

AIRLINE SPONSORSHIPS AND SPORTS – AN EXPLORATORY REVIEW OF MAJOR AIRLINE ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Airline involvement in sport sponsorship has grown over the last few years as sponsorship activity has proven effective as one method to reach a global audience. Aiding in this move to the use of sponsorship is the growing role of social media networks that can be utilized with traditional media and event marketing activities to leverage the impact of the sponsorship. However, the extent of involvement in sports, the leading area of sponsorship activity, and across other events by the world's major air carriers varies greatly. This review examines the reported sponsorships engagements in sports by leading global airlines at the airline's web site.

KEYWORDS

Airline Marketing, Sports Marketing, Sponsorship programs

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1. INTRODUCTION

Airline marketing as a subject has faced numerous criticisms and difficulties (Das and Reisel, 1997; Bhargava, 2006; Gianatasio, 2016) through the years. Due to the structural and competitive constraints of a mature industry, along with a consumer base chasing whatever the lowest fares may be for a flight, questions have arisen about the efficiency and effectiveness of airline marketing programs. Often these concerns are raised as critics note about the easy copying of themes used in airline marketing, especially airline advertisements; i.e., the over-reliance of pictures of either the newest first class seat or photos of far-away tropic or urban landscape depending on the airline's network and routes being advertised. Recent literature concerning trends in airline marketing focuses on the increasing use of technology-driven approaches, away from large-scale advertising based programs (Bhargav, 2006; Franko, 2018). This review examines the role of one of the oldest marketing tactics – sponsorship – and how new technological approaches are being utilized in conjunction with the growing sub-discipline of sports marketing by airlines across the globe as these airlines seek to strengthen their brands.

2. SPONSORSHIP AND SPORTS MARKETING

In many marketing management textbooks, the role of sponsorship within the promotion - communication mix is often noted as one of the tools of public relations (Peter and Donnelly, 2015; Lamb, Hair and McDaniel; 2017) and may only be discussed in terms of event sponsorship (Grewal and Levy, 2018). Sponsorship may also be introduced as a marketing tactic when discussing the role of sales promotions and trade shows (Kotler and Keller, 2006). When trying to define exactly what sponsorship may entail, the American Marketing Association (AMA) web site presents two definitions of the term; one is from a leading marketing consulting firm in the field, IEG (see <http://www.sponsorship.com/>).

Sponsorship (1): Advertising that seeks to establish a deeper association and integration between an advertiser and a publisher, often involving coordinated beyond-the-banner placements.

Sponsorship (2): A cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically sports, entertainment, non-profit event or organization) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property. Source: IEG
Source: <https://www.ama.org/resources/Pages/Dictionary.aspx>

This inability to reach a concise definition of the term and the role of sponsorship in the promotion - communication mix is not new. In reviewing the strategic role sponsorship may play in the promotion - communication mix, Dolphin (2003) found the lack of an agreed upon

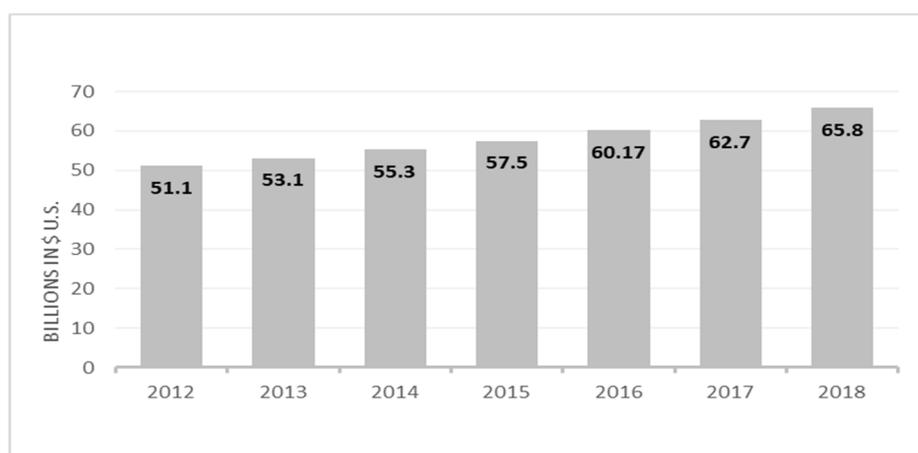
definition of the concept common but that most of the definitions do agree sponsorship is a paid activity for access and association to an event, organization, person or charitable cause. Unlike the AMA, most of the research reviewed by Dolphin (2003) clearly notes differences between sponsorship and advertising. While advertising may be one outcome of the sponsorship, and be used in supporting the sponsorship activity, sponsorship may not always be tied to advertising and have different strategic goals than advertising.

