

From sport to ‘sportainment’: The art of creating an added-value brand experience for fans

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Abstract

Sport, by itself, ceased to exist a long time ago. We are now living in the era of ‘sportainment’, the merger of sport and entertainment. On the one hand, ‘sportainment’ epitomises a major trend, or process, that is reshaping the boundaries of the industry, which aligns with Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’ theory. On the other hand, ‘sportainment’ is a potential strategic leverage for sport organisations and sport industry stakeholders in order to create an added-value brand experience for fans. Therefore, the objectives of this conceptual article are to articulate the concept of ‘sportainment’, identify strategic branding implications and present a set of guidelines to managers who work in the sport industry. If ‘sportainment’ can fit naturally in some cases and contribute to broadening the fan base, as well as deepening customer loyalty, in some others, finding a balance between the product on the field and entertainment can become challenging. In this vein, the article examines the four pillars that can help generate an added-value brand experience via ‘sportainment’ and how a stakeholder can deliver its brand promise through sport, spectacle and technology.

Keywords

‘Sportainment’, sport, entertainment, added-value brand experience, customer lifetime value, ‘creative destruction’, NBA, e-sport

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS ‘SPORTAINMENT’?

As far as we can remember, entertainment has been an integral part of the world of sport. In Ancient Rome, the Colosseum

and the Circus Maximus were hosting gladiator fights, charioteers’ races, executions, animal hunting, theatre plays, etc., with the purpose of entertaining, or distracting, the masses, and this led

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to the expression ‘bread and circuses’.¹ More recent examples include boxing matches in Las Vegas, with all the glitz and glamour surrounding the combats; the scripted fights of the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE); American football games with cheerleaders’ choreographies; baseball games with mascots and original contests, such as the one launched by the Oakland Athletics’ owner, Charlie Finley, who, prior to the 1972 season, offered a bonus of US\$300 to every player who grew a moustache in order to increase the brand awareness of the baseball team and its appeal to fans²; etc. As such, we have been witnessing the transition from sport to ‘sportainment’.³⁻⁵ This is the term that epitomises the merger of sport and entertainment, where the marketing of a unique set of experiences and emotions becomes the catalyst that helps sell a sport brand.⁶ In other words, the sporting event becomes scripted in a theatrical way, with both sport and entertainment being interwoven.⁷ In this vein, ‘sportainment’ can be described as the state in which the industry is being remodelled or reinvented, as the sport industry incorporates more and more entertainment. This is despite the fact that ‘sportainment’ is also a strategic leverage for sport industry stakeholders, who can therefore trigger an added-value brand experience for fans, as will be explored in this article.

It is against this background that this conceptual article has set the following three main objectives: (i) articulate the notion of ‘sportainment’; (ii) link ‘sportainment’ to strategic implications in branding; and (iii) provide managers who work in the sport industry with some guidelines. To achieve this goal, the article is organised as follows: First, the reasons behind the emergence of ‘sportainment’ are presented. Second, some examples are illustrated. Third, the potential benefits and

drawbacks of ‘sportainment’ are discussed. Fourth, a conclusion, with some implications, will help crystallise the essence of the article’s contributions.

THE EXPANSION OF ‘SPORTAINMENT’

In essence, sport is a game and is an integral and a unifying component of one’s culture.⁸ Sport can make a positive impact in terms of civic pride and sense of belonging, role models and fan identification, community involvement, physical activity, fun, passion, escapism, job creation and overall economic activity.⁹ Additionally, sport favours socialisation¹⁰ and can even contribute to reduce violence and crime.¹¹

Since antiquity, athletes have mirrored moral and ethical values, such as honour, beauty, purity, competition, prowess, victory and sacrifice. Yet sport is a domain where tensions between material value and immaterial values have always existed: sporting events, notably major ones, have been organised to produce wealth and fortify social hierarchies; the end of the Cold War sparked an inflow of capital that led to the demise of the amateur ideal and the rise of the migrant professional athlete; and nowadays, colossal revenues in college sport in the USA dispute the notion of the student-athlete.¹²

Indeed, sport is more than just a game. It has become a global market, estimated at US\$489bn in 2018, which should reach US\$614bn by 2022.¹³ Sport is a business where several stakeholders, who have their own motivations and objectives, interact. These stakeholders and the environment in which they evolve have transformed and have been reshaping the sport industry into ‘sportainment’. More specifically, there are three main reasons, or triggers, that feed the ‘reinvention’ of the sport industry and the expansion of

'sportainment': (i) the changes in consumers' habits and society; (ii) the objectives pursued by sport organisations and (iii) the transformation of the sport industry in itself.

