

Towards an integrated framework of sports sponsorship life-cycle process and digitalization: a case study of Euroleague Basketball

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10803/687815>

Data de defensa: 24-02-2023

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DOCTORAL THESIS

Title	Towards an integrated framework of sports sponsorship life-cycle process and digitalization: a case study of Euroleague Basketball
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a dissertation is a collaborative work in many senses and this project was possible because of the support of many people through the entire journey.

Back in 2016 Dr. David Riu encouraged me to start this journey so I will always be thankful for that. I am thankful as well to Dr. Francesc Miralles who opened me the door to be part of the GREITM research group and to the Innova Institute and has been supporting me since then. Also, thanks to the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) for the given scholarship to start my PhD studies abroad.

I want to thank specially to my thesis director Dr. Chris Kennett. Chris, overall you have been a mentor. Thanks for your time, guidance, and for trusting that we will be able to finish this dissertation. We did it!

A happy thanks to my PhD gang Lily, Juan, Kata. You have been true friends during this process, my emotional support, and food providers... I am grateful to cross paths with you in this journey. This experience would have not been the same without you! Thanks for all the moments you were there for me. Also, I want to thank my dearest friends Gabi and Bianca as your friendship was pillar during the first years of my PhD. And of course, Kika, thanks for your unconditional support even at the distance. I am also grateful to the other PhD candidates that are sharing this journey at the Innova Institute and to all my colleagues at the IOTICAT, specially Fátima, Maryam, Eoin, Martina, Angélica, Osvaldo – my ‘last mile’ supporters, and to my colleagues at the undergraduate business programs as I have learned plenty from you through these years.

Thanks to the PhD program coordinators Dr. Xavier Vilasís and Dr. Francesc Alías, and the team that collaborates with the program. Thank you for your support. I am grateful as well to the nominated panelists who agree to take part and to reviewers of this dissertation in its different stages, your feedback has contributed in a very valuable way.

I also want to thank all the people at Euroleague Basketball. This thesis is possible because of you as well. Thank you for your time and your trust, for opening the doors for me and sharing your story.

I will always be grateful to my family, my mom and dad and my siblings for their encouragement and love. And specially to Fabián and Nina. Fabián, thank you for being there, for teaching me endurance, hard work, and reminding me every day that I am capable of reaching whatever goal I pursue. Nina, my baby, thanks for bringing light and joy to my life, you have taught me that family is first and that everything else can wait. Te amo mi niña.

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ABSTRACT

The digital transformation phenomenon is affecting the sports industry including marketing practices and specifically sponsorship. The sponsorship life-cycle process is a well-established practice among sports organizations that is being transformed due to the changing digital landscape and emerging technologies forcing sports organizations to digitalize their management processes and innovate in their marketing practices. To better understand how the changing digital landscape is impacting on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process, a longitudinal case study has been conducted with the Euroleague Basketball following an abductive logic and using qualitative methods. Data collection took place between 2018 and 2022 involving three rounds of semi-structured interviews with Euroleague Basketball executives, directors, and managers. First in 2018, then 2021, and lastly 2022. This was complemented with participant observation at the 2018 and 2019 Final Four events and secondary documentation gathered from 2018 to 2022 to achieve data triangulation.

Following Euroleague Basketball during this period enabled the researcher to arrive at an in-depth understanding of the organization's evolution regarding the adoption of digital technologies for sponsorship-linked activities and the digitalization of processes within the sponsorship life-cycle process. The case study show there is an evolution in different sponsorship concepts generated by the changing digital landscape and eight propositions are made.

The research revealed that digitalization of sponsorship and wider marketing practices has affected wider the digital transformation journey in Euroleague Basketball as an organization as a whole. This research contributes to the theorizing process of the impact of the digital transformation phenomenon in sports marketing practices by providing new insights on the impact of the changing digital landscape in the sponsorship life-cycle process.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background

Sports events are social and media occasions for entertainment around sporting competitions, which provide business opportunities to the stakeholders involved in the organization such as the sponsors and the broadcasters (Parent and Chappelet, 2017). Sports industry revenues worldwide reached in 2021 354 billion US dollars and the sports market it is expected to reach the 700 billion US dollars by 2026¹. Sports sponsorship alone reached 64 billion US dollars and is expected to rise to 112 billion US dollars by 2030².

Sponsorship plays a key role in the sports industry as part of strategic marketing decision-taking (Cornwell and Kwon, 2020), which provides financial investment and marketing and media expertise for sports organizations (Beech *et al.*, 2014). The sponsorship life-cycle is a complex relationship-based process (Athanasopoulou and Sarli, 2015) with different phases that include partners' seeking to establish and close a deal, executing sponsorship-linked activities to measurement and evaluation of the sponsorship (Beech *et al.*, 2014; Cornwell and Kwon, 2020; Foster *et al.*, 2016; Goldblatt, 2014).

The above-mentioned sponsorship life-cycle process has been evolving through the years as part of the professionalization of sports. In recent times digital transformation of organizations has begun (Appio *et al.*, 2021) and involving the increasing digitalization of marketing practices (Chintalapati and Pandey, 2021; Ziólkowska, 2021; Dumitriu *et al.*, 2019; El Hilali *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, digital technologies have been adopted for different sponsorship activities such as data collection and analytics, sponsorship-linked marketing activities, or to measure sponsorship effectiveness (Garza Segovia and Kennett, 2022b).

Furthermore, macro-environmental events such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, drove the adoption of digital technologies as sports organizations struggled to overcome economic impacts, presenting solutions either for improving streaming services or maximizing fan engagement (Horky, 2020; Drewes *et al.*, 2021; Veiga, 2022).

¹ Sports industry revenue worldwide in 2021, with a forecast for 2022 and 2026. Last accessed: 04/11/2022. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/370560/worldwide-sports-market-revenue/>

² Size of sports sponsorship market worldwide in 2021 and 2030. Last accessed: 04/11/2022. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269784/revenue-from-sports-sponsorship-worldwide-by-region/>

These factors have played a part in the creation of a complex digital landscape affecting marketers and sports organizations. Therefore, by conducting this research the intention is to contribute, on one side, to the theoretical understanding of sponsorship in the digital era. Specifically, through developing marketing theory related to sponsorship literature by conceptualizing the sports sponsorship life-cycle, the impact of digital technologies and its wider effects on an organization. From the other side, to contribute to the practice of managing sponsorship life-cycles as part of wider strategic marketing activity in the sports industry.

1.2 Research overview

The accelerated digitalization of marketing practices has affected sponsorship practices (Garza Segovia and Kennett, 2022b) and research is needed to understand how it impacts on the sponsorship life-cycle and its wider effects in sports organizations.

The main question stated in this thesis is: *How is the changing digital landscape impacting on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process?* Answering this question will help contribute to the marketing area of knowledge by shedding light on how the digital transformation phenomenon has affected traditional marketing practices such as sponsorship.

Three research objectives have been established to guide the process:

1. Explore to what extent digital technologies have changed the sports sponsorship life-cycle process main activities and which, why and how new digital technologies are used.
2. Explore to what extent digital technologies and the new digital landscape affect marketing practices, in general, and sponsorship practices, specifically, and its impact on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process.
3. Develop and integrated model that conceptualizes and represents up to what extent the changing digital landscape impacts on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process.

An exploratory single longitudinal case study approach following and abductive logic is used to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Euroleague Basketball is the chosen organization for the case study as the organizers of Europe's premier professional basketball competitions at the club level. The Euroleague Basketball sponsorship life-cycle process and wider strategic marketing practices were followed over a period of five years and their story is shared at the findings section.

These findings were analyzed generating an exploratory framework that combines the sponsorship life-cycle and digitalization. The evolution of marketing concepts related to the sponsorship practice was observed, providing insights regarding how the changing digital landscape impacts on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process.

The originality of this research relies on gathering two different areas: sponsorship within marketing area of knowledge and digitalization of processes within the digital transformation phenomenon. There is a clear overlap between both areas identified in the literature review section, digital technologies have been adopted for marketing practices and specifically for sponsorship. An integrated framework showing how both areas interrelate is proposed as an original contribution of this thesis.

1.3 Structure of the dissertation

This PhD thesis is structured in the form of a monograph. The content overview is presented below:

i. Chapter 1: Introduction

The current chapter provides the research background and context for this study. This is followed by the motivation, which is defined by the research gaps identified which serve as basis for the establishment of the research objectives in this dissertation. The details on the structure of this document are also provided.

ii. Chapter 2: Literature review

The second chapter introduces to the related literature referenced in this document concerning the phenomenon of study. The three areas of study addressed are event management theory, sponsorship theory within marketing theory, and digital transformation theory. At the end of the chapter, the literature research gap is described and the research question and objectives are stated.

iii. Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter three reflects on the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that serve as basis for designing this research. The chapter structure follows the Rashid's, et al. (2019) four phases for a qualitative case study method in business research. It describes the

methodology adopted for the study, the methods used for data collection, and the strategy followed for data analysis.

iv. Chapter 4: The case study

The Euroleague Basketball case study is presented. This chapter describes Euroleague Basketball ecosystem and their digital transformation journey in the last years to bring a detailed contextual background to the case study.

v. Chapter 5: Findings

The findings chapter is divided in two parts. Part I showcases the company's sponsorship life-cycle process. Part II focuses on the digitalization of their flagship event, the Final Four, on their 2021 edition which was celebrated behind closed doors relying 100% in digital technologies for fan engagement and brand exposure. A summary of the main themes identified in the findings is shared at the end of the chapter.

vi. Chapter 6: Discussion

The discussion chapter is structured following the two main themes identified in the findings. The first part analyses the changing digital landscape and the second part the digital technologies impact on the sponsorship life-cycle process. Eight propositions are made through the chapter related to the observed management evolution of the sponsorship life-cycle due to the drivers for change in the digital landscape.

vii. Chapter 7: Conclusion

The main conclusions, theoretical contribution and practical implications, limitations and directions for future research are presented in this last chapter.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review chapter is divided in three main sections starting with literature on event management to then focus on sports events. When analyzing the sports events business model, the stakeholders that are involved in the organization of a sports event are mentioned identifying the sponsors as a key stakeholder.

The second section of the literature review analyzes the sponsorship theory within marketing theory focusing on the sponsorship life-cycle process and the different activities within. The third section is related to digital as digital technologies play an important role through the sponsorship life-cycle process. It contains literature review related to the digital transformation phenomenon, digitalization of marketing practices, sports marketing, and in specific digitalization of sports sponsorship practices.

Lastly, the chapter ends with the literature research gap and statement of the research questions and objectives aimed to answer in this dissertation.

2.1 Event management theory

Events of all kinds have existed as an intrinsic part of human behaviour to break the routine of day-to-day life. Ceremonies and rituals have developed and changed through the years to fit contemporary needs (Shone and Parry, 2013) such as socializing, relaxation or escapism (Getz, 2007). An event can be defined as a planned occurrence at a given place and time, which occurs once and is impossible to replicate (Getz, 2007). Shone and Parry (2013) noted two key characteristics of events: non-routine and uniqueness, agreeing with Getz (2007).

Planned events can be categorized in different groups like leisure events, cultural events, organizational events or personal events (Shone and Parry, 2013). Within leisure events, sport events can be found. Sport events can be described as events where a sports activity occurs (Getz, 2007) which brings people together as they are a social occasion happening around a sporting competition (Parent and Chappelet, 2017). Beech *et al.* (2014) sustain that both sports events and cultural events express cultural knowledge, emotions, a common understanding of rituals, and are used as symbolic representations of nations, cities and regions.

Different rankings exist up to date for planned sports events dividing them into categories depending on its size: mega event, special event, hallmark event (Hall, 1989); giga-

event, mega-event, and major event (Müller, 2015); or mega event, large-scale sports events, and hallmark sports events (Parent and Ruetsch, 2020). Besides size, other criteria is used to classify sports events: spectator-driven or participant-driven (Graham *et al.*, 2001), if they are global, national or local (Foster *et al.*, 2016), amateur, professional or commercial games (Beech and Chadwick, 2004), or the target attendance and the type of media interest (Graham *et al.*, 2001; Roche, 2000). Parent and Chappelet (2017) share a list of parameters to classify sports events regarding their size, spatial, temporal, and sporting characteristics, financial objectives, and renown.

Event studies comprise different disciplines and bring together three discourses including event management, event tourism, and the study of events in society (Getz, 2012).

In line with event management, planned events must be designed and are conceived to achieve specific outcomes, have different purposes, and are created with different styles (Getz, 2007; 2012). Because planned events have a clear goal to achieve, it is necessary to manage them efficiently and effectively. As an event is a onetime occurrence, and because is a unique time-limited operation, it can be managed as a project (Shone and Parry, 2013). Project management techniques can be used to plan and execute an event. Beech *et al.* (2014) state that there are differences between event projects and projects of other kinds, but project management can add value when it comes to managing events if the right tools are used in the right way.

As projects, planned events have different management phases during their life cycles. Different approaches had been reviewed, but most authors agree that a planned event must have a preparation phase, an execution phase and the follow up or evaluation phase. **Figure 1** shows some of the approaches that different authors have proposed. For example, Shone and Parry (2013) propose an event management life cycle compared to a project management life cycle. Other authors differ on the number of phases an event life cycle has, but agree that there must be a preparation, planning, or conception phase, the operation phase, and the closing or evaluation phase.

2.1.1 Sports events

There are different types of sport events. The governance and leadership, the economic and social impact in the host city, and the level of public financial involvement will depend on the size and the description of the event (Hall, 1989). For example, sports mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup may leave social, economic and physical legacies

(Hall, 2006) because of international corporate investment. Regarding on the size and type of the event, sports events may be organized by one or more entities such as national sport governing bodies, sport venues, leagues, clubs or teams, sport commissions, educational institutions, corporations, and private entrepreneurs (Graham *et al.*, 2001).

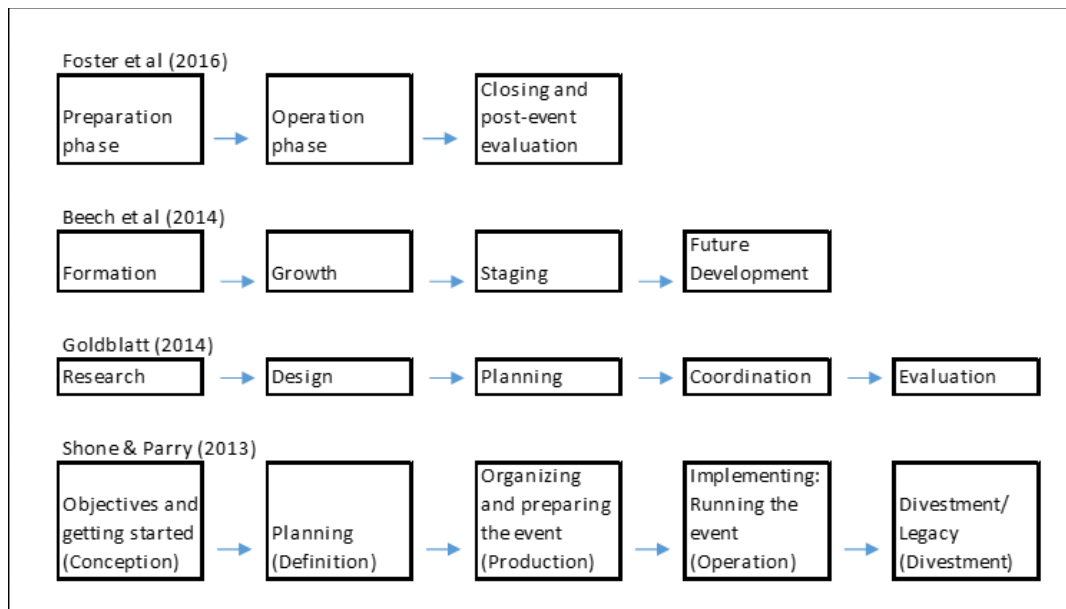


Figure 1: Examples of event life cycle approaches

These entities or sports organizations may be large profit-seeking businesses, publicly-funded bodies, or member clubs (Beech and Chadwick, 2004), can be profit-oriented or non-profit, provide professional or consumer services, or be part of the public or private sector (Chelladurai, 1992).

Sports organizations, regarding their size, structure or function, all require financial management and should attempt to maximize their value (Beech and Chadwick, 2004). Different ways when seeking funding for an event can be: event owner funding, applying for grants to a government entity, public authorities or to any other foundation grants, commercial borrowing from banks, loan agreements with government entities, venture capital, in-kind arrangements, fundraising activities, donations, commercial partners and corporate sponsorship (Beech *et al.*, 2014; Shone and Parry, 2013; Getz, 2007; Graham *et al.*, 2001).

Some authors include additional sources of income such as revenue-generating activities and sponsorship-related activities besides ticketing, such as concessions selling food, beverages, and/or merchandise, hospitality areas, parking or transport services, stands, games, in some cases a membership type subscriptions, advertising, and broadcasting rights (Beech *et al.*, 2014; Goldblatt, 2014; Shone and Parry, 2013; Solomon, 2002).

Therefore, it can be said that sport events are complex projects involving numerous actors, organizations and decisions-taking processes (Foster *et al.*, 2016), suggesting that a good stakeholder relationship is needed to conduct a successful event (Jepsen and Eskerod, 2009). Getz (2007) states that stakeholder theory provides a framework that event managers and owners can apply to better manage stakeholder relationships. In fact, many events depend on their stakeholders for their survival (Larson, 2004).

The stakeholder concept is well established in management theory. Freeman (1984, p.25) stated that a stakeholder is “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm’s objectives”. Stakeholders in a project can be defined as “individuals and organizations that are actively involved in the project or whose interests may be affected as a result of project execution or project completion” (Project Management Institute, 2013). It is common knowledge that to achieve project success the interest of the stakeholders must be taken into account (Achterkamp and Vos, 2008).

There are different stakeholders identified when managing planned events and the sports business ecosystem has specific stakeholders to consider. **Table 1** compares stakeholders that several authors had identified in different contexts within planned events. Foster *et al.* (2016) mention a broad range of stakeholders involved in the sport business ecosystem, Beech *et al.* (2014) also identified stakeholders in sports mega events, Shone and Parry (2013) identified political stakeholders in managing events, Getz (2012, 2007) mentions general events’ stakeholders and also describes some examples of their experiences when participating in an event, on the other hand Beech and Chadwick (2004) show some examples of how stakeholders are involved in the commercialization of sport.

	Authors					
	Foster <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Beech <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Shone and Parry (2013)	Getz (2012)	Getz (2007)	Beech and Chadwick (2004)
Stakeholders in sports business ecosystem						
General public or spectators and fans. Paying customers	X	X		X	X	X
Guests and VIPs					X	
Gamblers						X
Participants or performers (players and athletes)	X	X		X	X	X
Investors, funding bodies and grant givers		X	X		X	
Organizers and staff	X	X		X	X	

Volunteers				X	X	
Sponsors	X	X	X	X	X	X
Suppliers	X			X	X	
Facilities or venue, arenas and stadiums	X					X
Governments and political parties	X	X	X			
Cities and the community	X	X	X			
Corporate hospitality industry			X			X
Regulators or governing bodies				X	X	X
Leagues and sport federations	X					
Clubs and teams	X					X
Agents and players associations	X	X				
Sports advisory	X					
Regulatory and sports law	X					
Rights holder / rights owner	X					X
Media	X	X			X	
Coaches and referees	X				X	
Medical staff	X					
Sport technical staff	X					

Table 1: Stakeholders in planned events and sports events

When observing **Table 1**, it can be noticed that some of the stakeholders are mentioned several times. The ones repeated four or more times are the organizers, the players or athletes, customers and fans, and the sponsors.

When managing sports events, the organizers are key stakeholders as the entity that make events possible by coordinating different entities in order for a competition to take place as rules, time, venue, marketing, and revenue share must be agreed (Noll, 2003). There are different types of bodies that organize sports events. They can be sports federations, leagues, or other entities like the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

On the other hand, sponsors are key because they support events in many different ways, from a financial way to marketing strategies (Beech *et al.*, 2014). From the event organizers perspective, some of their main objectives when seeking for a sponsor are the financial investment, in-kind services, marketing and media expertise, event brand enhancement, and product and service offers for event participants (Beech *et al.*, 2014).

Sponsorship has become, in many cases, a pivotal part of running an event regardless of their shape and size (Foster *et al.*, 2016; Goldblatt, 2014; Solomon, 2002).

2.2 Sponsorship theory

Sponsorship is considered a strategic marketing decision (Cornwell and Kwon, 2020) and can be described as a commercial transaction in which an external organization pays another one a fee for the right to associate itself, its brands, or products in exchange of specific marketing benefits (Goldblatt, 2014; Masterman and Wood, 2006; Mazodier *et al.*, 2018). Successful sponsorship agreements involve the exchange of valued resources on the basis of each partner's contribution leads to a balanced relationship (Tsotsou, 2011). In agreement, Biscaia *et al.* (2013) define sports sponsorship as a business-to-business relationship that seeks mutual benefits where the sports entity earns financial or in-kind resources while the sponsor obtains marketing benefits. Sport sponsorship is one of the fastest-growing forms of marketing communication (Abeza *et al.*, 2015) and a valuable marketing tool that has been gaining popularity moving from a type of corporate donation to a key element of marketing strategies (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013)

Some of the objectives that sponsors seek to achieve when partnering with an event are the driving of sales, increasing brand and corporate awareness, developing internal relations and achieving competitive advantage (Masterman and Wood, 2006). Agreeing with Masterman and Wood (2006), Beech *et al.* (2014) add more objectives such as brand image enhancement, product trial or service exposure, market exposure and interactivity, contribution to CSR projects, and media exposure. Foster *et al.* (2016) complement the list adding increasing brand loyalty, gain access to a community of potential consumers, create exclusivity, motivate employees, support the community and showcase a country.

2.2.1 Sponsorship life-cycle process

Sponsorship is a 'complex, relationship-based, business-to-business service' (Athanasopoulou and Sarli, 2015, p. 552). The sponsorship life-cycle includes different phases from partner seeking to measurement of the outcomes. Cornwell and Kwon (2020) propose a holistic sponsoring process model from an ecosystem perspective divided in six main categories: (1) initial decision; (2) target audience; (3) objectives; (4) engagement; (5) measurement and evaluation; (6) subsequent decisions (see details in **Figure 2**).

Following Cornwell and Kwon (2020) model, developing a sponsorship deal until the contract is signed fits in the first three categories: *initial decision*, *target audience*, and *objectives*. Designing an optimal sponsorship deal and measuring the effects must be taken into account for a successful marketing campaign (Kotler and Keller, 2012). Beech *et al.* (2014) agree and say that this is a challenge for event managers because they must have a complete vision

and understanding of the potential benefits that a sponsorship deal can bring to the event and to their sponsors.

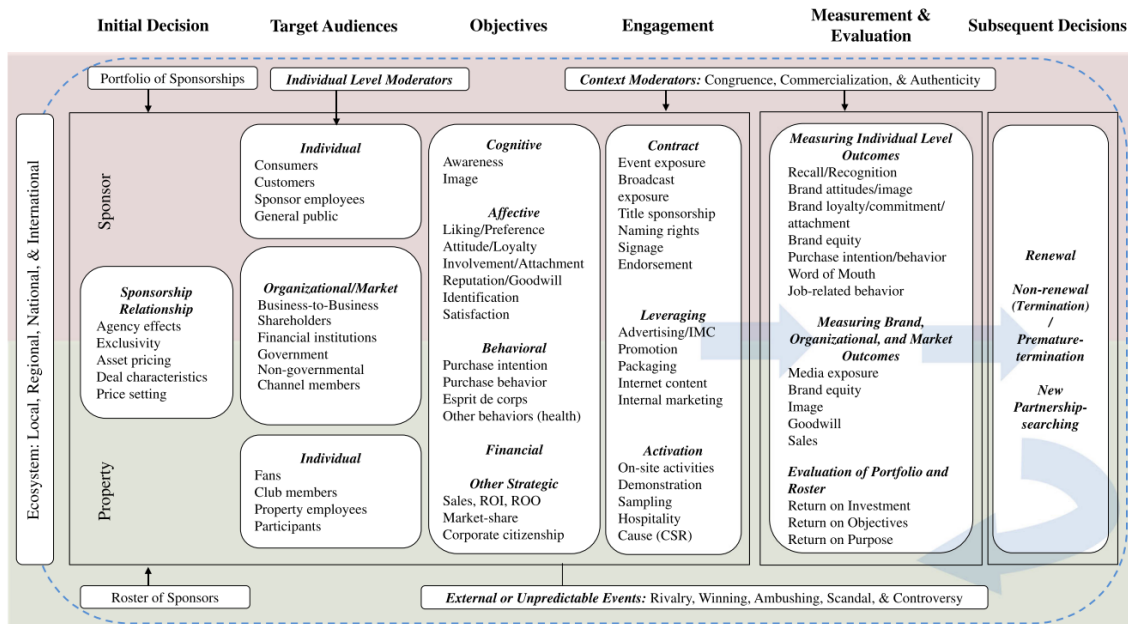


Figure 2: Sponsoring process model. Retrieved from Cornwell and Kwon (2020, p.610).

As a first step, the sponsor and event organizers have to know their needs and the objectives they aim to accomplish when agreeing to a sponsorship deal, this information is indispensable for creating a plan that can match expectations (O’Keefe *et al.*, 2009). When deciding to participate in a sponsorship deal, event managers and sponsors must take into account several issues to assure the effective management of the sponsorship, such as having a clear definition of goals on both sides, seeking and coordination of mutual benefits, formal identification of mutual relationships and agreeing the long-term nature of business cooperation (Beech *et al.*, 2014).

Different authors agree in three main phases for developing a sponsorship deal: (1) research and data collection; (2) proposal creation, presentation, and evaluation; (3) negotiation, contract development, and signing the deal (Athanasopoulou and Sarli, 2015; Douvis *et al.*, 2015). These contracts are complex, long-term and should be confidential (Beech *et al.*, 2014), they must include term, event definition, sponsor’s benefits and obligations, indemnity, insurance, confidentiality, and governing law (Solomon, 2002).

When both parts have agreed in a sponsorship deal, it is recommended to undertake a sponsorship agreement or sponsorship business plan to assure that sponsor’s expectations will be fulfilled and the objectives are achieved and measured (Beech *et al.*, 2014; Goldblatt, 2014; Shone and Parry, 2013; Masterman and Wood, 2006; Solomon, 2002). In this sense,

measurement and evaluation conditions must be established (O'Keefe *et al.*, 2009). Besides measuring ROI, O'Keefe *et al.* (2009) mentions that measuring the return on objectives (ROO) such as driving traffic, media measurements, or elevation of brand awareness may be equally significant. Foster *et al.* (2016, p.291) share four different areas where a sponsorship can be evaluated "from message/exposure to awareness to engagement to the desired decision and outcome by the sponsorship target(s)".

Continuing with Cornwell and Kwon (2020) sponsoring process model, the subsequent category *engagement* covers the sponsorship-linked marketing activities agreed within the sponsorship deal contract.

After the contract has been signed, sponsorship-linked marketing activities occur to ensure all the elements agreed are fulfilled (Foster *et al.*, 2016). Both sponsor and sponsee must commit themselves to the sponsorship deal (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013), the sponsorship-linked marketing activities and the implementation of agreements must begin as the relationship with the sponsor will be developed mainly through the event's life cycle (Beech *et al.*, 2014). Different benefits can be obtained when activating sport sponsorship deals. Biscaia *et al.* (2013) mention several examples from different authors such as overcoming cultural barriers and getting involved with the community, increasing brand awareness, reaching different target markets, and boosting sales.

Activating sponsorship deals require making changes in the traditional marketing communications that organizations use to employ. Because of the investments these changes represent, strategic managerial decisions must be taken in the organization's marketing strategy (Deitz *et al.*, 2013). Researchers define marketing activations as activities that help leverage the sponsorship deal, they require additional investment, must be planned, and it is recommended to be something creative so the company's brand may be attractive to the audience (Herrmann *et al.*, 2016; O'Keefe *et al.*, 2009). Sponsorship leveraging can be defined as "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).

In this matter, an additional amount of money must be considered in the sponsors' budget to spend on activation activities to improve sponsorship value (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013) and increase the return on the investment (ROI) (IEG-ESP Properties, 2017; Foster *et al.*, 2016; O'Keefe *et al.*, 2009; Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2009). Results from the 16th annual IEG/ESP Properties Sponsorship Decision-Makers Survey revealed that half of the respondents spent two activation dollars or more for every dollar spent on fees, and nearly a quarter of

sponsors reporting they spent \$4 or more on activating and leveraging for every \$1 spent to acquire sponsorship rights (IEG-ESP Properties, 2017).

Activation usually include different activities that may involve traditional and digital elements. These activities aim to awaken spectator/participant awareness and can vary from advertising on massive channels such as television, to public relations, event signage, hosting, sampling, or retail (Foster *et al.*, 2016; Abeza *et al.*, 2014). But currently, digital activations such as mobile, online, and social media are a key trend for reaching sponsors' target markets (Abeza *et al.*, 2015; Meenaghan, 2013; O'Keefe *et al.*, 2009). Increasing traffic in these online initiatives has become a key objective for the firms when activating sponsorship deals (O'Keefe *et al.*, 2009).

The fifth category on Cornwell and Kwon's (2020) model is *measurement and evaluation*. This happens after the sponsorship-linked marketing activities or activations are finished leading to the last one *subsequent decisions* where it is decided if the sponsorship deal is renewed or terminated.

Kotler and Keller (2012) share two ways of measuring sponsorship activities: supply-side and demand-side methods. The supply-side measurement focuses on the potential exposure to the sponsor's brand in the media coverage of an event. The demand-side method identifies the effect sponsorship has on consumers gathering information reported by the event spectators. Nowadays a more complex and innovative approach is needed for measuring sponsorship results due to emerging channels, devices, and the increasing coverage of sports on television, and specially online streaming through Over The Top (OTT) platforms (Leaders, 2017) because media can be distributed directly to consumers bypassing any traditional telecommunication services.

Besides Cornell and Know (2020), other authors previously have shared the sponsorship life-cycle process in sports. For example, Foster *et al.*, (2016) divide it in three phases: structuring the sports sponsorship decision, activation plan and execution, and measurement and evaluation. Beech *et al.*, (2014) divide it in planning, processing, and post-processing; where the planning phase includes the analysis of the market and sponsorship choices, the processing part includes the initial contact with the potential sponsors up to signing the deal, the post-processing phase includes both the implementation of the marketing activities and the measurement of the performance. With a different view, Goldblatt (2014) shared four different phases, the first related to market and sponsors' research, the second is about developing and presenting the sponsorship proposals up to signing the agreement, then the implementation of

the marketing activities plan, and fourth, the analysis of the results. Lastly, taking the Cornwell and Kwon (2020) sponsoring process model, the first three main categories: initial decision, target audience, and objectives comprise a first phase which will be structuring the sponsorship deal; the next category, engagement fits with the sponsorship marketing activities phase; lastly, measurement and evaluation, and subsequent decisions categories comprise the last phase.

When comparing the different sponsorship life-cycle processes it can be agreed that three main phases comprise a sponsorship life-cycle processes: (1) structuring the sponsorship deal, (2) sponsorship-linked marketing activities, and (3) sponsorship measurement and evaluation (Beech *et al.*, 2014; Cornwell and Kwon, 2020; Foster *et al.*, 2016). **Figure 3** represents the sponsorship life-cycle process main phases.



Figure 3: Sponsorship life-cycle process main phases

2.3 Digital transformation phenomenon

Digital transformation is an emerging phenomenon that affects organizations in different levels and forms (Appio *et al.*, 2021). Extensive literature has been published in the last decade but it is still diverse and fragmented (Hanelt *et al.*, 2021) resulting in several definitions for digital transformation existing to date. A definition in business management terms is given by Hanelt *et al.* (2021) after reviewing 279 articles which define digital transformation as “organizational change that is triggered and shaped by the wide-spread diffusion of digital technologies” (p. 1160). After conducting a systematic literature review on digital transformation, Vial (2019, p.119) presented a framework describing digital transformation as “a process wherein organizations respond to changes taking place in their environment by using digital technologies to alter their value creation processes”. In agreement it can be said that the digital transformation is resulting in organizational evolution at a continuous pace triggered by global or local technological insights generating changes in the organizations processes, products, and stakeholder relations building opportunities for value creation (Lanzolla *et al.*, 2020).

Verhoef *et al.* (2019) identify three stages of digital transformation: digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation concluding that the first two incremental phases are needed to achieve digital transformation and that achieving a digital transformation stage

implies “a change in how a firm employs digital technologies, to develop a new digital business model that helps to create and appropriate more value for the firm” (Verhoef *et al.*, 2019, p.889). Other authors agree on the three stages of digital transformation (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021) differentiating each of the stages: (1) Digitization can be explained as transferring analog information into digital information (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021; Verhoef *et al.*, 2019). (2) Digitalization as the use digital technologies to modify and/or optimize business processes (Verhoef *et al.*, 2019) or to reinvent products, processes and value chains (Lanzolla *et al.*, 2020). (3) Digital transformation involves strategic organizational improvements that leads to changes in the business model (Verhoef *et al.*, 2019) and to a shift towards malleable organizational designs and digital business ecosystems (Hanelt *et al.*, 2021) that may be revolutionary to the organizations or industry (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021). **Figure 4** summarizes the different phases.

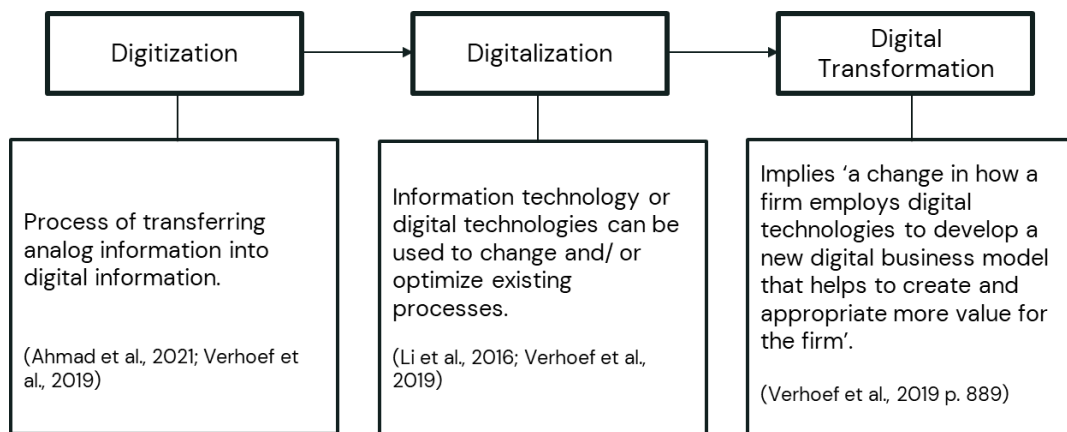


Figure 4: Digital transformation phases

2.3.1 Digitalization in marketing

Digital transformation is multidisciplinary (Verhoef *et al.*, 2019). In their research Verhoef *et al.* (2019) mention three specific areas where academics have put attention to the digital impacts: information systems, strategic management, and marketing. Hausberg *et al.* (2019) also found three business dominant areas in digital transformation research: Innovation management, finance, and agreeing with Verhoef *et al.* (2019), marketing.

The importance of marketing has been highlighted in the digital transformation process as besides digitalizing processes, the customer has to be at the center of the business becoming a co-creator of value (Ziółkowska, 2021). Different authors agree that digitalizing marketing tools is key to achieve digital transformation (Chintalapati and Pandey, 2021; Dumitriu *et al.*, 2019; El Hilali *et al.*, 2020).

Ziółkowska (2021) presented digital marketing trends divided into macro and micro trends by pointing that macro trends such as big data, artificial intelligence (AI), Internet of things (IoT), blockchain, cryptocurrencies, or smart robots impact on consumer behavior and to the economy by changing the marketing approach and opening new market opportunities; and micro trends such as service customization, e-commerce, mobile, communication platforms, or neuromarketing determine marketing and business activities increasing marketing operations efficiency.

