the sport product is seen. This creates potentially unique and modern avenues for leveraging sponsorship in the future.

Better wireless internet connections combined with more powerful mobile devices have allowed increasingly more complex tasks to become commonplace worldwide (Sanakulov and Karjaluo, 2015). In 2019, 4.1 billion people were estimated to be using the internet (see Further Reading, ITU Publications, 2019). The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) reports that some parts of the world are so well covered that they are already reaching saturation levels, and the growth of internet use in these areas is not significantly higher than it was decades ago. Mobile broadband subscriptions are growing strongly via mobile-cellular subscriptions, while landline telephone subscriptions are in steady decline (see Further Reading, ITU Publications, 2019). Thus, an ever-increasing amount of the world is mobile, allowing people to connect to the internet *almost* anywhere. Further development of mobile devices is unclear due to rapid changes in the app

development sphere, but mobile devices are largely prevalent, and consumers are becoming comfortable using mobile devices for a majority of their daily tasks.

Science seems to lag behind practice in terms of marketing strategies applied via digital channels (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019), and there is a lack of research on marketing management of the sponsorship process (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019). Thus, much of our knowledge on leveraging activities in digital sport marketing, for both sponsor and sponsee, is based on anecdotal evidence that lacks sufficient scientific proof. We additionally lack tested knowledge on the possible limitations or demands of these activities. When researching social media, it is crucial to consider the PR perspective. PR—a ‘*strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics*’ (see Further Reading, Public Relations Society of America, Inc., n.d.)—can be seen as a process that assists leveraging activities in sport sponsorship. Such is the case for digital marketing communication, which uses two-way communications between the content creator and the audience.

In summary, mobile internet is prevalent and accessible almost everywhere worldwide. People’s mobile device habits are changing, which means that service providers need to adapt to this change, and marketers, especially in digital marketing communication, need to stay competitive in digital mobile internet activities. For corporations to utilise marketing in combination with sport sponsorship, specific leveraging strategies should be applied. While past research has focused largely on the quality of relationships, marketing strategies and the implementation of online tools for marketing, there is a gap in the in-depth qualitative research on digital marketing communication of sport sponsorship. Laurell and Soderman (2018) identified 25 articles via a systematic review in leading business studies journals between 2000 and 2015, finding only 4 articles that addressed sponsorship and 18 that applied quantitative research methods. Additionally,

one applied a mixed-methods approach and three were qualitatively oriented. Therefore, we lack thorough knowledge of the reasoning behind sport sponsorship and its leveraging strategies from a qualitative research perspective. Despite Sherry (1998) raising a similar issue, this topic has not received a significant response in academia.

### **Conceptual Model for Leveraging Sport Sponsorship**

Our proposed conceptual model (Figure 8.2.) for leveraging sport sponsorship comprises three distinctive domains: marketing strategy (with a focus on digital marketing communication), sport sponsorship (due to its value, exclusivity and presence in social media) and leveraging strategy (via influencers in sport). The following paragraphs elaborate these domains to develop the reasoning behind the proposed model.

<INSERT FIGURE 8.2. HERE>

#### *Sport as a Sponsorship Target*

Sponsorship has been viewed as a philanthropic exercise (Wilkinson, 1993), and its practice has been related to corporate culture, beliefs and motivations (Vance *et al.*, 2016). As stated previously, sponsorship is an internationally practiced marketing strategy for creating competitive advantages in the marketplace between large corporations, and it is a significant revenue stream for sports at the national and international levels (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013). A commonly accepted definition of sponsorship is ‘*an investment, in cash or in kind, in activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity*’ (Meenaghan, 1991, p. 36).

Fullerton and Merz (2008) described the sponsorship-based marketing strategy as a basic principle of sports marketing to cover traditional marketing, venue naming rights, endorsements and

licensing. Sport sponsorship in particular has also been utilised as a marketing strategy by companies to communicate with large-scale audiences (Cornwell, 2008). This refers to a two-way benefit. The sponsee (the receiver of support in cash or in kind) and the sponsor (the investor) are both gaining from this business-to-business relationship; the former receives financial gain, and the latter gains access to the audience or fan base of the entity they support.

Copeland *et al.* (1996) reported that sponsorship is also valued as a form of marketing communication. According to their research of Canadian corporations with advertisement budgets in excess of 50,000 Canadian dollars, sponsorship initiatives were often supplemented with other communication measures. This viewpoint was supported by Quester (1997), who considered sponsorship a communication tool. While the link between marketing and sponsorship has been investigated (i.e. Farrelly *et al.*, 1997), companies are now utilising sponsorship as a marketing tool through different outlets and leveraging activities (Weeks *et al.*, 2008). Leveraging in the context of sponsorship is *'the act of using collateral marketing communications to exploit the commercial potential of the association between a sponsee and sponsor'* (Weeks *et al.*, 2008, p. 639).