THE CHANGES IN CONSUMERS' HABITS AND SOCIETY

Consumers are looking to be constantly stimulated¹⁴ and entertained¹⁵ within the realm of the experience economy.¹⁶ As Gabriel¹⁷ expressed it, 'We are living in the era of spectacle.' One could even say that the world has become a society of spectacle where the representation of reality has superseded reality.¹⁸ Admittedly, what is now the case for the world, in general, seems also to apply to sport, in particular. All the more so since sport is marketed as an experience, for either amateur or professional sport, as well as for traditional and non-traditional sport, including one of its spin-offs, known as e-sport,^{19,20} which is explored later on.

In this environment, fans become 'fan-actors', co-creators of their experience and ambassadors of the sport brand.²¹ The more fans get involved, the more they feel engaged and connected to the brand,²² thereby further nurturing the consumer-based brand equity²³ of the sport organisation, which is the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing strategies and actions of the brand.²⁴ This concept of 'fan-actors' was illustrated by the supporters of the Major League Baseball 2019 World Series' Champions, the Washington Nationals, who made 'Baby Shark' the unofficial team song and a rallying cry, as part of their in-stadium rituals and a strong brand association for the club.²⁵ The rite began when Nationals' outfielder Gerardo Parra started using the melody to help him get out of a slump, as a nod

to his young daughter. Some fans even dressed up as sharks to take ownership of the ritual.²⁶

THE OBJECTIVES OF SPORT ORGANISATIONS

Arguably, nowadays, sport organisations are managed as enterprises or even real estate projects that are aiming to maximise their return on investment.^{27,28} Newly erected stadiums provide a good case in point, as the sport venue is now increasingly being envisioned as a building block to develop community campuses or points of social convergence, with housing and office towers, shops, restaurants, movie theatres, recreational sport grounds, green spaces, etc. To be successful, these entertainment real estate projects need to be in operation all year round and provide benefits for the population as a whole, not sport stakeholders alone, with the inherent purpose of leaving a socio-economic legacy.²⁹ Examples of such projects include the Rogers Place complex in Edmonton, Canada, home of the National Hockey League (NHL) Edmonton Oilers, aiming, among others, to revitalise the downtown centre; the Miami Freedom Park, scheduled to be completed by 2021 for the MLS Inter Miami CF and designed as a community hub with its soccer stadium, public sport fields, a park, lodging, as well as office, retail and commercial space; and the VTB Arena, the multisport complex of Dynamo Moscow's clubs, which is set up in Petrovsky Park as part of the urban development plan for the Russian capital.

In this regard, 'sportainment' can increase customer loyalty but also enlarge the sport organisation's audience and fan base by appealing to different market segments — passionate sport fans, casual followers, families, corporations, etc. — as all of the latter groups find themselves

interacting with the various sport organisation's touch points that simultaneously relate to sport, entertainment and lifestyle.³⁰ Thus, value is created by answering to changes in consumers' habits but also by adapting to the reshaping, or reinvention, of the sport industry. 'Sportainment' can help a sport organisation position and promote itself, and sell its product, on the field and beyond it. Moreover, as explained further on, non-traditional stakeholders can find in 'sportainment' an opportunity to leverage their brands as well.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SPORT INDUSTRY

In general, we could posit that 'sportainment' is a major trend (or megatrend) of the sport industry, a reflection of the remodelling of the ecosystem into a broader mix of activities. A parallel could be made, here, with Schumpeter's theory of 'creative destruction' when 'sportainment' is envisioned as a process, more specifically, a process of mutation that dramatically transforms the structure of an industry, destroying the 'old' one in order to shape a 'new' one.³¹ Indeed, society is continually searching to innovate in order to execute in a 'better' way what is being performed. Throughout this process of economic innovation and business cycle, stakeholders who innovate in an industry add or improve existing features, attributes or dimensions of the product, which helps expand the market and weakens less innovative organisations.³² We shall see that, in the sport industry, this occurs with some traditional but also non-traditional stakeholders who challenge both the contours of the industry and the way it is operating. Sport is being reinvented as 'sportainment', and although it remains to be seen

how far this will go, the transformation is clearly under way and appears irreversible.