The inability to find a commonly accepted definition between the research on sponsorship and in marketing texts may in fact relate to the different goals sponsorship may fulfill. There are many reasons marketers may become involved in sponsorship, listed are some of the following:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Identify with a target market | Build brand awareness local and globally |
| Identify with a life style | Create / reinforce brand perceptions & associations |
| Enhance corporate image | Express commitment a community |
| Entertain key clients & customers | Support merchandising opportunities |
| Stimulate sales | Employee reward and moral building |
- (Source: derived from Dolphin, 2003; Kotler and Keller, 2006)*

As shown herein, sponsorship may be used to meet a variety of possible corporate, marketing, promotional and internal human resource goals. Figure One displays how global spending on sponsorships have increased yearly, including projections for 2018, demonstrating how sponsorship spending is increasing by over 4% per year (IEG, 2016a; IEG 2018):

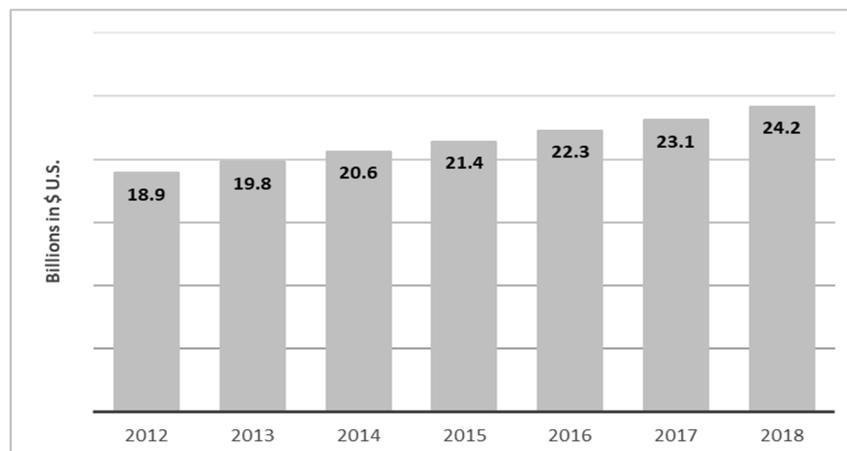
Figure 1: Global Sponsorship Spending



Source: IEG, 2016a; IEG 2018

By far, the greatest amount of spending currently occurs in the North American region (IEG, 2016a; IEG 2018). Figure Two displays the growth in spending in North America, also averaging over 4% per year.

Figure 2: North American Sponsorship Spending



Source: IEG, 2016a; IEG 2018

Examining spending trends in other global regions, excluding North America, Table One displays how spending is increasing, especially in the Asia Pacific region (IEG, 2016a; IEG 2018).

Table 1: Sponsorship Spending by Global Region (In Billions \$ U.S.)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Avg. Growth Percentage
Europe	14.8	15.3	16	16.7	17.6	4.43 %
Asia Pacific	13.3	14	14.8	15.7	16.6	5.70 %
Central/South America	4.2	4.3	4.4	4.5	4.6	2.30 %
All Other Countries	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.8	3.93 %

Source: IEG, 2016a; IEG 2018

While sponsorships by category are not reported globally, the data available from North America clearly demonstrates that sponsorship related to sport is by far the leading category (IEG2016A, IEG, 2018). Table Two shows the spending pattern for North America by category or property type and the growth percentage over the years. An examination of the spending projections for 2018 easily reflects how sports sponsorship dominates in the overall percentage of dollars by category type. Specifically, the percentage values by category in 2018 are 70% for Sports, 10% for Entertainment, 9% for Causes, 4% for Arts, 4% for Festivals and Fairs, and 3% for Associations and Memberships.

