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Sponsorship activation: a systematic review and future research agenda

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Abstract: Since the utilisation of sponsorship activations is constantly increasing, the objective of this article is to provide a thorough overview of knowledge, and to showcase future avenues of research according to trends and gaps found in literature. A systematic review of the literature (SRL) which summarises the different understandings of sponsorship activation within an innovative conceptual framework linking both activations and events was conducted. The analysis of the 107 writings included in this SRL contributes to a better understanding of the current literature. The results show that no consensus exists when it comes to the definition of the activation concept. Also, the results reveal that taking into consideration certain variables drawn from a theoretical framework related to event marketing which unite both the organisational strategy and the consumer experience can enable a global overview. This article provides an in-depth analysis and overview of the relatively chaotic body of knowledge currently found in this field.

Keywords: activation; sponsorship activation; sponsorship; sponsorship leveraging; leverage; systematic review; systematic literature review; SRL; Future research agenda; event; management; marketing.

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1 Introduction

Worldwide, close to USD\$70 billion had been invested in sponsorships prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 (IEG, 2019). Global sponsorship spending has more than tripled since 2000 (IEG, 2019). In North America, sponsorship spending has more than doubled since the beginning of 2004 and represented more than USD\$25 billion in early 2020. From the late 1990s to the end of 2019, sponsorship investment growth has outpaced most other areas of marketing (O'Reilly et al., 2021). The increase in sponsorship spending in the past few years shows the excitement of marketers for this strategy. Sports represent 70% of the global market sponsorship shares alone, clearly making it the area with the most sponsorships (IEG, 2018).

Meenaghan (1991) describes sponsorship as being an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity. This definition is broadly used in sponsorship literature (Cornwell et al., 2005, O'Reilly and Horning, 2013, Weeks et al., 2008). In addition to this definition, Cornwell (1995) proposes to define sponsorship-linked marketing as the orchestration and implementation of marketing activities, for the purpose of building and communicating an association with a sponsorship. Moreover, this definition was used in several articles (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998, Cornwell et al., 2001, O'Reilly and Horning, 2013). Thus, based on these definitions, Cornwell and Maignan (1998) suggest that sponsorship has two main activities:

- 1 an exchange between a sponsor and an event property
- 2 the marketing of this exchange by the sponsor. This second activity can be realised, among other things, by sponsorship activations.

Even if sponsorship investments increase every year, its success isn't guaranteed (Fransen et al., 2013). To maximise positive outcomes associated with sponsorship, multiple companies spend, in addition to the amount allocated for the initial sponsorship fee, an additional amount of money in order to promote it (O'Keefe et al., 2009). Indeed, other than the colossal expenses of sponsorship, most companies invest in marketing activities to communicate their sponsorship to the public. To do this, companies can, for instance, use activation sponsorship, which encourages the consumer to interact with the sponsor. Activation impacts the efficiency of a sponsorship so much that, without it, the sponsorship's value is sometimes seen as null (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013). Accordingly, it is mentioned that if a brand cannot afford to communicate its sponsorship, then it simply cannot afford to sponsor an activity (Carrillat et al., 2015, O'Reilly and Horning, 2013, Cornwell et al., 2005).

Even though there have been studies on sponsorship activation, literature on the subject remains fragmented. In addition, most of the time, activation papers are based on 'best practices' and/or classic sponsorship research on consumer perceptions. It is

apparent that moving away from this fragmented reasoning to gather articles that sometimes use different disciplinary approaches and perspectives about the matter would be relevant. In concrete terms, this study presents a systematic review of the literature (SRL) and will, on the one hand, achieve an in-depth analysis of the state of knowledge concerning sponsorship activation. On the other hand, this study offers a pertinent line of research according to the current gaps in the sponsorship activation literature. In this SRL, sponsorship activations will be analysed through an event marketing perspective in order to draw parallels between the concept of sponsorship activations and event concept principles aiming for the creation and execution of effective sponsorship activations (Gillooly et al., 2017a). This innovative SRL helps to understand how sponsorship activation fits within the innovative conceptual framework to help future researchers and practitioners better understand how events and activations are linked. As well as being, to our knowledge, the first SRL focused on sponsorship activation, the interest towards it is even greater since this review will allow for a better understanding of it. It will further classify studies on the matter in a relatively chaotic environment without any concrete typology, except the one classifying activation types. The next section will show the conceptual framework in which the sponsorship activation is studied.

2 Conceptual frameworks

Sponsorships can be activated in numerous ways, but all of them need a strategy and preestablished planification on different levels. An activation's preestablished nature means that it is produced at an agreed place, and generally lasts for a predetermined period. This offers a structured opportunity to facilitate a favourable, strategically built experience for the marketer. A key question is to know how the sponsors' objectives can be achieved by creating activations. Therefore, the making of these activations is not accidental, but rather establishes a planned leveraging strategy that needs to be pervaded with a strategic intent. Thus, in conjunction with the changes in the sponsorship world, event marketing is emerging as a useful strategy to improve the efficacy of sponsorship activations (Gillooly et al., 2017b). Event marketing certainly includes a larger range of activities than sponsorship, but some authors like Gillooly and his colleagues (2017) argue that the elements used to activate sponsorships can be seen as examples of event marketing. In even before the rise of sponsorship activations, Cornwell and Maignan (1998) were already establishing a link between sponsorship and event marketing, stating that event marketing included event sponsorship. A few years later, Wood (2009) suggested a typology of marketing events that included the creation of events through sponsorships. Hence, sponsorship can be linked to event marketing as long as it is run through activation strategies. In that case, sponsorship activation can be seen as an event (planned by the sponsor) within a bigger event (the sponsored event/activity), or an event entirely created by a sponsor, which is less common. Thus, sponsorship activations can be considered as events embedded in a larger sponsorship program.

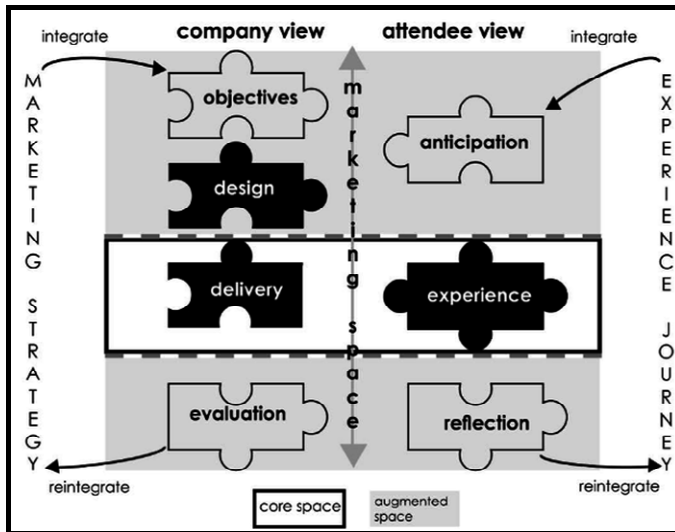
Event marketing includes communication tools whose purpose is to disseminate a company's marketing messages by involving a target public in experiential activities that involve an interaction between the participants and the company (Drengner et al., 2008). These events give rise to two-way communication, emphasising the active involvement of the participants. They are considered as an integrated communication tool with

interactive relational and experiential characteristics that encompass multiple strategic functions. The consumer’s active participation and the relational aspect are consistent with the activation’s inherent characteristics, since they aim to offer an interactive, highly participative environment which promotes engagement, implication and consumer participation with the sponsor (Gillooly et al., 2017b).

By creating activations, sponsors look to benefit from their associations while keeping a certain amount of control over how their brand is communicated to existing and potential consumers. The effective use of event conception principles can help to achieve the intended results (Gillooly et al., 2017b). Those principles are especially important since the characteristics tend to make the creation of the activations even more complex, such as the involvement of numerous stakeholders (property, sponsor, agency, etc.), the importance of taking into account what links the sponsored property to the sponsor, and the importance of preserving the perception of goodwill generally associated with the sponsorship. All these elements emphasise how important it is to consider the event conception principles when creating sponsorship activations.

The success of activations cannot be guaranteed but can be facilitated with planning processes. With this in mind, based on an event marketing literature exam, Crowther (2010) develops a theoretical framework relying on the concept of marketing space. As shown in Figure 1, Crowther (2010) introduces the notion of marketing space by referring to a specific space created by events in which companies can interact with their target group whether it is their clients, suppliers, or other stakeholders.

Figure 1 Crowther’s ‘marketing space model’ (2010)



Despite being originally designed for event marketing, this conceptual framework includes a large range of activities, allowing the sponsorship activations to be analysed through that lens. As a matter of fact, after reading more than half the selected articles from this SRL, the pieces of the puzzle, encompassing multiple strategic and experiential functions, appear as relevant for activation programs, whether it’s sampling distribution or creating an interactive activity.