Hence, in the spirit of Schumpeter's creative destruction theory, 'sportainment' is stretching the boundaries of the sport industry and its ecosystem by integrating traditional and non-traditional stakeholders alike who can benefit from their association with sport through a positive image transfer³³ (Figure 1). From 'Sport' (game on the field; Stratum 1), the industry moved towards Stratum 2 ('Sport + Entertainment with traditional sport actors'), where sport teams, athletes and fans converge to be part of a flamboyant display of sport, be it a regular game, a championship match (see the Washington Nationals' fans discussed earlier), a mega event or a staged demonstration (the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team would come to mind here). In Stratum 3 ('Sport + Entertainment from traditional and non-traditional stakeholders'), artists, celebrities, entertainment companies, software firms, movie theatres, e-sport enterprises, poker tournaments, fantasy leagues, even politicians and other unconventional actors, are trying to benefit from their collaboration with sport.³⁴ In what follows we shall examine some examples of how 'sportainment' materialises, both from within (traditional actors) and from outside the historic boundaries of the sport industry (non-traditional stakeholders).

EXAMPLES OF 'SPORTAINMENT' IN ACTION

Several examples can be found to illustrate Stratum 2. Three of them shall be provided, before turning to Stratum 3. The cases pertaining to Stratum 2 that will be reviewed are the NBA, the Stade Français and the AFL.

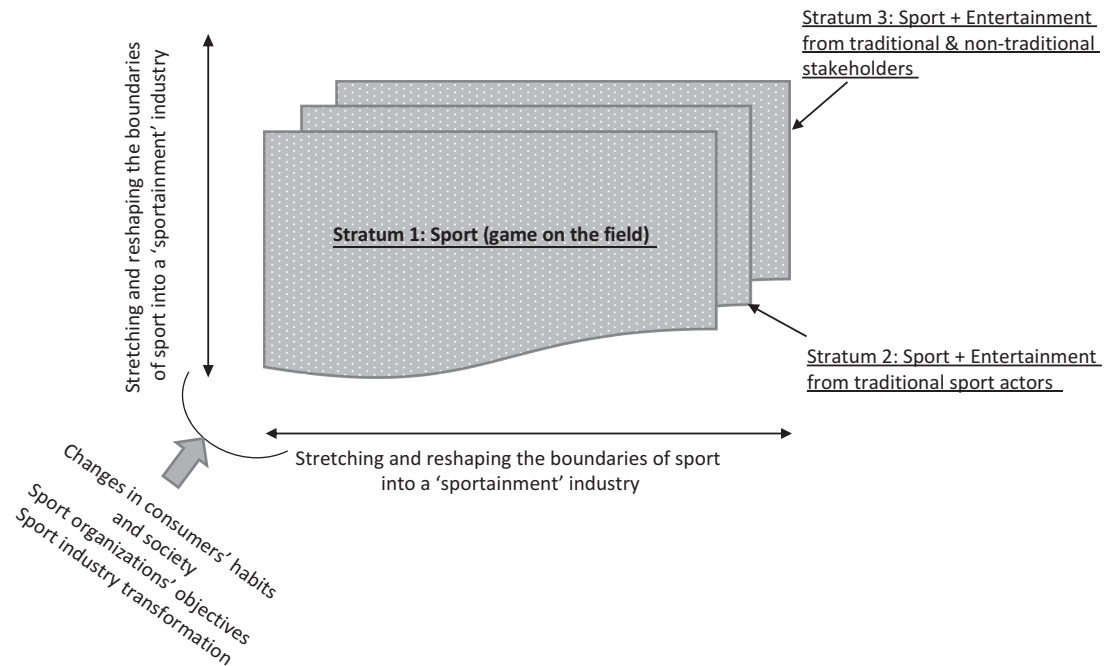


Figure 1 The reinvention of sport as 'sportainment'