Table 2: North America Sponsorship Spending by Category (In Billions \$ U.S.)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Avg. Growth Percentage
Sports	14.35	14.99	15.7	16.26	17.05	4.41%
Entertainment	2.05	2.13	2.22	2.29	2.4	4.02%
Causes	1.85	1.92	1.99	2.05	2.14	3.71%
Arts	.923	.939	.962	.993	1.03	2.78%
Festival, Fairs and Annual Events	.847	.860	.878	.903	.936	2.53%
Associations and Membership Organizations	.574	.591	.604	.616	.635	2.56%

Source: IEG, 2016a; IEG 2018

With the growth in sponsorship spending, the research effort of trying to develop the value of sponsorship has increased. As sport sponsorship has lead in the spending by type of sponsorship, much of the research is found in sports related journals. As a starting point research in the past has focused on the biggest global sporting event, the Olympics (Tripodi and Hirons, 2009; Cho; et al.; 2011; Ellis, Parent and Seguin, 2016) or on sponsorship in auto racing focusing on the two major racing series, Formula One and NASCAR (DeGaris, Kwak and McDaniel, 2017; Jensen and Cobbs, 2014; Rothhoff, Depken, and Groothuis, 2014). In a recent publication, Grohs (2015) found 44 studies that focused on sponsorship and the effects on the sponsors brand image from 1995 to 2014 with the Olympics, auto racing and football (soccer) being the most consistent sponsorship areas across the studies. Also of note, while the sports involved are identified by league for most of the 44 studies, the sponsoring firms, if named in the articles, are not identified by Grohs (2015).

3. AIRLINE SPONSORSHIP

While a historical review of airline sponsorship was not undertaken for this study, sponsorship has long been used by airlines. In the past the aviation literature on sponsorship might be covered as Nelms (1996) did in a report on Delta becoming the official airline of the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympic games. The article reads much like a case study of the airline strategy in acquiring the sponsorship as being the official carrier and the operational aspects the games would have on the airline's main hub in Atlanta. As with many sponsorship articles, the sponsorship focus for Delta is on building the carriers brand awareness globally. Relatively few

such articles appeared in the past with an airlines focus. With the growth in sponsorship and firms such as IEG (www.sponsorship.com), SportBusiness (www.sportbusiness.com), and Nielsen Research, who recently launched a separate sports sponsorship reporting service, Nielsen Sports (www.nielsensports.com) now regularly reporting on sponsorships, it would be hard to not find a story on some airline sponsorship deal being signed almost on a daily basis.

The other way sponsorship as a tool of the airline promotional mix was known in the past was for the traditional public relations tasks of community involvement and corporate social responsibility response (Dasburg, 1998). Airline management needed to be ready to respond to the request for services and assistance from the communities the airline served and have long recognized the need to have a strategy to deal with this request and get the stories to the public about the activities engaged. In the US, it is not uncommon in fact for the sponsorship links on the web site to focus more on the charitable aspects of the firm and how the airline responds to charitable requests. An example of this would be the American Airlines web page "let good take flight" (<https://www.aa.com/i18n/customer-service/about-us/let-good-take-flight/let-good-take-flight.jsp>) which highlights the various non-profit and community-based organizations the airline and its employees participate currently along with links to how to engage the airline in a program.

Academic research on the use of sponsorships by airlines is rather lacking. As noted, Grohs (2016) did not directly identify whom the sponsors were in the article found in his research on brand image. Additionally, in an earlier review of sponsorship research Cornwell and Maignan (1998) also do not identify the sponsors in the 78 articles referenced in the review and in the table presented provide no clear airline sponsor identity. One of the few articles found directly referencing the role of sponsorship by an airline is a case study of Turkish Airlines (Atas, Morris and Bat, 2015) during the late 2000s to 2013. The case study interviewed three members of the Turkish Airlines marketing staff who provide their views on the selection of the sponsorship and accompanying advertising and other promotion tactics of the airline at that time. While stating their belief in the tactics used, there is no empirical evidence presented to support the claims.