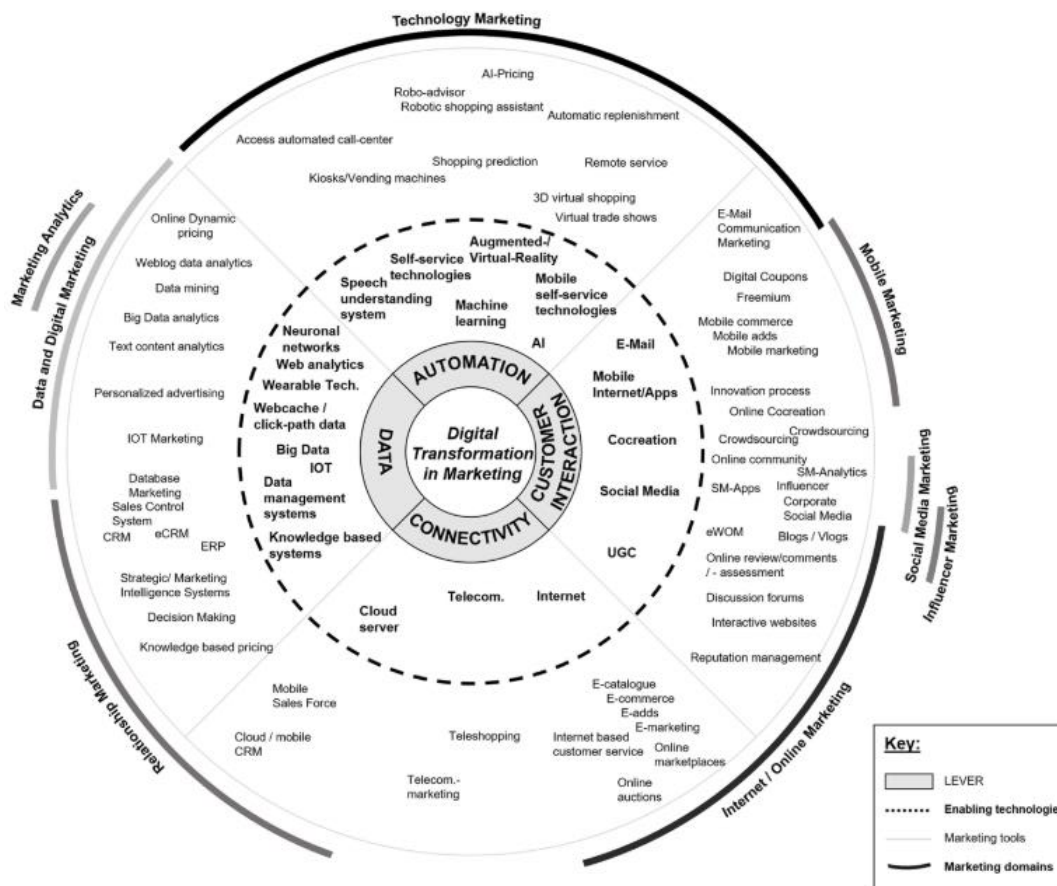


Figure 5: Digital transformation in marketing framework. Retrieved from Graesch et al. (2021, p.17)

Agreeing with Ziółkowska (2021), Miklosik and Evans (2020) share that emerging technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), blockchain, and IoT have great impact on the marketing field. Chintalapati and Pandey (2021) highlight the impact of AI in marketing practices listing a wide variety of examples in integrated digital marketing, content marketing, experiential marketing, marketing operations, and market research concluding that AI brings strong opportunities for value creation in marketing. Graesch et al. (2021) present a digital transformation framework in marketing (Figure 5) where the authors enlist a wide variety of enabling technologies and marketing tools showing the chronological evolution of digital transformation in marketing. Insights are also provided on emerging marketing tools, such as 3D

printing, augmented intelligence, 6G connectivity, or new predictive models that have the potential to improve search engine activities.

Within marketing micro trends and digital transformation research, Verhoef *et al.* (2019) shared that the main focus has been on digital advertising and social media effects. In their systematic literature review, Hausberg *et al.* (2019) identified three specific clusters of research related to marketing and digitalization: the use of VR, user-generated content (UGC), and customer relationship management (CRM); summarizing that digital transformation has been highly influential on marketing activities in recent times. Dash and Chakraborty (2021) analyze digital transformation in marketing practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, concluding that the increased need to adopt digital marketing activities forced organizations to change rapidly and that using CRM along with SEM and SEO practices were key to increase customers satisfaction and purchase intention. Ziłkowska (2021) also highlight the use of SEM and SEO along with content marketing, social media, data analytics, and customized marketing messages. Miklosik and Evans (2020) study the impact of big data and machine learning (ML) in marketing practices sharing three applications such as social media analytics, product and purchasing decision making, and advertising concluding that the right use of big data and ML impact digital transformation. **Table 2** summarizes the different trends.

Macro trends	Micro trends
Big data	Service customization
Artificial intelligence (AI)	Mobile
Internet of things (IoT)	Social media
Blockchain	Neuromarketing
Cryptocurrencies	Virtual reality (VR)
Smart robots	User-generated content (UGC)
6G connectivity	Customer relationship management (CRM)
	SEM and SEO
	Data analytics
	Machine learning (ML)

Table 2: Digital trends in marketing

2.3.2 Digitalization in sports

In the sports industry digitalization can be seen in the adoption of different technologies such as smart venues and stadiums (Caulfield and Jha, 2022; Deloitte, 2016), the proliferation of over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms (Lovett, 2018), AR and VR immersive technologies (Deloitte, 2019; GSIC, 2021; Hebbel-Seeger, 2012; Rynarzewska, 2018), blockchain (GSIC, 2021),

online betting (Lopez-Gonzalez and Tulloch, 2015); cloud computing (Wan, 2022), big data and analytics (Gallardo and Garcia-Unanue, 2020), mobile big data (Wan, 2022), or the entrance of digital sports such as esports (Gawrysiak, *et al.*, 2020; Lovett, 2018).

Digitalization has also transformed the communications and new media and platforms continue to emerge complementing the existent ways of consuming sports (De Moragas *et al.*, 2011; Lee Ludvigsen and Petersen-Wagner, 2022). Technologies have changed the media landscape creating a complicated cross-media environment by integrating popularity and personalization with traditional mass media and social media causing digital media to bring more opportunities for sports streaming (Zheng and Mason, 2022) as it can be leveraged for targeting different sports audience generations with different consumption habits (Leszczyński *et al.*, 2022).

Further, different technologies have been adopted to reach sports fans. For example, virtual reality is one of the technologies that has been popularized for sports broadcasting. Capasa *et al.*, (2022) found that audience adopting VR technologies for watching sports events may be driven by extrinsic motivations such as meeting social norms for the adaption of disruptive technologies. The adoption of new technologies for sports consumption brings changes to the audience behavior driven by flexibility (access anytime anywhere) and inclusivity (different demographics) (Glebova *et al.*, 2022).

Besides, the digitalization of sports has also been affected by the incorporation of new technologies in sports practice. Recent literature shows the relevance of the use of different technologies. For example, mixed realities (MR), such as AR and VR, use can go beyond broadcasting and marketing purposes as they can enable also sports competitions (Westmattmann *et al.*, 2021); social media platforms are used for online training and fitness courses with video tutorials (Štajer *et al.*, 2022; Tjønnedal, 2020; Vrontis *et al.*, 2020); and the use of wearable technologies and artificial intelligence to help increase physical activity (Štajer *et al.*, 2022). **Table 3** presents a summary of the digital trends in sports.

Digital trends in sports
eSports
Smart and aesthetic venues
Live broadcasting in OTT streaming platforms
AR, VR and MR
Online betting

Cloud computing
Data, big data and analytics
Blockchain
Social media
Marketing strategies in mobiles / smartphones

Table 3: Digital trends in sports

In the sports marketing context, sponsorship has been an effective marketing strategy (Popp and Woratschek, 2016) and digital technologies add value when sponsoring sports by increasing online exposure on a global scale (Koronios *et al.*, 2020). Further, sports organizations that adopt and use innovative technologies can be perceived positively by the technology industry sponsors (Plattfaut and Koch, 2021).

Regarding sports sponsorship trends, social media and mobile strategies lead the academic conversation along with data and analytics strategies (Garza Segovia and Kennett, 2022b). Some examples of digital technologies that have been adopted to deploy sponsorship strategies are mobile and online media (Meenaghan *et al.*, 2013). Social media platforms are being used as tools for fan engagement (Baena, 2016; Kaushik *et al.*, 2020; Popp and Woratschek, 2016; Stavros *et al.*, 2014; Wakefield and Bennett, 2018), as well as mobile and smartphones (Ha *et al.*, 2017) as they are being used to contribute increase sponsor’s presence in social media (Hazari, 2018). Besides using social media as tools for fan engagement, sports marketers and sponsors are using them for data collection and analytics (Delia and Armstrong, 2015; Naidenova *et al.*, 2016; Weimar *et al.*, 2020).

2.4 Digitalization of sports sponsorship practices

As digitalization of sports sponsorship practices is key to this research work, a systematic literature review was conducted to identify how has sport sponsorship evolved in recent years because of digitalization processes and to identify the research gaps in the literature³ and elaborate the research objectives for this study.

According to Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022b), the most relevant state-of-the-art related to sports sponsorship and digital media was undertaken by Santomier (2008) as more recent publications have focused on sports entrepreneurship (Huertas González-Serrano *et al.*,

³ Results from the systematic literature review in sports sponsorship digitalization were published by the author of this dissertation. The paper reference is: Garza Segovia, M., and Kennett, C. (2022b).

Digitalization and Sports Sponsorship Strategy: A Review and Research Agenda. *Annals of Applied Sport Science*, 10(4). <http://aassjournal.com/article-1-1066-en.html>

2019), sports innovation (Ferreira *et al.*, 2020), strategic sponsoring (Demir and Söderman, 2015), and sports storytelling in social media (Laurell and Söderman, 2018). Jin’s (2017) review in marketing and sponsorship presents in-depth results of the “knowledge structure of sponsorship research” (p. 363) after conducting a content analysis of 282 articles published by the *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*.

To select the articles included in the systematic literature review different criteria were followed. The first step for articles selection involved six searches by topic (article title, abstract and keywords) and with a year restriction from 2000 to 2020 at the WOS and Scopus databases in November 2020 obtaining a total of 2.168 results (Garza Segovia and Kennett, 2022b). Details can be seen in **Table 4**.

Search	Criteria	Documents found
1	Sponsor* AND Sport*	n=1.282
2	Sport* marketing	n=437
3	Sport* AND Digital Marketing	n=66
4	Sport* AND Technolog* AND Sponsor*	n=70
5	Sport* AND Digital AND Sponsor*	n=30
6	Sport* AND Media AND Sponsor*	n=283

Table 4: Criteria for articles selection

The second criteria applied was by journal. Articles in the five highest-ranked management and marketing sports journals according to the Scimago Journal and Country Rank 2020 list were included:

- Sport Management Review
- Journal of Sport Management
- European Sport Management Quarterly
- Sports Marketing Quarterly
- International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship

The results of the different searches had to fit at least in one of these five journals for them to be included in the study. 283 articles were identified after eliminating duplicates.

The third criteria applied was by keyword selection. 41 articles out of the 283 were excluded as they have no keywords in the publication. The three most frequently keywords occurring were: *sport(s) marketing*, *sponsorship*, and *sport(s) sponsorship*. All articles that included at least one of these three keywords was selected giving a total of 139 articles found. Two further lists of keywords were created. The first list included keywords that included the word *sponsor*, as several relevant keywords were identified related to sponsorship activities. The second was a list with all the keywords related to digital technologies. With this new

keyword criteria, 50 more articles were added to the corpus giving a total of 189 articles that further were included in the research topic categories' analysis (Garza Segovia and Kennett, 2022b).

Even though the original search was made from the year 2000 to 2020, it was found that the first article from the 189 selected articles that put together sponsorship with digital technologies is from 2006 and by 2008 a variant grow can be seen as shown in **Figure 6**.

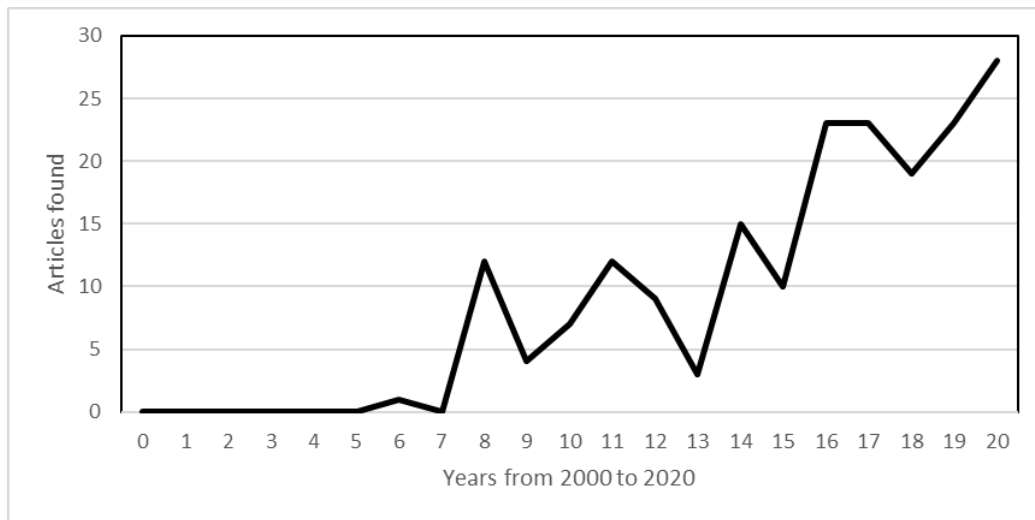


Figure 6: Year evolution

A first step in the analysis of the 189 articles was to classify them into the 22 research topic categories related to sponsorship proposed by Jin, (2017) by analyzing title, keywords, and the abstract, coding them in multiple topic categories per article following Jin's (2017) procedure. Details in **Table 5**.

Common research topic	Frequency	Common research topic	Frequency
Consumer behavior	65	Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	11
Sponsorship effects	61	Regulation and laws	10
Sports marketing strategy	56	Team/league/Venue sponsorship	10
Brand performance	35	Promotion and advertising	8
Sports and the internet	29	Commercial sponsorship	7
Corporate sponsorship	27	Fan loyalty	7
Sports event sponsorship	24	Alcohol sponsorship	6
Corporate image	21	Celebrity endorsements	6
Business performance	17	Sports broadcasting	6
Relationship marketing	13	Service quality	3
Ambush marketing	11	Art and music events	0

Table 5: Common research topics found. Retrieved from Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022, p.3).

As a second step, the authors selected 23 articles out of the 189 that were found related to digitalization because of the use of digital technologies, broadcasting or internet related and

sports sponsorship by analyzing the title, keywords and abstract for a deeper analysis. The most relevant research topics that concur with digital media are: *Sports and the internet*, *consumer behavior*, and *sports marketing strategy* (see **Table 6**).

Common research topic	Frequency	Common research topic	Frequency
Sports and the internet	29	Sports event sponsorship	3
Consumer behavior	20	Alcohol sponsorship	2
Sports marketing strategy	11	Business performance	2
Sponsorship effects	8	Corporate sponsorship	2
Brand performance	6	Corporate image	1
Sports broadcasting	5	Fan loyalty	1
Ambush marketing	3	Promotion and advertising	1
Regulation and laws	3	Service quality	1
Relationship marketing	3		

Table 6: Digital media common research topics found

These 23 papers were studied in depth to unveil the conversation academics are having regarding sports sponsorship and digitalization. **Table 7** provides a general bibliometric overview.

Source title	Authors	Media	Research method
European Sport Management Quarterly (4)	Naidenova <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Social media	Regression analyses
	Kaushik <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Social media	Regression analyses
	Lin, <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Social media	Experiment
	Weimar <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Social media	Regression analyses
International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship (14)	Santomier (2008)	Multiple media channels	Systematic literature review
	Jensen, <i>et al.</i> , (2015)	Social media	Visual analytics
	Kelly, <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Television broadcast and social media	Content and frequency analyses
	Baena (2016)	Website, social media and mobile	Survey
	Popp, <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Social media	Netnography study
	Gee, <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Television broadcast	Content analyses
	Ha <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Smartphones	Survey
	Kim, <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Website	Survey
	Leng (2017)	Short video clips	Control and experimental groups
	Popp, <i>et al.</i> (2017)	Social media	Regression analyses
	Hazari (2018)	Social media	Survey
	Jensen, <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Television broadcast and second screens	Experiment
	LaGree, <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Multiple media channels	Experiment
	Lu, Zhu, and Wei (2020)	Multiple media channels	Regression analyses
Journal of Sport Management (2)	Breuer and Rumpf (2015)	Television broadcast	Experiment
	Delia and Armstrong (2015)	Social media	Content and case study analyses

Sport Management Review (3)	Stavros <i>et al.</i> (2014)	Social media	Netnography study
	Popp and Woratschek (2015)	Social media	Survey
	Wakefield and Bennett (2018)	Social media	Survey

Table 7: Bibliometric overview of the 23 selected papers. Retrieved from Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022b, p.3)

According to Garza Segovia and Kennett’s (2022b), seven research lines were identified regarding sponsorship and marketing strategies in the digital landscape, technology management related to digitalization and sports sponsorship, and fan engagement through sponsorship strategies.

The first research line is regarding **social media** (Kaushik *et al.*, 2020; Lin *et al.*, 2020; Weimar *et al.*, 2020; Hazari, 2018; Wakefield and Bennett, 2018; Leng, 2017; Popp *et al.*, 2017; Baena, 2016; Popp and Woratschek, 2016; Delia and Armstrong, 2015; Stavros *et al.*, 2014). Social media has been wide studied within its use and management in sports sponsorship strategies as new sponsorship dynamics are being generated with the proliferation of social media platforms and services. Findings in the literature review reveal that social media is used mainly as interactive platforms for fan engagement (Stavros *et al.*, 2014; Wakefield and Bennett, 2018); and engagement in virtual communities (Baena, 2016; Popp and Woratschek, 2016); as tools for measuring sponsorship effectiveness (Delia and Armstrong, 2015; Kaushik *et al.*, 2020; Wakefield and Bennett, 2018; Weimar *et al.*, 2020); or as tools to study purchase intention (Hazari, 2018; Lin *et al.*, 2020; Popp *et al.*, 2017).

The second research line identified is related to the use of **smartphones**. Different actions were identified from the consumers side mainly as a ‘second screen’ for reviewing statistical information and social media content sharing during a sports broadcast (Jensen *et al.*, 2018; Hazari, 2018; Ha *et al.*, 2017). Still, the impact of the use of second screens on sponsorship effectiveness is still under researched.

Following, the third research line identified how digital technologies have brought new ways for **data collection and analytics** (Weimar *et al.*, 2020; Popp *et al.*, 2016; Naidenova *et al.*, 2016; Delia and Armstrong, 2015; Kelly *et al.*, 2015; Jensen *et al.*, 2015; Stavros *et al.*, 2014), being social media platforms the main tools for fan data gathering.

Two additional research lines were identified regarding marketing strategy and digitalization according to Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022b). Traditional marketing strategies such as reputation, alcohol, and ambush marketing management continue to exist but different **media strategies** are needed to face their execution in a digital landscape (Lin *et al.*, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2020; LaGree *et al.*, 2019; Kelly *et al.*, 2015).

The next research line rises questions regarding which are the most appropriate tools to measure sponsorship effectiveness in the digital landscape as **new tools to measure sponsorship** ROI, ROO, and/or KPI's continue to arise (Jensen *et al.*, 2018; Kim *et al.*, 2017; Leng, 2017; Popp *et al.*, 2017; Baena, 2016; Naidenova *et al.*, 2016; Breuer and Rumpf, 2015; Delia and Armstrong, 2015; Jensen *et al.*, 2015).

Regarding fan engagement, interaction, and virtual communities, other two research lines were identified within the reviewed papers being the first one the fan role as **co-creator** which increases digital interactions with other fans, brands, and sponsors (Kaushik *et al.*, 2020; Weimar *et al.*, 2020; Wakefield and Bennett, 2018; perspective Popp *et al.*, 2016; Stavros *et al.*, 2014). Lastly, the seventh research line unveils the role of **virtual communities** as platforms for fan engagement and its impact on consumer behavior (Baena, 2016; Popp and Woratschek, 2016; Popp *et al.*, 2016; Stavros *et al.*, 2014). Academics are still in the path of finding how virtual communities can help increase fan engagement.

After discussing each of the research lines, several research questions were risen as answers about the impact of digitalization in sports sponsorship strategies are still needed. Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022b) propose a research agenda for a better understanding of the phenomenon. **Table 8** summarizes the findings.

RL1	Strong social media focus in the management of sports sponsorship strategies.	Kaushik <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Lin <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Weimar <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Hazari, 2018; Wakefield and Bennett, 2018; Leng, 2017; Popp <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Baena, 2016; Popp and Woratschek, 2016; Delia and Armstrong, 2015; Stavros <i>et al.</i> , 2014.
	How are new sponsorship dynamics being generated with the proliferation of social media platforms and services?	
	How can sports marketers leverage new marketing dynamics to deploy sponsorship strategies?	
RL2	Use of smartphones as second screen while watching sports broadcast, review statistical information, and share content on social media.	Jensen <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Hazari, 2018; Ha <i>et al.</i> , 2017.
	How is the use of second screens affecting sponsorship effectiveness?	
	How can sports marketers add value through the use of second screens during a sports broadcast?	
RL3	Growth of digital data collection and analytics strategies.	Weimar <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Popp <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Naidenova <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Delia and Armstrong, 2015; Kelly <i>et al.</i> , 2015; Jensen <i>et al.</i> , 2015; Stavros <i>et al.</i> , 2014.
	Which new or adapted digital data collection methods are being employed in the sports industry and academics?	
	How can academics and practitioners use new digital data analysis methods to understand consumer behavior?	
	How do digital analytics impact on the management of sports sponsorship strategies?	

RL4	Media strategies development in reputation management, alcohol sponsorship, and ambush marketing in the digital context.	Lin <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Lu <i>et al.</i> , 2020; LaGree <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Kelly <i>et al.</i> , 2015.
	To what extent have traditional marketing activities such as reputation management, alcohol sponsorship management, and ambush marketing strategies changed because of new digital media and what implications does this have for sponsorship management processes?	
	How can sports marketers add value through new digital platforms to better deploy traditional marketing and sponsorship strategies?	
RL5	New tools to measure sponsorship effectiveness, ROI, and KPI's.	Jensen <i>et al.</i> , 2018; Kim <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Leng, 2017; Popp <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Baena, 2016; Naidenova <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Breuer and Rumpf, 2015; Delia and Armstrong, 2015; Jensen <i>et al.</i> , 2015.
	Which are the most appropriate tools to measure sponsorship effectiveness in the digital context?	
RL6	Increased value of fan-to-fan and fan-sponsor interactions as co-creators in the digital context.	Kaushik <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Weimar <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Wakefield and Bennett, 2018; Popp <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Stavros <i>et al.</i> , 2014.
	How can fan interaction and their active participation as co-creators impact on digital sponsorship strategies and brand value?	
	How can fan interaction as co-creators be measured?	
	Which digital sponsorship strategies increase fan interaction?	
RL7	Social media and virtual communities as platforms for fan engagement and as influence on consumer behavior in a global scale.	Baena, 2016; Popp and Woratschek, 2016; Popp <i>et al.</i> , 2016; Stavros <i>et al.</i> , 2014.
	How is fan behavior changing as a result of participation in virtual communities?	
	To what extent do virtual communities increase fan engagement in digital platforms?	
	How can sports marketers leverage the use of virtual communities to engage fans?	

Table 8: Research lines and agenda adapted from Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022b)

By revising the research lines and research questions it is unveiled that more research is needed as digital technologies continue to evolve generating opportunities for sports marketers to engage with fans in a more targeted way. Still, a gap exists in understanding how sports sponsorship strategies can be better planned, executed, and measured as fan behavior continues to evolve due to the fast-changing digital landscape generating sports organizations and brands to be in continuous learning on how to build a successful sponsorship deal and its effects in the whole sponsoring life-cycle process.

2.5 Literature research gap and statement of the research question and objectives

Marketing practices are being transformed because of technology (Ziółkowska, 2021). Sports marketing has also been impacted because of digitalization processes, one traditional area of sports marketing strategy that has been transformed is sponsorship (Garza Segovia and Kennett, 2022b) and sport marketers are still in the course of finding potential opportunities and challenges generated because of the accelerated digitalization of processes driven by the digital transformation phenomenon.

Literature regarding sponsorship and digital technologies continues to grow, as seen in *Figure 6: Year evolution*, showing that technology impacts in marketing strategies, and in specific, sponsorship as mentioned by Garza and Kennett (2022b). In their review, the authors (Garza and Kennett, 2022b) expose that technologies and platforms such as mobile, social media, and data analytics are being used within sponsorship practices but how are they used and the impact they have in the sponsorship life-cycle process is still unknown.

On one hand, literature conceptualizes the sports sponsorship life-cycle process. On the other hand, the digital transformation phenomenon is a recent addressed topic in the literature where the use of digital technologies and digitalization practices is currently under study in different domains such as marketing. The literature shows there is a direct impact of digital technologies in sponsorship practices but there is still a gap on how the digitalization of these practices further affects sports sponsorship life-cycle and its impact on sports organizations.

Said this, more research is needed to understand the impact of digitalization as marketing practices, and in specific, sponsorship practices are being affected and marketing researchers must study the sponsorship life-cycle process from a new perspective to understand the implications of the digital transformation phenomenon as new technologies continue to emerge changing the digital landscape, which has become more complex due to the proliferation of technologies and platforms causing changes in consumer behavior leading to changes in sponsors' demands, and sports organizations need to understand the impact of the digital transformation phenomenon in their sponsorship processes to better plan and execute further sponsorship strategies.

Following Miklosik and Evans (2020) call for research in marketing digital transformation and Garza and Kennett (2022b) call to understand the impact of digitalization in sports sponsorship, the overarching aim of this dissertation is:

How is the changing digital landscape impacting on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process?

Table 8: Research lines and agenda adapted from Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022b) on the literature review chapter presents several questions that still need answers to close the gap on how the digitalization of marketing practices affects sports sponsorship. If comparing those findings to the three main phases of the sports sponsorship life-cycle process: (1) structuring the sponsorship deal, (2) sponsorship-linked marketing activities, and (3) sponsorship measurement and evaluation (Beech *et al.*, 2014; Cornwell and Kwon, 2020; Foster *et al.*, 2016) it can be seen that digitalization is happening at the different phases but there is no clear answer on how digital technologies impact in each of the processes involved in the different phases.

Furthermore, if taking the different identified research lines presented in the mentioned *Table 8* and accommodating them amongst the three phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process it is seen that research line 3, *RL3* is related to phase (1) structuring the sponsorship deal regarding digital data collection strategies. Research lines *RL1*, *RL2*, *RL3*, *RL4*, *RL6*, and *RL7* impact directly on the (2) sponsorship-linked marketing activities phase because of the use of social media, sports sponsorship strategies, the use of mobiles, media strategies on the digital landscape, the participation and interaction of the fans as co-creators and in virtual communities. As for the (3) sponsorship measurement phase, *RL3* and *RL5* can be related because of data collection and analytics strategies and the different tools used to measure sponsorship effectiveness. This means, in each of the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process at least one research line with unanswered questions regarding the impact of digitalization in sports sponsorship is identified. So, there are open questions that need answer for a better understanding on how digital technologies affect the sponsorship life-cycle process. Besides, more clarification is needed regarding the different activities happening in each of the phases.

Moreover, literature on sports digitalization show that different technologies such as mixed, augmented, and virtual realities, big data, cloud computing, blockchain, or platforms such as for streaming or social media channels have been adopted for different purposes such as to improve communications, broadcasting, and fan engagement. The impact of these technologies and its adoption for different purposes affect the sponsorship life-cycle process as well and more explanation on how they impact is needed. Therefore, the different objectives to achieve in order to contribute to answer the research question are:

1. Explore to what extent digital technologies have changed the sports sponsorship life-cycle process main activities and which, why and how new digital technologies are used.
2. Explore to what extent digital technologies and the new digital landscape affect marketing practices, in general, and sponsorship practices, specifically, and its impact on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process.
3. Develop and integrated model that conceptualizes and represents up to what extent the changing digital landscape impacts on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process.

By answering the overarching research question through accomplishing the research objectives it is intended to contribute to marketing theory by providing a better understanding of the impact of the changing digital landscape in the sponsorship life-cycle process as it is stated that these technologies are affecting the different phases of the process and it is necessary to know how they affect them due continuous technological evolution to further know its impact in sports organizations.

Technology is driving digitalization of marketing practices and digitalization of processes in the sponsorship life-cycle process, widely impacting organizational digital transformation. Lopez *et al.* (2021) state that sponsorship has become more dynamic and strategic due to digitalization. By answering the stated question and by understanding how the digital transformation phenomenon impacts the nature of marketing practices it is expected to contribute to marketing theory in the changing digital landscape and accelerated digitalization processes.

In the managerial context bring in-depth, context-rich insights, from an organization with a complex ecosystem to contribute with sports organizations and stakeholders to be more effective when managing sponsorship strategies in a digital landscape due to the need of being more responsive because of continuous accelerated digitalization processes.

To answer the research question and the posed research objectives, an exploratory research was conducted following a relativist ontology and an abductive logic. A longitudinal case study based on qualitative methodologies was conducted being the sports organization *Euroleague Basketball* the unit of analysis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The structure of the methodology for this dissertation is an adaptation from Rashid *et al.* (2019) four phases for a qualitative case study method in business research: foundation phase, prefield phase, field phase, and reporting phase.

The *foundation phase* states the philosophical assumptions that support this dissertation objectives. The *prefield phase* describes the research protocols designed for the case study. The *field phase* includes the interaction with the case study participants and exploration of the phenomenon. Lastly, the *reporting phase* presents the analysis protocol of the empirical data results.

3.1 Foundation phase

Research philosophy underpins the research strategy and methods chosen for a scientific study. Within research philosophies, epistemological assumptions constitute the knowledge of a field of study. Regarding what is known about a phenomenon or field of study, two main epistemological assumptions are identified in social sciences: positivism and interpretivism. Both approaches are used in management and business studies (Langley and Abdallah, 2011).

The positivism epistemology uses highly structured methodologies usually lead to quantifiable observations and statistical analyses while interpretivism focusses on understanding a phenomenon, being appropriate for management studies (Saunders *et al.*, 2007).

Besides the epistemological assumptions, research logic considerations need to be considered when conducting scientific research. The two common research logics used in social sciences are induction and deduction, and a middle-ground third logic consideration suitable for case study business research is abduction (Rashid *et al.*, 2019). A deductive research logic tests hypothesis and is used when following a positivist approach as it is a theory driven approach, an inductive research logic is a data driven approach, theory is built from empirical data, lastly, an abductive research logic can be seen as a combination of both where empirical data is connected to theory (Gehman *et al.*, 2018) where “theory and literature is applied in tandem with the raw data to explain the patterns and story behind the data” (Thompson, 2022, p.1411).

Case study methodology is widely used in technology management and innovation fields for both theoretical and practical aims (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018). A case study can be defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 2006, p.13) being widely accepted research strategy by qualitative researchers (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018) and widely used in business research (Dul and Hak, 2008).

Case study research can be employed when aiming to answer a *how* or *why* research question and the type of research can be exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive (Yin, 1994). Yin (1994) adds that using a case study is applicable for exploring real-life situations where the studied phenomenon has no clear outcomes. Case study research can be mainly divided in two: single or multiple case (Yin, 2006; Stake, 1995). In either ways, to conduct a case study, it should have a *case* – “a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27) to be the object of the study (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018). For a single case, Yin (2003, 2006) suggests different logics can be used to select a case study: if it is a critical case to test a particular theory; if it represents a unique or extreme case where something exceptional seems to be occurring, if it is a representative or typical case, if it is a revelatory case which offers high potential for developing new insights into an understudied phenomenon, and if it is a longitudinal case where there are at least two or more different points in time. Multiple case studies usually are better accepted but more resources are needed to accomplish the research objectives (Yin, 2006).

Different approaches for case study methods have been studied by several authors through the years. Yazan (2015) compares three representative seminal studies in case study methods: Yin’s method, Stake’s method, and Merriam’s method. Qualitative research is an iterative process (Bansal and Corley, 2012) but authors differ on the way a qualitative case study research should be designed. First, from a positivist perspective, Yin suggests that for a case study to be valid and reliable a very structured and tight design should be done. On the contrary, from a constructivist point of view, Stake and Merriam bring a more flexible approach allowing changes in the research design later on the case study research (Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018). Although the three scholars present different methods for doing a case study, they converge in: epistemological commitments, defining the case study, designing case study, collecting data, analyzing data protocols, and data validation (Yazan, 2015).

Siggelkow (2007) proposes three uses for case study research: *motivation*, *inspiration*, and *illustration*. The proposed case study in this dissertation intends to *illustrate* the impact of

digitalization in the sports sponsorship life-cycle process as the author believe marketing theory is missing to include this phenomenon and more refined conceptualization is needed. The contribution of this work aims to bring the proposed conceptual argument into empirical settings.

In this line, as the research question of this dissertation aims to answer how the changing digital landscape is impacting on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process, an interpretivist philosophy is adopted as it will bring a better understanding of the impact of the digital transformation phenomenon in sports sponsorship. Further, as objectives one and two of this dissertation aim to explore the impact and use of digital technologies in the sports sponsorship life-cycle process within sports organizations, choosing an interpretivist philosophy is appropriate for this research study (Saunders *et al.*, 2007).

Moreover, and abductive logic is used as, from one side, literature in marketing theory is extent and there is plenty literature in sponsorship. On the other side, there is novel literature in digital transformation but still few due to the recentness of the phenomenon and there is a lack of empirical studies. Therefore, an abductive logic will be followed in this research by using marketing literature as a basis for constructing the case study and at the same time, let the empirical findings help to explain the impact of the digital transformation phenomenon.

Lastly, to use case study research is appropriate to answer this dissertation research question as it will contribute to explain how is the changing digital landscape impacting on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process. In words of Yin (2006), choosing a case study is appropriate as it will give the opportunity to empirically study a contemporary phenomenon. A single longitudinal case study approach is chosen to get in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon, aiming to understand thoroughly the case and be able to 'develop and integrated model that conceptualizes and represents up to what extent the changing digital landscape impacts on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process' as stated in objective three of this dissertation.

3.2 Prefield phase

3.2.1 Case study selection – Euroleague Basketball

Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam (2018) suggest choosing an information-rich case is worthy no matter the case selection strategy. When the knowledge accessible for a specific research problem is scarce and it is required to build novel theory, it is recommended the *revelatory* single case study (Seidel *et al.*, 2013) in which theory is built upon the empirical data collected.

Single case studies are useful for understanding evolutionary processes or patterns by providing rich empirical description rather than a comparison of outcomes lead by variances (Seidel *et al.*, 2013). Beyond the technical criteria for selecting cases for their revelatory potential, in-depth studies also require organizations that provide open access to the researcher to ensure data richness (Langley and Abdallah, 2011). In this line, this research inquiry follows a revelatory single longitudinal case study method selecting Euroleague Basketball organization as the case of the study.

Euroleague Basketball is an international leader in the sports industry that has been organizing the top-tier professional basketball competitions in Europe since 2001. In their main competition, the Turkish Airlines Euroleague, eighteen teams compete during the regular season with the aim of reaching the 'Final Four' end of season finale weekend, where the semi-finals and championship games are held. The media rights for the event are sold to over 190 countries around the world, attracting audiences in the millions across multiple digital media platforms (Garza, 2021). Euroleague Basketball organization fits with the objectives of the study as it is an international sports property and market leader in Europe, has an extensive network of ownership and partners, has an extensive portfolio of international sponsors from several industries around Europe, is an active adopter of new technologies, and gave open access to the researcher.

The case study takes the perspective of the sports organization rather than the perspective of the brands - roster of sponsors rather than portfolio of sponsorship (Cornwell and Kwon, 2020). As the unit of analysis is Euroleague Basketball as an organization, the case study research scope is limited within their internal decision-making processes regarding their use and implementation of digital technologies and how they impact on their sponsorship life-cycle process. A snowball sampling approach was used to identified the interviewees until a saturation point was reached in the interview process within the established time boundaries of the case study.