THE NBA

The National Basketball Association (NBA) has transformed itself into a global entertainment venture. It is now being compared to the world of Walt Disney³⁵ or to a 'cathedral of consumption', where the different touch and sales points (court, sidelines, giant and arena vision screens, restaurants, shops, museums, etc.) have become part of the show.³⁶ The NBA realises that a strong brand can help the league develop or strengthen the loyalty of its fans, as mentioned previously. This can also enable the NBA to sell its product at premium prices, regardless of the age, gender, social or geographical origins of consumers. Consequently, the use of 'sportainment' by the NBA potentially increases the customer (or fan) lifetime value for the league and its franchises,³⁷ which represents the total amount of money a customer is expected to spend on a brand during a lifetime.³⁸ On this

subject, 'sportainment' could become all the more effective when an organisation seeks to attract a market segment such as millennials,³⁹ especially when 'sportainment' transcends traditional sport to incorporate other initiatives, namely e-sport,⁴⁰ which the NBA has entered with its NBA 2K League; this specific case shall be examined later in the article.

THE STADE FRANÇAIS

The Stade Français is a rugby club based in Paris. It usually plays at the 20,000-seat Jean Bouin stadium. Every year since 2005, however, for some marquee games, the Stade de France has been used, which can accommodate more than 80,000 spectators. At this venue, the rugby match features a karaoke, a concert, a dance show, pirouettes from cheerleaders, motorcycle spins, etc., including the 'Goddess of Rugby' who descends from the sky in

a parachute to bring the match ball. By incorporating entertainment into what used to be known as a very conservative masculine sport, the Stade Français has transformed the way rugby is being consumed, managing to attract women and children to the game with enticing ticket prices (some as low as 5 and 10 Euros),⁴¹ thus enlarging the fan base by creating an added-value ‘sportainment’ experience that can trigger long-lasting memories, followed by repeat purchases.

THE AFL

The Australian Football League (AFL) is the main professional football league in Australia. Facing increased competition from other leagues and entertainment options, the AFL has recently launched its ‘three revolutions’ (or innovations to relate to Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’) in order to ensure that the league remains the country’s most successful sport league.⁴² First, a women’s national league, the AFLW, began to play in February 2017, looking to capitalise on the rise in women’s participation in Australian football. Second, the AFLX, a modified version of Australian football, was established in 2017. It took place in 2018 and 2019, in the pre-season of the AFL, in order to appeal to a wider audience overseas and among immigrants. Third, in 2019, nine changes were introduced to the AFL rules to generate more free-flowing, instinctive football and one-on-one contests, such as long kick-outs and 6-6-6 starting positions.⁴³ In all three ‘revolutions’, ‘sportainment’ was seen as leverage to refresh the AFL brand and ensure AFL’s primacy on the Australian sport scene, by engaging existing and new fans.⁴⁴

Following the three examples of the NBA, Stade Français and AFL, we could posit that traditional actors’ ‘innovations’

fall in line with Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’. These innovations help differentiate the respective sport organisations, forge value for their brands, as well as for their customers, and, as a result, help reinvent sport into ‘sportainment’ (Figure 1). Illustrations of non-traditional stakeholders shall now be brought to the fore.

EXAMPLES INVOLVING NON-TRADITIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

If entertainment has always been part of sport, as underlined previously, what has changed is the magnitude entertainment has assumed and the array of actors who have entered the sport arena. For instance, as noted earlier, the Roman Colosseum used to stage a combination of processions, displays of exotic animals, gladiator battles, chariot races, executions and mock naval battles.⁴⁵ But as the industry is increasingly permeated by non-traditional sport actors, the following cases exemplify what is happening in Stratum 3 of Figure 1.

First, the Cirque du Soleil, with shows it organises for the NHL Vegas Golden Knights games.⁴⁶ Pre-game and in-game entertainment features, among others, a video of a cowboy chasing an outlaw who dared to steal the Knights’ golden sword; Cirque du Soleil performers showcasing their abilities, then interacting with fans and players; men and women dressed as knights who prepare to battle the enemy, with a light and sound show made to impress the more than 17,000 fans in attendance at the T-Mobile arena; etc.⁴⁷ The elaborate spectacles, combined with the good team performance and prime location of the arena (next to the ‘Strip’), have made the expansion Golden Knights club a very popular team and entertainment alternative, despite the lack of a hockey tradition in the city of Las Vegas

and the state of Nevada (the Vegas Golden Knights debuted in the NHL in the Fall of 2017).