The marketing space, which goes beyond the event's physical and temporal components, is represented by a temporary, modifiable and adaptable reality, in which the companies meet the participants in a planned way (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). The marketing space is made and facilitated by the organisation and is experienced by the participant. This involves both the businesses and the participant's point of view, by suggesting that some interdependent processes exist. From the company's point of view, the marketing space is composed of objectives, design, delivery and evaluation of the activation, while the participant's point of view consists of anticipation, experience and reflection processes. The marketing space's framework correctly highlights the conditional relationship between the participants' experience with the activation and the underlying objectives, the design, the execution and the evaluation by the sponsor. The following describes the elements included in the framework presented in Figure 1 by drawing a parallel with the analysis of a sponsorship activation.

According to the Crowther (2010) conceptual framework, the organisation must first identify the underlying *objectives* of the event, which in the context of this study, are the underlying objectives of sponsorship activation. These objectives must be measurable to facilitate their evaluation. Once the objectives have been established, the organisation must determine how these objectives are to be achieved. At this step, the aim is to *design* sponsorship activations that allow the organisation to reach the predetermined objectives. In conjunction with these two steps, the organisation must implement tools so that consumers *anticipate* their experience during the activation. However, the organisation must moderate its pre-activation communications in order to avoid creating unrealistic expectations among target consumers. Ideally, expectations should be slightly lower than or equal to the experience offered during the activation. These three phases, objective identification, design and anticipation, take place before the activation.

The moment when the activation takes place is considered the core of the model (Crowther, 2010). During this moment, the organisation is *delivering* the activation and the consumer *experiences* this activation. These two elements are closely interrelated and the organisation must be able to perform an activation that provides the most positive experience for the consumer.

After the activation, the organisation must *evaluate* its impact and, in particular, the reaching of its objectives (Crowther, 2010). For the consumer, the experience gives way to the *reflection* phase. This phase is the activity that occurs in consumers' minds as they step back from the experience they have had. Post-activation communication provides an opportunity for the organisation to influence this reflection and extend the experience. As with pre-activation communication, post-activation communication is an additional component which can either improve or degrade the experience. The tools used must therefore be carefully selected and integrated to form a value-added continuation of the activation.

The event marketing's conceptual framework and its concepts are the foundation of a glossary for researchers and practitioners interested in events that they use for marketing purposes (Crowther, 2010). Crowther points out how important it is to consider his model, since the events are too often an informal addition to marketing activities and lack strategic integration. With this framework, sponsors have the opportunity to strategically plan an activation program that logically fits in with the framework of a larger company strategy (Crowther, 2010). In fact, the conceptual framework emphasises the connection between the event and larger marketing objectives and activities. This links the events to

a perspective that is more integrated and strategic. For the participant, the experience must be coordinated with his or her larger experience with the company during the activation (Crowther, 2010).

With a systemic review of the literature, every piece of the framework’s puzzle (i.e., objectives; design; delivery; experience; anticipation; reflection and evaluation) was studied through the discussion of trends, strengths and weaknesses of evidence from the selected articles. This discussion also offers research avenues to fill gaps when necessary.

3 Research methodology

Numerous features distinguish traditional literature reviews from SRL (Kitchenham, 2004). To produce an SRL, the development of a research strategy that can rigorously identify the largest number of relevant papers is crucial. This strategy must be clearly communicated, so readers can attest to the approach’s rigorosity and exhaustiveness. Furthermore, the SRL must clarify the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as the quality criteria that objectively evaluate the potential relevance of all compiled studies. Therefore, in relation to this study, this SRL is a way to identify, evaluate and interpret every possible study concerning sponsorship activation when possible. Individual studies that are subject to systematic analysis are called primary studies while systematic analysis as a whole are secondary studies (Kitchenham, 2004).

Kitchenham (2004), interested in software engineering, was inspired by three medical literature guides and developed a procedure to produce an SRL adapted to his field of study. All this while taking into consideration that there is a relatively lower number of empirical studies in software engineering, and that the research methodologies are not as rigorous as in medicine. These characteristics, which distinguish the medical field from software engineering, can also be attributed to marketing. Subsequently, other recent and peer reviewed SRLs in marketing have used Kitchenham’s approach (2004) (e.g., Başka et al., 2019, Kaewbanjong and Intakosum, 2015, Muller Queiroz et al., 2018, Tafesse and Skallerud, 2017). For these reasons, this SRL is inspired by Kitchenham’s (2004) proposed approach.

The following sections describe in detail every step of the SRL. Despite being laid out in a sequential order, these steps were achieved iteratively. As presented in Figure 2, this SRL is divided into three main phases, with a total of eight steps.

Figure 2 The systematic review process inspired

Phase 1	Planning	Demonstrate the need for SRL
		Development of a Review Protocol
Phase 2	Conducting	Identification of Research
		Assessment of inclusion and quality criteria
		Study Selection
		Data Extraction
		Data Synthesis
Phase 3	Reporting	Writing the SRL

Source: Kitchenham’s approach (2004)

4 Objectives and research questions

Once the realisation of a systematic review has been proven relevant, the next step is to clearly define the objectives and questions that will delimit the research, so that the literature review can be guided and the research objectives reached (Kitchenham, 2004). The overall goal is to establish an overview of the current knowledge concerning sponsorship activation. In particular, the first specific objective is to uncover the history of the sponsorship activation's evolution.

The second specific objective is to draw a parallel between the concept of sponsorship activation and event planning to establish an overview of the current knowledge, arising from the systematic reviews' methodological rigor, from the standpoint of event conception principles. Thus, to reach this objective, the research questions commit to drawing a parallel between sponsorship activation and [...]:

- Q1a [...] its objectives
- Q1b [...] its design
- Q1c [...] its delivery
- Q1d [...] its experience
- Q1e [...] its anticipation and reflection
- Q1f [...] its evaluation.

Finally, the last specific objective of this review is to show relevant research avenues, throughout the results presentation, regarding the identified weaknesses that were found in the literature.

5 Data sources and research strategy

A research strategy aimed at limiting as much bias as possible was developed in collaboration with two other specialists. The inclusion of four databases was determined upon mutual agreement. It includes two databases frequently used in marketing, and which cover most of the scientific articles concerning business administration:

- 1 ABI/inform global
- 2 business source premier one which specialises in communication, media and related disciplines
- 3 communication and mass media complete and one multidisciplinary database
- 4 Web of Science.

The research was not limited according to the years of publication for two main reasons. First, sponsorship activation is a relatively new concept that emerged in the 2000s. More specifically, to the best of our knowledge, the first articles clearly referring to the concept of sponsorship activation were published in 2006 (Bennett et al., 2006, Choi, 2006, Cornwell et al., 2006, Miloch and Lambrecht, 2006). The second reason results from the

will to clearly document the concept of sponsorship activation's evolution over the years, particularly the transition from the leverage concept to the activation concept.

The keyword string used for this systematic review holds two main concepts:

- 1 sponsorship
- 2 activations.

The synonyms that seemed the most relevant, a priori, for these two concepts, are presented in Table 1 hereinafter.

The step to determine the best keywords was iterative, since numerous combinations of keywords were tried out. The goal of these various keyword strings attempts was to evaluate both the number of papers found (volume) and the relevance of the said articles (quality). It was important to use a similar query in every database to make sure the research conducted was equivalent from one database to another. Thus, the queries specified that the keywords could be anywhere except in the full text, since the percentage of papers including the full text vary from one database to another. In addition, in each of the databases, the query only included peer-reviewed papers, since a review by a peer that critically evaluates other researchers work is a good indicator of a paper's rigor. Table 2 summarises these different attempts made in fall 2019.

Table 1 Concepts and synonyms

<i>Keywords for concept 1 (sponsorship)</i>	<i>Keywords for concept 2 (activation)</i>
Sponsor* (includes sponsored, sponsorship, sponsors, sponsoring)	Activation
	Leverag* (includes leverage, leveraging)
	Exploit* (includes exploits, exploitation, exploiting)
	Activit* (includes activity, activities)
	Experien* (includes experience, experiential)

Table 2 Keyword strings attempts

<i>Queries</i>	<i>ABI/inform global</i>	<i>Business source premier</i>	<i>Web of science</i>	<i>Communication and mass media complete</i>	<i>Total</i>
(sponsor*) and (activation)	44	65	215	8	332
(sponsor*) and (leverag*)	242	248	276	28	794
(sponsor*) and (exploit*)	143	157	345	18	663
(sponsor*) and (activit*)	1,148	3,078	3,113	241	7,580
(sponsor*) and (experien*)	1,017	1,055	3,187	129	5,388
(sponsor*) and (activation or leverag* or activit* or experien* or exploit*)	2,433	4,358	6,793	386	13,970
(sponsor*) and (activation or leverag* or activit* or experien*)	2,242	4,122	6,268	366	12,998

Table 2 Keyword strings attempts (continued)

<i>Queries</i>	<i>ABI/inform global</i>	<i>Business source premier</i>	<i>Web of science</i>	<i>Communication and mass media complete</i>	<i>Total</i>
(sponsor*) and (activation or leverag* or experien*)	1,264	1,321	3,602	155	6,342
(sponsor*) and (activation or leverag* or exploit*)	419	454	865	51	1,789
(sponsor*) and (activation or leverag*)	276	292	482	32	1,082

The first two terms that were removed are ‘activit*’ and ‘experien*’, because their inclusion significantly increased the number of articles found, without being truly relevant to the questions research. For example, the most popular definition for sponsorship, namely Meenaghan’s (1991): sponsorship is an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity, includes the word ‘activit*’, even if most of the articles study the sponsorship as a whole and not the activation specifically. Next, the concept ‘exploit*’ was removed since, after reviewing many articles, it was discovered that this concept isn’t used on its own, but instead is a concomitant of ‘activation’ and ‘leverage’. In this way, even if Papadimitrion and Apostolopoulo (2009) have suggested this third synonym for ‘activation’ and ‘leverage,’ those subsequent articles used it in order to reach one of the two concepts already included in the research. Subsequently, it seems there may be some confusion in the literature, since the concepts of activation and leverage are often used interchangeably to describe how promotional materials/tools can be used to improve sponsorship efficiency (DeGaris et al., 2009). It was therefore relevant and necessary to keep these two terms. The keywords with the best results while considering the volume and quality variables, in each database, were the following: (sponsor*) and (activation or leverag*).