Gill (2008) reported that corporate messages have saturated the public, and sponsorship can be utilised to regain lost value in the eyes of consumers. He refers to the notion of creating valuable relationships with consumers that are mutually beneficial. According to DeGaris and West (2012), sponsorship could be seen as more of an 'active' marketing strategy versus advertising—a 'passive' technique. This 'active marketing strategy' should also be strongly connected with strategic management of the sponsorship process via PR strategies (Wilson *et al.*, 2008).

The internet boom has allowed corporations and smaller companies to utilise low-cost methods to further activate their audiences by employing various web-based strategies and leveraging

manoeuvres (Weeks *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, due to the developments in sport sponsorship over the last two decades and the major development of communication technology, the marketplace that involves professional sport has generated 1% of the global GDP (Laurell and Soderman, 2018). Having this amount of cash flowing through professional sports via sponsorship is notable, and understanding how to better utilise sponsorship to advance the relationships of sponsors and sponsees with research-based leveraging activities within digital marketing communication is pivotal for further growth in the internet era.

### *Digital Marketing Communication*

Digital marketing communication, which is defined as the use of digital or social channels to promote a brand or reach consumers via a computer (see Further Reading, American Marketing Association, n.d.), can include one-way and two-way communication (Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). When a company controls all messaging (e.g. via websites, ads in e-mails or banners or online directories) (one-way) and uses company-generated blogs or interactions between the company's own communities (two-way), they have high control. Low company-controlled communication channels include search engine optimisation and search engine advertising, both of which are considered one-way communications, and social media, which has the possibility of two-way communication. As Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) described, '*the essential nature of social media requires company marketing to take the form of two-way communication with customers instead of monologues from the company*' (p. 636). Digital marketing communication is not necessarily an umbrella term that covers all PR; rather, it is a parallel activity that is tied to a corporation's strategic goals. Neither should exist without the other. While PR is the strategic communication process used with the organisation's customers, digital marketing is the communication of a company's product to their audience that offers opportunities for feedback.



Meenaghan *et al.* (2013) reported on the increased use of digital and online marketing for activating sponsorship. Chanavat and Desbordes (2014) discussed how various brands are building their activation strategy around social media platforms and how major corporations are utilising the internet to their advantage, even in terms of ambush marketing. Thus, gaining access to well-linked (famous) accounts gives corporations an advantage in reaching audiences similar to a major sporting event and helps enhance their brand while being a cost-effective method for leveraging strategies. Importantly, leveraging and activation are '*not opposing forces but are mutually supportive*' (DeGaris *et al.*, 2009, p. 90), and in certain instances, they could be treated as synonymous.

### *Influencers*

This brings about the issue of influencers. Phua *et al.* (2017) highlighted that due to its low costs and good reach, social media-based influencer marketing is an effective way for brands to attract consumers online. Influencer marketing could be defined as '*the use of influential opinion leaders (influencers), celebrity or non-celebrity, with many followers on social platforms to foster positive attitudinal and behavioural responses in their followers (consumers) regarding the brand's interests by using posts shared on such platforms, and which also allow influencers and followers to participate in the co-creation of the brand image on social media*' (Martínez-López *et al.*, 2020, p. 579). Influencers, who are essentially celebrities in the digital sphere, have been used as vehicles for advertising various products (Cork and Eddy, 2017; Evans *et al.*, 2017; Ye *et al.*, 2021). Sport is a prime example of brands attaching themselves to dominant figures to gain from co-operation. In 2015, it was reported that top-level professional athletes, ahead of other public figures, were earning the most from endorsement deals, with projected combined earnings of 836 million USD (see Further Reading, McCarthy, 2015).

Cost efficiency is a primary reason for moving towards social media marketing (see Further Reading, Heitner, 2015). While it is reachable and practical for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), it belongs in the marketing mix for larger corporations (Santomier, 2008; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2015). Therefore, by the beginning of the second decade of this millennium, most corporations had utilised social networking domains, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. While Facebook has been somewhat of a trendsetter in social networking (developing the concept of MySpace and other similar networking sites), the rapid development of mobile technology and the app market brought about the expansion of Twitter. However, by the beginning of the second decade of the 2000s, Instagram far surpassed Twitter user numbers, with one billion monthly users reported in June 2018, as opposed to Twitter's 330 million monthly users in the first quarter of 2019 (see Further Reading, Statista, n.d.). Due to the large number of users and the decline in traditional TV advertising, the new trend of influencer marketing on social media, specifically Instagram, has quickly overtaken a large portion of marketing investments from various SMEs and larger corporations. Today, Instagram has a strong competitor in TikTok, a Chinese social networking application that focuses on video content uploaded by its users.