Second, we could mention e-sport (electronic sport or video gaming) and its collaborations with sport properties, such as the joint venture between the NBA and Take-Two Interactive, an American video game company, which led to the launch of the NBA 2K League in 2018. Twenty-one of the 30 NBA teams are currently represented in the NBA e-sport league. Considering that e-sport is the fastest growing sport worldwide, sport organisations are eager to deepen their association with electronic sport.⁴⁸ The 2019 League of Legends Final in Paris drew over 15,000 spectators and more than 100 million viewers online⁴⁹; by the end of 2019, e-sport revenues were forecasted to surpass US\$1bn globally.⁵⁰ Through their partnerships with e-sport, sport entities can find fertile ground for developing a relationship with new (and younger) consumers, as well as crystallising the emotional connection with existing fans. In other words, increasing their market share and revenues by building bridges between traditional sport platforms and supporters, on the one hand, and highly engaged, passionate, video games players and fans, on the other.

Third, the company Salesforce worked with the online sport merchandise retailer Fanatics to amplify the connection the latter has with its fans and serve them better.⁵¹ By implementing the Salesforce Marketing Cloud CRM tool, Fanatics was able to launch personalised communications and campaigns that engaged the fans. For instance, when quarterback Peyton Manning announced his retirement from the National Football League (NFL), in March 2016, Fanatics sent customised e-mails to fans who had shown interest in Manning previously, such as fans of the

Indianapolis Colts and Denver Broncos, where he played during his career, and customers in Tennessee, where Manning attended college.⁵² In this case, technology is employed to strengthen the emotional bond between a sport brand and its customers and add value to customers' experience. This example reveals that 'sportainment' can go beyond mere spectacle and, instead, leverage the brand by engaging a conversation and developing a bond of trust with customers thanks to the proximity, connectivity and instantaneity that technology can provide.

Fourth, German singer Helene Fischer, who has performed for different sport brands and properties, including the German national football team, Borussia Dortmund and the German football Cup Final, among others. Since her beginnings on stage, in 2005, the star of *schlager* and pop in German-speaking countries has been able to reach across genders, generations and even social classes, not to mention her ability to engage with fans during her concerts. In the context of the merger of sport and entertainment, Helene Fischer has undeniably ventured into sport: she was the one who welcomed the German football national team after their World Cup win in 2014, in Brazil (not Chancellor Angela Merkel), with a rendition of her hit *Atemlos durch die nacht*. She also performed at the half-time of the German football Cup Final in 2017, admittedly with mixed reactions, as this Super Bowl-like show was seen by some supporters as a sign of the over-commercialisation of sport: 'We play football, and real fans of football don't want Hollywood during the half-time break'.⁵³ Truly, entering the realm of 'sportainment' can be a risky proposition, as some consumers might feel alienated. At the same time, this form of co-branding is a way for singers and other artists (actor Antonio

Banderas, as an honorary member of Real Madrid football club; actor Billy Crystal, who once signed a one-day contract with the New York Yankees; rapper Drake, as the global ambassador of the NBA Toronto Raptors⁵⁴; etc.) to capitalise on their brand reputation to expand their reach and elevate their brand image even more, thus increasing their revenues and brand value.⁵⁵ In the ways they stretch and reshape the boundaries of the sport industry, these artists can be considered as pioneers in the reinvention of sport as ‘sportainment’.

Fifth, politicians and celebrities who mingle at games to support their team, but also to advertise themselves. This is an extension of the previous example, arguably in a more passive way, and a reflection of what is known as the ‘vipisation’ of sport. The ‘vipisation’ transpires when an organisation favours corporate fans (lounges, premium seats) but also celebrities who are associated with the team and who can bring an additional touch of prestige to the latter.⁵⁶ The organisation sells tickets and subscriptions on priority to businesses and celebrities, often at high prices, rather than to sport fans, who are thus gradually economically excluded from the stadium, and redirected towards television and Internet platforms.⁵⁷ On the one hand, politicians and celebrities can benefit from a playful tribune to promote themselves: for example, since being purchased by a Qatari investment group, which spent heavily on acquiring star players (Beckham, Buffon, Cavani, Neymar, etc.), the Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) has become a magnet for former and current politicians (E. Macron, N. Sarkozy, M. Vals), including actors and singers (Leonardo DiCaprio, N. Campbell, Rihanna), who enjoy being seen supporting the PSG in ‘Le Carré’ lounge, looking to feed their capital of sympathy.⁵⁸ On the other hand,