6 Studies selection

After completing the search, the selection of studies that were going to be a part of the final sample required a meticulous methodology indicating inclusion and exclusion criteria related to the relevance of each study in relation to the research questions (Kitchenham, 2004). Before permanently choosing the inclusion and exclusion criteria, they were tested on a random subset of primary studies. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are not numerous. Indeed, a choice was made not to limit the research in terms of publication dates for the reasons discussed previously. Furthermore, although the majority of the identified articles were in English, because of its predominance in scientific literature, the article selection was much wider to avoid bias related to the language. Also, articles in Spanish, Portuguese and French have been identified.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria are introduced in Table 3. The inclusion criteria focusing on activation or on leverage were judged on two components. On the one hand, in a quantitative perspective, the summary of the article or its keywords had to mention

sponsorship activation or its leverage at least once. On the other hand, in a qualitative perspective, the content of at least one passage in the whole article had to extensively discuss the sponsorship activation or its leverage. Indeed, the articles that didn't focus on sponsorship activation or on its leverage were immediately rejected. The mention of it, without discussing it, was not enough to select the article, but the activation or the leverage didn't need to be the core element of the study. For example, if the article was interested in the impact of multiple variables, such as congruity, attitude or loyalty, on the sponsorship's efficiency and one of the studied variables was activation or leverage, it was kept. That was the case for many articles (e.g., Aslam, 2018, Close et al., 2009, Dees et al., 2019, Dos Santos et al., 2020, Grohs et al., 2004). However, the sponsorship activation or its leverage was sometimes mentioned in the summary but the only passage that discussed them were at the end of the article, in further research or in the conclusion. Rather, these concepts were discussed as recommendations for future researchers to explore them more in depth. The sponsorship activation and its leverage were not significantly discussed in these articles, which didn't add new elements to the comprehension of the phenomenon under review.

Table 3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria for scholarly papers

<i>Inclusion criteria</i>	<i>Exclusion criteria</i>
Scholarly papers indexed in one of the four databases	Congressional proceedings, conference proceedings or conference reviews
Peer-reviewed	Non-available papers
Focus on sponsorship activation or leverage	Duplicates

Not only does it identify inclusion and exclusion criteria, Kitchenham's approach (2004) also involves the specification of quality criteria related to the content of the studies' richness and rigor. In regard to the peer-reviewed papers, which constitute almost the entirety of the sample, it was decided that they held a level of quality that was high enough, just like other reputed SRL have done (see David and Han, 2004), since they had already been rigorously reviewed. To allow for efficient management of the numerous articles identified (N = 1,082) all paper's bibliographic records have been exported into the bibliographic management software endnote.

After this exportation, the first step was to withdraw the duplicates. The existence of these duplicates was normal and justified, since the searches were launched in four different databases, so the same article could be found in more than one of them. After the sorting was completed, 327 papers were withdrawn and 755 remained. The second step was to withdraw every paper without any link to this SRL's subject, but instead were related to medicine (241 articles), finance (145 articles), law (32 articles), human resources (32 articles), technology (25 articles) and other subject fields which, at first glance, didn't have any share linkages with each other. At the end of this sorting, 186 potentially relevant articles remained. If the article's title or summary couldn't lead to the withdrawal of the said article without a doubt, it was moved forward to the next step without being withdrawn. The third step consisted of downloading the full text of the 186 remaining articles. To achieve this, various tactics were implemented to successfully find all of the unobtainable full texts, such as checking if they were accessible through Open Access, finding them via a DeepDyve membership, trying to acquire them in other universities' public posts, requesting them from the author via ResearchGate, ordering

them through an inter-library loan service, and e-mailing the author with the request. Despite those numerous attempts, the full text of three articles remained untraceable, and these articles had to be excluded from the selection. Therefore, 183 scholarly papers were left to read. During the fourth step, a thorough and heedful reading of these articles was necessary to evaluate their relevance. The previously discussed inclusion and exclusion criteria were at the centre of those decisions. Thus, after withdrawing 82 additional articles, the final sample included 101 articles. Out of a total of 1,082 articles, 981 were withdrawn and 101 retained, which represents 90.67% of exclusion and 9.33% of inclusion, respectively.

7 Addition of other articles to complete the sample

Based on the 101 remaining articles, other papers were sought out with Wohlin's (2014) snowballing approach. It consisted of linking the 101 retained articles' reference lists to identify, as applicable, frequently mentioned sources, in relation to this SRL's subject, and which hadn't priorly been identified. This created a list with a total of 4,982 references. Thereafter, there was a compilation of every time each of those references would appear in a different article, for a total of 3,208 different references. The references that were mentioned in more than 10 different articles were chosen. In total, 35 references were withdrawn, including nine that were already a part of the initial 1,082-article sample. The content of the 26 remaining articles was analysed, and their relevance was evaluated according to the same inclusion criteria linked with a focus on sponsorship activation or on its leverage. During this step, 25 articles were excluded, since they were classics addressing sponsorship as a whole, without any particular focus on activation or its leverage. All in all, as illustrated in Table 4, this exercise identified one additional article. This article met the previously discussed quality criteria, since it was peer-reviewed before its publication. Furthermore, Table 4 illustrates not only the number of different articles that referenced it in the 101 articles identified so far, but also the number of times the article was mentioned in the scientific community according to Web Science, which shows its notoriety.

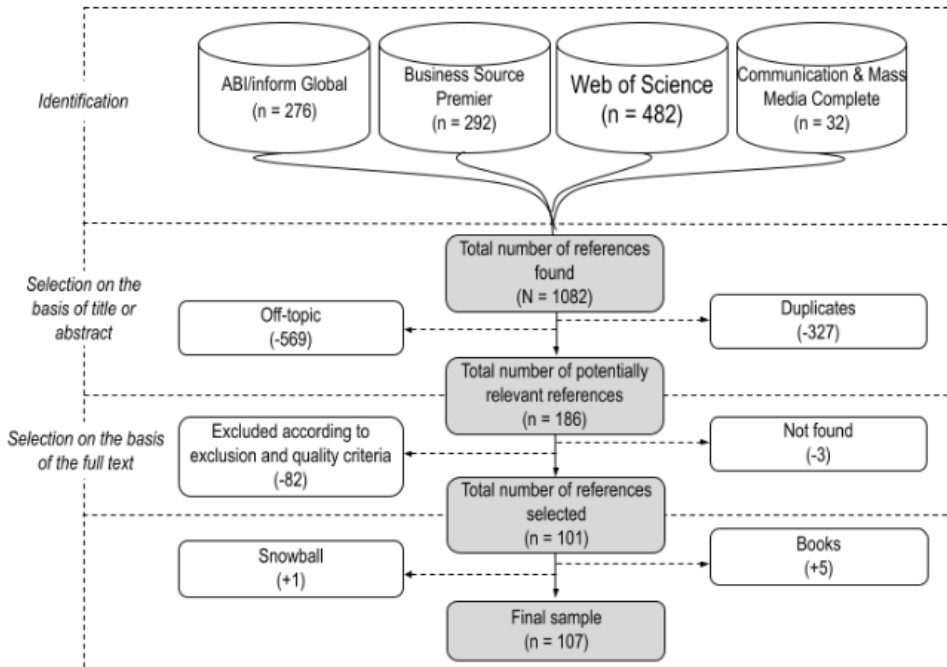
Table 4 Article added with the help of the snowballing approach.