### *Marketing Strategies Related to Sport Sponsorship*

Activation of an endorsement (sponsorship) through social media channels is part of an effective marketing strategy (Cork and Eddy, 2017). The ideas and key concepts discussed earlier in this chapter have gained further support from practitioners at IEG. In 2018, IEG predicted that sponsorship would grow globally by 4.9%, with sports comprising 70% of the sponsorship market; however, over half the sponsors reported wanting to exit their sponsorships prior to potential renewal (IEG, 2018a). This highlights the need for rightsholders to satisfy investors and meet their

partners' demands. IEG classified the three most important benefits of sponsorship as follows: category exclusivity, presence in digital/social media as well as tickets and hospitality (see Further Reading, IEG, 2018a). The top three objectives of sponsorship were to create awareness/visibility, increase brand loyalty and change/reinforce an image. Notably, stimulating the sale, trial and/or use of products of services had climbed from tenth to fifth place in importance since their last report. The report also indicated that, on average, \$2.20 USD for every \$1 USD invested in sponsorship was being spent on activating the sponsorship, while the percentage of sponsors that spent no money on activation had increased from 12% to 19%, with 45% planning to spend the same amount as the previous year and 40% planning to increase their spending. As 98% of sponsors reported using social media as a channel to leverage their sponsorship, including 95% using Facebook, 80% using Twitter and 66% using Instagram, we can surmise that the numbers for social media use are roughly the same today. However, the top three platforms used have most likely changed their order.

IEG further emphasised that sport is the most attractive category for sponsorship and the importance of social media as a cost-effective and practical tool for leveraging sponsorship, especially due to its potential to stimulate sales and promote the trial and use of products (see Further Reading, IEG, 2018a). While more companies are lowering their leveraging costs with the help of social media channels, the effective utilisation of all channels needs coordination, which may have so-called 'hidden costs' for sponsorship. It could be that the workload of marketing specialists is rising because their job entails the control and management of content on social media, including sponsorship messages, which may not appear to be a direct investment into leveraging but is the most effective way to activate and/or leverage sponsorship through the marketing process (e.g. new product launches that are communicated to social media influencers at the same time as official websites and other channels). However, influencers (i.e. athletes or other famous people) can take

on part of the workload, such as publishing posts and product placement in their photo or video posts. One strategy is to place the endorsed brand or product in a more natural setting in relation to the influencer rather than directly advertising to the audience. The strategies for leveraging sponsorships have become more diverse as the domain of social media has created new possibilities for brand image creation and reaching audiences more subtly.

Cliffe and Motion (2005) found that from a brand viewpoint, sponsorship can be a central driver of brand strategy and can add brand value through the process of leveraging brand values. Given that sponsorship is a marketing communication strategy (Cliffe and Motion, 2005), it could be assumed that sponsorship through such a strategy can be directly linked to corporate goals. Brand development in terms of meeting corporate goals can therefore be strongly tied to sponsorship activities aimed at finding the right audience and users and creating the necessary experience for customers for future relations with the corporation or brand in question.

Instead of further exploring the sponsoring process from the managerial perspective, it is now important to investigate it from the digital marketing communication perspective to understand what activities major corporations are utilising to leverage sport sponsorship in social media.

Web-based communications through different channels are pivotal because the internet is becoming the main source (and often the first source) of information. Internet accessibility has created opportunities for corporations to communicate their message to consumers. According to earlier studies (e.g. Dodds and DeGaris, 2011; Abreu Novais and Arcodia, 2013; Pappu and Cornwell, 2014; Dodds, 2019), sponsorship fit influences the success of sponsorship activation. Connecting one's brand or image with a sponsored athlete's social media profile is valuable. Tripodi (2001)

claimed that a sponsor's main objective is to improve their brand image. The right fit is crucial when selecting a sponsorship target. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that social media is already becoming saturated with leveraging activities and product placements, which indicates that the main concern of many companies is not the fit but rather the reach. Companies are willing to give out product samples to utilise the connection to followers of an online profile. In such cases, the marketing strategy relies solely on classical practitioner goals, such as reaching potential consumers. Gillooly *et al.* (2017) studied the content of social media-based sponsorship activation and found four main types of data: informing, entertaining, rewarding and interacting. According to their study, most of the sponsors' posts were informational, which further enhances the notion that the aim of activation is one-way digital marketing communication with high company control to simply inform about the presence of a product. Thus, what is the corporate strategy in many of these sponsorship-related marketing decisions? Is there a defined strategy behind social media-related leveraging at all?