Sponsors, clubs, or other stakeholders' perspectives are included as context informants in this specific research study because of time and resources limitations. Therefore, gathering data from the different partnering brands or other stakeholders was beyond the scope of this study as (1) the diversity and range of stakeholders was extensive, (2) in terms of sponsors rotation was continuous as deals ended and new ones began (except naming partners and official partners), (3) the access was limited to the researchers as it was intended to at least interview the naming partners for enriching the context and only the contact information of one

sponsor (7Days) was given by EB, and the data provided was limited due to commercial sensitivity (4) in general terms the sponsor's perspective was out of the scope of case study research but could be considered for future studies.

The case study time boundary was from 2018 to early 2022.

3.2.2 Case study protocols

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this dissertation aims to answer the following question: *How is the changing digital landscape impacting on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process?*

In order to answer the question, different research protocols were followed to assure research rigor. In this section they are described following Rashid *et al.* (2019) suggestion: research method, permission seeking, ethical considerations, interpretation process, and criteria for assessment.

1. *Research methods*

Case study scholars are in agreement regarding that a case study should collect data from multiple sources (Yazan, 2015). Yin's method recommends a combination of quantitative and qualitative sources, whereas Stake's and Merriam's methods suggest exclusive use of qualitative data sources (Yazan, 2015). What is critical for researchers conducting qualitative studies is to present the detailed journey for data collection and analysis to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the data (Bansal and Corley, 2012). Following Stake's and Merriam's approach, multiple qualitative methods were used for this case study data collection process and to be able to triangulate information (Yin, 2006). A flexible data collection strategy was followed to be able to iterate and make adjustments during the data collection process such as recommended in case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989). Different data sources were used to build this case study: observation, interviews, and archiving analysis, in line with Stake's (1995) recommendations for qualitative case study research. The details of the protocols followed in each of the three mentioned methods are described further in section **3.3.2 Details of field protocols** in this chapter.

2. *Permission seeking*

Permission and access were given to the researcher in different levels. Firstly, access was given through one Euroleague Basketball executive who 'opened the door' with the rest of the employees and give the researcher access with all Euroleague personnel and stakeholders

that may be involved in the interview process facilitating their contact information and ensuring the participants were well informed about the research project. Secondly, a different kind of permission was granted regarding the 2018 and 2019 Final Four events as the researcher was allowed to access to meetings, press conferences, different staff activities, the games, the Fan Zone and sponsors area for observation as if she was a Euroleague Basketball employee taking out all the possible restrictions. Both permissions were key for conducting the case study.

3. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were followed to ensure the participants knew the objectives and outcomes of their participation in the case study research. It can be summarized in the following terms:

- Privacy of the individuals is protected by only mentioning their position level in the organization and suppressing the name of the participants.
- The project was presented to the direction of the organization. When approved, a summary page with the project details was shared. The one-page document can be seen in **Annex I**.
- Before the interviews, the participants were provided with a consent form with the research project information to sign their agreement. If it was an online interview, the project information was given by the researcher and the participant gave their consent by voice agreement. Consent form attached in **Annex II**.

4. Interpretation process – data analysis strategy

Theory can be constructed from empirical evidence with case study research method (Mariotto, Zanni, & de Moraes, 2014). In words of Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, pp. 25-26) “since it is a theory-building approach that is deeply embedded in rich empirical data, building theory from cases is likely to produce theory that is accurate, interesting, and testable”.

Although multiple case studies are more accepted than single cases, more complicated theories may be found in single cases as theory may fit exactly to the particular case being studied, and bring a better explanation to a phenomenon (Tsoukas, 2009).

To achieve theory development a data analysis protocol must be conducted. Merriam (1998, p.178) defines data analysis as “the process of making sense out of the data... involves

consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning”.

Different strategies can be followed for data analysis depending on the nature of the study. For qualitative studies Stake (1995) proposes categorical aggregation and direct interpretation. Merriam (1998) presents six different strategies: ethnographic analysis, narrative analysis, phenomenological analysis, constant comparative method, content analysis, and analytic induction (Yazan, 2015). Other recognized author is Langley (1999), in her review she presents and compares different strategies for analyzing data which brings a wide variety of options for data processing such as narrative strategy, quantification strategy, grounded theory, visual mapping, temporal bracketing, and synthetic strategy.

Following an abductive logic, the data analysis strategies used in this dissertation are narrative strategy and temporal bracketing strategy using grounded theory bases for interview codification (Langley, 1999) as a combination of strategies is suitable and recommended for single case studies as they complement each other helping to share a complete story of the case and justifying theory building (Langley, 1999).

Case studies produce context-dependent knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and a good narrative approach brings in the complexity and richness of the studied phenomenon (Langley, 1999). The contextual detail of the narrative may uncover a rich problematic and by avoiding excessive data reduction different viewpoints can be presented as “...it is not desirable to summarize and generalize case studies. Good studies should be read as narratives in their entirety.” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.25). Nevertheless, using this approach by its own may lead to a weak conceptual contribution (Langley, 1999) so combining it with another strategy will bring more strength. Temporal bracketing strategy fits with the narrative strategy and with this longitudinal case study objectives as this strategy will be useful to structure data by bringing in temporal decomposition in different periods of time and will offer opportunities for structuring process analysis and sensemaking as ‘actions on one period lead to changes in the context that will affect action in subsequent periods’ (Langley, 1999, p.703). By combining this strategy with narrative data can be shown in linearly evolving phases. Lastly, thematic analysis was used to codify the interviews bringing a systematic data coding and analysis approach by gradually constructing sub-themes and themes bringing hierarchical data structure following codes, sub-themes, and themes order as basis for building a data structure (Thompson, 2022). The use of these three data analysis strategies will bring a high research accuracy (Langley, 1999).

5. Criteria for assessment

Interpretivist research seeks for credibility, conformability, transferability, and dependability, rather than reliability and generalizability as these two constructs fit best with a positivist perspective (Rashid *et al.*, 2019).

For example, rigor is well established by positivists and in natural science by following these criteria: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Mariotto *et al.*, 2014). For a social science case study perspective, the same criteria for ensuring rigor may be followed by having an argument with a consistent causal construction, use different data sources, and have a clear chain of evidence, transparency and clear protocols (Mariotto *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, external validity is complicated to achieve with a single case as statistical generalization cannot be made and achieving reliability and generalizability are relevant criteria only if a universal law is sought which is unlikely in management fields (Numagami, 1998) and, searching for external validity and reliability when conducting a case study may turn against the potential it has to detect specific and contextual issues, hence not applicable to this case study. Still, findings from a single case can serve as a preliminary phase to build general theory (Mariotto *et al.*, 2014).

Case study research can comply with other quality criteria different from traditional positivist perspectives by getting aside the generalization of a phenomenon and from an interpretivism perspective seek to deeply understanding a phenomenon in a particular case (Mariotto *et al.*, 2014). Flyvbjerg (2006) adds “a purely descriptive, phenomenological case study without any attempt to generalize can certainly be of value in this process and has often helped cut a path toward scientific innovation” (p. 10). Stake (2000) agrees that not every research work must seek for generalizability, especially qualitative studies, pointing that a single case brings an opportunity for an in-depth precise understanding of a phenomenon.

Different authors suggest other criteria for case studies such as transferability (Hellstrom, 2008). Transferability differs from statistical generalization as rather to trying to reproduce the obtained results of a case study, it gives the opportunity to apply the results to a similar case respecting the differences of the new context (Mariotto *et al.*, 2014) and that for the findings to be transferable, the researcher must provide sufficient contextual information. Complementing, Stake (1982) remarks the role of single case studies researchers by noting that they must illustrate the case rather than provide generalizations.

Following this line and consistent with the interpretivist nature of this case study research, it is sought to bring an in-depth understanding of the digital transformation

phenomenon applied to the sponsorship process by following research protocols that ensure credibility and that lead to transferable results.

3.3 Field phase

3.3.1 Contact and interaction

The empirical data was collected using semi-structured interviews mainly to Euroleague Basketball employees, two people from IMG Limited Media (Endeavor Company) because of the strategic relevance of the joint venture in Euroleague decision taking processes and their close collaboration relationship regarding the partnerships and sponsorship department, and three different stakeholders: a club, a sponsor, and a digital supplier for a holistic context overview.

3.3.2 Details of field protocols

Semi-structured interviews protocol

To gather in-depth information from Euroleague Basketball in order to understand the impact of digitalization on the sponsorship process, three different rounds of semi-structured interviews have been conducted following a snowball approach. Euroleague executives, managers, and stakeholders were interviewed for a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

The first round was done in 2018 to get a better context of the organization's processes and decisions regarding the sponsorship process and the impact of the digital transformation phenomenon. Additional stakeholders were also interviewed to build a richer context for the case. During the 2020 because of the health issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic no interviews were conducted. The second round of interviews was in done in 2021 with a focus on the novel digitalization processes implemented at the Final Four, as a result from an unexpected and accelerated digitalization due to the health crisis. The information was then complemented by a third round of interviews in 2022. The last round followed, with minor adaptations, the interview script of the 2018 interviews to see the evolution during the years and how the digitalization on the sponsorship process has evolved.

The first contact with the organization was a face to face meeting at the Euroleague Headquarters with one of the senior directors where the author of this dissertation and her supervisor presented the case study research project. We were able to present the project as Euroleague Basketball and the La Salle – URL had a previous relationship by working in different projects together. We believe this helped to get access to the organization and get the internal approval for conducting the case study.

After getting the approval from the organization, the first interview was with this senior director who guided the author by referring different people in the organization that could be interesting to interview for the case study purposes. The senior director gave the names and emails of the people to be interviewed. From there, the Euroleague employees were contacted via email, further met in person. When speaking to the other Euroleague Basketball employees, they were asked for further referrals that can be related to the case study. Additional people within the organization, plus, people from IMG and other stakeholders were referred.

Interviews conducted with Euroleague Basketball representatives in 2018 were conducted in a face-to-face modality at their headquarters, while the interviews to the different stakeholders were video calls because of geographical limitations. The 2021 interviews were done by video call, 2022 interviews were some video calls and some face-to-face depending on the accessibility of the interviewee. All the interviews were recorded and the transcriptions were made using NVivo software tool and double checked by the author of this dissertation and another researcher following a denaturalized transcription narrative (Thompson, 2022).

Besides, some other informal conversations were held through the years with Euroleague Basketball employees, these were not recorded but notes were taken. The information gotten from these casual conversations are used to enrich the context of the case study research.

As mentioned, data was collected in three sets of time: Years 2018, 2021 and 2022. The first script was used for the semi-structured interviews in 2018 and 2022. The 2018 schedule was built based on the sponsorship life-cycle process shown by the literature including questions related to digitalization with the objective of knowing how digital technologies have impacted in this process. The last version used in the 2022 interviews was refined following Cornwell and Kwon (2020) sponsoring process model to understand the impact of digitalization in the different phases of a sponsorship life-cycle using the Euroleague Basketball case study.

Interview schedule script final version for 2018 and 2022 interview rounds:

Opening information

1. In the last years, how has Euroleague embraced technological changes? Are there processes that have changed because of technology?
2. Has any relationship with EB stakeholders, for example IMG, the clubs, media, sponsors, fans, have changed because of technological changes? How they are being modified?
3. Can you guide us on how a sponsorship life-cycle process works in Euroleague? Can you explain the process?

Initial decision: Structuring the sports sponsorship deal

4. How do you analyze the market to identify prospective sponsors?
 - 4.1. Which criteria do you follow to sign a sponsorship deal with a sponsor?
5. How is IMG involved in this process of negotiation with sponsors?
 - 5.1. Is IMG involved through the sponsorship life-cycle process?
 - 5.2. Are the clubs involved through the sponsorship negotiation?

Sponsorship-linked marketing activities

6. Where the activation part begins after closing a deal?
 - 6.1. Which criteria do you follow to choose digital activation strategies?
 - 6.2. Do you have digital activation strategies jointly with club sponsors?
7. Which digital actions you carry out during the Turkish Airlines Euroleague?
 - 7.1. What technologies are being adopted?
 - 7.2. Which are your main digital activation strategies for fan engagement?

Measurement and evaluation

8. Do you measure the success of a sponsorship deal based on ROI or ROO?
 - 8.1. How do you measure ROI or ROO?
 - 8.2. Which KPIs do you have/use related to measure digital strategies?
 - 8.3. How are these metrics calculated?
 - 8.4. How do you measure sponsorship performance in the digital context?
9. How has technology changed your sponsorship life-cycle process?
 - 9.1. How digitalization has changed the post-event/follow-up relation with the sponsors?

Subsequent decisions - reflection

10. Which opportunities or risks are the digital transformation and new technologies generating in the sports industry?
11. Which is the biggest challenge you have faced because of the technological changes/digitalization?
12. How do you think the relationship with your stakeholders has changed because of digitalization?

The second round of interviews questionnaire was written following the EMBOK event life-cycle process and were done to all the departments in Euroleague Basketball involved in the organization of the Final Four event for a holistic view: marketing and communication, events, innovation, digital, partnerships, and business intelligence and analytics departments.

Interview schedule script for the semi-structured 2021 Final Four interviews:

Initiation

1. What were the main objectives of the 2021 EuroLeague Final Four, as opposed to the ones from previous editions due to executing the event behind closed doors?

Planning

2. What changes in the planning process were made considering the changes that the COVID pandemic brought?

3. What were the critical activities considered for this year's edition in comparison to the ones from previous editions?
4. What are the usual key performance indicators (KPIs) that allow the Final Four organizers to make an event evaluation? How they change for this 2021 F4?

Implementation and the event

5. Which were the threats or challenges in the event execution compared with past editions?
6. How were Euroleague digital channels used this 2021 F4? What were the most remarkable differences from previous editions?

Closure

7. What was the most important aspect to consider when doing this year's post-event evaluation as compared to other editions?

Participant descriptions and relationship

As stated, the main informants in the case study were Euroleague Basketball employees, supported by a couple of informants from their joint venture company – IMG and other stakeholders to bring better context to the study.

The 2018 and 2021 interviews were done to high level employees to understand the phenomenon from a more strategic level. The 2022 interviews were done as a follow up of the 2018 interviews to get the perspective of the tactical and operational side of the process where theoretical sampling saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was achieved as few new information was gathered suggesting sufficient data was collected to allow the exploration of the studied phenomenon by reaching sampling adequacy (Bowen, 2008). Besides, from a pragmatic perspective, time was also considered as the data collection period was planned to end in 2022 (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Table 9 shows the summary of the participants. To comply with the ethical guidelines, anonymity is given to the informants (Gioia *et al.*, 2013) by assigning them an ID code.

	ID	Company	Position	Date	Language	Minutes	Format
1	C-1	Euroleague Basketball	C-Level	2018	English	41''	Face-to-face
2	SD-1	Euroleague Basketball	Senior Director	2018	Spanish	42''	Face-to-face
3	SD-2	Euroleague Basketball	Senior Director	2018	English	38''	Face-to-face
4	D-1	Euroleague Basketball	Director	2018	English	28''	Face-to-face
5	SM-1	Euroleague Basketball	Senior Manager	2018	English	27''	Face-to-face
6	VP-1	IMG Limited Media	Vice President	2018	English	31''	Video call
7	D-2	IMG Limited Media	Director	2018	English	29''	Video call
8	VP-2	Blinkfire Analytics	Vice President	2018	Spanish	15''	Audio call
9	C-2	FC Bayern Basketball	C-Level	2018	English	52''	Video call

10	D-3	7Days (Chipita)	Director	2019	English	19"	Video call
11	FC-1	Euroleague Basketball	C-Level (Former)	2021	English	26"	Video call
12	D-4	Euroleague Basketball	Director	2021	English	39"	Video call
13	D-5	Euroleague Basketball	Director	2021	English	27"	Video call
14	SM-2	Euroleague Basketball	Senior Manager	2021	Spanish	58"	Video call
15	SM-3	Euroleague Basketball	Senior Manager	2021	English	33"	Video call
16	SM-4	Euroleague Basketball	Senior Manager	2021	English	34"	Video call
17	M-1	Euroleague Basketball	Manager	2021	English	33"	Video call
18	SM-2	Euroleague Basketball	Senior Manager	2022	English	22"	Face-to-face
19	M-2	Euroleague Basketball	Manager	2022	English	55"	Face-to-face
20	M-1	Euroleague Basketball	Manager	2022	English	19"	Audio call
21	EL-1	Euroleague Basketball	Entry level	2022	English	21"	Face-to-face

Table 9: Details of the interviews in the case study

To better follow the position of the interviewee when reading the quotations at the CHAPTER 4: THE CASE STUDY and CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS sections, note that the ID assigned to each person corresponds to their position level:

- Chief level position: C
- Senior director position: SD
- Director position: D
- Senior manager position: SM
- Manager position: M
- Entry level position: EL
- Vice president position: VP

Also note that interview 14 and 18 have the same ID: SM-2 and interviews 17 and 20 ID: M-1 as the participants were interviewed twice, in 2021 and again in 2022. Besides, the acronym of the company will be used to better identify the informant information. For example, it is used "direct quotation from the interviewee" (EB, SD-2, 2018) This means the interviewee was a person from Euroleague Basketball, the position is Senior Director, and the interview was held in 2018.

The semi-structured interviews are the main source of data for this case study (Gioia et al., 2013). Additional information was gathered and analyzed to contrast the data with the informants responses, to build an accurate time-line of events, and to be able to triangulate data (Yin, 2006). Two additional methods were used, observation and archiving analysis.

Observation protocol

Participant observation was conducted at different points in time, mainly during the Final Four games weekends in 2018, 2019, and 2021 as during the Final Four events the most representative sponsorship-linked marketing activities are held. The researcher was allowed to

follow Euroleague Basketball executives during the 2018 and 2019 Final Four games weekend and to attend to all the meetings and events previous to the Final Four and to the post-games sessions to understand the decision-making process and the different activities developed by the organization during the Final Four weekend.

At the same time the researcher attended to the 2018 and 2019 Fan Zone, the physical space where Euroleague Basketball deploy sponsorship strategies aimed to attract fans and bring brand exposure to the sponsors. The objective of attending was to observe the different activities the brands do for brand exposure and identify the fan behavior with the different activities proposed. Besides, see which of the activities involved digital technologies and how they were used for increasing fan engagement. Empirical data was gathered by taking notes in diaries and photographs and videos when attending physically to the arena and the fan Zone.

The 2020 Final Four was cancelled because of the COVID-19 health crisis, hence no observation was done that year.

The 2021 Final Four matches were celebrated behind closed doors and Euroleague Basketball broadcasted the games and shared content in digital platforms only. Two researchers, the author of this dissertation and another researcher from the sports specialization program, followed the 2021 Final Four games and activities during the games' weekend and the previous day by monitoring the six Euroleague online official channels to observe the different activities and broadcasting and taking notes and print screens. The channels were: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and Euroleague Basketball official website. The 2022 Final Four was held in open doors as regularly, still, the researcher was able only to follow the online activities and broadcasting of the event mainly for follow-up purposes as the 2022 Final Four event it out of the scope of this case study.

Archiving analysis

To complement the information gathered, secondary data was also analyzed by reviewing documents and news publicly available and reports shared by Euroleague Basketball which contain metrics and analytics of their digital channels and general information regarding their organization.

The main analyzed data set is constituted by the organization's press releases. Over 1.150 press releases between October 2018 (first date available) and July 2022 were found available at Euroleague basketball website. The authors went through all of the publications finding 110 articles related to digital technologies, digital innovations, sponsorship, or key

announcements that affect the entire competition (for example the suspension of the league games due to the COVID-19 health crisis). These 110 were selected for an in-depth analysis.

Being able to follow the press releases published during the 5 years of this longitudinal case study have brought the opportunity to develop an accurate temporary line for the construction of the case study context.

As the case study is longitudinal, a visual representation of the data collected at the different points in time for the three described methods is illustrated below in **Figure 7** for a better understanding of the different stages.

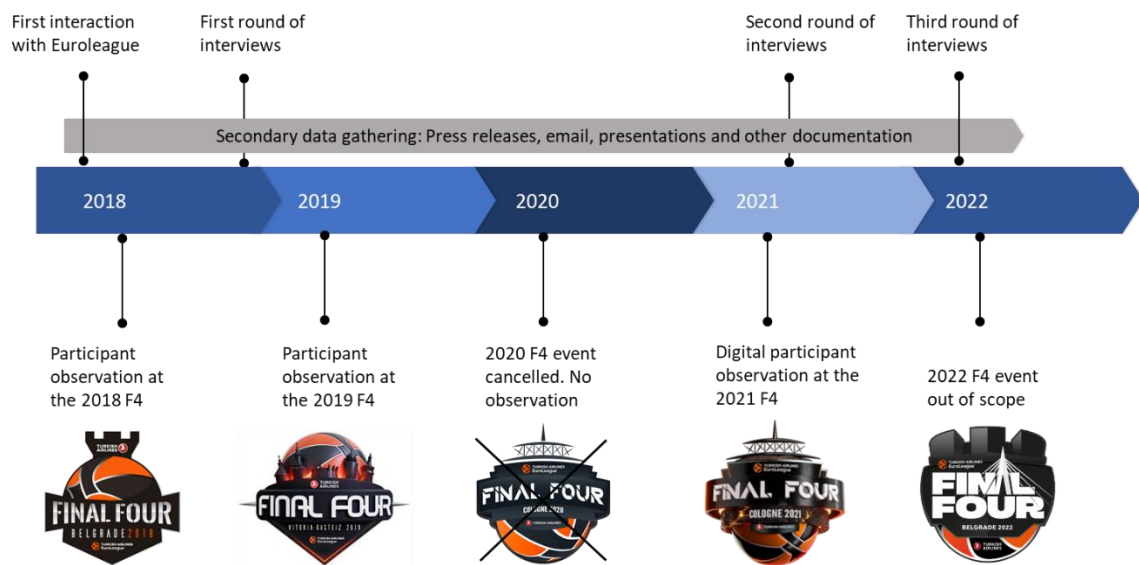


Figure 7: Graphic representation of the data collection phases

3.4 Reporting phase

3.4.1 Case description

The researched case study in this dissertation aims to understand the impact of the digital transformation phenomenon in the sponsorship life-cycle process and its impact on the organization.

3.4.2 Empirical material interpretation and analysis protocol

The primary source of data for the case study are semi-structured interviews with Euroleague Basketball key people such as executives, directors, and managers and other Euroleague’s stakeholders involved in the digital transformation process of the organization.

As stated, the interviews are divided in three different moments bringing a total of 21 interviews. All interviews were analyzed twice for coding generation using the NVivo software. Following an abductive logic, the interviews' scripts were designed based on the literature review knowledge and so the first iteration of analysis followed the pre-conceived concepts found previously in the literature. After analyzing the 21 interviews, a second data analysis iteration was done following an inductive logic using in-vivo coding.

The objective of doing an inductive second iteration was to make sure to get all the informants' data that we may be missing in the first round of coding in case some relevant data was said and was not captured in the first round.

When both iterations were completed, a total of 96 codes were obtained: 25 from the abductive iteration and 71 from the inductive iteration. Using the abductive iteration results as a basis, the codes from both iterations were analyzed and put together in order to obtain a unique list of codes to proceed with the analysis and find the sub-themes and themes where duplicates were eliminated.

For the interviews done in 2018 and 2022 regarding the sponsorship life-cycle process digitalization 43 codes were identified which were then categorized in 9 sub-themes, resulting in three themes. For the 2021 Final Four interviews the codes list counts 12 in three sub-themes which fit in one theme.

After numerous rounds of iterations and analysis of the findings, the final list has 16 codes identified within 4 sub-themes in two themes. Details can be seen at CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS.

3.5 Summary of the methodological aspects

To summarize the methodological approach of this dissertation it can be said that an interpretivist philosophy is adopted using an abductive logic and a longitudinal case study based on qualitative methodologies fits best for the exploratory research aimed in this dissertation. For a clear illustration of the research philosophy and approach of the research inquiry presented in this dissertation **Figure 8** presents the methodological approach summary following Saunders *et al.* (2007) 'research onion'.

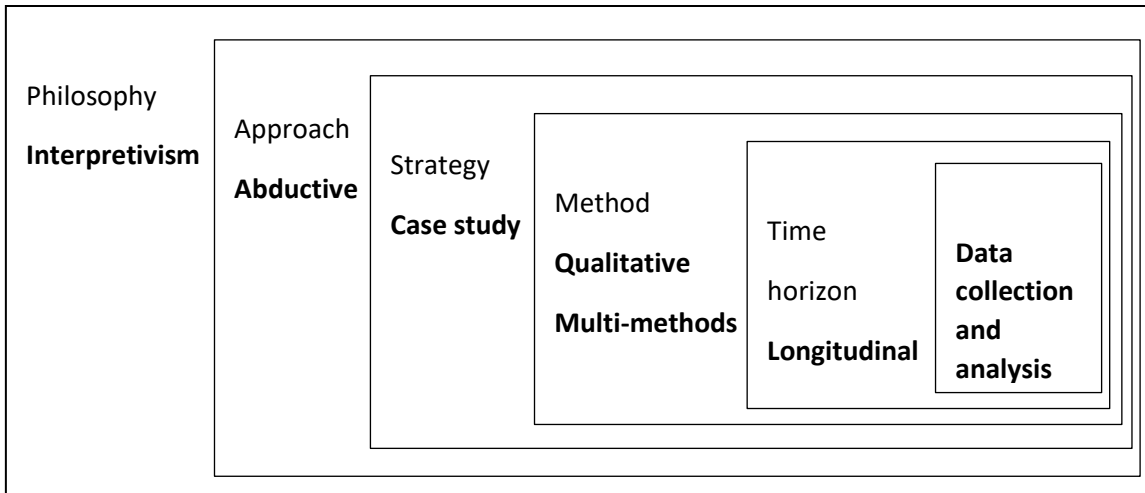


Figure 8: Methodological summary for this dissertation

The selected case study for this research is Euroleague Basketball. Data was collected from 2018 to 2022 to bring insights from a longitudinal perspective and using three different qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews, archive analysis, and participant observation.

CHAPTER 4: THE CASE STUDY

This chapter aims to bring contextual background on the case study context by chronologically sharing Euroleague's Basketball story. Information regarding the organization management and structure is also shared. Besides, the key events and decisions taken from 2018 to early 2022 are also described to bring deeper context of the organization's digital transformation journey influenced by the changing digital landscape. Empirical data gathered during the case study research is also used in this chapter to help share a more accurate and detailed story to build a deeper context.

4.1 Euroleague Basketball: The organization

Euroleague Basketball (EB) was constituted as a limited liability company in the year 2000 under the name of Euroleague Commercial Assets S.A. (ECA), following Luxembourg's legal system, and setting their headquarters in Barcelona, Spain. After 22 years EB have become international leaders in the sports industry organizing the clubs' top professional basketball competitions in Europe: the Turkish Airlines Euroleague and the 7DAYS EuroCup. Besides, EB organizes the sport's premier under-18 showcase: the EB Adidas Next Generation Tournament, manages the CSR One Team program, and runs the EB Sports Business MBA⁴.

Since its creation, EB has been disrupting the basketball industry by challenging the traditional sports federation model. Until late 90's the International Federation of Basketball (FIBA) organized the top European basketball competitions centralizing clubs' television rights and commercialization strategies giving back to them a small percentage of the earnings (Dávila and Haak, 2011). This situation generated the bigger teams to question the revenue distribution model and commanded more market share. By 2000 several clubs of different European countries terminated their participation in the FIBA competitions wanting to take a more active role commercializing their clubs and leagues by playing more games and having more marketing and sponsorship opportunities. Summarizing, a new league was created with the biggest

⁴ About Euroleague Basketball [accessed 14/09/2022]. Available at: <https://www.euroleaguebasketball.net/about/>

European basketball clubs transferring their commercialization rights to the new organization: Euroleague Commercial Assets S.A. (ECA)

The company was constituted in 2000 in a joint venture with European leagues and clubs disrupting the traditional European sports model by: transferring ownership of the league from federations to clubs; breaking with promotion and relegation models by granting long-term licenses to the clubs in key markets (a semi-closed league structure) according to economic and market results rather than sporting results (EB internal documents).

Today 75% of Euroleague Commercial Assets S.A. is owned and administered by some of the most renowned European clubs, they are: Anadolu Efes S.K. FC Barcelona Bàsquet, Saski Baskonia, Fenerbahçe S.K., Maccabi Tel Aviv B.C., Pallacanestro Olimpia Milano, Real Madrid Baloncesto, Panathinaikos B.C., Olympiacos B.C., Basketball Club Žalgiris, ASVEL Basket, PBC CSKA Moscow, and the FC Bayern München Basketball. The remaining 25% is owned by ULEB (Union of European Leagues of Basketball) and some domestic leagues (EB internal communication).

When ECA started, the organization was focused on human resources, operations, and legal leaving the commercialization of the rights to the board of directors who gave a third party the TV rights management. By 2009, Euroleague Properties S.A. (EP) was created with full control of the commercial assets of the league and from that point in time they managed and sold the league's rights expanding the workforce from the operational side to the commercial side (Dávila and Haak, 2011). EB started operating with 7 employees, now in 2022 the organization has over 80 people plus the audiovisual production staff that sits in London as part of IMG.

By 2009 the Euroleague Basketball brand was gaining recognition and the commercial value of the competition had increased sufficiently surfacing the need of a re-design in the licensing agreement and the decision taking processes management in the organization which ended in a change in the licensing agreement granting long-term licenses to top-tier clubs enabling the establishment on long-term strategic goals and more commercial agreements (Dávila and Haak, 2011).

As a sports property within the entertainment business and willing to continue growing the business, in 2016 Euroleague Basketball signed a joint venture with the global corporation IMG Media Limited (an Endeavor company) for 10 years and created Euroleague Ventures S.A. (EV).

With the creation of Euroleague Ventures S. A. the business model changed and the way it works is: all the clubs that participate in the Euroleague competitions (the Turkish Airlines Euroleague and the 7Days EuroCup) transfer some of their commercial rights to ECA for a centralized management. That is, the clubs transfer the entirety of the media rights and audiovisual rights for a centralized management. Besides, the clubs transfer part of their sponsorship rights to be centrally managed by ECA as well. Also transfer their IP rights on a non-exclusive basis. By IP rights means trademarks, logos, name of the club, and image of the players. So, all the rights related to media are transferred on an exclusive basis, sponsorship part of it is transferred on exclusive basis, and IP rights are transferred on a non-exclusive basis. Then, Euroleague Commercial Assets transfers those rights to Euroleague Ventures (EB SD-2, 2018).

So, the economic distribution will be, every euro that is generated by EV, after covering costs, is distributed to the clubs. The clubs get their share from EV depending on two main factors. First, part of the money available for distribution is based on core performance. Basically, the clubs get revenues based on their performance on the court, bid per game won or bid per being at the Final Four games (below detailed information about what is the Final Four). That is, the more a team advances in the competition, the more money the teams get. And the second factor is the market value. Meaning that it depends on how much the market in which the club operates generates for EB (EB SD-2, 2018). For example, Spain and Italy are big markets for EB, but Greece, Turkey and Serbia are core markets for EB with millions of fans which can be converted into better broadcasting deals (EB M-2, 2022).

At this point there are three different companies that make up Euroleague Basketball: Euroleague Commercial Assets S.A. (ECA), Euroleague Properties S.A. (EP), and Euroleague Ventures S.A. (EV).

ECA is the limited liability company that is co-owned by the aforementioned clubs and leagues and which is governed by the General Assembly constituted by the ECA's shareholders. ECA supervises all related with EB competitions, coordinates with the clubs, and has the authority to make decisions and confer functions on the Shareholders Executive Board. EP is controlled by ECA and is the liability company in charge of organizing both competitions, the EuroLeague and the EuroCup, and has the right to commercialize all their properties. EV is the liability company founded jointly with IMG Media Limited which has for objectives to increase awareness and economic value of the competitions and the clubs. In the agreement EV stays in

charge of the management, administration, promotion, and commercialization of all the Euroleague Basketball competitions as EP assigned its responsibilities to EV⁵.

For this case study purposes, when we mention the organization as Euroleague Basketball (EB) we are referring to Euroleague Ventures S.A. as we can summarize that the ECA is the owner and head of the EB governance model and EV will be the executing part of the company which is the focus of this research. The ownership distribution model can be seen in **Figure 9**.

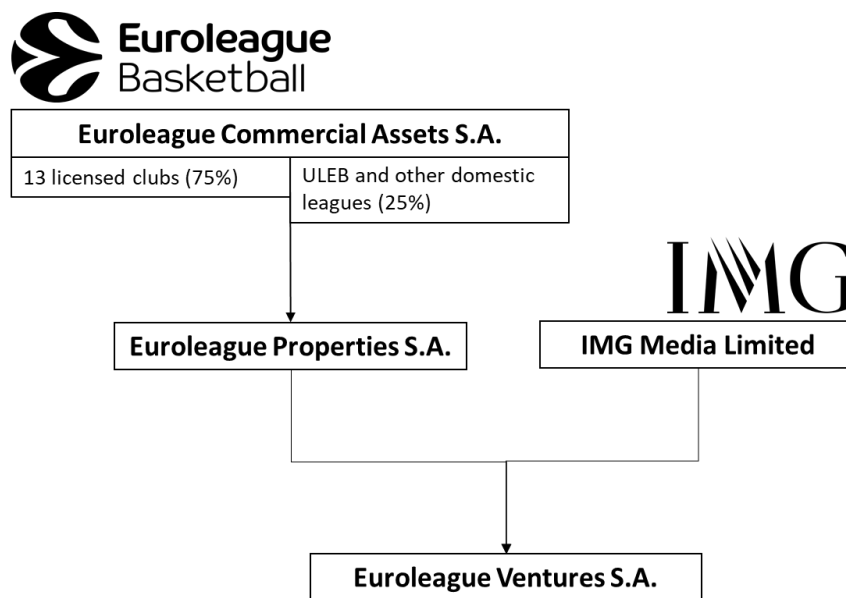


Figure 9: EB ownership model

The joint venture with IMG brought three main advantages: uplifting the quality of European basketball, investment into digital, and in-house control over the entire value chain (EB internal documents). The key activities EV share can be summarized in: broadcasting and distribution; media production and content; worldwide sales; partner activations; and IP rights management of clubs and players.

Since the joint venture with IMG, the Turkish Airlines Euroleague had over a 125% growth in revenues since 2016 until the end of the 2021-2022 season, a 31% interest growth amongst fans comparing 2018 – 2019 with the 2021-2022, and it is expected between a +15% - +20% revenue growth from 2021-2022 to the 2022-2023 season (EB internal documents).

⁵ 2016-2017 Turkish Airlines Euroleague Bylaws [accessed 01/10/2022]. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170113013107/http://www.euroleaguebasketball.net/rs/79tbcueu9ady8xkb/84bd1f8d-134d-42a0-a8ee-cd688d29aaa2/0d5/filename/2016-17-euroleague-bylaws-book-15-sept-2016.pdf>

Currently Euroleague Basketball has four main revenue streams: TV rights and media content (61%); sponsorship – partnerships (27%); the Final Four event (6%); and other sources such as merchandising (6%) (EB internal documents). As a reference of EB economic growth, in 2011 EB revenue was around the 25,5 million euros (Dávila and Haak, 2011). Through the years a continuous growth can be seen expecting to reach the income of nearly 90 million euros by 2023 (EB internal documents). See **Figure 10** for details.

When agreeing to the EV joint venture the main role of each organization was clear: IMG will lead the media rights commercialization and EB the sponsorship agreements. Still, both organizations collaborate in both revenue streams. Partnering with IMG accelerated Euroleague Basketball growth through commercializing media rights, reaching agreements with television and other media partners for example, and leveraging the audiovisual production.