<i>Article</i>	<i>Number of articles mentioning it</i>	<i>Mentions according to web of science</i>
Cornwell et al. (2005) 'Sponsorship-linked marketing: Opening the black box', <i>Journal of Advertising</i> , Vol. 34, No. 2, pp.21–42.	35 different articles/101	300 times

Considering the fact that sponsorship activation is often discussed from a managerial standpoint, especially by the experts, a meticulous choice was made to widen the research by including some best-sellers on sponsorship. Rarely used, these books represent a reliable source of information. Besides, several reviews and clinical medicine meta-analysis have concluded that the inclusion of grey literature provides a clearer picture of the phenomenon under study (Oppenheim et al., 2015). In order to find grand classics of

the managerial sponsorship literature, an exploratory search on Google with the keywords ‘sponsorship activation*’ book* was conducted. This research identified a list of “71 Best-Selling Sponsorship Books of All Time” (BookAuthority, 2019). This list, frequently updated by experts, was compiled with a technology using a dozen different indicators, including the number of mentions, recommendations, evaluations, popularity, and sales history. Subsequently, 66 books about sponsorship that didn’t include at least one important passage focusing on sponsorship activation or on its leveraging were removed while five books were selected. The next step was to ensure the quality of the selected books, because they were not peer-reviewed before publication. These descriptive writings didn’t contain an empirical study; therefore, it wasn’t appropriate to evaluate the quality of the research methodology the same way as the scientific articles. As shown in Table 5, other signs could indicate quality, for instance the noteworthy contribution of each author in the sponsorship scientific literature, the number of times a lead author was quoted within the 101-article sample, and the number of citations according to Google Scholar. The number of citations compiled by Google Scholar is an indicator showing the scientific impact of a paper, even though it can be limited.

Figure 3 The flowchart of the primary studies’ selection



After adding the reference with the help of the snowballing approach and the addition of the five books, the final sample contained 107 articles. The flowchart illustrated in Figure 3 summarises every step followed to select the relevant articles for this systematic review of the sponsorship activation literature.

Table 5 Books added to the sample

<i>Books</i>	<i>Mentions according to google scholar</i>	<i>Number of times an author is cited as the lead author (over 101 articles)</i>
Collett, P. and Fenton, W. (2011) <i>The Sponsorship Handbook. Essential Tools, Tips and Techniques for Sponsors and Sponsorship Seekers</i> , San Francisco.	25 times	2 times
Cornwell, T.B. (2014) <i>Sponsorship in Marketing: Effective Communication Through Sports, Arts and Events</i> , Routledge	73 times	187 times
Ferrand, A., Torrigiani, L. and Povill, A.C. (2006) <i>Routledge Handbook of Sports Sponsorship: Successful Strategies</i> , Routledge	57 times	6 times
Fortunato, J.A. (2013) <i>Sports Sponsorship: Principles and Practices</i> , McFarland	34 times	9 times
Grey, A.M. and Skildum-Reid, K. (2003) <i>The Sponsorship Seeker's Toolkit</i> , McGraw-Hill, Sydney.	61 times	1 time

8 Data extraction

The data extraction conducted was directly linked to the research questions. To objectively and systematically extract data, an Excel database was created, which included descriptive variables, such as the year of publication, and mainly variables linked to research questions. The categories included in this database emerged during the reading of the references and was formalised after the reading of more than half the papers, 55 out of 107 articles to be more specific. Indeed, the categories as a whole appeared to regard overall questions concerning sponsorship activation. The analysis of other articles was conducted according to these various predetermined categories, and it could still create other categories if needed. Furthermore, a look back on the first 55 analysed articles was conducted in order to ensure that no relevant piece of information was overlooked. The following sections summarise the results derived from the final sample made of 107 articles, starting with descriptive results, such as statistics and trends, followed by analytical results related to the research questions.

9 Descriptive results

Based on the existing literature, this first section provides an insight on previous studies, as well as statistics contributing to a better theoretical and contextual understanding of the sponsorship activation's concept. Thus, 71% of the articles included in the sample ($n = 107$) were theoretical or conceptual, while 29% were empirical, of which 51% used a quantitative research method, 49% a qualitative one, and the remaining 4% a mixed approach. Furthermore, activations were mainly studied in a business-to-consumer (B2C) context (in 76 articles), then in a business-to-business (B2B) context (in 35 articles) and finally in a business-to-employee (B2E) context (in 4 articles) (the total is over 107

articles, as the categories were not mutually exclusive). When mentioned in the articles, the sponsorship activations studied are mainly related to sports (72%) and more rarely related to arts and culture (8%). Table 6 illustrates, in descending order, the journals from which at least two articles were drawn from the 102 (excluding books) scholarly articles included in the final sample. The Journal of Sponsorship is clearly the main reference, with a total of 18, which represents 18.36% of the articles. Moreover, linking up lists of the articles' references to apply the previously discussed snowballing approach has also helped to discover the most frequently mentioned authors and references. Table 6 sorts out the 20 most quoted lead authors from all the articles taken together. T. Bettina Cornwell, a pioneer researcher in sponsorship activation, is at the top of the list; within the 102 articles, she was quoted 187 times. Lastly, Table 6 displays the articles that were quoted more than 20 times. The most consistently cited ones are Sponsorship-linked marketing: Opening the black box (Cornwell et al., 2005) and Sponsorship: From management ego trip to marketing success (Crimmins and Horn, 1996). Both are quoted 35 times, which represents a ratio superior to one article out of three.

With the objective of retracing the history of how sponsorship activation evolved, Figure 4 illustrates the classification of the 107 references according to their year of publication. The total number of references (in blue) regarding sponsorship activation or its leverage reached its peak in 2008. This excludes the years 2019 and 2020 (an article was officially published in 2020, since it was in the review process during the documentary research in the databases), since they weren't completed at the time of the research in databases. Every year, the number of new references remains similar, which demonstrates a constant interest in literature about those concepts. On each column representing the total number of published references sorted by year, other columns are superimposed to also illustrate the articles that focused on either the leverage concept (in orange) or the activation concept (in yellow). When an article discussed both concepts in an equal manner or used them as interchangeable synonyms, it was sorted in the 'Both' category (in purple).

Figure 4 Classification of 107 references according to their year of publication (see online version for colours)

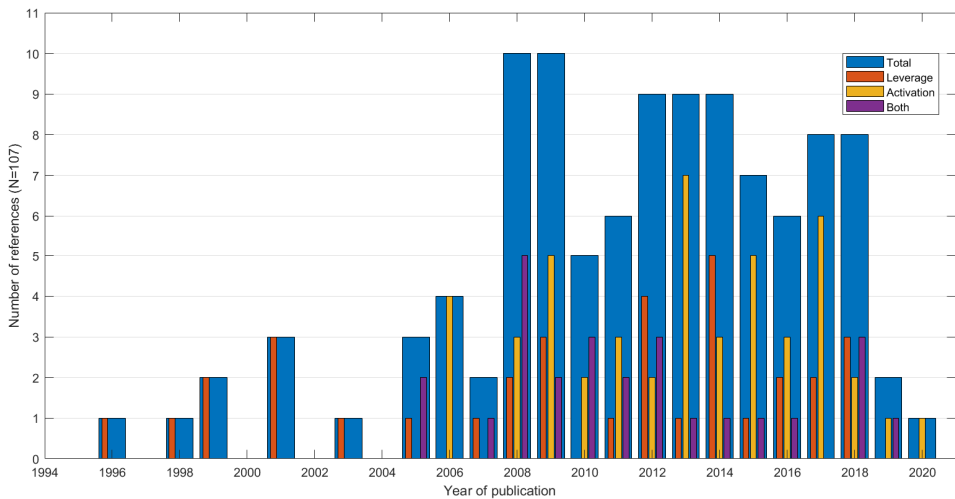


Table 6 Display of the main journals, authors and references

	No.		No.	No.		
<i>Journal</i>	<i>Journal of Sponsorship</i>	18	<i>Psychology & Marketing</i>	4	<i>Case Studies in Sport Management</i>	2
	<i>Journal of Sport Management</i>	6	<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	4	<i>International Journal of Advertising</i>	2
	<i>Sport Marketing Quarterly</i>	6	<i>Journal of Promotion Management</i>	4	<i>Journal of Marketing Communications</i>	2
	<i>International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship</i>	5	<i>Journal of Advertising</i>	3	<i>Marketing Intelligence and Planning-</i>	2
	<i>Journal of Brand Strategy</i>	5	<i>Journal of Advertising Research</i>	3	<i>Sport Management Review</i>	2
	<i>Sport, Business and Management</i>	5	<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	3	<i>Other (appearing only once)</i>	26
<i>Authors</i>	Cornwell, T.B.	187	Crimmins, J.	35	Weeks, C.S.	26
	Meenaghan, T.	107	O'Reilly, N.J.	34	Roy, D.P.	25
	Gwinner, K.P.	68	Madrigal, R.	32	Crompton, J.L.	23
	IEG	62	Aaker, D.	29	Grohs, R.	23
	Farrelly, F.	42	Amis, J.	29	Sandler, D.M.	23
	Keller, K.L.	38	Speed, R.	28	Séguin, B.	23
	Quester, P.	37	McDaniel, S.R.	26		
<i>References</i>	Sponsorship-linked marketing: Opening the black box	35	Determinants of sports sponsorship response	28	Sponsorship-linked marketing development	24
	Sponsorship: From management ego trip to marketing success	35	Leveraging sponsorships on the Internet: Activation, congruence, and articulation	25	Exploring managers' perceptions of the impact of sponsorship on brand equity	24
	Building brand image through event sponsorship: Role of image transfer	31	An international review of sponsorship research	25	State of the art and science in sponsorship-linked marketing	20

As illustrated in this histogram and according to the 107 listed references, the concept of sponsorship activation appeared around the early 2000s. The few articles published between 1996 and 2004 are exclusively about sponsorship leverage by mentioning sponsorship rights and the additional sum invested to promote the sponsors (Cornwell et al., 2001). Today, the most frequently used definition to describe the leverage approach was written by Weeks, Cornwell and Drennan (2008). They define the concept as 'the act

of using collateral marketing communications to exploit the commercial potential of the association between a sponsee and sponsor'. This definition was mentioned again multiple times by various authors (e.g., Carrillat and d'Astous, 2013, DeGaris et al., 2017, Uhrich et al., 2014). Other less popular definitions were also suggested, all gravitating around the additional resource allocations invested in marketing communication or promotional activities in order to benefit from a sponsorship. DeGaris et al. (2009), Farrelly and Quester (2005), Koenigstorfer and Uhrich (2017) and Lamont and Dowell (2008).