this approach can potentially trigger a backlash, as this self-promotion can be interpreted as a testament to sport being taken hostage by politicians and celebrities, as stated earlier in the discussions surrounding the German Cup Final.⁵⁹

On the basis of these examples, we could posit that non-traditional stakeholders follow the spirit of Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’ theory in reshaping the sport industry into ‘sportainment’, by challenging the interpretation of the sport industry and how the latter is functioning. In fact, non-traditional stakeholders could be considered as even more than ‘mere’ innovators, but also ‘disruptors’⁶⁰ of the sport industry ecosystem who accelerate the transition towards ‘sportainment’ and the expansion of the latter.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS

The analysis so far helps pinpoint different benefits and risks that ‘sportainment’ brings to sport industry stakeholders, both traditional and non-traditional ones.

BENEFITS OF ‘SPORTAINMENT’

In terms of benefits, ‘sportainment’ can help engage customers, existing and new ones, entertain them, develop a bond of trust and deliver a unique experience. This was exemplified by the rugby club Stade Français, whose managers challenged the way rugby was consumed by creating an added-value ‘sportainment’ experience that triggers memorable souvenirs, potential repeat purchase and brand loyalty. In an era when consumers are expecting to be constantly stimulated⁶¹ and entertained,⁶² the more a brand involves its consumers with such innovations, the more these customers will feel engaged,⁶³ and the stronger the consumer-based brand equity

should be. And if the team wins, that is even better,⁶⁴ as showcased by the collaboration between the NHL Vegas Golden Knights and Cirque du Soleil. In this vein, the Washington Nationals fans' rendition of 'Baby Shark' during the team conquest of the 2019 World Series title is a powerful example of how fan-actors' rituals can lead to strong team identification, together with brand community and brand equity.

For sport organisations, 'sportainment' is a leverage that allows a brand to retain its audience and potentially conquer a new one, even reinvent itself along the way, as demonstrated by the AFL and its three 'revolutions'. In other words, 'sportainment' allows a brand to generate value, as consumer habits change and the sport industry is transforming itself within the context of economic innovation and business cycle, as underscored by Schumpeter.⁶⁵ Consequently, brands have the potential to enlarge their customer base and increase the customer lifetime value, as was underlined earlier.⁶⁶ This was displayed by the example of the NBA, which, thanks to its strong brand, can sell its product at premium prices to consumers, without distinction of age, gender, social or geographical origins; this would apply to both NBA's 'traditional' basketball league, as well as to its NBA 2K e-sport league. A strong consumer-based brand equity can therefore feed a strong financial-based brand equity and ensure the longevity of the respective brand.⁶⁷ This is worth emphasising because, as stated by the social exchange theory, parties involved in a relationship seek to gain mutual benefits from this particular relationship.⁶⁸ When a party perceives that he/she has obtained benefits from the other, he/she will feel indebted and will reciprocate in kind. Customers make contributions to their relationships based on the benefits from their interactions with organisations.⁶⁹

In other words, the more value a brand creates for its customers, the more it will potentially get in return (in terms of sales and profits, but also in increased customer lifetime value and higher brand equity). Therefore, referring back to Schumpeter, innovators not only forge larger markets, but also generate value and strengthen their competitive advantage (USP) against less innovative organisations.⁷⁰