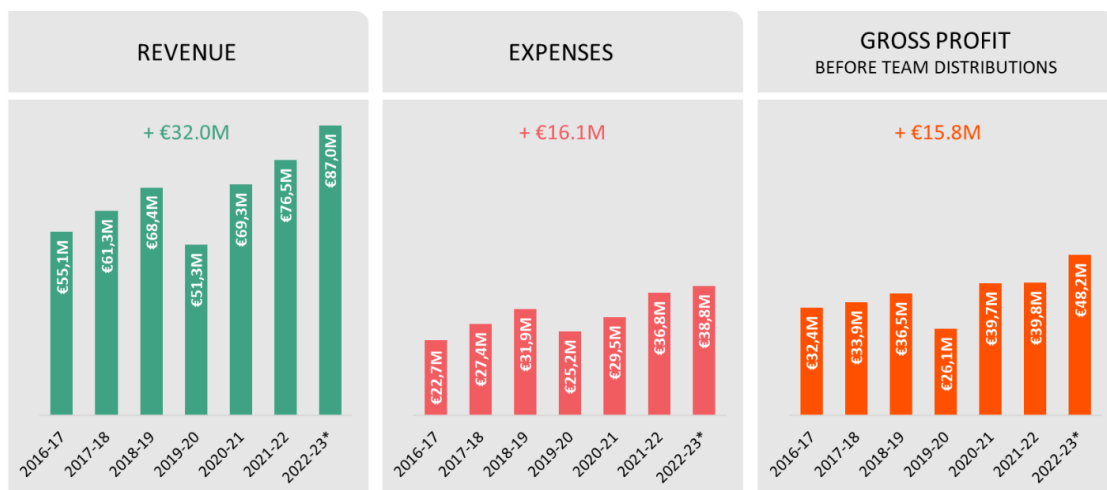


Figure 10: EB economic growth in the last seasons. Source EB internal documents.

“The partnership with IMG basically transformed the way we were doing things. We now have access to resources that we never had before... They have improved the capacity of the league to reach to new and existing audience in a better way and to present the product in a much more appealing and sophisticated way as well.” (EB SD-2, 2018)

“We also centralized and unified the production of Euroleague, so in the past the Euroleague games they were mainly produced by the host broadcaster in each territory... So, one of the first things we did within this joint venture, we have a big company here at London with thousand people which is called IMG productions, and those guys are doing the entire production for Euroleague so the production quality, formatting the content, made a significant boost in [broadcasting] quality.” (IMG VP-1, 2018)

Regarding the sponsorship revenue stream, partnering with IMG also positively impacted on the results although Euroleague leads the sponsorship department.

“There are obviously many synergies because we give them [IMG] support in the sale of media rights... And on the other hand, our sponsorship, it is true that the most important part of the sale of sponsorship remains in Euroleague, but they do provide some conversations with brands, some contacts. Then in some cases they are also the ones who have brought an agreement with the sponsors.” (EB SM-2, 2021)

“Last year we then started tackling the sponsorship program and we did some changes there. So that led to the fact that, overall in sponsorship we doubled our revenue in the first two years which is an outstanding result.” (IMG VP-1, 2018)

Euroleague Basketball joint venture with IMG push their content to be at the forefront of media production turning EB sports competitions into holistic entertainment products.

“We are working with all sorts of experts across the entire company to see how we can make Euroleague a bulletproof property for the future.” (IMG VP-1, 2018)

The third source of EB revenue is the Final Four (F4) event which is celebrated yearly as the final games for the Turkish Airlines Euroleague (TAE). EB organizes three competitions: The Turkish Airlines Euroleague (TAE) which is the main male competition where the best 18 teams in Europe compete for the championship at the end of the season at the F4 weekend games. The other organized competition is the 7Days EuroCup which can be compared to a secondary division tournament where the season’s winner gets promoted to the TAE. The third competition is the Adidas Next generation tournament (ANGT), the under-18 tournament that showcases young talent.

The TAE championship is the top and most representative competition within the ones organized by the EB being Turkish Airlines the title sponsor of the competition since 2010. Eighteen clubs compete during the regular season in a round-robin format starting October each year aiming to reach the playoffs and finally a spot at the Final Four - the season finale games where the semifinals and finals are played every May during a weekend of celebrations hosted by a different European city each year. To help illustrate the Final Four experience, **Figure 11** shows examples of how the arenas are dressed for the Final Four events and **Figures 12** and **13** show a Final Four game seen from the benches.



Figure 11: Arena branding at the 2018 and 2019 F4. Source: Own stock.



Figure 12: 2019 Final Four game. Source: Own stock.



Figure 13: 2019 Final Four champion. Source: Own stock.

Besides hosting the championship games, during a F4 weekend different activities can be found such as the Fan Zone (**Figure 14**), a space created for brand exposure and fan engagement where locals and fans can spend the day sharing a basketball environment and participating in different activities and games hosted by EB and the partnering brands. In parallel, there are other different events such as press conferences (**Figure 15**), awards ceremonies (**Figure 16**), or the final games of the U-18 Adidas Next Generation Tournament.



Figure 14: 2019 FanZone assembly day at Plaza España, Vitoria. Source: Own stock.



Figure 15: Press conference at the 2018 F4. Source: Own stock.



Figure 16: Before the awards ceremony began at the 2018 F4. Source: Own stock.

Since 2001 the F4 has been celebrated each year except for the 2020 edition which had to be cancelled because of the COVID-19 health crisis, then the 2021 games were celebrated behind closed doors for the first time in the league history still because of COVID-19 regulations. It is not the first time that the organization had to face external challenges when organizing their flagship competition but bringing the whole fan experience to digital channels was an unprecedented challenge.

While the ticketing revenue of the season's regular games is managed directly by the clubs, for the F4 it is managed by Euroleague being a source of revenue jointly with selling the games broadcasting rights and sponsorship.

The TAE and the F4 are broadcast to all five continents through different media channels such as the OTT platform DAZN in Spain or Fox Sports in Australia, and direct through their own

OTT platform EuroLeagueTV. By 2022 the media rights for the event were sold to over 190 countries around the world, attracting audiences in the millions across multiple digital media platforms providing global exposure.

4.2 Euroleague Basketball digital transformation journey: zooming into the last 5 years

There are external factors that have impacted Euroleague Basketball forcing the organization to change and adapt. In the last years it can be said that the main ones are the evolution of digital technologies with the entry of new players in the industry, the changes in consumer consumption habits and behavior, and the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions to sports events. For EB technological advances set the rhythm of society evolution and as being part of an ecosystem, they have to be part of the changes.

According to EB executives, digital technologies and new media bring opportunities to sports properties for fan engagement, data collection, measurement, monetization, or broadcasting.

“What we need to make sure is that every stakeholder from fans, to coaches, referees, players, staff here at the Euroleague, sponsors, everyone understands that we need to go forward and forward and forward and embrace technology.” (EB C-1, 2018)

Around 2015, the entry of new digital players into the sports industry affected EB in a direct way specially in terms of media rights as for example Amazon, Facebook, or Twitter are buying live rights of sports games. In terms of opportunities, the entrance of different players to the sports ecosystem brings more commercialization options.

“Amazon was not necessary interested in sports, they were just selling products, but now they brought some media rights, they're doing e-commerce sites, they're sponsoring some properties, having a player like that - a new player like that - in the industry is obviously good for everyone.” (IMG D-2, 2018)

Besides, data play an important role as these platforms manage big data about the consumers. For example, Amazon and social media platforms are successful in managing consumers' data as they are able to target people with specific content offering based on the consumer behavior information they have from using their platforms, which for a sports organization can be challenging to get (IMG, D-2, 2018).

“Facebook, Google, Instagram, all these people know your consumer better, your fan, better than you.” (EB SD-1, 2018)

In this sense, EB realized that changes must be made regarding how they were used to doing things. For example, TV broadcasting rights give economic stability, but the business model based on television broadcasting rights was no longer enough as EB started to face audience fragmentation into different platforms and the key to overcome the situation was by knowing their fan base such as the new digital players in the market do (EB SD-1, 2018).

“People love sports, people are very emotional about their favorite players, about their favorite league, so they are more than willing to give you clean data in exchange for whatever service you provide to them.” (IMG VP-1, 2018)

In this sense, there is an opportunity for sports to capture fan data and having a tool to gather and manage fan data is the first step to know better the fans. One of EB’s initiatives was the creation of a Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) to better understand the fans and consumers, how they behave, where are they, who are they, and how to reach them. The intention of this CRM is to centralize fan information which is divided in different platforms.

“We have a number of touch points with the fans, where they are consuming or buying products from us, all of that information is fragmented. So, the clubs have one information, our OTT platform has one database with that information, our fantasy games have another database with that information. We are trying to put all that together, so that will allow us to identify individual fans. Where do they have a relationship with us?” (EB SD-2, 2018)

Data play a big role going forward in terms of what it can offer in terms of benefits for EB: “whoever actually owns data and knows how to interpret it has a massive advantage over everyone else” (IMG D-2, 2018). For EB executives, deeply knowing their fan base by gathering clear data and managing their information correctly can help them take right decisions (EB SD-1, 2018); convert into sales (EB SM-1, 2018); deliver better targeted content to segmented fans (EB SD-2, 2018); allow the sponsorship team to target specific brands in certain categories (EB SD-2, 2018); and bring additional commercial value for sponsors so they can better tailor their product advertisement (EB D-1, 2018).

In documentation shared by EB in February 2021 they define themselves as “a sports entertainment business committed to innovation, disruption and growth”⁶. In 2022 the EB strategic priorities were⁷:

- “Be a League that strives for excellence within a culture of continuous improvement.

⁶ Euroleague Basketball Tech Challenge briefing presentation presented at La Salle University. February 2021. Page 2.

⁷ Taken from an EB interview follow-up email received from a Senior Director on the 22nd of September, 2022

- Become a truly pan European league developing an enhanced presence in major markets.
- Engage, entertain and excite people about the Euroleague”.

This was translated into four “pillars”⁸:

1. **“Brand:** Repositioning of the brand.
2. **Territorial expansion:** Accelerating growth in strategic markets (France, Germany, Italy, and the UK).
3. **Players:** Elevating the profile of the players and establishing a ‘business partners’ culture with them.
4. **Digital:** Transforming the business and embracing the digital opportunity to better connect with fans and grow revenues. Data at the center”.

In line with the fourth pillar, several actions have been taken in the organization to digitalize processes, leverage relations with the clubs, and innovate using different technologies for fan engagement and data management.

“You have to constantly be innovating because the whole digital space changes month by month. And that's a challenge to keep up with, to make sure that your product is up to speed with the other products in the market so, it is a challenge and an opportunity.” (EB D-1, 2018)

“Six years ago [2012], to EB the product was TV, TV, TV, and more TV and getting out the most possible in terms of advertising, and now is all about branded content, digital platforms, and getting powerful CRMs. Basically, it is all about digital now.” (EB SM-1, 2018)

Going back to 2018, when the research for this case study began, the organization was already executing different efforts to keep pace with the fast-moving digital environment. Some examples are the partnership with SAP Analytics to organize a hackathon with the objective of mixing cloud and machine learning technologies for improving basketball data storytelling⁹; the launch of *The Journey* behind the scenes broadcast series on YouTube jointly with five of Euroleague’s clubs as part of *The Insider Euroleague Documentary Series*¹⁰; or the partnership with StubHub, a global fan-to-fan digital marketplace, as official ticketing partner for the F4¹¹.

A different initiative from the EB marketing department was to partner with La Salle – URL university in collaboration with La Salle Technova Barcelona to find technological startups that can potentially work with EB and leverage their digital initiatives with the objectives of

⁸ Taken from an EB interview follow-up email received from a Senior Director on the 22nd of September, 2022

⁹ SAP and Euroleague Basketball partner in data storytelling Hackathon [accessed 21/09/2022]. Available at: https://mediacentre.euroleague.net/mediacentre/en/press_releases/single/175/no?app=2

¹⁰ The Journey: a new chapter in the EuroLeague story [accessed 21/09/2022]. Available at: https://mediacentre.euroleague.net/mediacentre/en/press_releases/single/118/no?app=2

¹¹ StubHub and Euroleague Basketball strike primary ticketing partnership [accessed 21/09/2022]. Available at: https://mediacentre.euroleague.net/mediacentre/en/press_releases/single/79/no?app=2

increasing direct or indirect revenue and improve fan experience. The partnership lasted three editions (2018, 2019, and 2020) celebrating the *Euroleague Tech Challenge* (**Figure 17**), changing the name in 2020 to *Fan XP Innovation Challenge* incorporating the initiative into the 4YFN at the Mobile World Conference¹². From 2021 the Fan XP innovation challenge continued to be executed but in a different format during the F4 weekend.

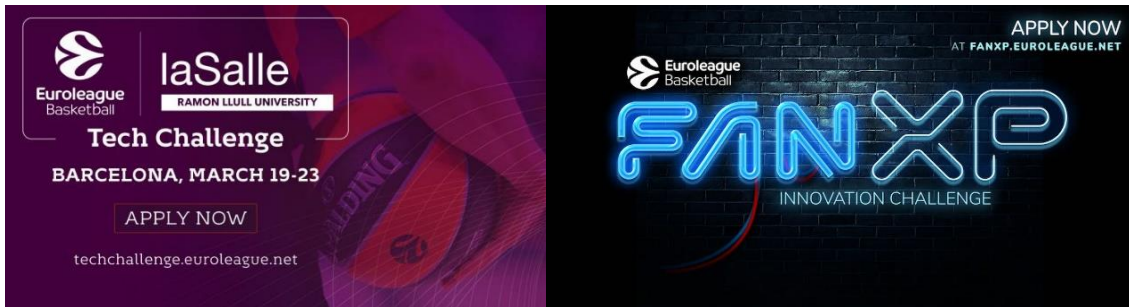


Figure 17: Print screens of examples of online advertising of the challenges.

The challenges brought together over 10 startups from different countries in each edition where they presented their final pitches at the Euroleague headquarters (**Figure 18**) after working in improving their product jointly with the organization. Outcomes included EB partnering with some of startups for product testing or as services providers such as *Content Stadium* who are regular providers of EB creating content in a more automatized way, or the finalist of the Fan XP edition *YBVR* who provided the technology to stream the championship games in virtual reality for the first time at the 2021 F4 (EB M-1, 2022).



Figure 18: Before the final pitches at the Euroleague Tech Challenge at EB headquarters. Source: Own stock.

¹² Euroleague Basketball's startup challenge allies with the world's leading tech conference 4YFN [accessed 21/09/2022]. Available at: https://mediacentre.euroleague.net/mediacentre/en/press_releases/single/854/no?app=2

In 2020 it can be said that EB had two main milestones and one external challenge to overcome. The first one was the decision of creating a digital transformation fund (DTF) to support 12 of the TAE clubs to grow their market revenues by modernizing and improving their digital systems¹³.

“Three years ago [2019], we decided that we needed to make an investment for starting the digital transformation fund of the Euroleague. It had two directions or two goals. One was to create the fund to help teams bridge the gap between their current capabilities and the new capabilities that can be achieved with the digitalization process mainly in the partnerships and marketing area. And then the other objective was to invest in upgrading the digital resources.” (EB M-1, 2022)

The digital transformation fund started with the re-design of EB official website and app and the upgrade of the CRM system (EB M-1, 2022) as before the CRM was only used in a B-to-C level, for managing fan data, and since it is used for managing the sponsorship sales pipeline as well for a better follow-up and visibility of the process (EB SM-2, 2021).

The second milestone, aligned to upgrading digital resources was the creation of the Business Intelligence and Analytics (BI&A) department in early March. The BI&A is a transversal department which serves all areas in the organization centralizing specific functions such as research, data analytics, and reporting providing data intelligence to the other departments for better decision-making processes (EB SM-2, 2021).

In order to have accurate, reliable, and complete data, the BI&A department started to work with the business intelligence tool *Tableau* with three objectives. The first one is “democratizing access to data” (EB SM-2, 2021). The creation of the department centralizes all the generated data to become a knowledge center and then transfer that knowledge to the different departments as the organization identified that some of the knowledge stayed in each department and there were duplicities.

“We started this project by automating all those reports that already existed in the organization, but were not efficient. In the sense that there were some reports on the performance of digital channels, but they were in an Excel format that was very difficult to share and interact with.” (EB SM-2, 2021)

Besides, those reports were being carried out in a manual way and therefore there were errors in the data generating few accuracy and missing data. With the automatization of these reports, data became more complete and the percentage of error went down to 1% which brings

¹³ Euroleague Basketball launches Digital Transformation Fund [accessed 21/09/2022]. Available at: https://mediacentre.euroleague.net/mediacentre/en/press_releases/single/1186/no?app=2

more reliable and accessible data (EB SM-2, 2021). The second objective is time saving. For example, with the tools provided by the BI&A department, the digital team in charge of managing social media platforms, saves 80% of the time they were spending in doing reports. This gives the opportunity to the digital team to dedicate more time to analyze a more reliable data (EB SM-2, 2021).

The third objective is “to become an organization that is based on data to make all decisions” (EB SM-2, 2021). In this sense, change the percentage of decisions based on perceptions and opinions to become data-driven. All these efforts in line with EB’s fourth pillar *transforming the business and embracing the digital opportunity to better connect with fans and grow revenues. Data at the center.*

By mid-March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic hit EB as it did with almost all sports properties. COVID-19 restrictions pushed EB into a management crisis as it forced them to cancel their core product – basketball games. EB was not able to finish the 2019-2020 TAE season as some of the games needed to be canceled because of government and travel restrictions that differ from one country to another. This was an important impediment as the TAE being a European league, 14 countries are involved in the competition. Summarizing, the calendar movements did not allow to finish the competition on time and EB wanted to respect the fairness of the competition so cutting the season at any point without having played all the games was not ‘fair play’ (EB D-4, 2021). So, not being able to finish the regular season plus the arena and government restrictions, for the first time the organization took the decision of cancelling a F4. Which represented ticketing loss and the need to re-negotiate broadcast and sponsorship agreements (EB D-5, 2021).

After the Cologne 2020 cancellation, in 2021 there still were major restrictions in arenas across Europe. Nevertheless, the 2020-2021 season started as regularly in October with all the games been played, most of them without audience because of each country’s particular legislations, but the most important thing is that the format did not need to be changed and the TAE had the opportunity to play the 2021 F4 games at the end of the season.

Celebrating a F4 behind closed doors for the first time was a challenge but also it presented an opportunity for EB to accelerate the digital transformation process they had already started. Euroleague Basketball gave a push to their current digital channels and adopted other new technologies to face the challenge of engaging the fans only through digital channels at the 2021 Final Four such as designing the event with a strong focus on broadcasting,

incorporating augmented reality technologies in their pre-game show which later was awarded with the first place at the International Festival of Events and Live Communication (BEA World) in the category of digital transformation¹⁴, using virtual reality streaming for the first time in a European professional sport competition and being the first professional basketball league to broadcast the games in TikTok, a hi-tech video 'fan wall', a 4 day live show through social media with unique content and influencers participation, or launching an NFTs collection without any precedents in the history of the organization.

“And in sports, and I guess in general business terms, if you don't adapt to change and post COVID has been telling us this, if you don't adapt to changing trends quick enough, you will sink. And we've seen this with different projects that we've done, and it's something that I'm taking in my heart and it's a really good lesson for us.” (EB M-2, 2022)

“It was stressful. But then when you see results at the end of the day, the results were really good and you are satisfied, you know, like “we've made it!” even though COVID.” (EB SM-4, 2021)

It is important to consider that probably the success in the increased engagement through digital channels is due as well because of the changes in consumer behavior during the pandemic period. Meaning that the fans and the general audience were consuming more content across different channels and when the lockdown ended, society in general continued to consume the same amount of content (EB M-2, 2022).

We will explore Euroleague Basketball's challenges and innovative solutions when celebrating the 2021 F4 at PART III of this chapter as executing their flagship event depending entirely on digital to reach the audience and fans resulting on being pioneers in the adoption of digital technologies deserves an entire section.

As for the following season, the 2021-2022, the restrictions were less as the time goes by and that season was also able to finish and after three years, the TAE celebrated the F4 with open doors, being able to have a FanZone and some other parallel events such as press conferences and awards' ceremonies.

For the Belgrade F4 2022 edition some of the digital initiatives were kept and improved such as the VR 360^o streaming and other new ones were added with the objective of giving the people and fans on location the best experience possible, but also increasing the fan

¹⁴ Final Four pregame shows win BEA World top prize [accessed 22/09/2022]. Available at: https://mediacentre.euroleague.net/mediacentre/en/press_releases/single/4791/no?app=2

engagement on digital platforms. One example would be the incorporation of a first trial into the metaverse with the virtual experience *Euroleague Land* and instant replay technologies.

“The meta world is also a big one. We're creating a meta world where anyone on location or at home, will be able to access a meta world and have fun and games with different fans as if they were at the 2022 Final Four. But imagine the Final Four in the meta world, and this is a way for us to connect with younger generations.” (EB M-2, 2022)

Euroleague Basketball’s digital journey has been leveraged by working with different suppliers such as agencies, startups and consulting companies which manage different technologies that help know better the fans through different data collection tools or measure their behavior and interests.

“All the digital transformation: to know your fans better, to know their consumer behavior, their purchase intention... there are companies dedicated to this.” (EB SD-1, 2018)

Besides Nielsen, EB has also worked with other consultancies such as Deloitte and N3XT sports, a consulting firm specialized in technology innovation who assisted EB in their digital transformation journey and help build the DTF. Some of the tech partners are for example Content Stadium, IQONIQ a fan engagement platform to help connect with younger audiences, or Blinkfire Analytics for social media engagement.

By mid-2022 the CRM that started managing fan data in 2018 now also manages properly the sponsorship sales pipeline, and now EB is planning to manage the media rights side of the business through the CRM as well to have an increased visibility on the different media rights deals (EB SM-2, 2022).

“This is what digitization is all about. It's about achieving growth and reach that you never had the chance to before. And for us, as a company using sponsorship as one of our main revenue models, it's a very important lesson in how we can adapt this and make sure that our sponsors are happy because in many ways, sponsorship also makes sure that your business will be successful in the near future.” (EB M-2, 2022)

4.3 Summary of the case study

The current chapter presented in detail the context of the case study: Euroleague Basketball. First, the history of Euroleague Basketball and its constitution as a company was shared. Also, the details about their operations, business model and revenue streams, core

activities such as the main sporting competitions, and the relationship with IMG were also described. Second, as the focus of this research is regarding the digitalization of the sponsorship life-cycle process, context regarding the digital transformation evolution of the organization in the last years is also presented for a better understanding of EB's initiatives to digitalize processes and willingness to innovate by using different digital technologies.

A visual representation EB history is summarized in a timetable and compared with the "eras in enabling technologies and emerging marketing tools" (Graesch *et al.*, 2021, p.11) to see the key moments in the organization in context with the digital technologies' chronological appearance. The timeline can be seen in **Figure 19**.

The timeline shows in the upper part the EB key moments since its creation in the year 2000 up to the 2021 Final Four. From the year 2015 and their joint venture with IMG, key initiatives regarding the adoption of technologies are seen, for example the search for tech partners with the Tech Challenge initiative, the creation of the Business Intelligence and Analytics department in 2020, and streaming 100% digital the 2021 Final Four.

Below the timeline, Graesch *et al.* (2021) four enabling technologies eras are illustrated in order to bring better context on what technologies were being used for marketing purposes and the evolution of EB. For example, by the time EB was created, organizations were already living in the "data-managed internet marketing era" and the use of CRMs and ecommerce sites were gaining popularity. Simultaneously, they were entering to the "user-enabled mobile era" where mobile applications and social media rise. By 2010, organizations entered to the "intelligent networking era" where tools such as web analytics, big data, blockchain, internet of things, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality were started to be used for marketing purposes. By this time, is when digitalization initiatives in EB can be clearly seen. More details comparing the evolution of the enabling technologies and EB's adoption of the marketing tools will be further discussed on CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION.

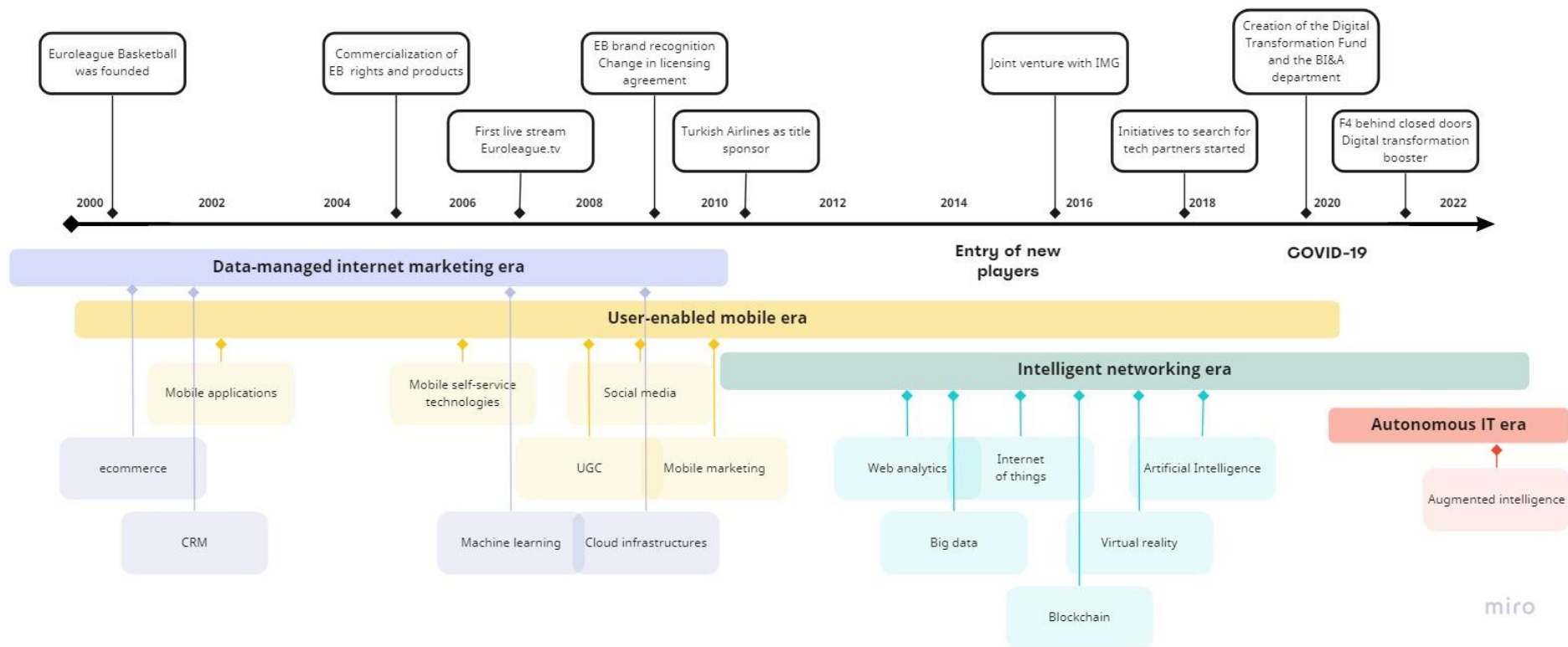


Figure 19: Euroleague Basketball timeline adding the evolution of digital technologies in marketing practices based on Graesch et al. (2021). Source: Own processing.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

The Euroleague Basketball case study findings are divided in two sections. PART I corresponds to the sponsorship life-cycle process digitalization including the different activities and technologies used through the three main phases of the sponsorship process. Then, as the case study was done during exceptional circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision of doing an in-depth study related to Euroleague's flagship event the Final Four was taken. Therefore, PART II of the study is focused on the digitalized strategies done at the 2021 Final Four as for the first time in the organization's history, the Final Four was celebrated behind closed doors and the organization faced the challenge to engage the fans in a 100% virtual way. The digitalization of their main event represented an unexpected acceleration in the digital transformation strategies in the organization.

PART I and PART II sections close with the thematic coding identified in the findings of each of the parts. The chapter closes with the summary of the findings where the thematic network is presented.

5.1 PART I – Sponsorship life-cycle process digitalization

5.1.1 EB sponsorship overview

Before entering into the results regarding the sponsorship life-cycle process at Euroleague Basketball it is relevant to share how their sponsorship model is built nowadays (2022).

As stated in the previous part, the sponsorship agreements represent 27% of the total revenue of the organization. The structure follows:

- Tier 1 – Naming Partner
- Tier 2 – Premium Partners
- Tier 3 – Official Partners (includes regional deals and license deals)
- Tier 4 – Official Partner of the Final Four
- Official licensing partners

EB has two title sponsors or naming partners: Turkish Airlines is the naming partner of the Euroleague and 7Days is the naming partner of the EuroCup. As for the second tier, EB has 11 premium sponsors or premium partners, including Turkish Airlines and 7Days as they both figure as premium partners at the competitions they are not the naming partner.

Official sponsors or official partners are 10 and the Final Four official partners are 4. Additionally, there is a different tier which is the official licensing partners including 2 partners. All tiers sum a total of 27 partners. Details of the sponsors in **Table 10**.

Tier	Sponsor
Naming Partner of EuroLeague and Premium Partner of EuroCup	Turkish Airlines
Naming Partner of EuroCup and Premium Partner of the Euroleague	Seven Days
Premium Partners	bwin
	Winline.ru
	MaxBet
	Nesine.com
	adidas
	BKT
	FEDCOM
	ARDU prime
	DAZN
Official Partners	Spalding
	EA7 Emporio Armani
	DenizBank
	Domino's
	Oscar Mayer
	NOVA
	Castrol EDGE
	ULTIMATE CHAMPIONS
	Beograd
	Siesta exclusive
Official Partner of the Final Four	tadim
	Frutti extra
	detur
	VODAVODA
Official Licensing Partners	MED
	amazon

Table 10: Euroleague Basketball partners in 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.euroleaguebasketball.net/marketing-partners/>

The length of the sponsorship deal contract varies depending on the tier and when it was signed, there are 3-year contracts and 1-year contracts with the possibility of renewing the deal. Also, it is relevant to notice that even there are established sponsorship tiers, the sponsorship packages vary from one brand to another. This in line with EB's focus on collaborating with the partners to meet their particular objectives. More details on this topic are shared in the next subsection *structuring the sponsorship deal*.

When speaking with EB executives, they identified that a shift had occurred in sponsorship processes with the evolution of technologies. One of the main observations was digitalization had increased the complexity of managing the sponsorship process but that it had created opportunities to increase fan engagement (EB SD-2, 2018).

Besides facing the challenge of audience fragmentation and adapting content production and distribution to different platforms, the way of selling sponsorship had also changed. Before the acceleration of digitalization sponsorship was about brand awareness and visibility, now, as one executive and two EB's senior directors and an IMG director stated in their interviews, the focus has shifted to bringing a quick return on the investment for the brands related to sales directly coming from the sponsorship deal.

“Before what brands wanted was visibility: their name on the court, their name on television, their name everywhere, and you can see brands names everywhere, that you could not even swallow it. Now, what they are more focused on, and which makes total sense, is sales.” (EB C-1, 2018)

“In the past it was all about making sure people knew the connection between Adidas and the league. So, they were looking for having their logo everywhere and be present, and then when measuring the ROI for them, we based on what visibility did we get on TV, whether we reached the audiences. Now Adidas what do care about is exactly selling products.” (IMG D-2, 2018)

They also shared information about how the relationship with the sponsors or the brands has changed in the way that now it is not enough to put a logo on TV or in a jersey, now there is a need for a shared agenda that goes beyond brand awareness, EB plays a role of problem solver for the sponsors.

“There is no other way. The *one size fits all* of yesteryear no longer exists, it no longer exists... Now they are very targeted, and what defines a relationship is what you want, as rights holder, and what they want [the brands]: to solve problems through me [the rights holder].” (EB SD-1, 2018)

This new mentality on both sponsor and rights holder sides has driven the sponsorship into a level of partnership (EB SD-1, 2018) where there is a win-win situation as there is genuine interest in solving the other part's marketing issues and making a difference in their agenda even though for EB can be a more resource intensive process (EB SD-1, 2018). As for EB, that specific brand can bring to the organization different resources and this brings balance (IMG D-2, 2018).

Figure 20 shows in a graphic way how sponsorship concepts have evolved in the last years which can be seen in line with the story EB people are sharing for this case study. This information was first shared in Dávila and Haak (2011) where the information obtained to get

this comparison was from EB internal documents. Even though it is from a decade ago, the evolution of the concepts seems to remain. We will discuss further at the *Discussion* chapter of this dissertation.

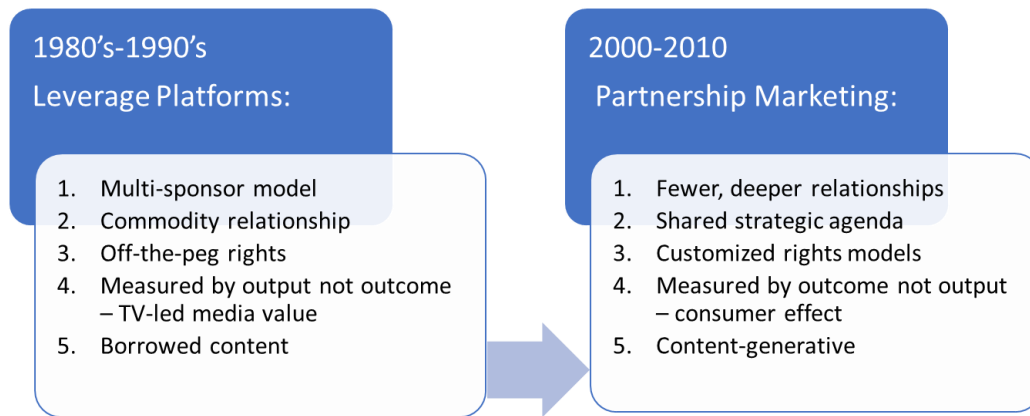


Figure 20: Evolution of sponsorship concepts in EB. Adapted from Dávila and Haak (2011)

In the next sub-sections within this PART II, we will be dissecting the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process by going through the structuring of a sponsorship deal, the sponsorship-linked marketing activities, and the sponsorship measurement.

As a note, during the interviews EB executives referred to their sponsors as partners or brands, so, in the next subsections the sponsors will be named as partners or brands following EB's terminology.

5.1.2 EB sponsorship life-cycle process

This subsection will follow the three main phases of a sponsorship life-cycle process: structuring the sponsorship deal, sponsorship-linked marketing activities, and sponsorship measurement and evaluation (Beech *et al.*, 2014; Cornwell and Kwon, 2020; Foster *et al.*, 2016). Each of the main phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process has specific practices according to the different authors. In this sub-section of the findings, the structure will follow the three main phases but the different practices within each one will follow the results and information obtained from the interviews to identify EB sponsorship life-cycle process model. Following EB process, the *structure of the sponsorship deal* can be divided into different activities according to the results obtained from the empirical data: Market analysis and scoping new leads, selling the sponsorship and establishing the commercial offering, objective-setting and planning, finally agreeing on a sponsorship deal according to the brands' objectives and signing the contract.

The *sponsorship-linked marketing activities* include content production and delivery, and the execution of the activation of the sponsorship (digital and *in-situ*).

The third phase, *sponsorship measurement and evaluation*, comprise measurement practices, meeting the objectives of a brand such as exposure, brand awareness, or consumer purchase intention, and lastly the subsequent decisions such as if terminate or renew the deal.

1. Structuring the sponsorship deal

The first step before going out to sale a sponsorship is to undertake a market analysis and scope new leads (EB SM-2, 2021). These activities were centralized in EB although IMG was also involved in the sponsorship commercial activities. The search for new prospects and meeting with brands was ongoing, but the sales efforts intensified before the season began each October and before the F4 championship weekend.

“I will say it is 365 - whole year, an ongoing process because you are always looking out for new leads and new opportunities, so the pitching phase it’s literally all year long, and then depending on the Tiers and what partner want, usually try to get them on board before the season starts.” (EB SM-1, 2018)

In an interview with an EB senior manager in 2021, he described the step-by-step process for searching for new possible partners. Firstly, before the creation of the Business Intelligence and Analytics department in 2020 there was no clear strategy on how to approach brands, or which markets or industries they should be approaching. As shared by the IMG VP, in 2018 the process of prospecting and getting in touch with the brands was made by starting conversations with people they already have a relationship with (either IMG or EB, or an IMG company), so the contact person will help facilitate the introduction conversation. In 2020 EB adopted a different strategy based on data beginning with the stratifying of the market.