In 2005, Cornwell and her colleagues discussed sponsorship activation, using this term as a synonym for leverage concept. Whereas no documented references mentioned sponsorship activation before 2004, since 2008, the number of references emphasising activation has always been higher than the number of references about the leverage concept. This distinctly brings the extension of the sponsorship activation from the leverage concept to light. For that matter, in 2009, O'Keefe, Titlebaum and Hill (2009) referred to the sponsorship activation concept as a relatively new one, while the leverage concept has been talked about since 1996. Weeks and his colleagues (2008) are the ones who came up with the most frequently used definition to explain sponsorship activation. According to their definition, sponsorship activation is the 'communications that promote the engagement, involvement, or participation of the sponsorship audience with the sponsor.' This definition, which clearly puts the emphasis on the significance of these three factors, was cited again in several other articles (Gillooly et al., 2017a, 2017b, Olejniczak and Aicher, 2012).

Despite the rise in popularity of the usage of the term 'activation', confusion with the leverage concept seems to persist. In 2008, Weeks and his colleagues suggested an explicit distinction between the two concepts by focusing on the fact that activation can be considered as a subcategory of the leverage concept, which includes activation communications and nonactivational communications. While nonactivational communications are inactive, such as a billboard, activation communications include communications that specifically promote the engagement, implication, and participation of consumers with the sponsor. From this perspective, the leverage approach would include all the additional marketing communications at the sponsor's expenses, while activation would specifically focus on communications that incite the consumer and the sponsor to interact (T. Bettina Cornwell, 2008). This distinction was supported in numerous subsequent articles (Carrillat et al., 2014a, 2015, Cornwell, 2008, DeGaris et al., 2017, O'Reilly and Huybers, 2015, Gillooly et al., 2017b, Ferrand et al., 2006). Some authors also mention 'working dollars', in which the leverage approach consists of 'standard' activities associated with a sponsor, such as their publicity, whereas activation refers to 'value-added' activities to maximise the return benefits associated with the sponsor, like developing an interactive game (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013, Pasqualicchio et al., 2017). Even after suggesting these distinctions, the fact remains that the two concepts are still sometimes seen as synonyms:

- "[...] sponsorship leveraging, activation, or exploitation [...] (Note: These terms will be used interchangeably throughout the text.)" Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou (2009)
- "Leveraging: an alternative way of referring to sponsorship activation [...]" Collett and Fenton (2011)

- “The term ‘activation’ (as well as synonyms ‘leveraging’ [...])” O’Reilly and Horning (2013)
- “[...] activations [...] (also known as leverage) [...]” Penna and Guenzi (2014)
- “[...] activation (leverage) [...]” Smith et al. (2016).

Furthermore, sponsorship activation is defined in multiple works in accordance with the same definitions as sponsorship leveraging (Carrillat et al., 2015, Fortunato, 2013, Fortunato, 2016, O’Keefe et al., 2009, O’Reilly and Horning, 2013). In brief, regardless of the fact that authors have showcased the necessity of establishing universally adopted definitions (DeGaris et al., 2009, Weeks et al., 2008, O’Reilly and Horning, 2013), the confusion between the leverage approach and sponsorship activation remains. Although activation and leverage mutually reinforce each other, a better conceptual distinction between both of them would contribute to the elaboration of the sponsoring.

10 Analytical results

Q1 Establishing a parallel between sponsorship activation and event marketing

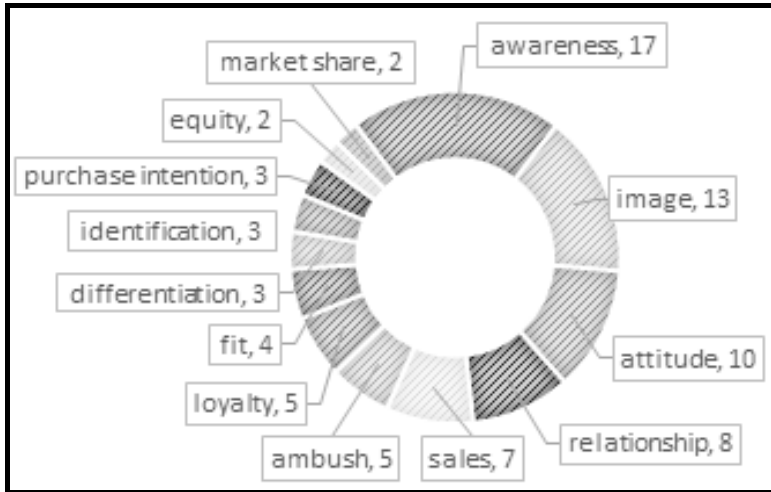
Q1a Sponsorship activation and its objectives

Sponsorship activations should be supported by explicit objectives that need to be enlightened by a larger sponsorship strategy (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). The two major stakeholders implied in a sponsorship are usually the sponsor and the property, the latter also called sponsored entity. Despite the fact that these stakeholders can have different goals related to the integration of an activation program in a sponsorship partnership, these goals associated with these activations are only applicable to sponsors in almost all the literature. This is because the majority of studies on sponsorship focus on the sponsors, claimed Toscani and Prendergast (2018). The only documented study addressing the property’s objectives (which are related to sponsorship in general and not about activations specifically) was conducted by Toscani and Prendergast (2018). They mentioned that the objectives of property are financial benefits, improving event fairness, or a combination of both. However, a good knowledge of the expected benefits and of the objectives both parties want to achieve can provide a better adaptation of their partnerships. Regardless of increased sponsorship costs, few studies have focused on sponsorship activations benefits for the property, which leads to the belief that sponsorship is only a financial leverage for the event sustainability. It doesn’t motivate properties to collaborate for the implementation of an activation’s program on the sponsored activity’s brand equity. It would be relevant to look more closely at the perceived benefits of sponsorship activation on the brand equity of the sponsored activity. Indeed, sponsorship activations, which are more ludic and major, can bring a positive impact on the experiences lived during sponsorship activities.

Figure 5 represents the sponsorship objectives proposed in at least two of the writings about sponsorship activations specifically, not just sponsorship in general. The sponsor’s objective, which can influence different audiences such as other companies (B2B) (e.g., Crader and Santomier, 2011), consumers (B2C) (e.g., Donlan and Crowther, 2014) and employees (B2E) (e. g. Carrillat et al., 2014b). The objectives most frequently associated

with sponsorship activations aim to increase awareness (mentioned in 17 different writings) (e.g., Biscaia et al., 2013), enhance images (13x) (e.g., Ferrand et al., 2006) and, finally, improve attitude (10x) (e.g., Gillooly et al., 2017a).

Figure 5 Sponsor’s objectives towards sponsorship activations



Most of the objectives are more transactional than relational. Relational objectives (8x) are in fourth place, when, normally, sponsorship has tremendous relational opportunities since it offers the possibility of interacting with a target audience to develop existing relationships and facilitate new relationships (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). Nevertheless, the same way that the marketing environment is characterised by the transition from a transactional orientation to a relational orientation (Donlan and Crowther, 2014), the sponsorship activation objectives appear to follow this trend by moving from a short-term, sales-oriented approach to a more strategic longer-term relational perspective (Gillooly et al., 2017b). As a matter of fact, among the eight articles concerning relational objectives, the first documented article was published in 2012 (Olejniczak and Aicher), and three of the other articles are from 2017 (Apostolopoulou et al., 2017, Gillooly et al., 2017a, Gillooly et al., 2017b). Long regarded as a tool that’s mainly used to achieve awareness and image goals, sponsors are showing evolution in the recognition of the role they can play in the realisation of relational objectives, especially when an activation program is adopted.

In addition, when setting objectives, the objectives linked to activations must follow the SMART criteria, which stands for what they should be: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Trackable (Lamont and Dowell, 2008). Nonetheless, given the difficulties inherent in the redaction of the SMART criteria, the documented articles showed that objectives associated with activations don’t usually respect these good practices, since they are extremely vague, such as “becoming involved with the community” (Biscaia et al., 2013). However, SMART criteria are crucial to evaluate the impact of an investment on sponsorship activations (Collett and Fenton, 2011).

Q1b Sponsorship activation and its design

Resources

Studies argue that the success of a sponsorship is established by designing an activation program and by the resources invested in it (Fortunato, 2016). Proper funding is necessary to exploit the full potential of a sponsorship, as well as having enough time and employees (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013).