## **Conclusion and Implications**

With the financing of sport moving towards the private sector worldwide and managers in sport needing to grasp the possibilities for finding sponsors, it is of utmost importance to understand the best course of action for successful sponsorship arrangements. It is critical to meet the demands of corporations and uphold the relationship with the sponsor by satisfying their needs and demands. In an ideal situation, this should allow both parties to benefit from each other—a so-called 'symbiosis of sport and sponsorship'. We have proposed a conceptual model for leveraging sport sponsorship, which begins with digital marketing communication, followed by utilising sport sponsorship for its exclusivity and social media presence and building leveraging strategies for reaching corporate marketing and PR goals via the social media channels (e.g. Instagram) of athletes (influencers), with the fit between the brand and the influencer playing an essential role. The rapid growth of

internet accessibility, social media use and the utilisation of social media for sport sponsorship leveraging has created the need for scientifically researched qualitative results to guide future practitioners towards a more desirable outcome and longer lasting relationships, with mutual benefits between the sponsor and the sponsee.

Future research should therefore focus on qualitative studies that investigate the corporate perspective and reasoning for leveraging activities in social media. Currently, both social and non-social media seem saturated, with the marketing messages and platforms for carrying the messages changing faster than the research produced. Cost-effective strategies that achieve desired outcomes are needed from the financial and fit perspectives in the market model of today.

#### *Implications/Limitations*

The literature in this study was collected prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ramifications of the pandemic on sports, PR and the communication of marketing in sport have been significant. Covid-19 changed how sport is being viewed and lifted social media use and engagement numbers to new levels (see Further Reading, Euromonitor, 2020). All previously noted points about the importance of social media presence and the utilisation of digital marketing communication have become even more critical. The online reach and participation numbers are changing rapidly, and reporting the situation accurately, as well as predicting the future, are difficult tasks. Additionally, the literature and studies explored in this chapter are by no means exhaustive but rather are supportive of the proposed conceptual model.

#### **Key lessons for future research**

- The field of sport sponsorship and digital marketing communication is changing at such a rapid pace that relying solely on academic articles for information is limiting. Therefore, the utilisation of other sources, such as IEG, Euromonitor or ITU, is vital.
- Sport sponsorship is an important source of revenue for sports. However, its current practice mostly relies on anecdotal evidence for qualitative information. Future research should focus on finding corporate reasoning to manage the leveraging of sport sponsorship.
- Leveraging sport sponsorship is more common outside Europe, making it less systematically practiced there. This can be due to the heterogeneous mix of sponsorship contracts, the corporate understanding of how sponsorship differs from general marketing and what strategies are involved with successful sport sponsorship. This topic deserves in-depth research in a variety of environments and cultures.

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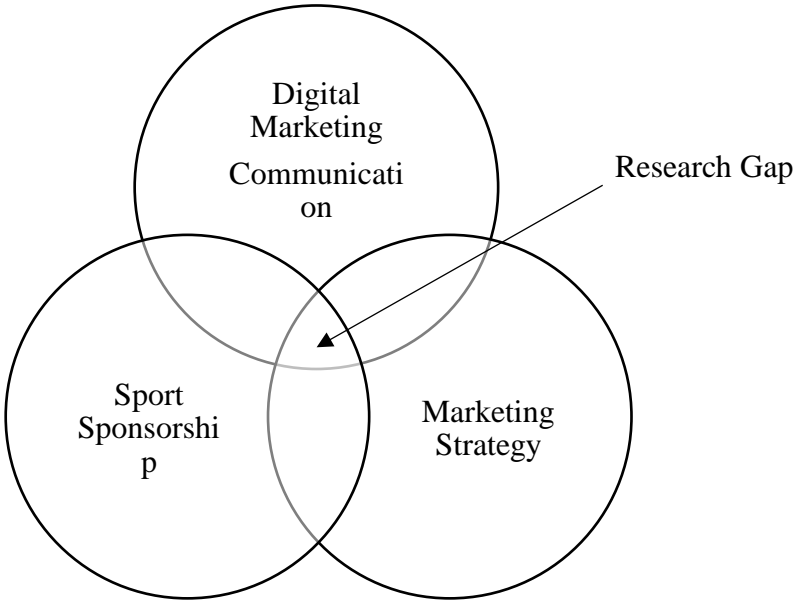
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**Figure 8.1. Research Gap**



**Figure 8.2. Conceptual Framework**