“The first step was to define very well all what we call categories, which in the end are industries and sectors that have the potential to bring us a sponsor. We are going to see which of these categories are the brands that have the highest volume of business. We are going to see which brands are investing more in sponsorship, what they are investing in, in which sports, in which type of properties, what is their marketing strategy to see the fit we can have with them.” (EB SM-2, 2021)

After having defined the categories, they analyze those that due to their marketing characteristics have a brand budget that goes to sponsorship to identify the ones that have more business potential based on data.

“I mean, indirectly, the fact of basing our go-to-market on data in this analysis has brought us new sponsors and opened many more conversations and have brands that are interested in locking in a sponsorship with the Euroleague. That would be the first step which is surely more data driven.” (EB SM-2, 2021)

Before reaching out the identified brands, a different activity was also being executed which is the valuation of their digital assets and inventory they have to offer through the BI&A department. This department brings the capability to value all the commercial offer, the commercial rights, and the commercial assets that EB can sell. This gave EB commercial managers the possibility to go-to-market knowing the value of what they were selling.

“We saw that there was this potential in the digital realm that then extends to amplifying the message through our clubs and players. That is, the Euroleague channels have a certain reach, they have a certain following, but at the same time we have clubs that also have their followers and players that also have their fan base that can help us deliver much more value.” (EB SM-2, 2021)

After having the category identified and knowing their assets value, a third phase was planning the approach with the possible partner-to-be with the help of the BI&A department. This enabled the sales team to be more prepared with more knowledge about the market they are targeting.

“Let's define the playing field, who we should approach, what we should approach, and it would be a little bit about how we should approach these brands with the offering we were talking about... with better understanding of the needs of the brand we are going to sell to and go with a much more adjusted offer and a better-informed conversation.” (EB SM-2, 2021)

Besides knowing the categories and the different brands EB executives emphasized the importance of getting to know their fans in-depth. The BI&A department carried out initiatives to get to know the fans better and their relationship with the different industry categories. EB has two main sources for collecting fan information. Firstly, through primary research with samples among their fans to obtain specific data on the opportunities that they have and to see the potential impact in terms of business that can have for brands. The second source of information is taken from different digital platforms with the use of analytical tools or suppliers. For example, EB uses Google Analytics to track their own website and works with Blink Fire Analytics for obtaining social media data (EB SM-2, 2022). Knowledge about fans is necessary to respond to the demand of brand partners to have a positive impact in their business, increase sales, and go beyond the typical media value provided in a standard sports sponsorship deal (EB SM-2, 2021).

“This allowed us at the time to go to all the brands with whom we had an open conversation and show them, knowing or being aware of the number of fans we have in each market, the potential, a bit of a funnel, right? If we have so many fans, so many would consider your brand, and the fact that you are a sponsor would help you, this can represent x sales. Beyond the media value that sponsorship usually has. So that's the approach we have taken.” (EB SM-2, 2021)

To summarize, the preparation for EB sponsorship sales can be divided into three phases: a strategic phase – know the industries; an offer phase – valuation of the assets; and the approach or go-to-market planning phase. The professionalization of these three phases before going to talk to the brands is possible because of the CRM tool that EB recently started to implement as part of their digital transformation process. The CRM helps to better manage the sales pipeline, allows EB to have better prospects follow-up, to have better visibility of the information, and at the same time to improve the process as all the data is now centralized and serves the organization in a transversal way.

In mid-2022 a follow-up interview was done to see the evolution of the process shared in 2021 with the implementation of the sales strategies based on data. A key improvement was the sales team using the CRM to track the sales pipeline activities and track conversations with the brands.

“I would say that we have continued improving it since we are now, for instance, providing the sales team with a brief of each industry that they are approaching so that they can understand the macroeconomic trends of the industry, who are the biggest players in terms of revenue, in terms of sales, which is their sponsorship spend, if any, and then strategy or overall marketing strategy. So, we believe that every day we bring more value to them, and they are more prepared to go to market.” (EB SM-2, 2022).

Regarding the second phase, offer phase – valuation of the assets, EB has been able to audit all the commercial assets and rights that they sell, properly structuring and organizing the CRM to identify what is sold, what is already available, and which partner has which assets and in which market. Using the CRM for managing the sponsorship sales pipeline can be seen as the beginning of the possible solutions this tool can bring to EB.

A different initiative that has been done as well in 2022 is benchmarking the activations that other sports properties are doing with brands in the different sectors that EB is approaching besides only benchmarking the industries themselves. For example, if EB is approaching a car brand, to see what kind of activations these brands are doing with the NFL, with football clubs, tennis tournaments, etc. to have an overview of how the industry is approaching these brands. The objective is to reinforce the partnerships team and give them more tools to make an attractive commercial offering to the brands that EB is approaching (EB SM-2, 2022).

Related to the commercial offering, back in 2018 the EB sponsorship team was already offering personalized packages. The way they did it was to offer a “very broad solution pool” (EB SD-1, 2018) or “standard off-the-shelf packages” (IMG VP-1, 2018) but then add another layer

for the specific brands and be flexible for them to choose a range of things that gives them solutions and then build a specific tool kit for the brand with a strong focus on IP rights.

“It means a brand has it all in one site, which is focused on the clubs, the players, the league itself, the pavilions, the partners, the other partners in the ecosystem, all of that is part of a commercial offering... We have chosen to take the rights and the assets or the IP rights of all the ecosystem the widest possible.” (EB SD-1, 2018)

At the same time, the digital department was already creating new products and new inventory to introduce to the commercial offering, with the objective of increasing the value and selling more assets. As examples they mention innovations in the TV feed up to exploring eSports events (EB D-1, 2018). Since 2018 the EB digital team has been working on providing sponsors with fan data in order to offer more tailored digital products and offer them in commercial packages.

“We need to start putting the process in place to change our commercial offerings so that it can be not just local exposure on lots of TV sets around the world, but we need to know more about our fans for example, we need to have a platform to communicate with them digitally, so we need to actually make sure we're getting that right and resource it properly”. (EB D-1, 2018)

Regarding digital offering, by 2021 there has been a paradigm shift about the digital commercial offering they are selling (EB SM-2, 2021). They have established a digital inventory with two main lines: the web and app inventory, and the social media branded content. For the web and app, the offering goes mainly to adding banners with the image of the brand. Regarding social media content, the strategy is more elaborated, and it is developed jointly with the brand and EB. One example would be that for social media, before it was just selling a specific number of posts in their channels. Now, the conversation is about selling engagement, more in line with the objectives of the brand.

However, elaborating EB's commercial offering has become more complex due to the proliferation of digital platforms, the fragmentation of the audience, and the changes in consumer behavior. Besides, EB has identified that there is potential in the digital realm that then extends to amplifying the message through the clubs and players' social media channels which in the end bring even more value and exposure to the brands and EB was missing to commercialize it correctly. Also, their fan base is growing each year which adds to the need to update their digital inventory.

“Concretely we saw that what we have contracted for social media we are delivering a value four times higher than what is paid... it is a very significant over delivery and at the same time it is closing the opportunity to monetize it with other

partners or with those same partners paying a higher sponsorship fee.... So, the ability to monetize has a lot of room for improvement in this sense.” (EB SM-2, 2021)

Additional to the complexity that digital channels bring, EB has not been able to measure ROI of each of the packages they sell individually, but they measure depending on the objectives established in the sponsorship agreement. According to one of the senior directors mentioned, the sports industry is moving from return on investment (ROI) related to media value to return on objectives (ROO). The KPIs of the sponsorship objectives are more or less targeted depending on the action and the type of sponsorship agreement.

“If your goal is ‘I want to sell more business class seats’, let's think in actions on how to sell them on Turkish Airlines. How many? What percentage of increase do you need? With what type of investment do we do it?” (EB SD-1, 2018)

An example of how EB will deploy a sponsorship strategy based on objectives with digital marketing tools will be by activations on social media with the objective to marketing the product rather than providing just logo exposure on the channels. This means some actions will be different to a typical digital activation, such as including banner ads, tracking links, agreed promotions for the product, agreed vouchers and discounts offered exclusively on EB platforms to drive sales at that product. And depending on the agreement, EB may receive a commission on any sales of that product (EB D-1, 2018).

Even though that EB is moving to measure the brands’ specific objectives, in 2022 brand exposure and advertising were still being measured in a generalized way. Thus, media value depends on advertisement audience views, and media value is one of the main KPI’s that is still reported to the sponsors. Also, depending on the type of exposure, if it is branded content on digital, for example when it is said that the content is published in collaboration with EB and the brand, impressions (how many people saw it) and engagements (clicks, likes, or shares) are measured. In addition, the brands continue to be interested in measuring not only the exposure that they have, but the business that they are generating thanks to the sponsorship deal such as sales conversion, consumer purchase intention and brand awareness (EB SM-2, 2022).

The last step in this first part of the sponsorship deal process is to close the partnership by signing the contract. Getting to this point can go from 1 month to 18 months of conversations from the first meeting with the brand (IMG VP-1, 2018). The timing depends mainly on the type of sponsorship agreement and how big will the package be.

“For example, the title partner Turkish Airlines, that would never be a conversation that is completed within one month because there is so much money at stake and there is so many rights at stake, this drags on. I would say that the smaller the package, the quicker the decision we can get to.” (IMG VP-1, 2018)

During this period of conversations, a tailored content matrix is developed which includes the assets and activations of the sponsorship agreement making sure they meet the objectives of the brand. To achieve it, EB uses a workshop format with the brand and based on the objectives shared with the marketing and partnerships department, EB presents to the brand some ideas that could work for them to meet their objectives. Based on the discussions, they jointly set the content that is going to be produced around the partnership.

“We offer them our services because we are a company that is able to act as an agency and deliver everything from A to Z around an activation program for a sponsor. So, if they want to use that as their agency, which we believe is the best way to go, because we know the industry, we know our fans better than anyone.” (EB SD-2, 2018)

EB also shared that for deciding the different activations or marketing activities there are two approaches. On the one hand, there could be brands that have a one big clear objective with a clear target and know which technology they want to use to execute an activation and from there EB will search for the technology options and providers in order to suggest a way to achieve the brand’s activation objectives (EB C-1, 2018). Or on the other hand, the brand may have different, more specific objectives that require smaller-scale activations, “maybe a sponsor is looking at breaking up their marketing budget into a thousand pieces” (EB D-1, 2018) which means there is a need to plan more targeted activations.

“We talk to the brands and we basically ask them ‘what do you want and how do you want it? And how do you think you can get your results?’ and we put our expertise on the table saying ‘from our expertise you can engage your fans this way, this way, that way’ and once we sat down together the activation plan is done in the next two-three weeks.” (EB SM-1, 2018)

When the EB commercial offering meets the brands’ objectives then the agreed contract is signed and the sponsorship moves to the execution phase.

2. Sponsorship-linked marketing activities

When the content matrix is defined with the different marketing activities, such as branded content and activations, the execution phase can be done in different moments, for example through the whole season or at specific games such as at the F4 games depending of the objectives of the brand and the type of sponsorship agreement.

“There are some of them that would activate season long, some of them will do a big campaign at the beginning using the whole season and then do something else at the Final Four, Turkish Airlines for instance does that.” (EB SM-1, 2018)

Before entering full to the EB activation strategies, fragmentation of the audiences in different platforms and changes in fan media consumption need to be considered. This has led EB to adjust their content production and delivery for their marketing activities and activation strategies.

Content production has evolved in a complex map where there is a main change from focusing the content production only for TV to developing digital content that needs to be delivered across multiple different channels or platforms, devices, demographics, and cultures (EB C-1, 2018).

“The future is digital. So, we started to create content dedicated only for digital platforms sponsored by partners and we focus more on activities that create a database for them. We definitely move towards a more digital environment let’s say, rather than just TV.” (EB SM-1, 2018)

This situation requires EB to dedicate the appropriate resources to manage the content production and the different platforms properly. To achieve it, EB needed to hire people to make sure that the content was produced in a way that targeted the consumers through the different platforms as opposed to before where they were producing generalized content and distributing the same in different platforms.

“Now we are producing one set of content for, let's say, Facebook, one set of content for our own website, another for our own app, another for Instagram, so that growth in the team allowed us to do that.” (EB SD-2, 2018)

As managing the creation of this content became more complex, one of the solutions that EB has for content production, besides hiring more human resources, are the *media days*. The media days are specific days before the season starts and before the Final Four where, with previous coordination with the different clubs, EB has access to players. So, the media, production, and digital team get together to shoot, record, or photograph all the material needed for the different campaigns or activations that are already in schedule during those days. The EB most produced content is video and imagery, so during those media days, between 80 and 90 percent of the video footage that will then use for digital content and sponsor’s activations throughout the season, is recorded as the content matrix and calendar of activations agreed with each partner should be ready by those days.

Nevertheless, as there are different tiers of partnerships and the task of seeking for new sponsors last all-year long, if a new sponsor joins in the middle of the season, the opportunity of recording on the media days is gone but still EB finds the way to create content based on game footage or on specific recordings that can be done afterwards (EB SD-2, 2018). As the F4 is the flagship event of TAE and there are specific F4 partners, before to the F4 weekend games again media days are held for video and image production for EB's or partner's content needs (**Figure 21**). During these media days the clubs will provide access to the players and so there is previous arrangements and coordination between the stakeholders for media days content creation. IMG is also involved by collaborating with content strategies tailored for distribution on different platforms besides the production itself (IMG VP-1 and D-2, 2018).

Regarding the content offering it can be said that there is a mix of goals as EB needs to adapt the offering depending on the partner's needs, objectives, and brand values in order to provide bespoke solutions for them (IMG D-2, 2018). Besides, EB has to decide how to distribute the branded content to the fans as they want to avoid "bombarding" the viewers with too much commercial content so EB and the partners have to find a middle ground (EB M-2, 2022).



Figure 21: Media days before the 2018 F4. Source: Own stock.

Social media channels are very much used for sharing branded content and one of the advantages of these digital platforms is the capacity of deciding what content to publish and when, compared to the limitations that advertisement on TV has. With social media it is possible to give exposure to a sponsor at any time and send the message you want to share. This has brought more opportunities to create digital assets and activations.

“Social networks have allowed us to have alive the information around an entity during the 365 days of the year. This is very good in one part, that is, before the sponsors had to focus very much on the activations or on having exhibitions on match days and now new opportunities are generated, such as training, such as team trips, etc. Why? Because in all those circumstances you can share information thanks to your social networks.” (Blinkfire Analytics VP-2, 2018)

Social media has been a good platform for EB to share content (**Figure 22**) and connect with fans and at the same time to monetize through branded content.

“If you go on our Instagram, one out of two posts most likely will have a logo of a sponsor on the visual, on the video. This is a way for us to bring the sponsors, who pay big bucks to be there, to the digital world. It's a way for us to connect the bridge.” (EB M-2, 2022)

Regarding the sponsorship-linked marketing activities, as mentioned, there is sponsors' branded content from one side, and from the other there are activations. As for activations of the brands we mean all the marketing activities that EB does jointly with the partners for fan engagement. These can be *in-situ* or digital. In terms of *in-situ* activations, these are mainly undertaken at the F4 weekend as the final games are the only ones managed entirely by EB and where there is a physical space to execute them. The activations can be during the games, for example a brand comes in during the half-time and makes some contests with the fans so they can win giveaways. Besides, the focal activations' site for fan engagement is the Fan Zone (FZ). The FZ is created in each host city where the F4 is celebrated as a central point for sponsorship activations which brings a space to interact with basketball fans and locals and at the same time provides a space for fan engagement and brand exposure.

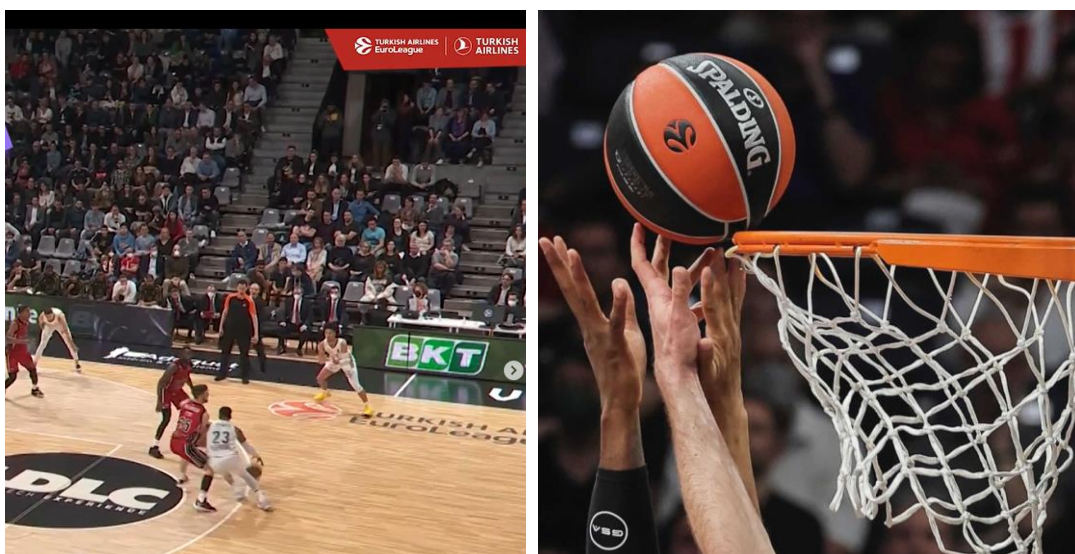


Figure 22: 2022 EB's Instagram print-screens with branded content

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Taking the Belgrade 2018 F4 as example for *in-situ* marketing activities with EB partners, it was observed that there were several activities and activations at the FZ with all EB sponsors. To mention some of them: an Adidas basketball related tournament, 7Days had an activity where you can take a picture with the trophy and post it on Instagram, Turkish Airlines had a photo booth, Armani also with basketball competitions (see **Figure 23** for examples). Additionally, EB itself had different booths with Virtual Reality activities to promote the TAE and their own brand.



Figure 23: 2018 Belgrade F4 sponsors' activations at the Fan Zone. Source: own stock

At the Belgrade 2018 F4, EB partners were also seen outside the arena with visual advertisement at the entrance hall and inside the arena during the games and on the time breaks (quarters and half time, see **Figure 24** for a visual reference).



Figure 24: 2018 Belgrade F4 sponsors' activations and branding at the arena. Source: own stock

Besides activating the partners' brands at the arena, EB also activates their own brand. An example during the mentioned F4 was a light show executed jointly with one of the startups finalists of the 2018 Euroleague Tech Challenge, NFC Sound (**Figure 25**).

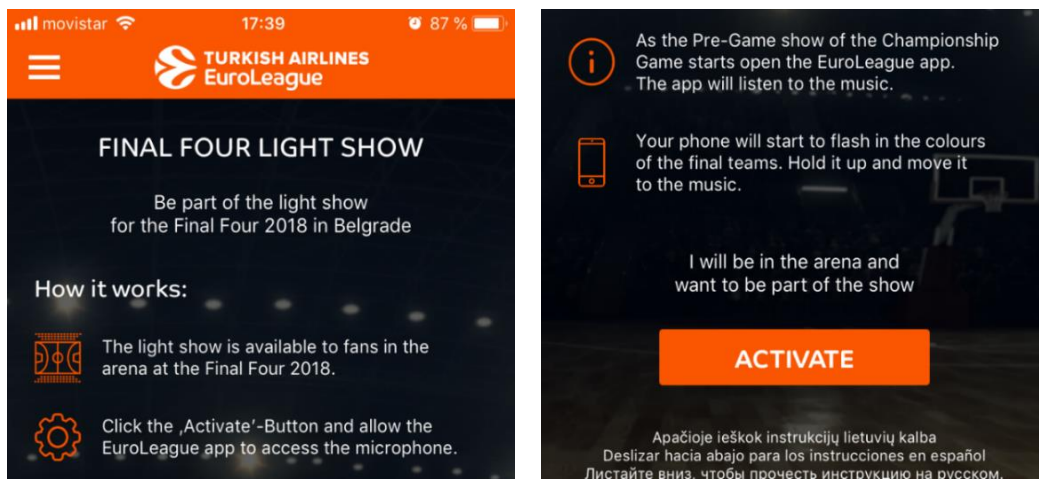


Figure 25: 2018 Belgrade F4 EB app image of EB activation

Staying with digital, besides the in-situ activations there are digital activations that EB carries during the whole season with the different partners, and then a push is done at the F4 as that is when the TAE has the most fan attention and media attention so sponsors invest more of their activation budget at that time (EB D-1, 2018).

Retrieving the EB senior manager comment about Turkish Airlines activating season-long, one of the main activations shared by EB in 2018 is called *The Insider*, with Turkish Airlines. This was a season long campaign meant for digital and social media where EB gave an inside perspective on Euroleague's athletes and games by creating four documentaries with focus on different athletes or teams which were shared every two months, then at the end of that season

EB used the referee camera during the F4 to give the inside perspective of the court and the game, all shared in social media.

“Now with digital media and social media especially, it's a way to show the sponsors that they have a new ground in front of them, with millions of fans connected online 24/7 to reach directly... Because digital and social media in general can really push your message to extends that you cannot do on a physical basis” (EB M-2, 2022)

A different example could be the *Nuts games*, with Tadim. This activation involved posting short videos showing different non-basketball related activities with basketball players. For example, a trivia contest, a whisper challenge, putting a basket on the players heads and get them dunk, as the objective was for them to interact with the product (tadim's nuts) so the brand wanted to have the *Nut show* with the objective of fans to consume nuts (EB SM-1, 2018).

For some sponsors being on board for digital activations was a process. Taking the example of the title sponsor of the EuroCup, 7Days, there has been an evolution in adopting digital channels.

“The sponsorship helped us move our mindset a little bit towards something other than TV. That's been a slow change over a period of time. It's not something that we just we just jumped in with both feet and we just started doing a lot of digital. We really looked into the process to get a better understanding of how this works.” (7Days D-3, 2019)

For example, in 2016 7Days only managed a Facebook page, but by 2019 they grown their digital channels through the addition of Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter doing more contests and activations with their fans. One of the main ones is called *7Days Magic Moment* which now in 2022 continues to run on EB social media (example images in **Figure 26**). The *7Days Magic Moment* are the best plays of Euroleague games, so every time EB shares a top play of a game in social media it is branded with 7Days. The activation part comes when the fans are invited to select the best players of the week, the month, and the season, giving prizes on a monthly basis with the objective or raising awareness and engagement (7Days D-3, 2019).

In a more recent activation with Turkish Airlines, a partnership between EB and Hawk-Eye Innovations was done to bring technology and calculate the time the players were on air when jumping for dunks or blocks. An activation was created under the concept of the time the players “fly” in line with the sponsor's main service (EB M-1, 2022).

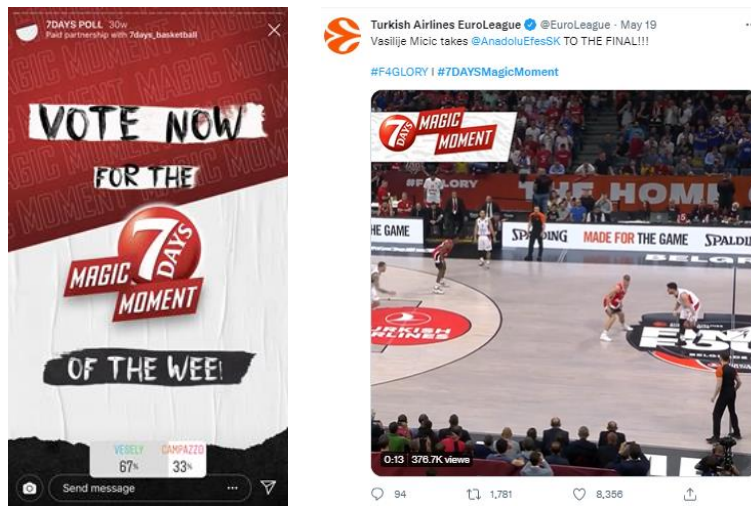


Figure 26: Instagram (2019) and Twitter (2022) print screens of the 7Days magic moment activation strategy

Even though many activations are considered a success, there is always a risk of making an investment on applying a digital activation and then the results are not what was expected. This may occur when there is a target for an activation such as social media impressions, levels of engagement, or a number of users from each of the markets that the partner is interested in, resulting in the KPIs not being reached.

“Digital activations, despite what many people would think of, are usually, if not more, around the same level of investment compared to a traditional experiential activation during a game, for example. So, that is a loss... having an investment that doesn't reach the desired KPI because there's very little way of knowing if it would work or not.” (EB M-1, 2022)

A risk on executing an activation using new technologies could be for example the metaverse platform *Euroleagueland* launched for the 2022 Belgrade F4 (Figure 27 shows a print screen of the advertisement). Euroleagueland was created as a digital space for engaging younger generations and brand exposure where fans can play different video games in a digital atmosphere that aims to replicate the physical experience such as being at the arena with audio and video captures (EB M-2, 2022). For EB this was to step into the unknown, some estimations were done regarding the number of users that could connect and participate in the platform, but EB had no way to guarantee that even if they do a big paid promotion on social media to advertise and reach the most fans possible if it would work (EB M-1, 2022). The impact is yet to be seen as when investing in new technologies, there is the chance that the expected results were not achieved. May be a social media campaign that didn't work, a sponsorship activation that didn't reach the expected levels of engagement, or jumping in into new technologies as the metaverse in a very early stage being still unknown (EB M-1 and M-2, 2022).

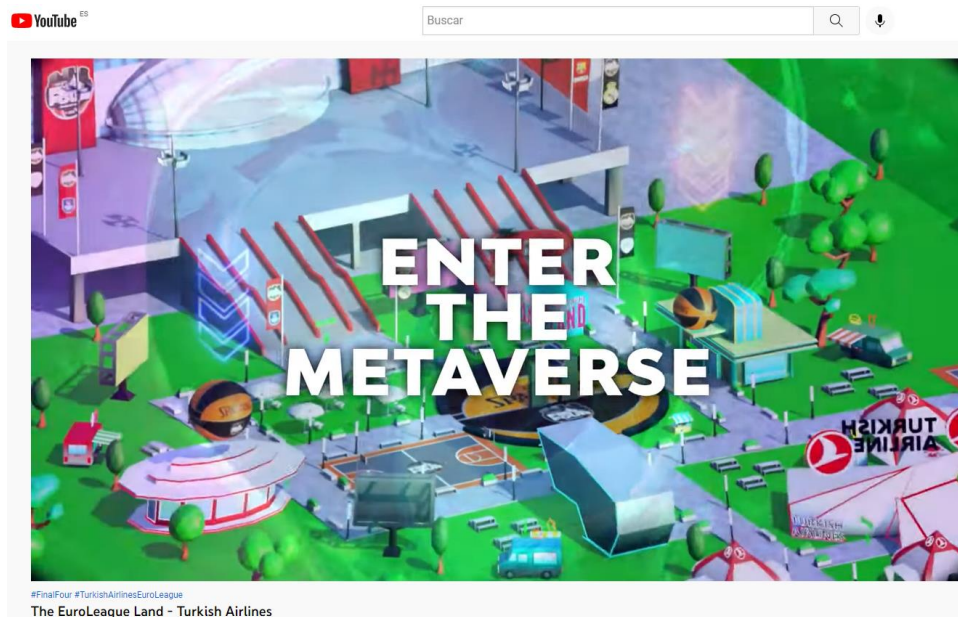


Figure 27: EB YouTube print screen of the advertisement for the Euroleagueland platform

In conclusion, both in-situ and digital activations aim to engage more fans and engage them better in order to bring value to the sponsor (EB SD-2, 2018).

“We are always looking at ways, and technology is one that helps a lot in that, to bring the fan closer to the game, to what they want, being the game itself or other experiences around that.” (EB SD-1, 2018)

The next step in the process is to measure the results of the sponsorship-linked marketing activities. Different KPIs can be evaluated but as the interviews with EB executives reveal that media value, purchase intention, and fan engagement are the main objectives to be achieved by the brands.

3. Sponsorship measurement

Traditionally sponsorship was about measuring brand awareness. Nowadays digital technologies have brought different opportunities for marketing practices and brands’ objectives are diverse when agreeing to a partnership. As mentioned in a previous section, the sports industry and the sponsorship agreements are moving more to evaluate ROO rather than ROI, nevertheless ROI coming from media value continues to be measured. Additionally, consumer purchase intention and sales conversion coming directly from the partnership are some of the objectives that brands seek to achieve when agreeing to a sponsorship deal besides increasing fan engagement according to EB executives.

In 2018 EB shared the main KPI’s to be measured at the time. The main one was measuring audience, both in TV and in social media. To achieve this, EB worked with Nielsen to

measure audiences for video content and live games on television and digital media. Regarding social media audience measurement, EB was working with different tools such as CrowdTangle and Meltwater which helped measure the impact on digital media of Euroleague shared content. These tools brought information about the audience in general, about how many people was watching EB content either on TV or digital (EB SD-2, 2018). In the same interview, the senior director then shared that EB was entering into a phase of focusing more in the level of fan engagement.

“It is not that important how many people watch the games, but how engaged they are with the games. It is not as important how many fans we have on Facebook to say something, but how many times they interact with any of our posts. That is becoming more relevant.” (EB SD-2, 2018)

Subsequently, EB started refocusing the measurement tools to better understand levels of fan engagement. Audience size was still important, but was no longer the priority in terms of measurement. Regarding what the brands were asking to measure back in 2018, most of them were measuring still only audience, and a few just started measuring engagement or direct sales although, more brands started to be interested. And the way of measuring sales was by counting the leads that EB generates.

“We want to make sure we are ready to deliver that level of information. We are trying to make sure that our measurement tools can deliver that.” (EB SD-2, 2018).

Besides, there is the media value, which is measured with the collaboration of Nielsen as well. Media value was measured by taking the audience number and the amount of time the brand was tracked during a broadcast or in digital channels. To consider there was a good a sponsorship deal, there must be a ROI from the media value from four to five times the investment (EB SM-1, 2018). At that point in time, most of the partners were still more interested in measuring media value as it was considered an established industry measure that obtains clear results and calculates advertising ROI. Measuring fan engagement and interactions was still in its infancy with different approaches and methodologies that were new for partners and rights holders alike.

As stated, brand visibility was the main KPI back in 2018. But the transition to measure sales conversion brought challenges because, as in the case of measuring engagement, it was still hard to convert into quantitative measures. Challenges started to come from the contracts where the agreements started to change and stop asking only for visibility.

“We are seeing more and more that the contracts are switching and are changing from pure visibility ‘I will have [the brand’s logo] three minutes on the court, this and there’ to ‘I will have three minutes [the brand’s logo] there and the business

that needs to come from your website to my website and that is then converted into real sales has to be x, y and z' (informant citing brands as an example for explaining the situation)". (EB C-1, 2018)

These made EB to face the challenge of transitioning from showing the brands on court to finding the way to make the fan that is watching not just if they see the brand. For example, it is possible to measure not only visits to EB's website but if they then visit a partner brand's website and track these movements precisely. This has made the measurement of sponsorship more complicated and sophisticated (EB C-1, 2018). From the digital side, some efforts were made to increase brand exposure in order to make an uplift in brand awareness aiming to reach a wide audience so at the end of the funnel there are enough people who will convert it into sales (EB D-1, 2018).

As for digital there are different metrics to measure engagement such as interactions, numbers of likes, comments, or clicks just to mention some examples. So, when an activation with the sponsor's brand is done in social media, let's say a poll on Instagram, the level of engagement can be measured by counting how many people participated, or web traffic can also be measured and if a customer clicks on a banner it can be tracked (EB D-1, 2018).

EB has been tracking their different social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, and the channels of the teams and the players with Blinkfire's analytics tool to detect the appearance of a brand and to follow the different activations with artificial intelligence. The main metric tracked is engagement.

"Engagement is basically the voluntary interactions with a post. That is, the likes, retweets, the comments. All of that is what is measured. Why? Because in the end that's what's transparent and vertical to all platforms." (Blinkfire Analytics VP-2, 2018)

In 2022 EB continues to work with external suppliers for measurement purposes in order to improve the real-time data collection and be able to provide the brands the results of the different marketing activities in a quicker way and add value to the partnership agreement by targeting the fans more effectively (EB M-1, 2022).

Media value remains as the main KPI to be measured. In terms of digital, branded content exposure, engagement, and impressions. For impressions EB means when a brand's logo appears in digital content but it is shown in an organic way, contrary to the branded content where the brand is shown on purpose. Besides, the conversation of measuring the direct business impact such as sales conversion it is still on the table so, purchase intention is measured as well (EB SM-2, 2022).

As for the management of the reported data, the BI&A department centralizes and manages the reporting of the sponsorship value that they have delivered at the end of the season both in TV and in digital or social media channels. EB analyses the sponsorship value for all the partners. Measuring each partnership results has two main objectives. From one side, to evaluate if they have met the expectations that the partner had from the partnership according to the contractual needs or assets previously agreed and then report to them the achieved results. And from the other side understand EB's commercial performance to evaluate the offered assets value (EB SM-2, 2022).

When the reporting is done, at the end of the season EB does a recap with each of the partners to understand what has worked and which things need to be changed or improved. This to have a better view of the partner's goals for the next season (EB M-1, 2022). For example, if the subsequent season the brand wants to ship from marketing sporting performance goods to better position as a lifestyle brand point of view or sell a different line of product. In this sense, together they review if the marketing approach will need to change for the next season. Regarding subsequent decisions there were two ways, to renew the deal or to terminate it. In general terms, most of the agreements that EB had with their partners are long-term agreements with the possibility of adding one year of renewal. What EB shared is that a "superior service" is one of the most important things for retention (EB SD-1, 2018). And for example, some brands like Turkish Airlines, 7Days, or Adidas have been partnering and renewing for over a half a decade.

"What we usually look for at are opportunities to add value. If you are not, in an authentic way, you do not add value as a brand to what you are sponsoring in one way or another, the fan will not capture that sponsorship and therefore will not work. We are always looking at ways and technology is one that helps to bring the fan closer to the game, to what they want, be it the game itself or other experiences around that." (EB SD-1, 2018)

"When we close a partnership, as I said before, it's all about delivering value to the sponsor. And that's kind of our mantra." (EB SD-2, 2018)

In conclusion, the digitalization of processes and activities within the sponsorship life-cycle process have allowed to move from a sponsorship deal to a partnership as both, EB and the sponsor, share a digital agenda which leverages the relationship from getting money from the sponsorship to increase value for the partner. This is happening by moving from brand exposure to digital activations for reaching fan engagement.

5.1.3 PART I - Findings thematic coding

After analyzing the PART I findings, ten codes were identified and then categorized in two sub-themes. Six of the codes were grouped to identify the first sub-theme: management evolution. The other four codes were established following Graesch *et al.* (2021) four levers, data, connectivity, customer interaction, and, automation where the second sub-theme was identified: the digitalization of the processes within the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle. By linking both sub-themes, the sponsorship life-cycle process theme emerged.

The emerging codes from the empirical data analyzed regarding the sponsorship life-cycle process can be seen in **Table 11** and further discussed in detail in CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION.

Codes	Sub-themes	Theme
Changes caused by the digital life-cycle	Management evolution	Sponsorship life-cycle process
Customized rights model		
Need for new technology adoption		
From ROI to ROO to ROE		
Evolution of the traditional model		
Undergoing paradigm shift		
Data	Digitalization of processes	
Connectivity		
Customer interaction		
Automation		

Table 11: Emerging codes, sub-themes, and theme related to the sponsorship life-cycle process

5.2 PART II – EB digital acceleration: The 2021 Final Four

5.2.1 Digital technologies for marketing practices at the Final Four (F4)

Organizing the F4 is one of EB's core activities. 18 teams participate at the TAE regular season which follows a round-robin format, playing a total of 34 games starting the season on October each year. By April, the best eight teams advance to the playoffs phase where they play best-of-five series. In May, the season culminates in the Final Four weekend where the playoff series winners play the semi-finals, the third-place game, and the championship game¹⁵.