To maximise a sponsorship's impacts, it is essential that sponsors also invest extra financial resources to promote their sponsorship, in addition to the amount allocated to the initial sponsorship. For that purpose, the activation ratio, used to guide sponsorship-related decisions, reflects the magnitude of activation investment compared to what has been invested in sponsorship rights. Therefore, an activation ratio of 1.7:1 means that the sponsor has invested \$1.70 in activation for every dollar spent in sponsorship rights (Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012). This ratio is, however, under debate in literature. Some authors state that the activation ratio should be in the order of 1–2:1 (Close et al., 2009, Fairley and Tyler, 2011, O'Keefe et al., 2009, Uhrich et al., 2014, Weeks et al., 2008, Herrmann et al., 2018), 1–5:1 (Fortunato, 2013, Guzman and Sisniega-Campbell, 2012, Olejniczak and Aicher, 2012) or even 1–10:1 (Carrillat et al., 2015, Mayo and Bishop, 2010, Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012, Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2009). However, increasing activation investments to get the most benefits out of it isn't enough, since the increase in activation investments can lead to decreasing profits due to potential reversed U-shaped relation with sponsorship efficiency (Carrillat et al., 2015). In summary, despite all these different points of view, the authors seem to think that the activation ratio must be at least equal to 1 :1 and that the ratios in the order of 1–2:1 are the most frequently found. The recommended ratio increases every year (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013), but the sponsors usually allocate fewer financial resources to the activation outside the initial rights than what is suggested (O'Keefe et al., 2009).

Although often discussed in literature, the most optimal ratio is difficult to identify, particularly because sponsors are sometimes unwilling to share information and don't generally conduct a clear financial breakdown of their activation expenses alongside their sponsorship rights (Sylvestre and Moutinho, 2007). Furthermore, it may seem utopian to establish an optimal universal ratio whereas every sponsorship is unique. For example, it is recommended to increase activation spending as sponsorship clutter increases (Quester and Thompson, 2001). In addition, an activation strategy focalising on digital can diminish the costs associated with it (Olejniczak and Aicher, 2012). The debate surrounding optimal activation ratios, as well as the difficulties inherent in its calculation, can lead us to question ourselves about the relevancy of knowing the 'how many' instead of the 'how' this additional money is and should be invested. Many studies are interested in defining the right ratio to invest, while few of them assess where and how that money is really spent (O'Reilly et al., 2008). Actually, Fortunato (2016) argued that developing a high-quality activation program created to fulfil the objectives is more important than simply increasing the activation expenses.

Most of the time, financial responsibility related to activations is the sponsor's responsibility since it's included in the contract. This contract clearly specifies who is responsible for what costs but sometimes, the property may also cover a part of the expenses (O'Reilly et al., 2008). Sponsors are increasingly trying to improve consumers overall experience during the sponsored activities, because the more a sponsored activity

is liked, the more the benefits associated with the activation are likely to be positive. By creating activations that add value to the activity, it would be valuable to financially involve the property, since activations benefit not only the sponsor, but also the property (Farrelly and Quester, 2005). In this regard, it is advised that the sponsor and the property collaborate to maximise the sponsorship's efficiency (Bagramian et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the longitudinal study conducted by O'Reilly and Huybers (2015) showed that the properties didn't provide enough services to sponsors on a certain number of important elements, such as the necessary resources for an activation platform. Even though collaboration can help to bring a sponsorship to another level, the properties can have a significant influence on sponsor activation rights by implementing strict rules on what they can and can't do (Gillooly et al., 2017b). These restrictions can be challenging for the design and execution of activations, especially in an environment with multiple sponsors (Gillooly et al., 2017b). Therefore, sponsorship is a particular situation in which collaboration and restriction entangle, but this duality has not been explored in documented articles.

Sponsorship activations require human, as well as financial resources. There are times when sponsors miss opportunities simply because they don't have the staff resources (O'Keefe et al., 2009). In these circumstances, some sponsors, especially small companies (Titlebaum et al., 2013), rely on agencies to help them with their activation programs. The involvement of a third party, in this case the agency, results in the implementation of a strong and strategic activation program which significantly increases the activation ratio (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013, Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012). Therefore, O'Reilly and his colleagues (2008) stated that all elaborated sponsorships should involve an agency. However, the agency's role is not well documented, so further research on the subject would be relevant (O'Reilly et al., 2018).

In short, even though some sponsors seem to have the necessary resources to activate their sponsorship, Jensen and his colleagues (2016) supported that only a few sponsors can actually mobilise their resources properly. The activation requires an investment in resources and some sponsors seek the value associated with the activation program, but they aren't willing to spend money, time or effort on it (O'Keefe et al., 2009).

The activation type's selection

Activation programs should be created to reach preestablished objectives (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013). When sponsorship activations are created, knowing how to reach these objectives is the key (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). Every activation program is flexible and can be personalised to better reach specific objectives (Fortunato, 2013). Countless ways exist for a sponsor to activate their sponsorship rights, which are only limited by their creativity and resources (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013, Fortunato, 2016). Therefore, once the objectives are established, a selection process of the most appropriate platform(s) should follow (Crowther, 2010).

Sponsors can opt for either on-site activations or off-site activations for their sponsorship activity. They can also choose between various platforms to make their sponsorship known beyond the event's boundaries, such as television (Donlan, 2014), radio (Goldman and Johns, 2009), mail (Quester and Thompson, 2001), cellphone (Crader and Santomier, 2011) and digital media (Apostolopoulou et al., 2017). In addition, the usage of digital media (e.g., Internet, browsing, blogging, social media, mobile applications, software, video games and other online interactions) is in constant

evolution and has a tendency to become one of the main activation platforms. Even the employees' personal social media are sometimes used as an additional resource to promote sponsorship (Delia and Armstrong, 2015). Activation programs are usually multiplatform (McKelvey, 2014), which reinforces the importance of establishing an integrated approach to coordinate all of the activation programs into a single 360° strategy (Ladousse, 2009). A well-integrated activation requires the coordination of marketing efforts in order to reduce the risks of duplication, inconsistency, frustration and disengagement (Collett and Fenton, 2011). For that matter, third parties such as agencies, can complicate this coordination (Collett and Fenton, 2011). Considering the high number of platforms available to sponsors, the appropriate choice depends, among other things, on the objectives regarding each sponsor (O'Reilly et al., 2018). As a result, selecting the appropriate platforms have repercussions on the sponsor strategy's particularities. But, as Cornwell suggested in 2008 and which has not changed, the current knowledge on each platform's individual impact and their interaction is very limited.

The most frequently studied methods are, in descending order of importance, advertising (found in 29 writings out of 107) (e.g. Cadwallader et al., 2012), sales promotion (13x) (e.g. DeGaris and West, 2012), signage (11x) (e.g. Olejniczak and Aicher, 2012), hospitality (9x) (e.g. Thwaites and Carruthers, 1998), banners/billboards/boards (8x) (e.g. Pierce and Petersen, 2011), public relations (8x) (e.g. Sylvestre and Moutinho, 2007), events (7x) (e.g. Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2009), displays (4x) (e.g. O'Reilly and Horning, 2013), samples (4x) (e.g. Bal et al., 2009) and sweepstakes (4x) (e.g. Cadwallader et al., 2012). Advertising is by far the most widespread method, being used by 79% of sponsors (Carrillat et al., 2015), followed by sales promotions (Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2009). Therefore, the companies looking to optimise their sponsorships have access to a wide range of methods, which tends to complicate the selection of the most optimal one.

Design's good practices

To reach the sponsorship activation goals, simply activating a sponsorship isn't enough, but it's still important to do it right (DeGaris and West, 2012). The design's role in the elaboration of activation programs has still received a minimum of attention (DeGaris et al., 2017). Few studies on the subject focused on the design's principles required to create good sponsorship activations (Gillooly et al., 2017b). The following lines introduce some elements that stand out in the literature, and which should be taken into consideration when activations are created so they can be effective.

Activating a sponsorship so that a sponsor can benefit from it is primordial, but the quality of the activation must prevail over quantity (Pegoraro and Jinnah, 2012). Hence, increasing an activation's budget isn't sufficient. Instead, assurances should be made that the activations are correctly created.

In the last few years, the ascending number of sponsorships obliged sponsors to become more innovative and creative regarding the design of their activation programs. By doing so, they can stand out in an environment which is more and more cluttered by other sponsors (Miloch and Lambrecht, 2006). The activations must be unique and different so they can make the sponsor shine and distinguish themselves from all the other stimulus (O'Keefe et al., 2009). Using the Olympic Games example, Tripodi and Hirons (2009) mentioned that the ideal strategy to 'stand out' in an environment

overcluttered by other sponsors trying to maximise their investment is to implement extremely creative and unique activations. Furthermore, to make sure they can truly distinguish themselves, a company has to activate their sponsorship in a way that can't be easily imitated by their competitors (Cornwell et al., 2001).

Throughout the design of an activation program, it is also important not to compromise the goodwill perception of the consumers towards sponsorships. It is the key factor that differentiates sponsorship from other marketing communication tools (Meenaghan, 2001). The perception of goodwill can be damaged if the activations showcase the sponsor's marketing objectives, like the will to reach new markets (Sylvestre and Moutinho, 2007).