DRAWBACKS OF 'SPORTAINMENT' AND HOW TO MITIGATE THEM

As the entertainment component accounts for a bigger share of sport and becomes more and more flamboyant, the sporting event slowly becomes a luxury option. Truly, the sport product or offering can be less and less financially accessible to fans. This situation relates to the concepts of the 'financiarisation' and 'vipisation' of sport. The 'financiarisation' translates into the desire of an organisation to maximise the revenues and profits, sometimes to the detriment of the product on the field.⁷¹ Sport team arenas becoming real estate projects would fall in line with the concept of 'financiarisation'; the effects could be mitigated, as stated earlier, when these stadiums are driven by a vision to become points of social convergence for the community and living environments, which derives from a genuine intention to leave a socio-economic legacy to the local population.⁷² As for the 'vipisation', it was defined previously as taking place when organisations sell tickets on priority to corporations and celebrities, often at high prices, rather than to fans, who are thus progressively economically precluded from attending the game at the sport venue.⁷³

Furthermore, entertainment might take precedence over sport to the point that it becomes a caricature of sport, distorting or even diluting the sport brand

in the process. An example would be the Legends Football League (LFL), the women's version of American football in underwear, which combines a mix of voyeurism, a dose of adrenaline and a trace of sport.⁷⁴ In sharp contrast, the half-time shows that involve violinist André Rieu in European football stadiums are examples of 'sportainment' that fits skilfully, even organically, into the script of the sporting event. Spectators are, here, entertained while getting involved, as football fans, in the co-creation of both the concert and choreography unfolding before their eyes; fan-actors are being engaged in the spectacle. Thus, to preserve the integrity of sport and make 'sportainment' coexist in harmony with the sporting event, a balance is needed between the central (the game on the field) and the auxiliary features (entertainment)⁷⁵— all the more so since, as outlined in this article, brands should be seen as generators of value.⁷⁶

Consequently, 'sportainment' is a means to create an added-value experience for the fans, by respecting the brand identity and the positioning of the organisation, including the unique selling proposition (USP). In fact, as with any other brand strategy, 'sportainment' should arise from the strategic construction of the brand⁷⁷ and not be considered as an end in itself. In this instance, the Harlem Globetrotters have built their USP around a singular basketball show, where, since 1926, their technical skills, antics and interactions with the audience have been harmoniously combined by playing exhibition games around the world.^{78,79}

CONCLUSION: CREATING AN ADDED-VALUE BRAND EXPERIENCE WITH 'SPORTAINMENT'

The main objectives of this conceptual article were to enunciate the notion of

'sportainment', associate it with strategic branding implications, as well as provide managers with some guidelines. 'Sportainment', on the one hand, epitomises a major trend, or process, that is reshaping the boundaries of the industry in the spirit of Schumpeter's 'creative destruction' theory; on the other hand, it is also a potential strategic leverage for sport organisations and stakeholders in order to spawn an added-value brand experience for fans. In both scenarios, innovations play a major role in the expansion of 'sportainment' and the creation of value.

Truly, 'sportainment' is the art of creating an added-value brand experience for fans, when done right. This means that 'sportainment' should be approached as a way to strengthen the identity and positioning of the brand. Sport organisations should keep in mind the importance of building and displaying a strong USP in order to differentiate themselves from other sport and entertainment options and, consequently, become more appealing to consumers, so the latter decide to spend their discretionary dollar on their brand, helping the organisation increase the customer lifetime value. This applies when a sport organisation works in collaboration with either traditional or non-traditional stakeholders.

'Sportainment' cannot and should not be used as a substitute for the lack of performance of a sport team, as transpires from this article's analysis. The product on the field represents the essence of the sport team brand; and if winning is not sufficient, it is essential.⁸⁰ On this subject, installing swings in corporate suites might amuse fans, but to what extent is this action consistent with the tradition of a storied hockey franchise, such as the Montreal Canadiens? Or how is transforming a hockey arena into a DJ rap house going to make the NHL Ottawa

Senators' fans forgive the team ownership/management for completely dismantling the team and the perpetual dysfunction that surrounds the organisation,⁸¹ which is now being ridiculed as the 'professional sport's biggest mess', not only in North America,⁸² but even in England, where hockey seldom makes the headlines⁸³? It should be underlined that a sport brand is, first and foremost, about sport and what occurs on the field; the auxiliary features of 'sportainment' should enhance, support and promote the core product related to sport.⁸⁴ Too much entertainment for the sake of entertainment can dilute or damage the brand, making the latter lose its credibility, respect and appeal. Despite all the challenges the sport industry has faced in recent years and the trends that are impacting sport, being and remaining authentic can go a long way towards ensuring that 'sportainment' fits with what the brand stands for. In this instance, Conejo and Wooliscroft state that '[b]rands are (...) multidimensional constructs (...). Brands generate value for direct and indirect participants, society, and the broader environment, through the exchange of co-created meaning'.⁸⁵