The F4 weekend games have a direct impact on EB revenue streams and are key for increasing the value of broadcasting rights and closing partnerships. Unlike the games during the regular season that are managed by the clubs, the F4 games are entirely managed by EB having full responsibility on the marketing strategies and actions. The Cologne 2021 Final Four was at the heart of EB's strategic marketing and showcases attempts to adopt digital technologies for achieving marketing solutions for fan engagement and brand and media management.

This particular edition of the F4 is unique in that it was held behind closed doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The absence of fans in and around the arena meant that all of the EB's marketing and communications activities were digital. Several international sports events found themselves in similar situations during this period, including the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. These interviews and ongoing research with EB provided insights into this singular moment in sports events management history. Therefore, this PART III will focus on the 2021 edition of the F4.

“The Final Four is basically what we work for the whole season... We have the four best teams of the regular season of the Euroleague basketball. They go to one single location and they play two semi-finals and one final in front of 15 to 20.000 people in the arena. It's an amazing event across the whole weekend.” (EB M-2, 2022)

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted people's lives and the economy worldwide, impacting different industries including sports and entertainment. Global containment measures forced sports events to be cancelled or played with capacity constraints (Ludvigsen and Hayton, 2020). The EB competitions were equally affected by unprecedented challenges when executing the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 tournaments including the F4 events. As mentioned, the 2020 edition was cancelled and the 2021 was celebrated behind closed doors.

¹⁵ 2022-23 Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Competition Format [accessed 10/10/2022]. Available at: <https://www.euroleaguebasketball.net/euroleague/format-el/>

For EB, staging a F4 event behind closed doors was a challenge on its own, even though it is a mature event in terms of organization because the protocols and activities are well established (EB D-4,2021). However, it was the first time doing it under a closed format and under exceptional health restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic generating a wider environment of uncertainty.

“This year the main threat, and that's something that has not disappeared during the whole year, obviously is COVID.” (EB D-5, 2021)

“Well, there was always the risk that they [local government] could cancel the event [2021 F4].” (EB SM-3, 2021)

In this sense, the main goal to achieve was simply to be able to execute the games and celebrate de 2021 F4. Different scenarios were presented in the previous months and each EB department prepared to execute accordingly to the scenario: 100% attendance, 75%, 50%, 25% or no attendance at all. In April 2021, the month before the event was about to take place, the decision of no fans or audience due to German legislation was taken (Garza, 2021)¹⁶. This was a hard decision for EB management as in the 20 years of existing, the TAE F4 events have always been a sold-out (EB M-1, 2021). Taking the decision of celebrating the games behind closed doors, also had an impact on the rest of the activities that surround the games such as not having the Fan Zone or the awards ceremony (Garza Segovia and Kennett, 2022a).

“That meant that we had to re-think the event itself.” (EB M-1, 2021 in Garza, 2021, p.177)

When being able to execute the F4 games, the first objective to achieve was to maximize fan engagement. Usually, when the F4 is celebrated in a regular format, the digital KPI's are reaching more people worldwide or increasing the brands' and the event awareness. For the 2021 F4 the main goal was to engage the fans that were watching at home (EB SM-4, 2021). This objective generates a challenge: “How do we bring this event to our fans on a digital infrastructure?” (EB M-2, 2022); “How can we, with digital and technologies, mainly offer them [the fans] a full show that they can enjoy because they are not here?” (EB SM-4, 2021).

The challenge of maximizing fan engagement was made more complex with the evolution of digital consumer behavior and audience fragmentation due to the proliferation of multiple platforms.

¹⁶ An earlier and brief version of the use of digital strategies regarding the 2021 F4 was first published by the author of this dissertation in: Garza, M. (2021). Digital media and its use in sports marketing: Turkish Airlines Euroleague Basketball Final Four 2021. In *Marketing Identity: New changes, new challenges conference proceedings* (pp. 174–182).

“With all this digital transformation that we are experiencing, although it brings lots of opportunities to better engage with the fans and connect with them, it has become much more complex. And how you really connect, because the audience is now fragmented into many, many different platforms.” (EB SD-2, 2018)

Fans and consumers were becoming more demanding about the way they like to interact with brands or teams or athletes challenging sports properties to adapt and evolve in content production and delivery into different platforms and demographics (EB SD-2, 2018). EB continuously face new scenarios as consumers behave in different ways than before. On social media for example, EB has seen that 35 to 40 years old are staying on Facebook, while 15 to 25 years old were giving it up on Facebook and moving to Instagram or TikTok. Different demographics are using different channels on a daily basis and the challenge is to find ways to connect and reach the fans, especially the younger audiences to secure a growing fanbase in the future.

“A very specific case of ours, in the last years the average age of our fans is being older and older every season. The average age of our fans is growing and in between 0.5 and one year every single season. So, that is a challenge that is in our view, it's a consequence of these new landscape.” (EB SD-2, 2018)

“I pay close attention to Gen Z because I know there they are the future of the competition because they are the next fans.” (EB M-2, 2022)

According to EB, the attention span of younger generations was decreasing resulting in it becoming increasingly difficult to keep them watching a full game (EB M-2, 2022). In this line, EB faced the challenge of producing and delivering content for different demographics, cultures, and for different platforms. Television broadcast consumption was still the main platform for watching sports but according to EB executives, the time that fans dedicated to television was decreasing and the time the fans spent on multiple screens was increasing. This resulted in a move to shorter content delivered across multiple platforms that was compatible with smaller screens (cell phones and tablets). This audience fragmentation added a layer of complexity as the fan behaved differently depending on what platform they are in (EB SD-2, 2018).

“We need to concentrate and we need to make sure that we do provide this content without getting lost in so many options that we have.” (EB C-1, 2018)

In order to maximize fan engagement in a 100% digital environment at the 2021 F4, EB developed several digital marketing initiatives to provide fans and the media a similar experience as if they would have had if they were in or around the arena (EB D-4, 2021).

The key technological strategies executed at the 2021 F4 were¹⁷: a virtual fan wall at courtside, virtual reality broadcast of the game, the 4/day 8hr digital show ‘Final 4 Fans’, a pre-game show with augmented reality technologies, and remote access to media (Garza Segovia and Kennett, 2022a). **Table 12** summarizes the strategies undertaken at the 2021 F4.

Technological strategies at the 2021 Final Four	Characteristics
Virtual reality <i>In collaboration with the 2019 Euroleague Tech Challenge finalist YBVR.</i>	Four 180-degree cameras on the backboards and the courtside seats. 12 live feeds with the option of real-time camera switch.
Final 4 Fans <i>In collaboration with the 2018 Euroleague Tech Challenge finalist Watchity.</i>	Digital show that broadcasted Final Four content during 8 hours from Thursday to Sunday. Available on Facebook and YouTube.
Virtual seats Fan Wall	136 Selected fans were remotely broadcasted at the arena connected simultaneously. Virtual stands were displayed across a 46 x 3.5m screen setup at the court sideline.
Augmented reality pre-game shows <i>Created by the agency Filmmaster</i>	Immersive experience designed for the fans at home.
On-site and remote media	250 journalists attended the event to provide on-site coverage. Over 200 remotely. Press conferences, mixed zones, open to media practices, interviews, and all standard media availabilities were available for both on-site and remote journalists.

Table 12: Technological strategies implemented at the 2021 Final Four. Retrieved from Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022a, p.8)

One of the technologies applied was the use of virtual reality (VR) for broadcasting the game. The main objective when providing the VR service was fan engagement through offering the fans an immersive experience to watch the games so they can feel like being on the arena with different visuals and cameras point of views (EB M-1, 2021). For this project, EB partnered with YBVR, one of the startups that participated in the Euroleague Tech Challenge, and the collaboration allowed to put different cameras around the court and to enable the VR streaming where the fan was able to choose the camera of the point of view of their preference, even

¹⁷ An earlier and brief version of the results regarding the main technological strategies executed at the 2021 F4 were first published by the author of this dissertation in: Garza Segovia, M. and Kennett, C. (2022a), Digital transformation and sports marketing: a case study of the Turkish Airlines Euroleague Basketball Final Four 2021. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 51st, (107592)

watch the players from a closer perspective and get details that usually are hard to see on a regular broadcasting format (EB M-2, 2022).

“Is something that we wanted to bring using technology to our fan base who weren't able to be there.” (EB M-2, 2022)

Being able to deliver the 2021 F4 in a VR format was not something improvised. Back in 2018 IMG executives have already referred to the example of how linear television consumption is decreasing and with this, the traditional way of watching sports was becoming obsolete. Therefore, EB identified the need to find a way to broadcast quality content and at the same time, deliver different content in different platforms to satisfy consumer demands.

“What we have seen in the way the industry is going is this is not enough anymore, you can't just rely on TV visibility... that is something we've seen in this industry and the sports has moved from a free to a product to pay TV and now the next phase is that it's going to go to direct to consumer” (IMG D-2, 2018)

EB started to work with YBVR in preparation for the 2021 F4 to learn about VR technology and see how it can be adapted for a basketball match. It was a process where different trials were made to see the best options for camera placement, show angles that a TV production does not show, and add the option in the visuals to see statistic information in order to bring the fans the best immersive experience (EB M-1, 2021). **Figure 28** presents a visual of the VR graphics.



Figure 28: Visual of the VR camera before the 2021 F4 broadcast. Source. EB stock

This initiative had limited success with very few purchases made (only the 30% compared to their regular streaming service sales) although the virtual ticket had a cost of 15€ compared with a regular arena ticket for a F4 which is sold for 200-300€. The main reason

provided by EB was that the promotion of the VR access was done just two weeks before the F4 so there was not enough time to communicate the service (EB M-1, 2021).

Another fan engagement project developed by the EB digital team was the ‘Final 4 Fans’ digital show. The details of the show are presented below in **Table 13**. The approach was to create a digital show where live and pre-produced content would be shared for 8 hours straight during the F4 weekend. The Final 4 Fans was broadcasted mainly in YouTube and Facebook with shared content on Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok resulting in an increase of “engagement per post (+112%), total engagement (+82%), views per video (+99%) and total views (+84%)”¹⁸ compared to the 2019 F4 social media engagement.

Digital activities	Website	YouTube	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Tik Tok
Influencers coverage						
Players' arrival and warm-up						
Scoreboard updates						
Post-game interviews						
Off-court interviews						
Sponsored content						
Challenges, quizzes & game highlights						
"Beyond The Lights" docuseries						
"The Final 4 Fans" live streaming						
"The Crossover" podcast						

Table 13: Summary table of the Final 4 Fans platforms and content distribution. Retrieved from Garza (2021 p.178)

Something that the access to these multiple social media platforms brings is the opportunity for the consumer to choose the content they want to watch having endless options of entertainment offering as they are used to direct satisfaction and targeted information.

“I think if you get your content mix right and if you make sure that the content is correctly distributed, correctly produced on different platforms, it opens a lot more opportunities. And I think if you tailor that content and sponsorship offering, you can recreate something that is much more meaningful.” (IMG D-2, 2018)

Some of the content that can be seen at the Final 4 Fans was for example exclusive behind the scenes live streaming such as players’ arrivals and warm-ups, scoreboard updates

¹⁸ New research shows growing interest in Euroleague. [accessed: 2021-10-06]. Available at: <https://mediacentre.euroleague.net/mediacentre/en/press_releases/single/2960/no?app=2>.

and commentaries during the matches, press conferences, off-court interviews with players, historical games of the teams, challenges or quizzes with players, or the Crossover Podcast. See **Figure 29** for the content advertisement.

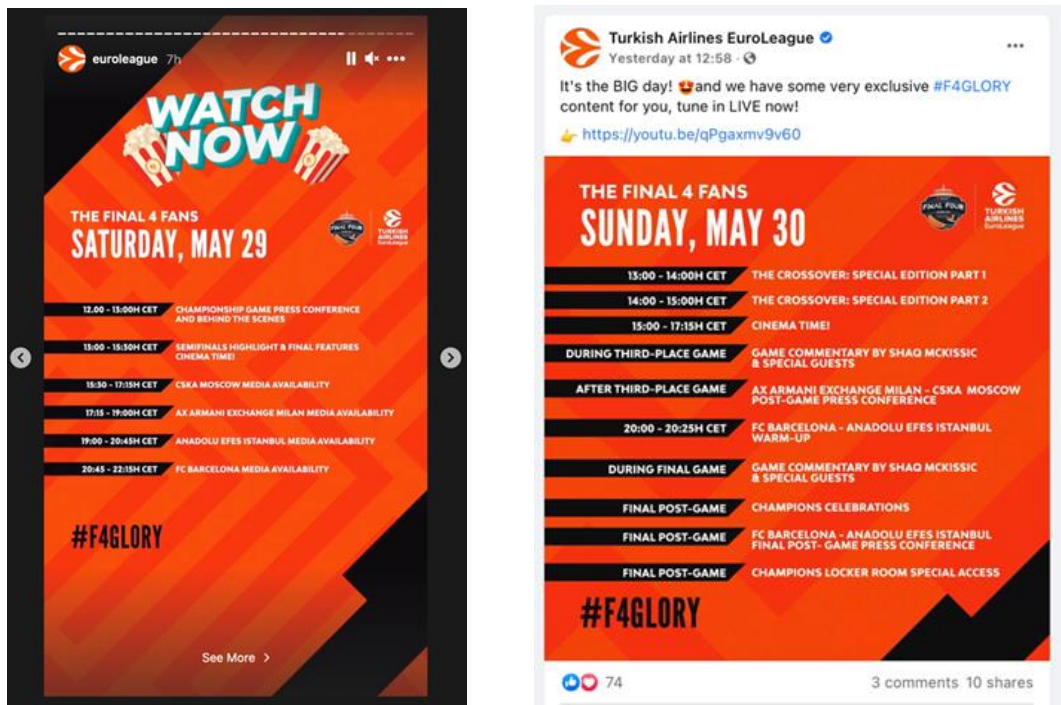


Figure 29: May 2021 Print screens of examples of the Final 4 fans content advertisement on Instagram and Facebook

In line with the Final 4 Fans project, also for the first time, EB brought into the F4 a ‘Euroleague reporter’ for social media. Mahal De La Durantaye was the “creator influencer” and the “face of the 2021 Final Four” (EB SM-4, 2021). Having a reporter was deemed to be a good fit with the content strategies EB had created for the Final 4 Fans and helped well for engaging young generations (EB SM-4, 2021). This also worked in line with what the audience demands regarding content consumption.

“What do the fans really want these days? They want two things. One, a different way to view sports. Second, backstage content, behind the scenes content. They want to know more about the player, they want to go beyond just looking at the game play.” (EB M-2, 2022)

One thing that could not be streamed on the social media channels were the games because of rights agreements with TV broadcasters (EB M-2, 2022). Still, EB was able to stream live game commentaries with different reporters and influencers (**Figure 30** shows a visual representation). Although, the games were broadcast in the TikTok platform but only in the United States and in Canada to avoid conflicting with the rights holders.

“This [the Final 4 Fans] was like the game changer in terms of the difference from between last season and this edition because we've never done this before. And it was a success and it has been what we originally objective we wanted, which was engaging with the fans.” (EB SM-4, 2021)



Figure 30: May 2021 YouTube print screen of the commentators streaming while the semifinals were played

A third initiative was the virtual seats ‘fan wall’ which was inspired by NBA practices and resulted an interesting solution to cover the emptiness of the arena and at the same time, engage fans by inviting them to apply to get a seat in the fan wall and cheer for their team (EB M-1, 2021).

The fan wall was a LED structure mounted aside the court with almost 4 meters tall an over 45 meters long. The assembly of this structure also helped the TV and streaming productions to dress the arena and get better shots from the court that will look more interesting than empty benches (EB M-1, 2021). **Figures 31** and **32** show visual examples of the fan wall project and how it was executed.

The decision of building the fan wall was assertive as it helped both for broadcasting and fan engagement by providing a direct substitute for crowd shots on the general background that the fans give during coverage. It enabled fans to be part of the broadcast of the game from their homes or wherever they were. This feeling of participation was a form of engagement. Nevertheless, just a very select number of fans were able to actively participate as the wall had a limit of less than 150 people to be broadcasted live cheering at the same time.



Figure 31: Fan wall design model. Source: <https://www.ombra.world/project-euroleague>



Figure 32: 2021 Final Four game with the fan wall behind. Source: Reuters

The augmented reality (AR) pre-game shows were a success as a TV product according to EB, and together with the fan wall and the dressing of the arena “showed to be a top-notch TV product” (EB M-1, 2021). Traditionally, EB has an open ceremony before the F4 semifinal games and before third place game and the finals. This “show” is thought to increase the fans’ experience at the arena. Without fans, the 2021 shows would be only a television product and so EB needed to re-think and the solution was to bring an augmented reality show built to be streamed (EB M-1, 2021).



Figure 33: Print screen of the AR pre-game show video. Source: EB stock

The concept of the 2021 F4 augmented reality shows included AR technologies, a DJ who was playing live on court and a couple of dancers and the show was integrating these three elements (**Figure 33**). The show was awarded the same year at the International Festival of Events and Live Communication with the 1st place in the *Digital Transformation* category and the 3rd place in the *Use of Technology* category¹⁹.

A further initiative was regarding media relations. For the F4 games, media from over the world join the celebration and EB welcomes around 500 to 600 journalists each year. For the 2021 F4, only about 250 journalists were able to attend the arena both because of German legislation and because of each country circumstances. This meant that EB needed to figure out how to provide access to the journalist that were not able to travel (EB D-4, 2021).

For EB media presence is key as during the F4. The media participate in several activities such as press conferences, player interviews, and reporting on the games.

“It’s [the media] a way for us to promote the league, promote the values that we have in Euroleague basketball and the performances that we have in the Final Four.” (EB M-2, 2022)

Therefore, EB needed to give access in a remote way, which represented a major challenge as they had never done this before and they had limited opportunities for testing prior to the event (EB D-4, 2021). Despite this, the technology worked well, and EB was able to give remote access form media coverage.

“This digital transformation of the services that we provided to the journalists... is something that I personally want to keep for future Final Four to reduce the number of journalists who can come on site but provide better service, both to the ones

¹⁹ 2021 Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Final Four Cologne – Shows [accessed 07/10/2022]. Available at: https://beaworldfestival.com/eubea_events/2021-turkish-airlines-euroleague-final-four-cologne-shows/

who are coming on site and the other journalist that want to cover the event remotely.” (EB D-4, 2021)

The implementation of these digital technologies gave EB the possibility to deliver the event in a digital way, and the different practices for fan engagement and for improving the media experience has pushed faster EB digitalization processes.

“Adapting to not having fans at the 2021 F4 forced us to get up, start walking, start running and adapt these technologies to the Final Four.” (EB M-2, 2022)

Even though the 2021 F4 was an exceptional event and that since 2022 the F4 is now executed as it used to be before the pandemic, the adoption of digital technologies in the different processes of the F4 event has left a legacy in the organization in the sense that some of the digital technologies implemented as an urgent response to an external crisis continue to be implemented, for example, to continue providing unique content to the fans on different platforms by replicating the digital show (EB D-4, 2021; EB SM-4, 2021).

5.2.2 The F4 from the partnership’s department perspective

In terms of fan engagement and media coverage, a different goal to achieve was identified by EB: to find digital initiatives for event brand exposure and activations and compensate the lack of *in-situ* activities for the partners (EB D-5, 2021). When signing a contract with each of the partners they have specific marketing benefits at the F4, e.g. agreed LED time, contractual tickets, branded content agreements, or activation campaigns. Since the 2021 F4 was without audience, some benefits were not delivered to the partners. For example: free tickets to enjoy the matches, the right to make a promotion during the game, or the right to be with the merchandising stands (EB D-5, 2021).

The 2021 F4 edition was very limited in its *in-situ* execution as it was not only about playing the games behind closed doors, but because the cancellation of all the parallel events that usually happen around the matches as well. **Figure 34** shows the draft of the activities organized for Saturday May 19th 2018 during the F4 weekend. This calendar serves as example of the numerous activities that EB carries out as parallel events during the F4 weekend, considering this calendar does not include the championship games which are the core activity of the F4 event. In **Figure 34**, the FanZone is pointed as one of the activities carried out on that day. **Figure 35** shows the activities within the FanZone, which is one of the numerous events executed during the weekend but the FanZone itself comprises several activities mainly related to the partners’ activations and brand exposure activities.

In this sense, not having the opening press conference as usual, neither the award ceremony, and most importantly, no FanZone, brand exposure and the opportunity for on-site brand activations compared to a regular F4 with full attendance was limited.

This situation affected EB sponsorship revenues as brands usually make an additional investment to be present at the F4, mainly depending on the teams that qualify to the finals.

“For example. We have many Turkish partners. If for the Final Four there are at least one or two teams qualified [from that country], they will be more active, they will be more able to invest money, they will be inviting more clients.” (EB D-5, 2021)

TIME (TBC)	ACTIVITY
	STARK ARENA
ALL DAY	STARK ARENA available
08:00 - 20:30	Main Accreditation Centre opens
08:30 - 09:15	Champion Trophy Ceremony rehearsal with volunteers and security deployment
9:30 - 10:30	Complete Champion Trophy Ceremony Rehearsal (with everybody involved)
10:00 - 00:00	Media Centre opens
10:15 - 11:30	Sports Business MBA
10:30 - 11:30	adidas EuroLeague Media Game
12:00 - 12:45	Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Championship Game Press Conference
12:00 - 12:45	Euroleague Basketball Platinum & Ambassadors Game
13:00 - 13:30	NUTS GAME Recording (TADIM)
14:00 - 16:45	Sports Business MBA
12:45 - 13:45	Open to entertainment rehearsals, if feasible
14:00 - 15:30	Official F4 practices
15:20 - 15:45	Media availability
15:35 - 17:05	Official F4 practices
17:10 - 18:40	Official F4 practices
18:30 - 18:55	Media availability
18:45 - 20:15	Official F4 practices
20:30 - 21:00	EB ANGT Trophy Ceremony rehearsal
21:00 - 22:00	3rd place game team presentation rehearsal
22:00 - overnight if needed	Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Championship Game entertainment rehearsal
	ALEKSANDAR NIKOLIC HALL
	Euroleague Basketball ADIDAS NEXT GENERATION TOURNAMENT Round 3
9:00 - 17:00	09:00: Game 1: U18 Lietuvos Rytas Vilnius - U18 CFBB Paris
	11:00: Game 2: U18 Real Madrid - U18 Mega Bemax Belgrade
	13:00: Game 3: U18 Crvena Zvezda mts Belgrade - U18 Stellazzurra Rome
	15:00: Game 4: U18 FC Bayern Munich - U18 Divina Seguros Joventut Badalona
18:00 - 20:00	International All Star Game
	TURKISH AIRLINES EUROLEAGUE FANZONE - KALEMEGDAN FORTRESS & PARK
10:00 - 00:00	Turkish Airlines EuroLeague FanZone
10:30 - 11:15	One Team session with Special Olympics
18:00 - 18:45	Slam Dunk Contest - U18 Teams
	OTHER LOCATIONS
10:00	adidas Trophy Tour
10:00	2017-18 Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Awards Ceremony technical checks
10:00 - 19:00	VIP Information Desk
14:00 - 16:00	2017-18 Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Awards Ceremony rehearsals
18:30 - 21:00	Armani Exchange Cocktail
20:00 - 21:15	2017-18 Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Awards Ceremony Welcome Drinks & Dinner
21:30 - 22:15	2017-18 Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Awards Ceremony
22:15 on	2017-18 Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Awards Ceremony Dinner continuation
23:00	Euroleague F4 party

Figure 34: Belgrade 2018 F4 general program draft for Saturday activities. Print screen from EB internal document: 2018 TURKISH AIRLINES EUROLEAGUE FINAL FOUR BELGRADE GENERAL PROGRAMME (draft) page 6.

For the 2021 F4 EB had to find solutions to compensate the contractual partners' benefits that were not going to be delivered with other ones. An option was to sell more opportunities for brand exposure when knowing the qualified teams. In this line, one of the main challenges was to find solutions for EB partners to increase brand visibility inside the F4 event. For the partners, good visibility of their brand logo in the arena has been one of their main KPIs with the objective that the fans attending to the arena can see the branding. For the 2021 EB had to find different platforms to give brands exposure to the different partners. A success story can be the EFES example, when the Anadolu EFES team qualified for the final, the partner EFES invested in buying extra minutes on the courtside LEDs screens to increase brand visibility (EB D-5, 2021).

The digital initiatives to compensate brand visibility included offering more exposure time in the LEDs or more TV graphics, which resulted in many brands appearing during the games' broadcast and which means more brands' advertisement but it was a solution for the partners (EB D-5, 2021). There were conversations on adding the brands into the pre-game show but because of the lack of time and the new format of the show (augmented reality) in the end the brands were not included (EB SM-3, 2021).

Another typical practice at the F4 under normal conditions was to offer a VIP experiences and hospitality to the partners when they attend to the F4 games. This included receiving contractual tickets that they can share with their own guests, meet and greets with players, to having VIP seats and private areas to enjoy the celebration. One of the solutions to tackle this situation was to provide VR passes to the partners so they could enjoy the game from home along with virtual reality headsets and Euroleague TV passes (EB D-5, 2021).

Regarding the partners branded content and activations, without a Fan Zone nor opportunities for engagement at the arena, EB focused on their digital channels to bring to the partners more opportunities for digital activations and branded content. According to EB, one of the most successful campaigns was undertaken with 7Days, which was done through the end of the regular season and ended with the F4. It was called '*from the heart*' and involved star players from different clubs such as Gigi Datome and Kyle Hines from the Pallacanestro Olimpia Milano or Shane Larkin from the Anadolu Efes Istanbul. The players took their own mobile device and make a short video for the fans explaining what they do when they are off the court, behind the scenes and in their personal lives (**Figure 36**). This was regarded by EB as a success in terms of fan engagement as it was quick and novel content (EB D-5, 2021).



FANZONE

KALEMEGDAN FORTRESS

Schedule of Activities

FRIDAY MAY 18		
10:00-22:00	Fan Zone	Kalemevdan Fortress
10:00-22:00	adidas 3x3 Tournaments U14, U16, U18	Satellite Court
10:00-14:00	EFES EuroLeague Dancing Squad Shows	Central Court A-B, Fanzone Area
10:00-10:30	Spectator game	Central Court A-B
10:45-11:00	Opening Ceremony	Central Court A-B
11:00-12:15	One Team Session & Ambassadors Exhibition Game : Theo Papaloukas, Ramunas Siskauskas, Joe Arlauckas, Nikola Vujcic, Matjaz Smodis, Mirsad Turkcan, Dusko Savanovic, Ibrahim Kutluay, Konstantinos Tsarsaris, Dusan Ivkovic.	Central Court A-B
12:15-12:30	Autograph Session with EuroLeague Ambassadors	Central Court A-B
12:30-21:00	5x5 School Tournament	Central Court A-B
19:00-20:00	TDI Radio Station DJs House Party	Main Music Stage
21:00-22:00	Courts opens to fans	Central Court A-B
SATURDAY MAY 19		
10:00-23:00	Fan Zone	Kalemevdan Fortress
10:00-22:00	adidas 3x3 Tournaments U14, U16, U18, 18+	Satellite Court
10:00-20:00	EFES EuroLeague Dancing Squad Shows	Central Court A-B, Fanzone Area
12:30-20:00	adidas 3x3 Men Tournament	Central Court A-B & Satellite Court
12:30-17:30	5x5 School Tournament	Central Court A-B
10:30-11:15	One Team session with Special Olympics and Ambassadors: Victor Khryapa & Kyle Hines, Luigi Datome & Ahmet Duvrioglu, Santi Yusta & Gustavo Ayon, Kevin Pangos & Paulius Valinskas	Central Court A-B
11:00-12:00	Turkish Airlines EuroLeague Final Four Players Visit	Central Court & Partners Areas
16:30 - 17:30	EuroLeague Basketball Ambassadors Meet & Greet / The Insider	Turkish Airlines Experience Area
17:50 - 18:00	Slam Dunk Contest Opening	Central Court A-B
18:00-18:45	Slam Dunk Contest / Ambassadors Committe	Central Court A-B
19:30-21:30	adidas 3x3 Men Tournament	Central Court A-B
20:00 - 21:00	TDI Radio Station DJs RnB, HipHop Party	Main Music Stage
21:00 - 22:30	Live Concert Neverne Bebe	Main Music Stage
22:30 - 00:00	FanZone open to fans	Central Court A-B
SUNDAY MAY 20		
10:00-22:00	FanZone	Kalemevdan Fortress
10:00-14:00	EFES EuroLeague Dancing Squad Shows	Central Court A-B, Fanzone Area
10:30-12:30	5x5 School Tournament Finals	Central Court A-B
10:10-21:00	adidas 3x3 tournaments	Central Court A-B & Satellite Court
16:00 - 18:00	TDI Radio Station DJs Mainstream, Top40 Party	Main Music Stage
18:00 - 19:30	Varda DJ Performance	Main Music Stage
21:00- 22:00	Courts open to fans	Central Court A-B

Figure 35: FanZone programmed activities at the Belgrade 2018 F4. Print screen taken from EB's Official Program page 47.

As mentioned previously, EB pushed for digital technologies and to adopt different digital platforms for fan engagement. For the 2021 F4, especial efforts were made not only to maximize fan engagement, but also to stay close to the partners and invest together in digital

campaigns resulting in a 2021 F4 with more branded content compared to previous seasons (EB D-5, 2021).

“This is what digitization is all about. It's about achieving growth and reach that you never had the chance to before. And for us, as a company using sponsorship as one of our main revenue models, it's a very important lesson in how we can adapt this and make sure that our sponsors are happy because in many ways, sponsorship also makes sure that your business will be successful in the near future”. (EB M-2, 2022)

The increase in content usage across the different digital channels and the increase of the digital content inventory after the COVID lockdown raised interest among the different partners as they had to undertake more digital campaigns in platforms such as Instagram and TikTok creating more opportunities for the EB sponsorship commercial team (EB M-2, 2022).



Figure 36: YouTube print screens of the 7Days 'From the heart' digital marketing campaign with EB.

To conclude, the 2021 F4 was executed in exceptional circumstances and would not be used as a model or reference for organizing future F4 (EB D-4, 2021). Nevertheless, it has pushed forward the digitalization of the organization and showcases EB willingness to adopt different digital technologies. Although it does not fall within the data collection period for this case study, the 2022 F4, executed in Belgrade with full arena attendance included many of the digital advances made for 2021: the digital show was again produced on social media channels; there were more digital activations with the brands; and for the first time EB invested in the creation of a metaverse platform both for fan engagement and brand exposure taking the VR experience to another level.

“Belgrade 2022 F4 will be very interesting because we're keeping the same technology but still giving the people on location the best experience possible by increasing the fan engagement on location, on the FanZone physically plus on a digital platform. So, then there will be different activations that we're working on right now, and it's going to be a good way for us to connect both worlds together.” (EB M-2, 2022)

5.2.3 PART II - Findings thematic coding

After analyzing PART II of the findings, six codes were identified and categorized in two sub-themes. Macro-environmental events, the technology development, the evolving consumer behavior, the changing demands of sponsors, and the entry of new players in the sports digital landscape can be cataloged as drivers for change. Then, the last code identified was open innovation, which is labeled into the strategic partnerships sub-theme. Both, drivers for change and strategic partnerships sub-themes build the changing digital landscape theme.

The emerging codes from the empirical data analyzed related to the changing digital landscape can be seen in **Table 14** and are further discussed in detail in CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION.

Codes	Sub-themes	Theme
Changing demands of sponsors	Drivers for change	Changing digital landscape
Macro-environmental events		
Technology development		
Entry of new players in the sports digital landscape		
Evolving consumer (fan) behavior		
Open Innovation	Strategic partnerships	

Table 14: Emerging codes, sub-themes, and theme related to the case study context – changing digital landscape

5.3 Summary of the findings chapter

This chapter shared the findings related to EB's digitalization journey when executing marketing strategies and in specific their sponsorship life-cycle process between 2018 and 2022.

In the first section, PART I – *Sponsorship life-cycle process digitalization*, the details of how EB sponsorship life-cycle process works was described by explaining in detail each of the three main phases of the cycle: (1) Structuring the sponsorship deal, (2) sponsorship-linked marketing activities and, (3) sponsorship measurement. The second part of this chapter, PART II – *EB digital acceleration: The 2021 Final Four*, showcased EB's willingness to adopt digital technologies and digitalize processes for marketing and sponsorship practices in a unique and extreme context.

The main findings of the chapter can be divided in two themes. **Figure 37** presents a visual representation of the thematic network (Thompson, 2022) by putting together the two identified themes and the four sub-themes including the different codes. In the following chapter, the case study main findings will be discussed based in the two themes mentioned.

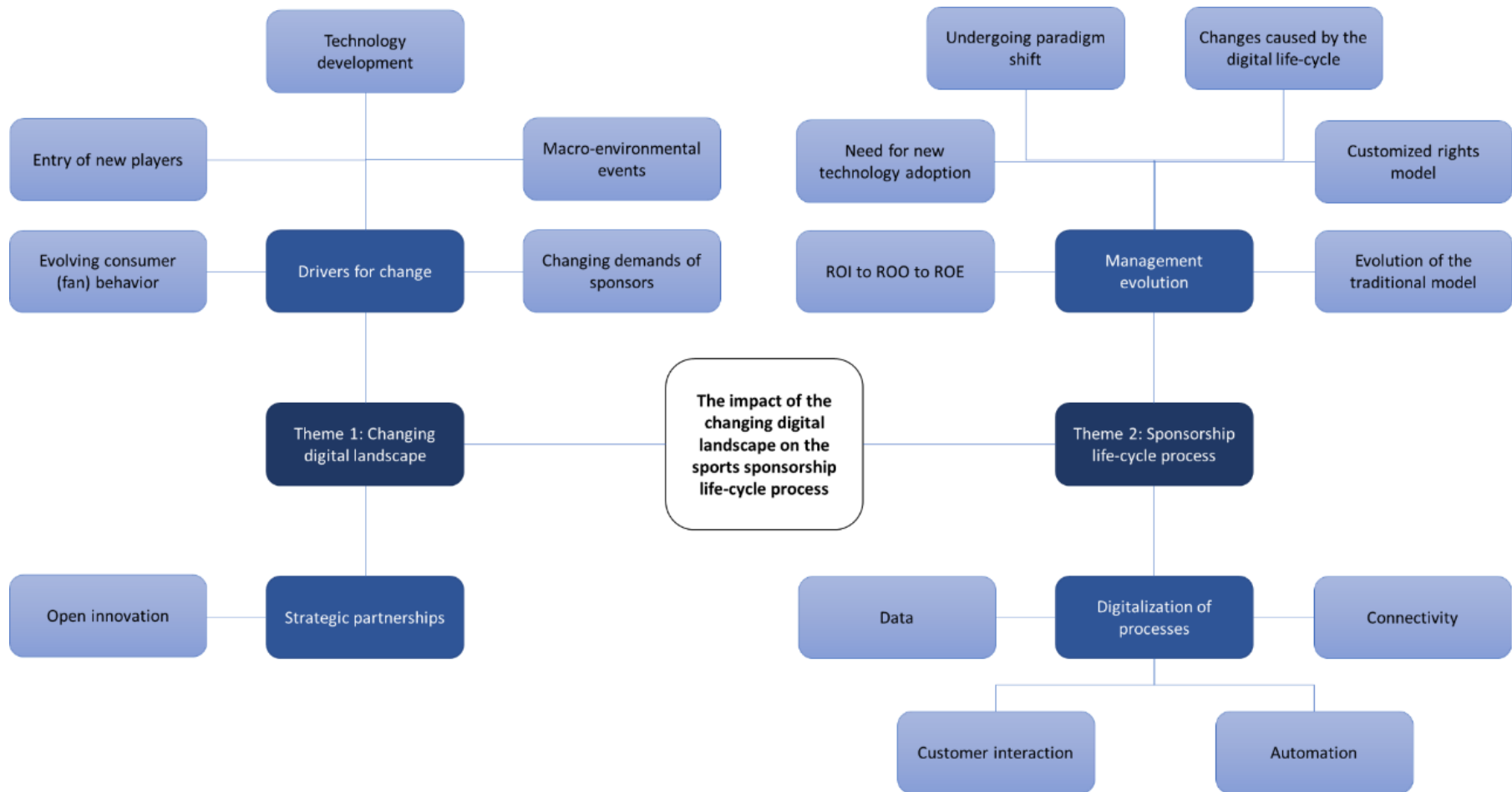


Figure 37: Thematic network

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The overarching research question of this dissertation is: **How is the changing digital landscape impacting on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process?**

The focus of this chapter is to engage in an in-depth discussion around this overarching question and the more specific research objectives established in chapter 2. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first corresponds to the identified theme: *changing digital landscape* where both sub-themes *drivers for change* and *strategic partnerships* are discussed. The second section covers the *sponsorship life-cycle process* theme including the *digitalization of processes* and *management evolution* sub-themes. Lastly, the third section brings together the findings discussed where they are contrasted with the stated objectives in this dissertation to contribute give answer to the research question. Following the discussion of the findings, a set of 8 propositions are described as a consequence of the discussion to reflect this research work contribution based on the findings from the EB case study and as inspiration for future research.