Lastly, when consumers are exposed to a sponsorship, from that moment on, three images are displayed to them: the sponsor's image, the property's image, and the image from the association between these two parties (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013). It's this association that unites the sponsored property, such as its theme and location, with the sponsor who distinguishes activation strategies from other marketing communication tools (Gillooly et al., 2017b). In the eyes of the consumer, this association can either be coherent or incoherent. According to Meenaghan (2001), the main factor to determine this association's perceived congruity concerns the perception of a logical connection between the sponsor and the sponsored activity. The concept of congruity was widely studied in order to improve the processing of stimuli linked to a sponsorship (2005). Generally, a high congruity is frequently associated with more positive results (Cornwell et al., 2005, Weeks et al., 2008). Because of this, a particularly relevant element of design that must be central to creation of sponsorship activations is the will to establish a connection between the sponsor and the property (Gillooly et al., 2017b). If this connection between them isn't naturally coherent, the creation of it should be even more central in the design of the activations. Additionally, an association which is initially perceived as incoherent can still eventually become coherent in the eyes of consumers. This depends on the strategy implemented, which explains to consumers the connection between a sponsor and a property, in other words, the way a sponsorship is articulated (Weeks et al., 2008). For example, in an article by Zaharia and his colleagues (2016), the relationship between a soccer team (property) and Samsung (sponsor) was seen as strongly logical by the respondents, even though those two entities don't naturally seem related a priori. This change in perception can generate multiple benefits. If the sponsor is indeed able to overcome the lack of natural congruity, a good articulation can, among other things, arouse enthusiasm and interest (Mazodier and Quester, 2014). Similarly, as explained by Mazodier and Quester (2014), a fit, first seen as incoherent to then become coherent, will eventually further increase the brand effect. In brief, those results showcase the need to perceive the congruity perception between a sponsor and a property as a dynamic variable, and not a static one (Mazodier and Quester, 2014).

In sum, all these elements, and many more, which must be taken into consideration during the creation of activations underline their complexity. Thus, more strenuously documenting the entire creation process and the role of the design in the activation program(programs) could be pertinent (DeGaris et al., 2017).

Q1c Sponsorship activation and its delivery

Every year, billions of dollars are invested in sponsorship activations, but a significant portion of this amount is wasted because of poor delivery (Sözer and Vardar, 2009).

Consequently, the activations should be supported by good delivery during their realisation (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). Delivery is even more important for the activations involving ‘at the moment of truth’ communications, such as activations which are more experiential. During an activation delivery, numerous tangible and intangible factors display the brand to the participants (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). Given the experiential nature of some activations, the tangible elements, such as the cleanliness of the facilities, and the intangible ones, such as the competence and friendliness of the staff in contact with consumers when delivering the activations, can both influence the consumer’s experience. However, there is still a gap in literature on the subject, since no documented study researched this variable thoroughly. This area of study is even more relevant considering the results of a survey conducted by Olejniczak and Aicher (2012) after a sponsored event showed that some participants who attended the activations were disappointed by the long line-ups and the lack of friendliness by various staff members, the majority of whom were volunteers. Thus, it would be important to study sponsorship activations by mobilising the notions of service, such as the factors influencing the quality of service. In the activation program, it would also be important to correctly document all of the consumer’s touch points (Soderman and Dolles, 2015), since good delivery during the moments of truth can lead to a meaningful experience for the participants.

Q1d Sponsorship activation and its experience

Since the early 2010s, alongside the rise of experiential marketing, the practices surrounding sponsorships have progressed, and activation programs gradually went from logo placement to the production of an experience to create a connection with the participants (O’Reilly and Horning, 2013). Experiential activations were then unveiled as a strategy holding the capacity to improve the efficiency of sponsorships (Gillooly et al., 2017b). Gillooly and her colleagues (2017b) mention “experiential sponsorship activation” (ESA), referring to the application of event marketing as a communication strategy used in the context of sponsorship activation. This term includes various activities, such as VIP parties, visitor attractions, and activations which allow consumers to actively take part in activities at the event venue (Gillooly et al., 2017b). This enthusiasm towards experiential activities is justified, for instance, by the fact that consumers no longer want to consume passively, but to actively get involved in experiences. Therefore, they retain an increased interest in the marketing communications that provide them with those experiences (Khan and Fatma, 2017). For example, at the third edition of the Grands Prix de la commandite in 2017, the prize for the best activation in the sports department went to D-Box. During the Formula 1 Montreal Grand Prix, they invited the participants into a cinema that reproduced thrills similar to the ones experienced by Formula 1 drivers (Martellini, 2017).

This example showcases the necessity for active participation by consumers during the activity proposed by the sponsor. In their article, Gillooly and her colleagues (2017b) summarise some key elements of experiential sponsorship activation, including the importance of creating experiences that stimulate the five senses (see Pine and Gilmore, 1998). They also mention the importance of taking into account the experience’s different dimensions, such as the sensorial, affective, cognitive, physical, behavioural and social (see Schmitt, 1999) and other attributes aiming for the enhancement of the experience, including innovation, integrity (see Wood and Masterman, 2008), novelty (see Tafesse,

2016), personal relevance, surprise, exclusivity (see Poulsson and Kale, 2004), intellectual stimulation and the possibility of interacting with peers (see Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2013). In short, several theories linked to experiential marketing are relevant for the creation of memorable experiences through sponsorship activation. Concerning the activations specifically, one of the keys to success, which emerged from the conducted interviews led by Donlan and Crowther's study (2014) is the exploitation of the participant's passion in order to create an experience that can't be bought nor reproduced easily or eventually.

To offer an actual meaningful experience that will win the hearts of the participants, there is certainly room for improvement (Soderman and Dolles, 2015). In order to do that, an initial and fundamental step consists of knowing the potential participants and placing the emphasis on their motivations and expectations (Crowther, 2010). This consumer orientation is especially important since experiential activations generally need active participation, requiring more efforts than passive communications. It's even more difficult to create a sponsorship activation that actually improves the relationship between the enterprise and its target audience because of the concept of 'perceived sacrifice'. This concept suggests that the costs collected by the participants actively taking part in an activation are straightaway higher than when they passively consume other forms of marketing communication (Crowther, 2010). It is necessary to make sure beforehand that the participants are pleased with the created activations a priori, but this consumer orientation isn't actually the core of the discussions surrounding sponsorship activations. One way to innovate when designing activation would be to explore the possibility of relying on approaches such as service design or design thinking. Both truly focus on the user, that is to say, in this context, the activation participant.

Q1e Sponsorship activation, its anticipation and its reflection

The conceptual framework suggested by Crowther (2010) includes anticipation steps, which represents the before the experience lived by the participant, and reflection steps, which represents the after. These two periods are the experience's extension and offer various ways of influencing the participants' perception (Crowther, 2010). Therefore, anticipation and reflection should be considered as fundamental elements of activation planning. Despite the importance that they should be granted, no documented studies talk about the anticipation and reflection periods associated with sponsorship activations. Nonetheless, when it comes to anticipation, the article by DeGaris and his colleagues (2017) did mention Close and Lacey's study (2014) associated with it, but not documented, because the abstract only mentioned 'event sponsor's exhibit area' referring to sponsorship activation. In this study, the authors compared individuals who participated in a sponsorship activation to individuals who only anticipated it. They discovered that both their attitudes towards the brand and their purchase intention didn't significantly differ. These results highlight the fact that, anticipation is as important as the experience itself when it comes to the evaluating attitude and purchase intentions. The authors explain their results with the help of the Affective Forecast Theory, and it would be interesting to further explore this avenue.

Q1f Sponsorship activation and its evaluation

According to O’Keefe and his colleagues (2009), one of the most important questions to discuss within the framework of activations involves its evaluation. Since the measuring methods that are currently available are difficult to implement, the results can be tricky to interpret. Overall, there seems to be a deficit in the sponsorship’s performance measurements, especially because of an inadequate, and even sometimes nonexistent, evaluation budget (Meenaghan, 2013). Yet, the elaboration of performance measurements is crucial to address criticisms of sponsorship (Meenaghan, 2013). The sponsorship performance’s global evaluation has many weaknesses that are all the more present when it concerns the measurement of the activation strategies’ performance. On account of the inherent difficulties to the extent of the activations’ efficiency, Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulo (2009) have noticed that all ten of the interviewed sponsors did not show any interest towards the impact of their activations during the Athens Olympics. When the activations are evaluated, the most frequently measured variables are reconnaissance (e.g., Cahill and Meenaghan, 2013) and recall (e.g. Herrmann et al., 2016). Other variables such as brand attitude (Bal et al., 2009), purchase intention (Bal et al., 2009), brand image (Cahill and Meenaghan, 2013) and store patronising (Herrmann et al., 2016) are also sometimes used. However, those variables, which are mainly built upon performance advertising evaluations, aren’t truly efficient to demonstrate the impact of a sponsorship activation, since they lose touch with the fundamental characteristics that distinguish the sponsorship from the publicity (Crompton, 2004). The most frequently measured benefits, whether they are cognitive, affective or behavioural, and the ways used to successfully measure them, do not accurately reflect the purpose of those strategies, which aim to promote consumers engagement, implication and participation with the sponsor (Weeks et al., 2008).