Following up on this point, 'sportainment' can become powerful when managers help fans take ownership of the sport brand rituals, by involving and engaging them as fan-actors who participate in different dimensions of a sport organisation. Indeed, an emotional value is derived from the co-creation and engagement of fans, and sport managers need to be more strategic and systematic in providing fans with opportunities to influence the game experience.⁸⁶ As such, the sport brand equity as a whole grows stronger, thanks to a higher brand image, perceived value, premium prices, revenues and profits.⁸⁷ Technology can be very helpful, as exemplified by the NBA 2K e-sport league, as

well as by the partnership between the Salesforce enterprise and sport merchandise brand Fanatics. In this regard, 'sportainment' represents a potential strategic leverage to help deliver the brand promise through sport and spectacle but also technology. Innovations should aim to produce value for the different stakeholders of the ecosystem, in order to try to do things in a 'better' way, adhering here to Schumpeter's theory of economic innovation and business cycle⁸⁸; not solely to provide mere entertainment to amuse the masses and collect fans' disposable income.

In summary, as illustrated in Figure 2, four pillars support the creation of an added-value brand experience for fans via 'sportainment'. These are: (i) 'sportainment' is a way to strengthen the identity and positioning of the brand; (ii) 'sportainment' is a complement to the on-field product: it cannot and should not be used as a substitute for the lack of performance of a sport team; (iii) 'sportainment' should transpire authenticity: the sport brand must remain true to itself and its market segments and (iv) 'sportainment' should help fans take ownership of the sport brand rituals: as mentioned earlier, the more involved fans are, the more they will be engaged and, consequently, the more loyal they will be to the brand.⁸⁹

Future research could delve deeper into the transformation of the sport industry by resorting to comparative international studies. For instance, what are the most successful brand strategies that incorporate 'sportainment'? What impact does culture have on the effectiveness of 'sportainment' in different countries? Also, how can 'sportainment' help a sport brand internationalise? In addition, how can celebrities, such as actors and singers, improve their collaboration with sport in order to benefit from this co-branding association, without alienating their fans and sport

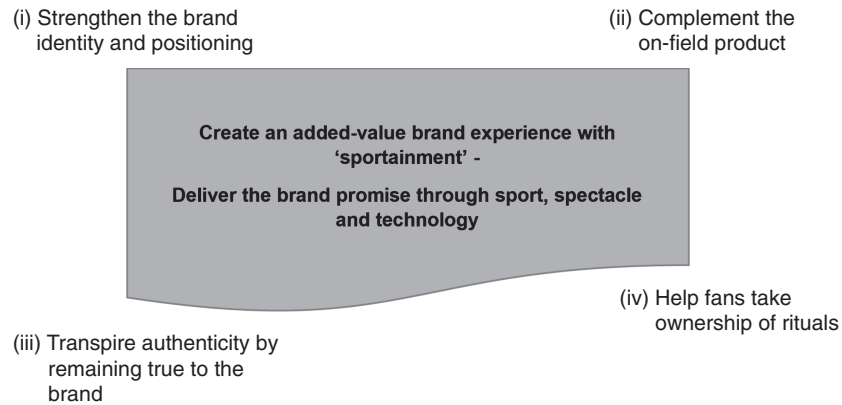


Figure 2 The four pillars of an added-value brand experience with 'sportainment'

supporters altogether? Moreover, how can celebrities and politicians help destinations (cities, regions and countries) define, position and promote themselves on the world stage, through what is known as a sport-oriented place branding strategy,⁹⁰ in the context of 'sportainment'? And, finally, considering that sport and, especially, money in sport have occupied so much of our lives, to what extent will 'sportainment' and its business model be disrupted by epidemics of the magnitude of COVID-19, as in the current scenario? Several organizations, such as Cirque du Soleil, were on the verge of bankruptcy during the pandemic. Perhaps, this is one more argument in favour of Schumpeter's creative destruction theory in the era of 'sportainment'.

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