6.1 Changing digital landscape

Digital technologies in marketing practices have experienced accelerated change in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The previous chapter revealed which digital technologies EB had adopted and how they were employing them for as part of the sponsorship life-cycle process. By comparing the date when the technologies emerge and started to be used in marketing, it can be seen that EB adoption of the technologies was reactive as the organization attempted to catch-up with fast moving trends in the digital landscape. Nevertheless, the 2021 F4 gave a push to EB in their digital transformation process as the adoption of digital trends for marketing practices in that specific event showed a clear willingness to innovate.

Taking *Figure 19: Euroleague Basketball timeline adding the evolution of digital technologies in marketing practices based on Graesch et al. (2021)* on chapter 4 as reference, in the timeline it can be seen that technologies such as the CRM had been adopted very late, having been used widely since 2002 but only being adopted by EB in 2017 with improvements and more features by 2022. Continuing with the CRM example, this could be related to the emergence of

big data by 2014, where social media platforms were becoming increasingly sophisticated in terms of data collection. At this point social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and other platforms such as Amazon or Apple, entered into the sports industry by generating fan data and forcing sports organizations to reach out and find solutions for generating and managing big data of their own. That same year, 2017, was when EB started to search for technology partners and began executing initiatives such as the Tech Challenge to keep pace with technology evolution. These changes were also driven by the joint venture with IMG in 2016 as this aimed to maximize EB's potential growth by contributing to content management and creation, plus bringing knowledge to become a data-driven organization to build stronger relations with the fans. In this sense, it can be said that 2016 - 2017 was the first digital inflection point for the organization as the entry of new players highlighted the importance of data.

Moreover, the tech start-up partnering initiative enabled technology adoption to grow continuously. For example, the use of VR technologies for marketing practices started around the year 2018 (Graesch *et al.*, 2021) and by the 2020 EB was already considering using the technology which was then implemented in 2021.

Continuing with the relevance of data, 2020 was also decisive in the organization as creating the BI&A department brought the expertise needed for better collecting and managing data in-house. This affected the department responsible for sponsorship, which how the BI&A department helps with the sponsorship life-cycle process has already been stated. Moreover, it brought the expertise to become a data-driven organization by developing knowledge for decision taking processes.

The second inflection point that has pushed EB's digital transformation process was the decision to accelerate and extend the adoption of digital technologies for the 2021 F4 held behind closed doors. Even though there was no plan to repeat the F4 in a closed format, several of the digital technologies implemented for the first time by the organization were maintained and earmarked for development in the future.

Said these, it can be seen that the digital landscape is changing leading to an evolved competitive environment and sports organizations need to adapt their business strategy. As stated by Porter (1997, p. 2), the "first step towards formulating a competitive strategy is to define the industry structure within which it is to operate". By taking the EB sponsorship life-cycle process case study it can be seen that the changing digital landscape has modified the sports industry as five drivers for change were identified in the findings: (1) Entry of new players

in the sports digital landscape, (2) evolving consumer (fan) behavior, (3) macro-environmental events, (4) technology development, and (5) changing demands of sponsors.

6.1.1 Drivers for change

In this section, the five drivers for change identified will be described on how they have evolved due to the changing digital landscape.

Entry of new players in the sports digital landscape

Change has been driven by a combination of factors such as new digital platforms and players entering into the sports ecosystem, media content distribution in different platform causing audience fragmentation, decreased attention span of younger generations, and the diversification of entertainment time. The entrance of new players into the sports industry ecosystem disrupted the way sports organizations used to manage their fan base. The fact that social media and e-commerce platforms owned fan data, not the sports organizations, was a key driving factor to digitalize processes as a fight for data emerged and in order to bring value to the brands. Data gathering, management, and knowledge became key for sports organizations (N3xtSports, 2022).

Besides the mentioned new players, other stakeholders from the sports industry also changed due to technological advances. For example, an evolution from the media partners side was observed when talking to EB executives and managers. Linear television passed to be from a pay-per-view business model to an over-the-top (OTT) streaming where platforms such as DAZN or Twitch (Qian, 2022) entered to the sports business as broadcasters disrupting the way to watch sports and re-distributing the sports media rights commercialization.

As a consequence, sports organizations needed to change their business models and adapt to the new digital landscape. For instance, social media platforms became engagement platforms and a valuable fan data collector tools, and the EB case study demonstrated OTT platforms became broadcasting partners to complement television broadcast, e-commerce sites became service providers for merchandise selling for example.

The new players that emerged with the changing digital landscape have brought competitive advantages to the sports organizations by bringing opportunities for data collection and management and opening more media rights deals which then are valuable when making commercial offerings to the sponsors. Attached there are risks as well because emerging digital

players have greater capacity and expertise for gathering and managing big data. If sports organizations do not respond to this trend, sponsorship and advertisement opportunities with brands may be missed or lost to the competition.

Evolving consumer (fan) behavior

The digital landscape has brought in an increasingly dynamic and competitive environment which is generating changes in consumer or fan behavior and there is a need to understand these changes in order to customize the services offered to partnering brands and to the sports customers.

Firstly, the new digital landscape and different media platforms cause audience fragmentation according to EB executives. This fragmentation has moved different demographics with different interests away from regular broadcasting services (Meier *et al.*, 2020) to different channels and platforms causing the sports organizations to produce content in a very targeted way. Content consumption is changing not only because of the different platforms it can be consumed on, but also because of the diversification of entertainment time. There are more content options beside sports such as TV series, concerts, or videogames to mention some examples, and now sports compete with other industries for consumer attention.

These factors drive change in sports organizations' content production activities by making them find solutions to engage fans through different channels, produce more targeted content with better quality, and with different initiatives such as moving away from traditional journalism towards streamer culture and individual influencers (Radmann *et al.*, 2021) by contributing to share related sports content on their social media channels or adopting emerging technologies such as 5G live broadcasting and 360 degrees cameras to provide an immersive experience which helped maintain the fan closer (Chang *et al.*, 2022). However, as described in the EB case study findings, managing an increased number of digital platforms is a challenge as it represents more people resource investment because more content needs to be produced.

Macro-environmental events

The latest macro-environmental event affecting sports organizations is the COVID-19 pandemic whose impact disrupted not only the sports industry but the global economy and society (Drewes *et al.*, 2021). Different containment measures were taken by the governments including the cancellation, rescheduling, or executing sports events with capacity restrictions

including major sports events such as the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics (Garza, 2021; Horky, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused catalyzing effects for digitalization particularly in the sports industry caused by the restrictions, which brought severe limitations for sponsorship *in-situ* activations forcing sports organizations to move to a digital landscape in order to go direct to fans with different content than the usual mix of live games and highlights packages. What is usually complementary content such as social media activations, behind the scenes content, back stories, or historic content, suddenly became primary. In the case of EB, these diverse contents were used also for branded content purposes as video content was key for fan engagement during the pandemic (Veiga, 2022). An accelerated digitalization occurred and there was deepening of existing trends such as more screen time, more multi-direction engagement, increased consumption of digital content, and more dwell time in entertainment platforms, that enabled sports organizations to be resilient and bring more opportunities to integrate brands in different digital efforts (Nielsen, 2022). Digital platforms help maintain the engagement with fans (Azer *et al.*, 2021). This drive to innovate revealed a wider value of sports contents and on top of that the ability to gather more accurate data on fan behavior.

Moreover, surviving the short-term loss in revenues caused by the cancellation of the events and the staging of 2021 without the ability to sell tickets will perhaps be compensated in the medium to long-term with the value generated by the digital investment caused by the unexpected digitalization. Further research would be needed in 3 to 5 years to study the medium-term impact of the accelerated digitalization as the current research only captures the immediate impacts of the crisis and short-term reactions and reflections.

Technology development

Sports organizations need to adopt the cutting-edge technologies in order to stay at the forefront. As it can be seen in *Figure 19: Euroleague Basketball timeline adding the evolution of digital technologies in marketing practices based on Graesch et al. (2021)* on chapter 4, different technologies have emerged in the last years for marketing practices such as internet of things (IOT), artificial intelligence (AI), the VR and AR, or blockchain (Chang *et al.*, 2022; Graesch *et al.*, 2021). All together with the rise of big data, data analytics for market and business intelligence (Chen, *et al.*, 2018).

Technology continues to move forward in a non-stop rhythm generating opportunities to the sports industry for broadcasting, fan engagement, or different monetization models. With the technology evolution, different players have entered into the sports business by managing

big data to target customers and buying streaming rights, making traditional sports organizations to change and adopt new technologies to be able to bring fan knowledge and in-house data solutions to their partners.

Changing demands of sponsors

The new players in the sports industry, changing fan behavior, external or macro-environmental events, and the technology development have also impacted on sponsoring brands as they navigate the changing digital landscape. By taking as reference the EB case study, it is seen that the changing demands of sponsors has made sports organizations also to change their processes. The two main changes can be seen regarding the sponsorship-linked marketing activities as with the proliferation of new digital technologies the brands demand innovative activations with trending technologies that can better engage with fans which then can lead to purchase intention. The second change in sponsors' demands is related to the outcome of a sponsorship deal. Sponsors are now demanding not only brand exposure but sales conversion coming directly from the partnership.

6.1.2 Strategic partnerships

The EB case study revealed that the joint venture between Euroleague Basketball and IMG Media limited help add value to EB in maximizing their growth potential by collaborating in content production and management, streaming quality improvements, build stronger relations with the fans, and facilitating tools to become a data-driven organization. The resource investment made by IMG to the EB joint venture was expertise, network, and guidance²⁰.

According to Adam Kelly, IMG President in his interview at the *Unofficial Partner* podcast (2022), the current complex media landscape pushed sports organizations for data driven products to achieve fan engagement as being able to connect with the fans in the new currency and the challenge is to understand the audience to be able to reach them. He claims that sports organizations do not hold enough expertise to produce in-house services and that outsourcing can drive value by creating sports products with better quality. The EB case study is a clear example as mentioned in chapter 4, as EB was able to double revenues within the first 18 months of the joint venture.

²⁰ Interview at *The Unofficial Partner* podcast to Adam Kelly, IMG Media president. Podcast available on Apple podcasts app on September 13th 2022 [last accessed: 28/10/2022].

The EB – IMG joint venture is not the only case of this type in the sports industry. For example, IMG recently announced a twelve-year partnership with The Rugby Football League²¹, or the NBA partnering with Take-Two Interactive Software Inc. to launch an esports league²². A joint venture with a technological partner can drive sports organizations to achieve digitalization objectives as they act as enablers that can bring strategic benefits (Narayanan *et al.*, 2009) by collaborating in a common project (Sanga, 2018).

Open Innovation

A different form of business collaboration is Open Innovation. EB practices such as the Tech Challenge and the Fan XP challenge show willingness to expand their ecosystem beyond traditional large-scale corporate partnerships adopting an open innovation approach. This is not a new practice and has been undertaken for at least twenty years or more in the sports industry (Ratten, 2011) in different sports organizations such as LaLiga, the NFL, or NBA, and teams like Manchester City or Bayern Munich by opening up their innovation processes to wider entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Open Innovation can help expand the sports organization ecosystem beyond traditional large-scale corporate partnerships and help meet different objectives with disruptive solutions such as for business strategy, new sport development, performance management, promotional strategies, or technological developments to mention a few (Ratten, 2011).

From the sponsorship perspective, one of the traditional motivations of sponsors in certain categories (particularly technology) is to use sports events as testing grounds for their innovations, for example, IBM and then ATOS at the Olympic Games. It is interesting to see how by adopting an open innovation approach a new profile of partnership relationship is established outside of the sponsorship model. In the particular case of EB, examples include YBVR with the VR experience for fans or NFC Sound with the Final Four light show. These partnerships are based on exploring and testing solutions to EB problems with the exchange taking place as more typical client-service provider relationship. This has also contributed to not only positioning the EB brand identity in relation to technology and innovation, but also in terms of corporate strategy where innovation and technology adoption is part of their strategy.

²¹ Interview at The Unofficial Partner podcast to Adam Kelly, IMG Media president. Podcast available on Apple podcasts app on September 13th 2022 [last accessed: 28/10/2022].

²² NBA inks joint venture to launch e-sports league with around 15 franchises. <https://www.bizjournals.com/houston/news/2017/02/09/nba-inks-joint-venture-to-launch-e-sports-league.html> [last accessed: 28/10/2022]

Moreover, the search for partners or potential service providers with innovative, disruptive solutions could lead into the sphere of Corporate Venturing and investing in tech, for example the NFL buying Fanatics capital²³, which opens discussion whether if it is there a new revenue stream through longer-term strategic investments in other organizations. One of the drivers behind this tendency was to add value to sponsor relationships – to innovate, engage, and capture data.

6.2 Sponsorship life-cycle process

Following the three main phases of the sponsorship life-cycle: (1) structuring the sponsorship deal, (2) sponsorship-linked marketing activities, and (3) sponsorship measurement and evaluation (Beech *et al.*, 2014; Cornwell and Kwon, 2020; Foster *et al.*, 2016), EB's sponsorship life-cycle was identified with the different activities and the digital technologies that the organization uses to maximize them.

6.2.1 Digitalization of processes

Figure 38 illustrates the different activities that the organization follows through the whole process within their sponsorship practices.

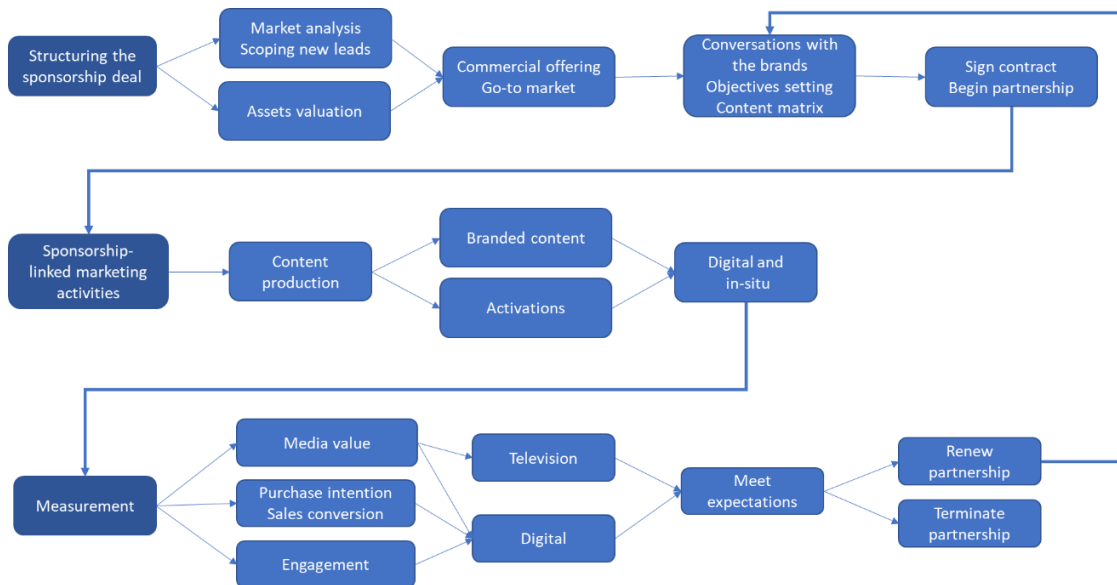


Figure 38: EB sponsorship life-cycle process. Source: own processing based on the empirical data gathered

²³ Estas son las millonarias inversiones en empresas emergentes deportivas de NFL y NBA https://www.elconfidencial.com/empresas/2022-07-19/startups-inversion-deportiva-nfl-nba-sportstech_3462738/ [Last accessed: 28/10/2022]

For phase one, *structuring the sponsorship deal*, different activities were identified with data as key for the first step of the process. In terms of the market analysis and the scope of new leads there has been a change in how the activities were undertaken and a shift towards a more digitalized process involving data collection and data management through a CRM tool to track the sales pipeline. Using a CRM helped visualize the available market information leading the commercial team to reach different brands in a more assertive way in specific, targeted industries. Moreover, collecting, managing, and analyzing fan data in relation with their connection with the different industries is also a key activity to prepare to go-to market, as knowing their fan base became a necessary asset to add value to the sponsorship packages. The commercial offering based on data became available for the sales team to plan their strategy to go-to market with an established digital inventory.

After the commercial team goes to market and the conversation with the brand moves to the next step in the process, setting the objectives of the partnership and creating the content matrix, it is observed that although it is a process that relies on conversations and workshops rather than on a specific digital technology, EB fan data plays a decisive role as the sponsorship-linked marketing activities planning to elaborate the content matrix relies in EB's knowledge of their fan base. Besides, the CRM is still used to track conversations with the brands. The last stage of the first phase is signing the sponsorship deal and begin the partnership.

As for the second phase of the sponsorship life-cycle, *sponsorship-linked marketing activities*, several digital technologies were identified for deploying different marketing practices with different objectives such as entering in new markets or for fan engagement. It is found that *in-situ* brand activations are still an ongoing practice and digital initiatives such as branded content on digital platforms and digital activations are being executed in a more intensive way as a solution for reaching new markets and maximize fan engagement.

For branded content, television is still relevant as for example LED time in arenas courtside is still offered and considered by the partners for brand exposure. However, more digital content is produced to be distributed among different digital channels with social media platforms being the main channels for the distribution of branded content. Branded content in social media has created advantages for sports organizations. For instance, content can be shared 24/7 on social media giving the opportunity to reach fans at any time with different types of content as time is not a limitation compared to sharing branded content on linear TV broadcasts. This has brought the opportunity to sports organizations and brands to be creative, opening a window for new content possibilities. Another advantage is the opportunity for sports

organizations to monetize as the more digital channels and the larger the audience is, more branded content opportunities could be sold to the partners.

As for activations, *in-situ* activations were an ongoing practice that were only suspended because of the COVID-19 health crisis. In the immediate post-pandemic period *in-situ* activations are still an important tool for fan engagement and technology is part of the physical experience as well. The digital technologies that are most commonly used are VR sets, photo booths with instant share on social media channels, or physical skills measuring devices. Therefore, having *in-situ* activations is still a relevant marketing activity for sponsors that has been enhanced by the incorporation of new technologies to increase fan experience.

On the other hand, digital initiatives for activations have intensified and there is a wider variety of platforms that can be used for fan engagement practices. For instance, social media platforms, AR, VR, or the metaverse environments. The use of these platforms increases the fan engagement as they give them an active role that enables them to take decisions. For example, in social media they can decide which channels to follow, to open or not a video, to interact by sharing or commenting in the different posts; regarding the VR technology, the fan is able to choose what to watch, preferred camera angles, or to see statistics while watching the game, something that regular broadcasting does not allow. Moreover, the use of social media platforms has shown an evolution in its use as it is seen a move away from traditional journalism towards streamer culture and individual influencers. This shift has been generated due to audience fragmentation in multiple channels and the need to reach different demographics in each platform. By inviting influencers to take an active role in the sports content sharing brings authenticity and proximity with the fans in multi-directional channels.

The last phase of the sponsorship life-cycle process is the *measurement* of the marketing activities. There has been an evolution from measuring only media value ROI to a more complex measurement on ROO besides media value. The platforms that were still being measured were traditional TV broadcast, the different social media channels, and websites with help of specialized outsourcing agencies and consultancies and analytics tools.

Fan engagement on digital platforms was also being measured, which was an evolution itself as five years ago what was measured on social media was views and impressions but engagement measures interaction, meaning that fans' clicks are a key metric. Indeed, purchase intention and sales conversion coming directly from the partnership are new requirements asked by the brands, which has complicated the measurement process. For measuring media value, standardized measurement tools were available, as in the case of engagement, but the

key was to measure interactions across multiple platforms. Measuring sales conversion or purchase intention coming directly from an activation or branded content within a sports event has pushed sports organizations to think how these can be measured and which tools can be used. For example, one of the solutions found was the use of discount coming directly from a promotion made at a sports event. Another was to track all the click-path data from the customers, in the case that they started their purchase journey at an EB platform that it led them to a partner's website.

By way of synthesis, digitalization of processes was occurring in the sponsorship life-cycle process. Data has been identified as key in the three phases, *structuring the sponsorship deal*, *sponsorship-linked marketing activities* and in the *measurement* phase. EB's statement on becoming a data-driven organization is shown in their sponsorship process with the decision taking regarding the commercial offering and the targeted industries increasingly relying on market data knowledge.

Furthermore, fan data was key for planning the sponsorship-linked activities and developing the content matrix. Regarding data in the measurement phase, data collection and analysis were core activities to measure the partnership effectiveness. From measuring TV audiences and gathering social media data to tracking website clicks, data is generated to monitor fan engagement and track sales conversion leads. **Figure 39** shows in a visual way how digital affects in the sponsorship life-cycle process by identifying in each of the phases the key digital activities regarding the implemented tools.

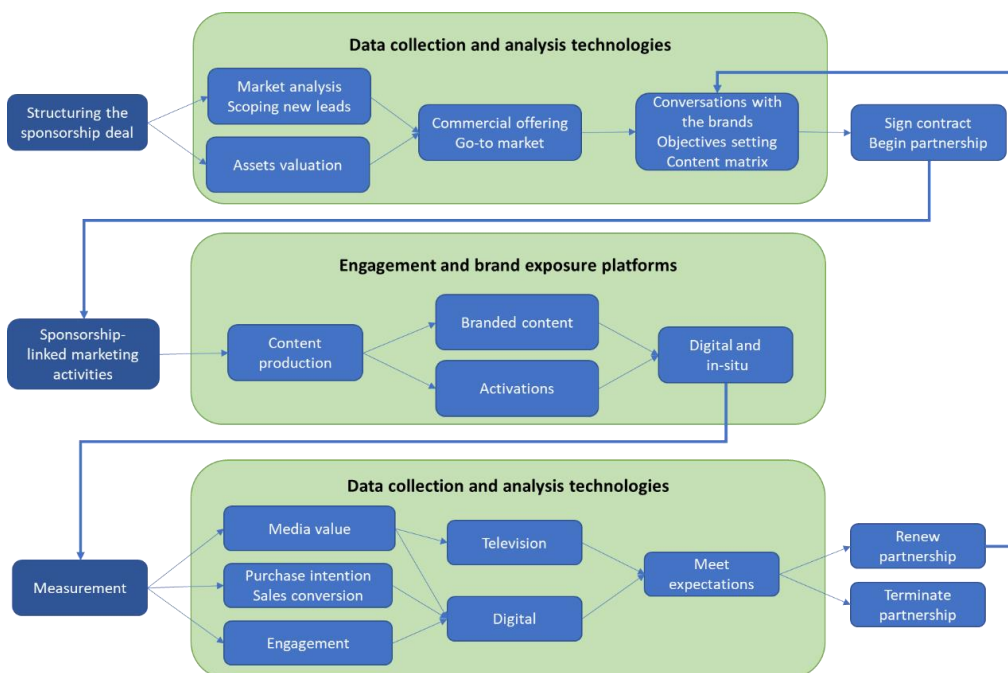


Figure 39: EB sponsorship life-cycle process adding digital technologies main use on each phase.

By taking the EB case study as a reference, an analysis as to how the digitalization of the different activities in the sports sponsorship life-cycle process impact on marketing practices and the wider sports organizations. To frame the analysis, the findings will be analyzed using the four levers proposed by Graesch *et al.* (2021) in their digital transformation in marketing framework (*Figure 5: Digital transformation in marketing framework. Retrieved from Graesch et al. (2021, p.17)* in the literature review chapter).

Connectivity

Digital technologies help increase levels of connectivity between the sports organization, sponsoring partners and sports consumers. According to Graesch *et al.* (2021) there are three connectivity-enabling technologies: cloud servers, telecommunications, and the Internet. These technologies are the basis for using marketing tools such as cloud CRM, mobile communications, and basically enable any internet-based service such as e-commerce or e-marketing.

In a global era, the use of internet is key for increasing the levels of connectivity as it allows global reach. When executing the different activities in the sponsorship life-cycle process digital technologies that allow connectivity play a key part in the three phases of the cycle.

Through the sponsorship life-cycle process, managing data through a CRM facilitates the connectivity within the sports organization as the information is centralized and then can be distributed to the different departments in the organization. On the other hand, Internet-based connectivity is key as it enables a two-way communication with the fans. It enables a multi-channel approach allowing different points of engagement.

Customer interaction

The customer interaction lever fits directly to the second phase of the sponsorship life-cycle where the main objective with the sponsorship-linked activities is to engage fans, the ultimate sports customers. Graesch *et al.* (2021) present various enabling technologies and marketing tools which several of them are used for brand exposure and fan engagement purposes. For example, currently social media is the main digital platform for activating sponsorship deals and brand exposure due to the different channels that can be used.

These same platforms facilitate co-creation, user-generated content (UGC), electronic word of mouth (eWOM), online communities, discussion forums, and influencer's participation. Besides, other technologies as mobile apps contribute to the interaction. A recent platform for customer interaction is the metaverse environment, which even though the Graesch *et al.*

(2021) is a recent publication, this platform is not mentioned or considered but by 2022 it has been seen that is applied for fan engagement and brand exposure purposes, although its effectiveness for fan engagement still needs to be studied.

On the other hand, if we consider the sponsor as a customer of the sports organization, the customer interaction lever also affects the first phase of the sponsorship life-cycle process based in Graesch *et al.* (2021) as co-creation is also given between the sports organization and the sponsor when developing the marketing activities planning.

Data

As mentioned, currently data is key in the sponsorship life-cycle process in all the different phases. From data collection to data-based decision-making processes. Accurate customer data management is key and so EB has integrated it as a core activity at the organization. Actions have been made for improving data collection and analysis of the data for decision taking processes at different levels in the organization and for different purposes moving toward intelligent and data-based decisions.

For the structuring the sponsorship deal phase, different tools for data management are used such as data management systems, data analytics, database marketing, CRM, and strategic marketing/intelligence systems in order to go-to market with a targeted plan and a better elaborated commercial offering. As for the measurement phase, measuring engagement and purchase intention requires social media and web analytics, click-path data, and big data analytics.

In summary, data has transformed the sponsorship and wider marketing processes at EB and was contributing to a wider organizational transformation. The use of data management and analytics tools used in this phase provide valuable information for strategic decision taking processes and developing market intelligence. This enables a more accurate and targeted marketing strategies to execute at the activation phase of the sponsorship life-cycle. Regarding the phase two the sponsorship-linked marketing activities, the execution of digital activations and digital branded content create opportunities for fan engagement. The interaction between the fan or customer and the different digital platforms generate data which is a valuable outcome from the marketing activities that then can be analyzed and become valuable knowledge for business intelligence.

Automation

The automation lever was only evident in the second phase of the sponsorship life-cycle and to a limited extent. These included mobile applications such as the access to the different social media channels, self-service technologies, AR, and VR, high enable the customer to manage their own activity in the different platforms. For example, in VR-driven and metaverse environments, the fan is in control of their digital experience choosing what to see, what to play, and with whom. The personalization of the experience is one of the ways to engage with fans (Chang *et al.*, 2022), to put the fan in an active role, gives them options and enables them to take decisions. In turn, fan actions on the digital platforms produce data that enable sports organizations to know more about fan behavior and preferences. Nevertheless, the use of metaverse environments is in an experimental phase and a clear return on investment and engagement metrics still need to be measured.

Regarding AI and ML, they are technologies that sports organizations have started to implement specially for measuring brand exposure on social media with the collaboration of data analytics agencies such as EB does with Blink Fire Analytics. Still, more can be gotten out of these technologies as so far it is still in the early stages of development and will depend on EB's ability to generate, manage, and analyze big data.

Figure 40 summarizes and illustrates the different enabling technologies used in the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process.

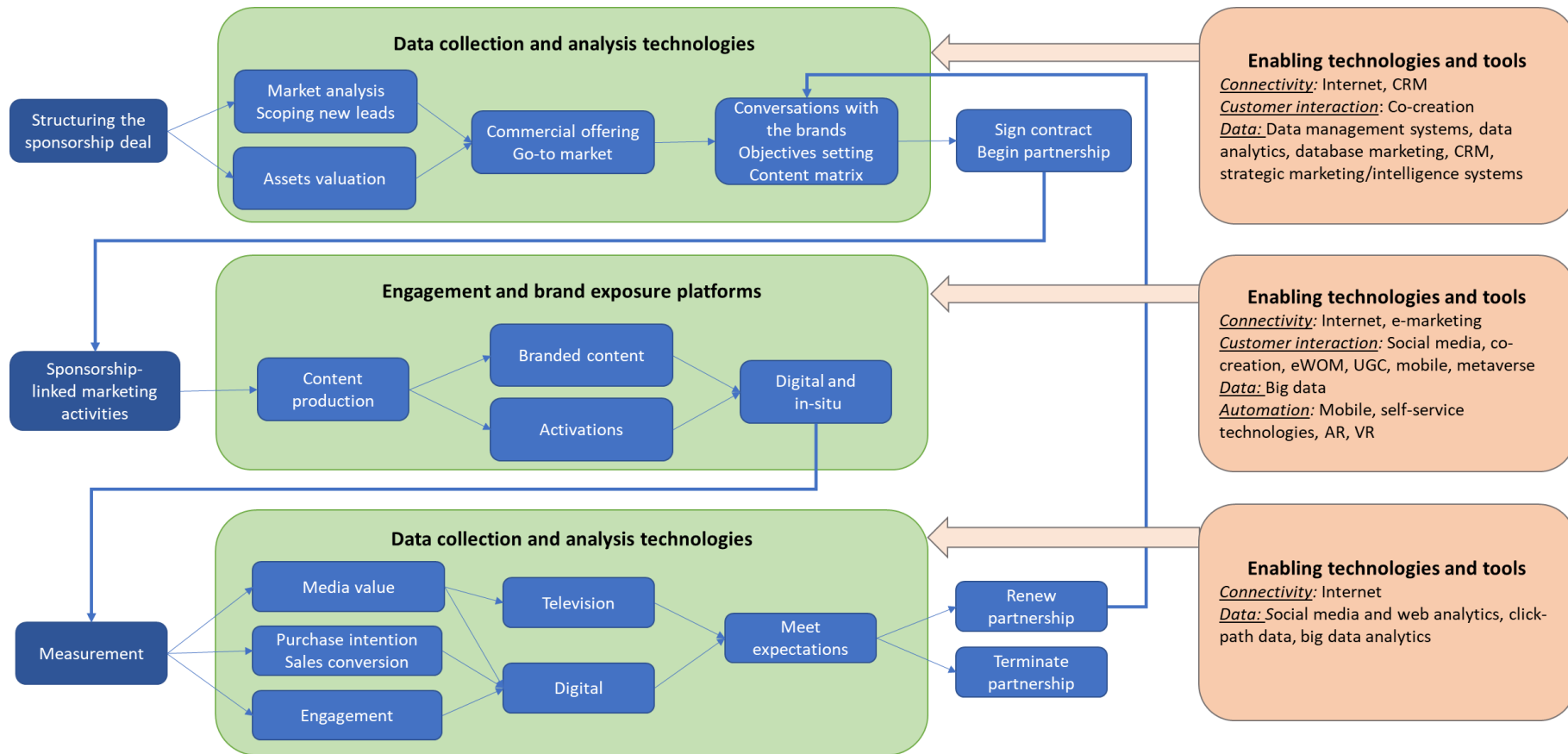
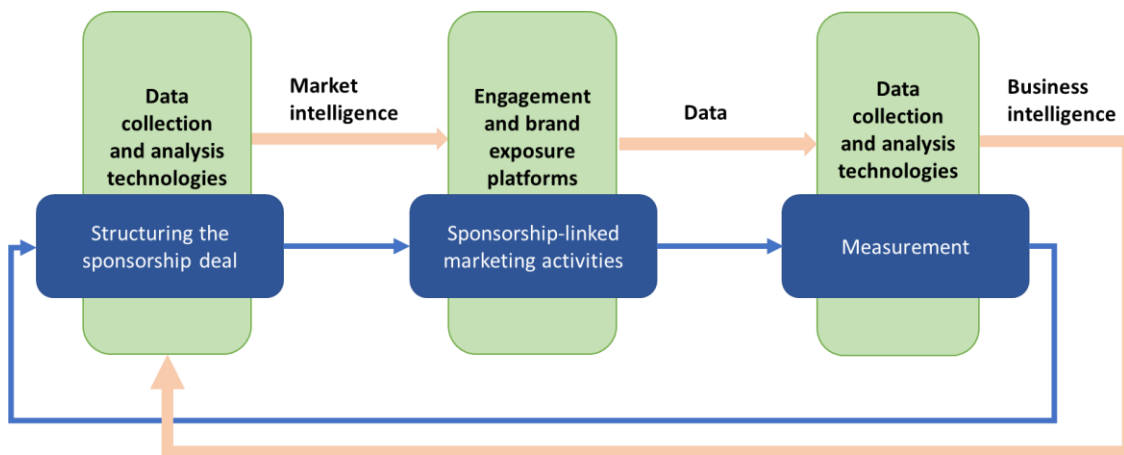


Figure 40: Enabling technologies and tools for digitalizing activities in the EB sponsorship life-cycle process

By identifying the different enabling technologies and tools in the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process it can be interpreted that a main outcome emerges from each of the phases. **Figure 41** presents a model that conceptualizes the impact of the digitalization of processes within the sports sponsorship life-cycle process.

Proposition 1: The digitalization of processes within the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process brings wider business intelligence to the organization.



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Figure 41: Digitalization of processes within the sponsorship life-cycle process

6.2.2 Management evolution

By disclosing the digital technologies used in the different phases in the sponsorship life-cycle, it can be seen that management of the process has changed with accelerated digitalization as the data collection analysis tools and technologies used at the structuring the sponsorship deal phase generate market intelligence, then the engagement and brand exposure platforms used when executing sponsorship-linked marketing activities generate data which is then measured generating business intelligence to the organization. Besides generating intelligence, it can be concluded from the findings of the case study that the organization is experiencing a management evolution.

²⁴ With clarification purposes, the blue arrows represent the flow of the sponsorship life-cycle process activities. The orange arrows represent the outcome of the different uses of the enabling technologies and tools within the sponsorship life-cycle process.

Taking *Figure 20: Evolution of sponsorship concepts in EB adapted from Dávila and Haak (2011)*, it can be said that some concepts remain the same when comparing to 2010, but some have evolved in the last decade. An update of the concepts is shown in **Figure 42**.



Figure 42: Evolution of sponsorship concepts based on Dávila and Haak (2011) – An update

The identified evolution of the concepts in the EB case study are described below from numbers 1 to 5. A sixth number is added related to the evolution from “partnership marketing” to “co-branding partnership”.

1. Multi-sponsor, deeper, shorter relationships - Changes caused by the digital life-cycle

The traditional model of a limited number of exclusive deals in key categories might be changing in the digital era. The emergence of different platforms brings the opportunity to reduce brand clutter and target different demographics in different channels so, the traditional sponsorship model of having less sponsors aimed to reduce clutter caused by having a large number of partners in a limited number of channels in the broadcast era can be over.

Moreover, long-term relationships can be seen to be moving to a medium-term / short-term model due mainly to accelerated digitalization and changing fan behavior. This affects the sponsorship life-cycle process by demanding quicker measurement and responses to the changing landscape and committing to the long-term in a fast-moving digital landscape could be riskier.

Proposition 2: The fragmentation of audiences and diversification of channels create the possibility to have a wider portfolio of partners and open up new categories going back to a multi-sponsor model. Moreover, the accelerated changes in the digital landscape cause shorter deals due to the need for continuous evaluation of the technological evolution and changing fan behavior. A deep relationship is built with each of the partners driven through a shared digital agenda.