In addition to the general lack of performance evaluation on sponsorship activation strategies and the lack of knowledge about crucial relational variables, the majority of the articles study sponsorship according to a static period of time, such as comparing, only once, participants with non-participants to an activation (Cahill and Meenaghan, 2013), while the activation’s efficiency should also be evaluated according to a long-term perspective and using longitudinal studies (Mazodier and Quester, 2014). With this in mind, the data relevant to a sponsorship activation should be collected several times in order to be able to notice the changes in some variables over time (Mazodier and Quester, 2014). Furthermore, the tests used to demonstrate the changes induced by the sponsorship aren’t always adequate. More specifically, Mazodier and Quester (2014) showcase the inherent limits of the traditional (examples: t-test (e.g., Miloch and Lambrecht, 2006), MANOVA (e.g., Ye, 2013) and regression approaches (e.g., Dees et al., 2019), in trying to measure the changes brought by sponsorship activation strategies. According to these authors, the intraindividual changes can’t be empirically studied in an appropriate manner by using traditional approaches for various reasons. As a matter of fact, these approaches can’t model the interindividual differences within the intraindividual changes (Mazodier and Quester, 2014). Moreover, one of the conditions of use for some of these traditional approaches involves the independence of error terms. Yet, in the context of a longitudinal study regarding the changes on the variables of interest and in case the data are based on the same measures, this condition isn’t met. In order to overcome the inherent lacks in the traditional approaches, Mazodier and Quester (2014) were the first authors to use the latent growth modelling analysis in a study of sponsorship. This type of analysis is used

in numerous disciplines since it holds the capacity to describe, measure and analyse longitudinal changes. Furthermore, the latent growth modelling allows operationalising interpersonal changes, through three repeated measures for instance. More precisely, this type of analysis offers the possibility to quantify the variations from the sample when it comes to intraindividual changes, such as a change in an individual's quality perception over time, and to interindividual changes, such as a change over time in quality perception of different individuals from the same sample. In brief, this type of latent growth modelling would be an interesting avenue of research to fill the current gaps in literature concerning sponsorship activations measures and evaluations.

11 Conclusions

11.1 Future research agenda

In light of the results which have been presented and the gaps in existing literature which have been highlighted, it would be interesting to further explore certain research avenues. Figure 6 summarises the main research avenues previously discussed throughout the analytical results.

More particularly, with respect to the objectives of sponsorship activations, one avenue for future research would be to study the objectives associated with activations, not only from the sponsor's point of view, but also by taking into consideration the property's perspective. By improving knowledge of the objectives and expected benefits of an activation for both the sponsor and the sponsored event, partnerships can be more relevant. If sponsorship activations allow properties to achieve their objectives, they may be more willing to collaborate, both in terms of financial and human resources, in the implementation of activations. In terms of sponsorship activation design, the main avenues for future research are, first, to document the specificity of each activation platform and their interaction, since this knowledge is currently very limited, even though activation programs are generally multiplatform. Indeed, activation programs generally include a mix of activations on site, as well as on social media, on the Internet, on television, etc. Another avenue for future research would be to improve the knowledge of how activation investments are spent. The emphasis here must be on the 'how' and not on the 'how much', as opposed to many studies which have tried to establish an optimal activation ratio. Future studies may also explore the collaboration/restriction duality between the sponsor and the sponsored event. This duality represents a particular context associated with sponsorship that is not present in most other communication tools such as advertising. Finally, it would be interesting to document the design process of activations. Indeed, there are countless ways for a sponsor to activate their sponsorship rights and it is this flexibility that makes this communication tool so attractive. That said, the growing number of sponsorships, as well as the increasing emphasis on return on investment (ROI), is forcing organisations to focus more on the need to strategically exploit their sponsorships in terms of design (Smith et al., 2016). Considering this systematic review, however, minimal attention has been paid to the process of designing activations and to the design principles required to develop successful sponsorship activations.

Figure 6 Potential research avenues on sponsorship activations

	COMPANY VIEW	ATTENDEE VIEW		
MARKETING STRATEGY	<p>Objectives Studying the objectives associated with the activations of the property's point of view.</p>	<p>Anticipation Exploring the contribution of the Affective Forecasting Theory on the benefits related to the activations.</p>	EXPERIENCE JOURNEY	
	<p>Design Documenting the specificity of each activation platforms and their interaction. Documenting "how" the investments in activations are spent. Exploring the collaboration/restriction duality between the sponsor and the property. Documenting the activation design process.</p>			
	<p>Delivery Exploring the role of delivery in activations.</p>			<p>Experience Documenting consumers' consideration concerning activation decisions. Exploring the added value of a consumer orientation.</p>
	<p>Evaluation Evaluating the longitudinal impact of the activations with the help of the latent growth modelling analysis.</p>			<p>Reflection Exploring the role of reflection on consumers experience at the activations.</p>

The implementation of an activation should be supported by its proper *execution*. In this sense, it is important to document how the execution of an activation is generally done and to identify best practices and red flags. For example, when a sponsor hires an agency, should they delegate the execution of the activation at the sponsored event to brand ambassadors provided by the agency? If so, what are the most important aspects to consider when forming brand ambassadors? For example, is it better to focus on experience management or on knowledge of the sponsoring organisation?

Regarding *anticipation*, this systematic review also raised the importance for future studies to explore the contribution of Affective Forecasting Theory on the impact of activations. The role of *reflection* on participants' experience related to activations should also be explored in future research, since none of the studies identified in this systematic review addressed this aspect.

Regarding the *experience*, it would be relevant to document the current consideration of the consumer in decisions related to activations and to evaluate the added value of a consumer orientation. Indeed, to succeed in designing a memorable activation, it is suggested to create more consumer-oriented sponsorship activations by using design thinking or service design approaches, for example. An initial and fundamental step to achieve this is to know the targets of the activation and more specifically their motivations and expectations (Crowther, 2010). This consumer focus is even more important because of the concept of ‘perceived sacrifice’ which suggests that the perceived costs to consumers of actively participating in an activation are higher than when they passively consume other forms of marketing communication (Crowther, 2010). This participant-centered approach could therefore be an avenue for designing a meaningful experience through activation. However, no study has measured the impact of a participant orientation on the experience of activation.

Finally, with respect to *evaluating* the impact associated with sponsorship activations, future studies may be interested in measuring the longitudinal impact of activations using latent growth modelling. This systematic review has shown that sponsorship activation needs more longitudinal research and additional repeated measures designed to address the current weaknesses associated with the measurement and evaluation of sponsorship activations as previously discussed.

11.2 Contributions

This systematic review of the literature contributes to improving the knowledge of sponsorships by refining the reflections surrounding activation strategies. It does so through events lenses, which haven’t prompted many publications in the scientific community thus far. From a scientific perspective, this study helps to develop a better understanding of all the writings about the activation concept since, to our knowledge, this is the first SRL on the matter. Moreover, the results highlight the necessity to continue improving the comprehension of what a sponsorship activation is, and what makes it different from sponsorship leveraging. By pointing out some of the gaps in literature, this SRL also helps to introduce a guideline in order to lead future studies on sponsorship activation. From a managerial point of view, the predictions on sponsorship activation usage show an upward trend for the years to come (IEG, 2018). Thus, this SRL can help practitioners to adjust their activation strategies to make them as efficient as possible, and to actually invest in the most promising elements. Thereby, this review seeks to ultimately improve the activation’s efficiency by borrowing an innovative conceptual framework emerging from event marketing literature, and by providing itself with the best practices.

11.3 Limits

Even if the previously discussed results are based on a rigorous methodology, the approach still has some limitations. Firstly, even if multiple measures have been taken to identify all of the relevant articles, the fact remains that this SRL doesn’t claim to have reached that goal exhaustively. Indeed, it is possible that other studies, in which the abstract described the type of activation, such as an exhibit area, without mentioning if it was an activation or a sponsorship leveraging, were not identified, in the same way as the Close and Laces study (2014) previously mentioned. Secondly, since the decisions concerning the inclusion or exclusion of the studies were only taken by one individual,

this SRL wasn't subjected to an inter-judge agreement. Nonetheless, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were, all in all, very objective, and were easily applied without raising any ambiguity or any real doubts. Thus, the involvement of a third party has not been necessary. That being said, the test-retest method was used to guarantee the reliability of the decisions. In order to do this, after selecting or not selecting the articles, a random 100-article sample was drawn from the initial sample, which included 1,082 articles, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria were reapplied to it. For these 100 articles, the final decision was the same as the one taken during the initial analysis. This demonstrates the coherence of the decisions related to the previously discussed inclusion and exclusion criteria. Lastly, with the desire to draw a parallel between the activation and many other variables of interest, the analytical results summararily display each of the variables included in the theoretical framework. It would be relevant to study each of them more thoroughly in future studies, with the help of the previously discussed research avenues.

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