2. Shared strategic digital agenda - Evolution of the traditional model

A shift was observed away from the traditional perception of a sponsorship deal by EB - from a commercial transaction to a partnership managed with a collaborative approach and a shared agenda oriented towards shared digital strategies contributing to achieve each other's digital objectives. The changing nature of the relationship responds to the need to provide partners with a tailored service by going deeper into a strategic partnership with increased value exchange occurring than in the traditional model of sponsorship.

In the case study it can be seen a shift from the traditional vision of the sponsorship to a more collaborative approach with a shared agenda. Having a shared agenda is not a new concept in sponsorship as, for example, both sponsor and sponsee seek for mutual brand exposure (Yu *et al.*, 2021). What is being observed is that the shared agenda is moving more towards shared digital strategies that can contribute to reach each other's digital objectives such as improving the fan-base knowledge for a better targeted advertisement and digital marketing strategies through the use of digital technologies and platforms, which become the converging point to achieve each other's objectives and contribute to a win-win situation by being able to reach more markets and better engage fans.

Proposition 3: A shared strategic sponsorship agenda between sponsor and sport organization is an ongoing practice but it has evolved into meeting digital objectives due to the changing digital landscape.

3. Customized rights model

Regarding the rights commercialization, there has been an evolution as more broadcasters and streaming platforms have entered into the sports industry besides the different social media platforms (Qian, 2022). In the previous decade the rights model was already customized and this customization remains nowadays but as there is an increased number of platforms it leads to more opportunities for managing and selling rights being able to segment by markets and platforms. The impact of the changing digital landscape in the customization of rights can be compared to what is happening to the partners portfolio where new categories are widening up because of the diversification of the channels (Proposition 2 on this dissertation).

Proposition 4: The digital landscape brings more monetization and commercialization opportunities for sports organizations when selling and

distributing rights as it gives more customized options in different markets and platforms.

4. Measured by outcome not output – From ROI to ROO to ROE

There is a refocus on the sponsorship measurement KPIs. Even though ROI from media value is still measured, the focus has shifted to purchase intention and sales conversion coming directly from the partnership. Moreover, there has been also a shift in measuring digital marketing efforts as measuring views and impressions has turned into measuring engagement (Cornwell, 2019).

By executing more digital activities and using more digital tools and platforms when activating a sponsorship has evolved into an engagement-centered approach when measuring the sponsorship effectiveness. Engagement measures the interaction a fan or a customer has with the different marketing strategies which brings more accurate information regarding fan loyalty, attachment, passion, and love (Cornwell, 2019) and if there is activity related to purchase intention. Moreover, engagement has been consolidated as a strategic concept in the digital era affecting wider organizational strategy (for example *Proposition 1* in this dissertation, when engagement data is analyzed brings business intelligence). Fan loyalty and engagement is no longer taken as a given, it has to be managed continuously, monitored and nurtured.

The evolution of measurement is clear as audience size is still important but no longer the priority, there is an evolution to measure objectives such as purchase intention or sales conversion but, in order to measure these objectives new methods for data collection are needed. Tracking fan engagement in digital platforms may lead to contribute measuring the previous objectives.

Proposition 5: Sports sponsorship measurement is moving from ROI to ROO to ROE. ROI considering measurement of the investment in media value through audience rates; ROO such as the return on purchase intention and sales conversion coming from a partnership; to ROE – Return on Engagement, where measuring engagement becomes key for acquiring fan data knowledge that can be translated to information for measuring other objectives and bring wider business intelligence.

5. Multi-platform content-generative - Need for new technology adoption

In 2022 sponsorship content is still generated for branding content purposes or activations but the changing digital landscape has forced the content production to be more

targeted to different demographics and to fit into different platforms as the EB case study has demonstrated. A major change has occurred from the content generation needs of the early 2000s' to the quantity and quality of content needed during this research period. This is one of the main challenges sports organizations are facing as the rapid evolution of digital technologies, plus the changing fan behavior attached to it, causes sports organizations to besides being multi-platform content-generative to adopt new technologies for managing data and market analysis up to fan engagement platforms.

The need to be multi-platform content-generators results in a deeper need to adopt data management systems and tools such as CRMs, immersive platforms such as VR or metaverse environments to go direct-to-fan and be able to engage and capture data.

Proposition 6: Sports organizations need to be multi-platform content-generators to keep pace with the changing digital landscape and be able to engage with fans. The adoption of new digital technologies becomes necessary to achieve fan engagement.

6. Co-branding partnership - is sponsorship undergoing a paradigm shift?

Sponsorship is a commercial transaction where marketing benefits are obtained (Goldblatt, 2014; Masterman and Wood, 2006; Mazodier *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, the importance of considering sponsorship a relationship, more than a commercial agreement, as it proved helping in reaching the sponsorship agreements' objectives (Gordon, 2014). Moreover, other studies have already considered sponsorship as partnerships (Athanasopoulou and Sarli, 2015; Douvis *et al.*, 2015; Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2017). And as mentioned previously, EB case study has shown the sponsorship partnerships are turning into a shared strategic digital agenda agreement which raises the question, are sports organizations and brands using sponsorship agreements to obtain co-branding partnership benefits? Co-branding partnerships have proven to raise brand awareness and increase purchase intention (Yu *et al.*, 2021). There are plenty of examples of co-branding in the sports industry such as Nike and Apple or Puma and Ferrari (Yu, *et al.*, 2021).

In the EB case fans were perceived as belonging to the teams or clubs rather than the league. EB strategy went towards to going direct-to-fans aiming to strengthen the identity for the league. This effort is also pushed by the digital efforts done with the different partners. This rises another question, is EB co-branding with their partners to push the EB's brand? As co-branding can increase brand's reputation (Yu *et al.*, 2021) and could be an effective marketing

strategy already being used for team co-branding (Lee *et al.*, 2016). By positioning EB's brand, further digital marketing efforts could be given to the teams facilitated by IMG's push in the digitalization process.

Proposition 7: Sports sponsorship is moving from a marketing partnership to a co-branding partnership where sports organizations leverage the sponsorship agreements. Their shared strategic digital agenda is created and driven forwards by becoming co-branding partners with their sponsors to generate more positive outcomes from the partnership.

Furthermore, the EB case study revealed that the sponsorship life-cycle process in its basis remains the same regarding the different core activities such as brand exposure and other marketing activities related to the sponsorship. However, it is to be seen if there is an ongoing paradigm shift as part of accelerated digitalization processes. More understanding is needed regarding if the changes that digital technologies bring to the sponsorship life-cycle process are modifying in a deeper way the relationship between a sponsor and the sponsee and contribute to create a co-branding partnership. There is a need to understand if the influence of digital and the new model of a shared strategic digital agenda is generating and undergoing paradigm shift. The question arises as to what extent is this paradigm shift under way.

Taking the EB case study as reference, there is a clear evolution of the sponsorship life-cycle process as digitalization has affected each of the main phases. The core activities on each phase remain the same but they are executed in a different manner, digital technologies have transformed management processes, from data collection and planning to reaching fans and generating business intelligence.

Proposition 8: The changing digital landscape is transforming the sponsorship life-cycle process. The three core phases of the process remain but the activities within are evolving due to their digitalization as they have been transformed because of the different tools and platforms used and new processes that appear. Business intelligence is generated by the digitalization of the sponsorship life-cycle process causing organizational change.

6.3 Summary of the discussion chapter

The EB longitudinal case study enabled the analysis of the digital transformation phenomenon in the sponsorship life-cycle process in its three main phases. It also has showed the shifts and transformations the sponsorship life-cycle has had, and it has raised questions regarding the extent to which digitalization is transforming sponsorship.

This chapter discussed the findings by dividing the information into the two themes and subthemes. The first discussed theme *Changing digital landscape* brings information that contributes to understand further the context in which sports organizations are cruising. Five drivers for change were identified that are forcing sports organizations to adapt their strategies and adopt digital technologies, besides, open innovation was found to be a solution to keep pace to the accelerated digitalization. A deep knowledge of the context facilitated to understand the changes that are occurring in the EB's sponsorship life-cycle process.

Regarding the discussion around the findings on the second theme: *sponsorship life-cycle process*, the three objectives stated in this dissertation have helped to answer the research question and identify the contribution of this study. Taking objective 1: 'Explore to what extent digital technologies have changed the sports sponsorship life-cycle process main activities and which, why and how new digital technologies are used', a complete description of the main activities is shared in the previous section of this chapter **6.2.1 Digitalization of processes** where **Figures 38, 39, 40, and 41** summarize the EB sports sponsorship life-cycle process' activities and the different technologies implemented in each of the phases based on Graesch *et al.* (2021) four digital transformation in marketing levers.

Answers to the objective 2 on this dissertation: 'Explore to what extent digital technologies and the new digital landscape affect marketing practices, in general, and sponsorship practices, specifically, and its impact on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process' were given when analyzing the *management evolution* sub-theme at the **6.2.2 Management evolution** section. Six concepts were identified to impact raising more questions and where eight propositions were made taking the learnings from the EB case study. Furthermore, by taking the six analyzed concepts, an update to the *Evolution of sponsorship concepts based on Dávila and Haak (2011)* is proposed in **Figure 42**.

Lastly, **Figure 43** gives an answer to the third objective of this dissertation: 'Develop and integrated model that conceptualizes and represents up to what extent the changing digital landscape impacts on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process'. Figure 41 presents the

integrated model that conceptualizes the sports sponsorship life-cycle process and the impact of digital technologies based on the EB case study. The model is built based on the two themes identified in the findings of this case study: (1) the changing digital landscape and the two sub-themes within, drivers for change and strategic partnerships; and (2) the sponsorship life-cycle process including both sub-themes as well, the digitalization of the sponsorship processes and the management evolution. The model aims to visually represent what has been discussed in this chapter: How the changing digital landscape impacts the sponsorship life-cycle process leading to management evolution.

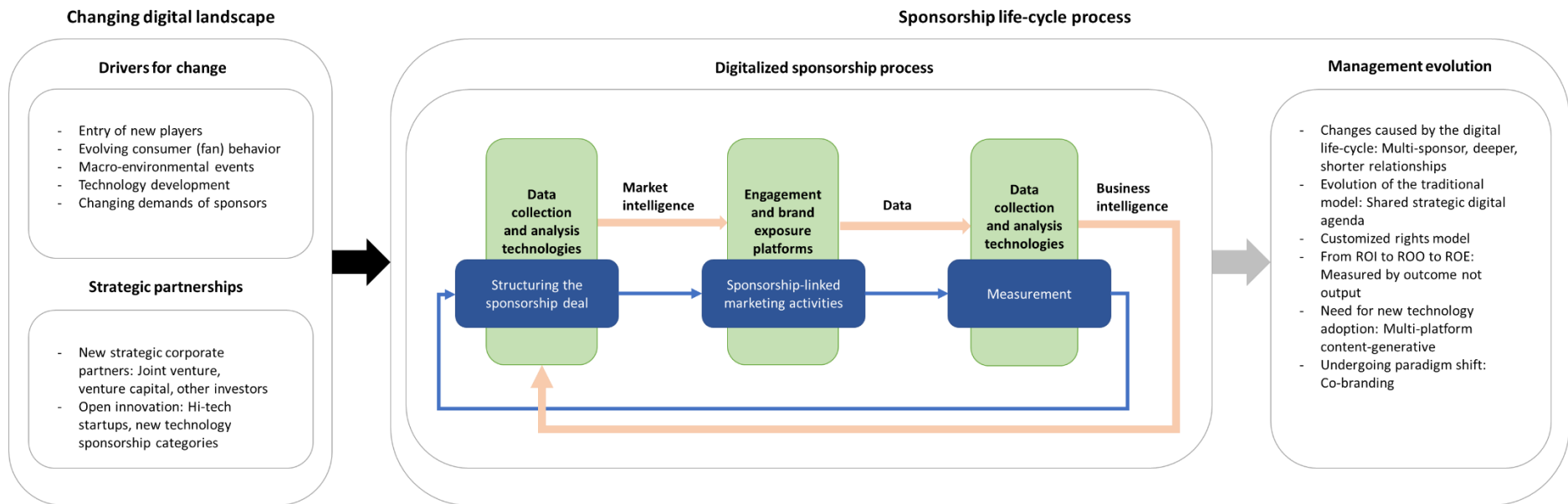


Figure 43: Integrated model that conceptualizes the sports sponsorship life-cycle process and the impact of digital technologies

Moreover, the EB case study contributed close the gap regarding the impact of digitalization in sports sponsorship strategies. If taking the main findings in this dissertation and comparing to the research lines and research agenda proposed by Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022b), some answers can be given. The details are presented in **Table 15**.

Research lines and agenda from Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022b) - Research gap regarding the impact of digitalization in sports sponsorship	Findings from the EB case study
RL1: Strong social media focus in the management of sports sponsorship strategies	
How are new sponsorship dynamics being generated with the proliferation of social media platforms and services? How can sports marketers leverage new marketing dynamics to deploy sponsorship strategies?	The EB case study exposes that social media platforms are key for collecting fan data, show branded content, and execute digital activations. Regarding measurement, are the preferred platform for measuring engagement.
RL2: Use of smartphones as second screen while watching sports broadcast, review statistical information, and share content on social media	
How is the use of second screens affecting sponsorship effectiveness? How can sports marketers add value through the use of second screens during a sports broadcast?	The use of second screens while watching a sports broadcast was not in the scope of the EB study. Still, it is shown that second screens such as mobiles are used while sports games are broadcasted and fans use social media for different purposes. This can be leveraged by sports organizations and sponsors as seen at the EB case study, digital activations with sponsors on platforms as social media are key for fan engagement.
RL3: Growth of digital data collection and analytics strategies	
Which new or adapted digital data collection methods are being employed in the sports industry and academics? How can academics and practitioners use new digital data analysis methods to understand consumer behavior? How do digital analytics impact on the management of sports sponsorship strategies?	The EB case study exposes that there is growth on digital data collection and analytics strategies. It is identified that digital platforms are used for collecting data and then analyzed in the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process. Data became relevant in the initial phase for going-to-market and preparing the commercial offering. Furthermore, the sponsorship-linked activities are based on fan data previously collected and simultaneously serve for fan data collection. Then, all the data from the different sponsorship executed activities is further analyzed to measure sponsorship metrics such as engagement and purchase intention, generating business intelligence to the organization.
RL4: Media strategies development in reputation management, alcohol sponsorship, and ambush marketing in the digital context	
To what extent have traditional marketing activities such as reputation management, alcohol sponsorship management, and ambush marketing strategies changed because of new digital media and what implications does this have for sponsorship management processes?	Traditional marketing activities such as reputation management, alcohol sponsorship management, and ambush marketing strategies were not directly in the scope of the EB study. But, it can be taken from the EB case study that media strategies in the digital landscape are evolving, therefore changing,

How can sports marketers add value through new digital platforms to better deploy traditional marketing and sponsorship strategies?	and becoming more complex as from one side, there are more platforms (such as the recently launched Metaverse) and from the other side, the fan changing behavior needs to be considered when planning a digital sponsorship activation.
RL5: New tools to measure sponsorship effectiveness, ROI, and KPI's	
Which are the most appropriate tools to measure sponsorship effectiveness in the digital context?	The EB case study shows that ROI is still measured but ROO and other KPIs such as engagement are becoming more relevant. So, further than identifying some of the used tools for measurement, what was found were the different KPIs that are being measured such as media value, purchase intention, sales conversion, and engagement.
RL6: Increased value of fan-to-fan and fan-sponsor interactions as co-creators in the digital context	
How can fan interaction and their active participation as co-creators impact on digital sponsorship strategies and brand value? How can fan interaction as co-creators be measured? Which digital sponsorship strategies increase fan interaction?	Different information was found within the EB case study regarding co-creation. From one side, it was found that fan interaction or active participation can be leveraged by immersive technologies such as VR as fans can be decision takers regarding the content they want to see and how to interact with it. Besides, more commonly used platforms such as social media, continue to be used for co-creation and engagement is one way to measure it as engagement requires an action from the fan. On the other hand, it was found at the EB case study that in the sponsorship process a different way of co-creation is occurring: sponsor-sports organization. As seen in the "structuring the sponsorship deal" phase within the sponsorship life-cycle, the objectives setting and the content matrix is co-created between both organizations.
RL7: Social media and virtual communities as platforms for fan engagement and as influence on consumer behavior in a global scale	
How is fan behavior changing as a result of participation in virtual communities? To what extent do virtual communities increase fan engagement in digital platforms? How can sports marketers leverage the use of virtual communities to engage fans?	Although the use of social media platforms was part of the EB study, specific information regarding virtual communities was out of the scope. Still, the EB case study exposed that fan behavior is changing due to different factors, including platforms diversification, therefore fans are participating more actively on different digital channels and it is likely that fans belong to different virtual communities (for example with other fans that follow their favorite team or club in a specific digital platform) and their active participation in this communities can increase engagement. Therefore, sports marketers must diversify and target different demographics in specific virtual communities.

Table 15: Research agenda from Garza Segovia and Kennett (2022b) and findings from the EB case study

Summarizing, this dissertation has contributed to marketing theory, in specific sponsorship, by presenting a complete description of the main activities carried out on EB's sponsorship life-cycle process, including the digitalized activities and processes, and their impact on the management of the organization. This allowed to build an integrated model that conceptualizes the sports sponsorship life-cycle process and the impact of digital technologies. Furthermore, the EB case study has contribute to bring answers to Garza Segovia and Kennett's (2022b) research agenda regarding the impact of digitalization in sports sponsorship.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This thesis contributes to both the theoretical understanding of sponsorship in the digital era and to the practice of managing sponsorship life-cycles as part of wider strategic marketing activity in the sports industry. The research responds to a clear gap in existing research regarding the need to understand how digitalization impacts on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process amidst the fast-changing digital landscape. The managerial contribution focuses on how to better plan, execute, and measure sponsorship strategies providing insights on how digital technologies can be used to professionalize and improve the sponsorship process.

Based on the EB case study, there has been a professionalization of the sponsorship life-cycle process management driven by the adoption of digital technologies and data management. The use of CRM has professionalized the first phase by helping the commercial team to go-to-market with market intelligence increasing the possibilities for accurate conversations and reducing prospects' searching time. Constructing the commercial offering with a previous valuation of the digital assets contributes to the setting of more accurate partnership objectives and better content matrix planning. This leads to more targeted sponsorship-linked marketing activities opening opportunities for choosing the most accurate engagement and brand exposure platforms to serve both engagement of fans and the gathering of data for further analysis. Lastly, by improving the reporting and using more sophisticated tools, such as visual analytics or AI, for measuring brand exposure and fan engagement, valuable knowledge of the sponsorship performance is generated bringing business intelligence to the organization. However, further research is needed to see if this is replicated in other cases.

A key conclusion for this study was the observation of a shift away from the way the traditional sponsorship deal towards the concept of a 'co-branding partnership' driven by a collaborative approach and a shared digital agenda. This emerging paradigm is generated by the needs of both the sports organizations and the brands: to keep pace with digital trends and technology development; the entry of new players in the industry; macro-environmental events; and responding to evolving fan and wider consumer behavior. Through a co-branding approach, opportunities for more targeted digital marketing strategies can be deployed and marketing objectives can be better achieved. The findings in the EB case study reveal this possible paradigm shift in the field of sports marketing and the need to continue to research this topic in different sectorial contexts, organizational types, and from different perspectives.

Moreover, the EB case study shows there is an important evolution in different sponsorship concepts generated by the changing digital landscape and, after analyzing the findings in the discussion section, eight propositions are made:

1. The digitalization of processes within the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process brings wider business intelligence to the organization.
2. The fragmentation of audiences and diversification of channels create the possibility to have a wider portfolio of partners and open up new categories going back to a multi-sponsor model. Moreover, the accelerated changes in the digital landscape cause shorter deals due to the need for continuous evaluation of the technological evolution and changing fan behavior. A deep relationship is built with each of the partners driven through a shared digital agenda.
3. A shared strategic sponsorship agenda between sponsor and sport organization is an ongoing practice but it has evolved into meeting digital objectives due to the changing digital landscape.
4. The digital landscape brings more monetization and commercialization opportunities for sports organizations when selling and distributing rights as it gives more customized options in different markets and platforms.
5. Sports sponsorship measurement is moving from ROI to ROO to ROE. ROI considering measurement of the investment in media value through audience rates; ROO such as the return on purchase intention and sales conversion coming from a partnership; to ROE – Return on Engagement, where measuring engagement becomes key for acquiring fan data knowledge that can be translated to information for measuring other objectives and bring wider business intelligence.
6. Sports organizations need to be multi-platform content-generators to keep pace with the changing digital landscape and be able to engage with fans. The adoption of new digital technologies becomes necessary to achieve fan engagement.
7. Sports sponsorship is moving from a marketing partnership to a co-branding partnership where sports organizations leverage the sponsorship agreements. Their shared strategic digital agenda is created and driven forwards by becoming co-branding partners with their sponsors to generate more positive outcomes from the partnership.

8. The changing digital landscape is transforming the sponsorship life-cycle process. The three core phases of the process remain but the activities within are evolving due to their digitalization as they have been transformed because of the different tools and platforms used and new processes that appear. Business intelligence is generated by the digitalization of the sponsorship life-cycle process causing organizational change.

The propositions regarding the managerial evolution observed in this case study are further related with the literature to build a theoretical contribution in the following section.

7.1 Theoretical contribution

This research contributes to marketing theory by shedding light on the impact of digitalization in the sponsorship life-cycle. Literature existed on the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle (Beech *et al.*, 2014; Cornwell and Kwon, 2020; Foster *et al.*, 2016; Goldblatt, 2014) and literature combining sports sponsorship concepts with digital technologies (Demir and Söderman, 2015; Huertas González-Serrano *et al.*, 2019; Laurell and Söderman, 2018; Santomier, 2008). The research undertaken in this dissertation contributes to the marketing area of knowledge by combining both the sponsorship life-cycle and digital technologies in the sports context. As the EB case study has shown, the traditional sports sponsorship life-cycle process has been impacted by digital technologies and the it has been transformed.

First, this original work contributes to developing marketing theory related to sponsorship literature by presenting a model of the three main phases of the sponsorship process including the different activities within each phase in the context of a sports organization (**Figure 38**). Furthermore, the model is complemented with information of the main use of digital technologies in each of the phases (**Figures 39, 40 and 41**) including the enabling technologies and tools (Graesch *et al.*, 2021) used for the digitalization of the different activities in the sponsorship process, and the digital outcomes of each of the phases such as market intelligence, data, and business intelligence. Hence, proposition 1 states: *The digitalization of processes within the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle process brings wider business intelligence to the organization.*

The central contribution relies on **Figure 43** where an integrated model that conceptualizes the sports sponsorship life-cycle and the impact of digital technologies and the wider effects it has on an organization is presented, making a new contribution that gathers the

changing digital landscape drivers for change, the digitalized sponsorship life-cycle process, and its organizational impact presented as management evolution in the same framework. In this line, proposition 8 states: *The changing digital landscape is transforming the sponsorship life-cycle process. The three core phases of the process remain but the activities within are evolving due to their digitalization as they have been transformed because of the different tools and platforms used and new processes that appear. Business intelligence is generated by the digitalization of the sponsorship life-cycle process causing organizational change.* This contribution, besides adding knowledge to the above-mentioned sponsorship theory, develops nascent digital transformation theory with regards to data management for market intelligence (Jamil, 2014; Li and Li, 2013; Rakthin *et al.*, 2016) and business intelligence (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Dedić and Stanier, 2017; Kimble and Milolidakis, 2015; Liang and Liu, 2018; Sun *et al.*, 2016).

Secondly, whilst the main aim of this research was to contribute to the development of knowledge on the impact of digitalization in the sponsorship life-cycle process, further contributions were made to specific sponsorship concepts. Dávila and Haak (2011) in their publication shared the evolution of sponsorship concepts up to the year 2010. Findings in the EB case study contribute to an updating of these concepts (**Figure 42**). In this line, propositions from 2 to 7 were presented in the discussion chapter aligned with each of the marketing concepts.

Beginning with proposition 2: *'The fragmentation of audiences and diversification of channels create the possibility to have a wider portfolio of partners and open up new categories going back to a multi-sponsor model. Moreover, the accelerated changes in the digital landscape cause shorter deals due to the need for continuous evaluation of the technological evolution and changing fan behavior. A deep relationship is built with each of the partners driven through a shared digital agenda'* contributes to the consumer behavior marketing concept (Baena, 2016; Popp and Woratschek, 2016; Popp *et al.*, 2016; Stavros *et al.*, 2014; Veiga, 2022).

Proposition 5: *'Sports sponsorship measurement is moving from ROI to ROO to ROE. ROI considering measurement of the investment in media value through audience rates; ROO such as the return on purchase intention and sales conversion coming from a partnership; to ROE – Return on Engagement, where measuring engagement becomes key for acquiring fan data knowledge that can be translated to information for measuring other objectives and bring wider business intelligence'* and 6: *'Sports organizations need to be multi-platform content-generators to keep pace with the changing digital landscape and be able to engage with fans. The adoption*

of new digital technologies becomes necessary to achieve fan engagement' contribute to the marketing concept engagement (Veiga, 2022; Azer *et al.*, 2021; Cornwell, 2019).

Moreover, proposition 7: *'Sports sponsorship is moving from a marketing partnership to a co-branding partnership where sports organizations leverage the sponsorship agreements. Their shared strategic digital agenda is created and driven forwards by becoming co-branding partners with their sponsors to generate more positive outcomes from the partnership'* contributes as well to specific marketing concepts theory such as co-branding (Yu, *et al.*, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2016).

Lastly, propositions 3: *'A shared strategic sponsorship agenda between sponsor and sport organization is an ongoing practice but it has evolved into meeting digital objectives due to the changing digital landscape'* and 4: *'The digital landscape brings more monetization and commercialization opportunities for sports organizations when selling and distributing rights as it gives more customized options in different markets and platforms'* can be related to the strategic management area of knowledge besides marketing, as they can be linked to the evolution of the sports industry competitive environment (Porter, 1997) due to the digital transformation phenomenon (Appio *et al.*, 2021; Hanelt *et al.*, 2021; Vial, 2019; Verhoef *et al.*, 2019).

These contributions help to fill the gaps in the literature by joining marketing theory with emerging digital transformation theory to see how this phenomenon affects marketing strategy. As stated in the research gap, digital technologies are transforming sponsorship (Garza Segovia and Kennett, 2022b) but knowledge on how they impact on the sports sponsorship life-cycle process was missing. The findings on the EB case study enable us to understand the impact of digital transformation in the sponsorship life-cycle in the sports league context and could be transferrable into different organizations and companies.

Lastly, conducting a 5-year longitudinal case study contributes to the understanding of the evolution of the impact of the digital transformation phenomenon on society and organizations which gave a rich context to the case. Moreover, experiencing a macro-environmental crisis while the research was conducted, accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and this study was able to capture the changes and evolution contributing to strengthen the findings.

7.2 Practitioner implications

The findings in the EB case study also contribute to sports marketing practitioners as they comprise relevant managerial implications for organizations involved in sponsorship agreements. This research provides insights on how digital tools and platforms can be used to professionalize the sponsorship process, reduce resource expenditure, and be more efficient by better establishing the sponsorship objectives and executing a more targeted sponsorship-linked marketing activities.

This thesis provides novel insight and empirical evidence about how to execute a sponsorship process, the use of digital platforms and tools, and the measurement of related outcomes. This information is transferrable to different companies that execute a similar sponsorship process bringing the possibility to adapt the convenient practices for improving any of the different sponsorship phases. This case study also provides insights into fan data collection, management, and analysis that sports organizations need to adopt analytical intelligence in their processes.

Moreover, this research contributes to an understanding of the changing digital landscape, how it impacts on consumer behavior and describes the role of the different players that are entering into the sports industry. Knowledge about fan content consumption habits contributes to the planning and execution of sponsorship-linked marketing strategies. Understanding the role of the new players in the industry guides strategic managerial decisions such as how to manage fan data. In addition, sports organizations can apply the findings in this research as they contribute to the understanding of the increasingly complex digital landscape and key managerial insights include:

- Sports organizations are required to capture and manage fan data to understand the changing nature of fan behavior and to take sponsorship and wider strategic marketing decisions. This involves increasing levels of personalization and customization of each sponsorship deal.
- Sports organizations are required to demonstrate not only the ROI and ROO but also ROE, which needs to be measured accurately and consistently.
- Sports organizations can consider strategic partnerships with organizations with expertise in digital transformation and open innovation processes to enter entrepreneurial ecosystems.

- Sports organizations can consider new approaches to managing their portfolio of sponsors or brand partners to open up new categories that can be activated in specific channels targeted at well-defined fan segments.
- A fan-centered, data-driven approach can drive wider change in the strategic marketing of sports organizations and contribute to deeper digital transformation processes.

Summarizing, this knowledge contributes to sports organizations to keep pace with technological trends and be able to offer added value to their sponsors or branding partners by:

- Having the technological tools and know-how to comply with their possible digital demands and objectives.
- Knowing how to manage the different phases of the sponsorship life-cycle amidst a fast-changing digital landscape.
- Sponsors can be regarded as brand partners as part of a collaborative process that involves the co-creation of a shared digital agenda. This requires a different approach to the traditional model of sponsorship.

7.3 Limitations

The research undertaken in this study has some important limitations. First, there are limitations regarding the methodological approach of this research. From one side, single case studies have been considered unscientific by positivist researchers but objections have been made as research quality criteria can be achieved and the scientific method for single case studies has been proved (Mariotto *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, the single case study method, such as the conducted in this research, is a valid method in the scientific community but it has limitations such as the opportunity of contrasting observations compared as when working in a multiple case study (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991).

On the other hand, there is an open debate as to the relative reliability and validity of qualitative and quantitative methods as qualitative researchers may adopt a more iterative, non-linear process with greater uncertainty prior to data collection as to what findings they will encounter (Bansal and Corley, 2012). Still, as stated in the methodology chapter of this dissertation, qualitative methods such as the ones used in this case study can be reliable when the chain of evidence and protocols are clear (Mariotto *et al.*, 2014) and resources such as data triangulation are used (Yin, 2006). Therefore, this research work presented an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and it can be transferable but, the qualitative methods used

limited the obtained results as for example, statistical generalization cannot be achieved and further research is recommended in different contexts.

Regarding the case study approach, the time span for data collection was between 2018 until spring 2022. Exceptional circumstances affecting Euroleague Basketball in 2022 were not considered in this study such as the Ukraine – Russia conflict and the change of EB's CEO and President announced in September of this same year. Also, as the case study focus was in the organization's sponsorship life-cycle process, the research data collection centered on gathering data from the EB perspective.

Another important limitation was the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions attached to it. Companies and organizations in the different industries struggled to survive or keep working during the lockdown period, Euroleague Basketball included, thus restricting the researcher's ability to collect primary data. Although the pandemic interrupted the research process unexpectedly, this provided an invaluable opportunity to include the related information and reflections in the narrative of the case study by bringing in one of the most important moments in the recent history of the sports industry.

7.4 Directions for future research

Finally, the case reveals how the digitalization of sponsorship can be a key driver in the transformation of strategic marketing and the beginnings of wider digital transformation of the organization. These processes were driven by data. This would indicate the need not only for more research but also the need to explore the overlaps with other knowledge areas such as digital transformation, strategic management, organizational behavior, among others to understand the wider organizational changes that were taking place in this context.

As flagged on the discussion chapter, the changing digital landscape is also modifying the competitive environment of the sports industry, therefore, further studies on strategic management are needed for understanding the impact of the digital transformation phenomenon related to competitive strategy linked to the proliferation of digital technologies.

Besides calling for more research to explore overlaps with other knowledge areas, future research is suggested to study further the propositions made in this thesis. More research is needed to understand the wider impact of sponsorship digitalization on organizations' business intelligence and to what extent the digitalization of the activities within the sponsorship process drive organizational change. Furthermore, more knowledge regarding to what extent commercialization and monetization opportunities are created because of the proliferation of

digital platforms and their potential use for fan engagement is needed. Data was found to be key throughout the sponsorship life-cycle, but more research regarding the different data collection and management tools used is needed due to the rapidly changing digital landscape.

Lastly, marketing researchers are called to further study if sponsorship is going through a paradigm shift and if the way sponsorship is known has been transformed by digital technologies, generating a deeper co-branding partnership between the sports organizations and the brands by sharing a strategic digital agenda that drives win-win digital opportunities for both.

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Appendix I – Research proposal



Research proposal for Euroleague Basketball:
**AN ANALYSIS OF SPORT EVENT SPONSORSHIP ACTIVATION IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT:
A CASE STUDY APPROACH**

Marcela Garza // marcela.garza@salle.url.edu
Chris Kennett, PhD (Advisor) // chris.kennett@salle.url.edu
La Salle – URL

Sport sponsorship is one of the fastest growing forms of marketing communication. Activation activities aim to awaken fan awareness and currently digital activations are a key trend for reaching sponsors' target markets.

We propose to conduct a case study with Euroleague Basketball aiming to answer:

How is digitalization transforming sport sponsorship activations?

- o What technologies are being adopted during activations and why? How are they used and why?
- o How and why is digitalization changing the value exchange process between the sponsor, the sponsee and other key stakeholders?
- o What are the opportunities and risks generated through digitalization and how are these being managed by the sponsor and sponsee during the sponsorship activation life-cycle?

Methodology: Longitudinal case study of 2018 – 2019 Euroleague Basketball season

The objective is to follow up the sponsorship deal life-cycle from the planning and the decision taking process to the measurement and evaluation phase to analyze how digitalization is affecting sponsorship activations.

It is proposed to follow Euroleague Basketball during one year tournament to study sponsors activation phases in the digital context: pre-season, tournament, and post-season.

Expected Outcomes:

Contribute with sports organizations such as Euroleague Basketball and sponsors to be more effective when managing activations in a digital context by:

1. Delivering an analysis of the changing nature of stakeholder relations in the digital era.
2. Delivering an analysis of the effectiveness of strategic activations and the adoption of emerging technologies.
3. Elaborating strategic recommendations for the ongoing digital transformation of Euroleague Basketball.

The information will be summarized and published in two academic articles and in an international conference participation.

Commitments

From La Salle – URL: Information management following ethical guidelines and agreements. To provide Euroleague Basketball three reports on the progress of the research, one every six months.

We ask from Euroleague Basketball: Access to EB key decision takers, partners, sponsors, and/or clubs to conduct interviews, questionnaires, and follow up communication. Access to metrics from digital activations and related secondary documents.

Appendix II – Consent form



Consent for Participation in Research Case Study

“AN ANALYSIS OF SPORT EVENT SPONSORSHIP ACTIVATION IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT: EUROLEAGUE BASKETBALL CASE STUDY” (working title)

I agree to participate in a research project conducted by Marcela Garza and supervised by Chris Kennett, PhD from La Salle – Universitat Ramon Llull in Barcelona, Spain.

The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project through being interviewed.

1. I understand this is an academic research and the purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project has been explained to me and is clear.
2. My participation as an interviewee in this project is voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion whatsoever to participate.
3. Participation involves being interviewed by Marcela Garza Segovia from La Salle – Universitat Ramon Llull. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes, and I consent being contacted again for follow up interview. I allow the researcher to take written notes during the interview. I also allow audio recording of the interview. It is clear to me that in case I do not want the interview to be taped, I am at any point of time fully entitled to withdraw from participation.
4. I have the right not to answer any of the questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to withdraw from the interview.
5. I have been given the explicit guarantees that, if I wish so, the researcher will not identify me by name or function in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.
6. I understand that the findings of the study may be used for publication in selected academic journals and/or academic conference participation.
7. I have been given the guarantee that this research project complies with ethics espoused by La Salle – Universitat Ramon Llull, and has been endorsed by the same university.
8. I have read and understood the points and statements of this form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
9. I have been given a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer.

<u>Researcher's Signature over Printed Name and Date:</u>  Marcela Garza 04/oct/2018	<u>Participant's Signature over Printed Name and Date:</u>  [Redacted Name] 4/oct/2018
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