Another academic article found noted sponsorship only by example as the article's focus is more on the brand messaging strategies used in social media communications (Coursaris, Osch, and Balogh, 2016). The article examines how three firms, Delta Air Lines, Wal-Mart and McDonalds utilize Facebook in two selected periods in 2012 post content on the firms' Facebook pages. The article proposes a typology of social media communication strategies and then reviews the messages posted during the time periods used to derive the typology. Within the article, four

sub-categories, Promotion, Awareness, Fundraisers and Event are identified to contain posts that deal with the content of sponsorships. Due to the manner in which the data was presented only examples of the sub-categories were shown. Totaling the Delta percentages from the main data table, the four sub-categories that may have sponsorship content posted by Delta are less than 2% of the total messages across the three firms in the study.

4. TACTICAL EXAMPLES OF SPONSORSHIPS BY AIRLINES

With the growth of the international airline industry, more and more firms have striven to market across the globe the active promotion of sponsorship activities, especially across country borders. While local or domestic related sponsorships are still common, catering to the events and demographics of an airlines home market, international and cross border sponsorships are more common. As satellite and digital communications have grown with the world of digital tools and apps now offered by sports networks such as ESPN and NBC Sports, more sports are global in their reach. While the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup are clearly global sporting events, now some leagues and series across sports are challenging for global dominance.

In the past some airline consultants suggested that airlines not become involved in dangerous sports like racing (Shaw, 2011, page 296). However, over the past 20 years F1 has become known as the world's most watched racing series and most successful in garnering sponsorship dollars, surpassing FIFA (Sylt, 2015). Airlines are now the major sponsor of F1 Grand Prix races such as the Singapore Airlines Singapore Grand Prix (<http://www.singaporegp.sg>), the F1 Etihad Airways Abu Dhabi Grand Prix and the F1 Gulf Air Bahrain Grand Prix (<https://www.formula1.com/en/championship/races/2017.html>). If not named as a title sponsor, airline involvement in F1 can still be seen by the numerous advertisements around the track by being a "Global Partner of F1" as Emirates is currently signed to be through 2018 (Paul, 2013).

Another major sport airlines have especially become active in sponsoring is football clubs. Most noticeably is the English Premier League, the most watched soccer league globally (Total Sportek, 2017). Airlines have become the major sponsor on the soccer kit (the uniform shirt) as Emirates has with Arsenal and Etihad with Manchester City. Overall, for the EU soccer leagues, UAE firms are noted for spending the most in 2015/2016 at \$183 million as Emirates has deals additionally with Real Madrid and Paris Saint-Germain (Badenhausen, 2016). While not part of the Emirates spending, Qatar Airlines cannot be forgotten in the world of global soccer sponsorship. Qatar renewed their shirt deal sponsorship with Barcelona for 2016/2017

for 33.5 million EU (Marsden, 2016). In the future, while no longer being the shirt sponsor, Barcelona and Qatar just signed a new sponsor deal for 50 million Euros per year to be the official club carrier and receive other marketing rights (Nicholson, 2017a). Additionally, Qatar has just signed to become the world sponsor of FIFA, replacing Emirates going forward immediately through 2022 when the World Cup will be held in Doha, Qatar (Nicholson, 2017b). As noted with Qatar’s changing agreement with Barcelona, if not on the shirt, the other way airlines are becoming involved with teams is by becoming an official partner of the team. In the English Premier League sponsorship arrangements exists between Delta with Chelsea, Malaysia Airlines with Liverpool, South African Airlines with Sunderland and Aeroflot with Manchester United. In comments by Emirates founding CEO, Sir Maurice Flanagan, the airline’s investment in sponsorships, especially football is made clear. “Advertising never produces the same exposure for the money as the rights sponsorship, especially on TV,” stated Sir Maurice (Halligan, 2015). Sir Maurice believes that the rights deal struck between Emirates and the Arsenal Football Club, which includes not just the shirt, but naming rights for the club’s stadium, was the best deal the airline made as Emirates began its sponsorship strategy (Halligan, 2015). Examining the web sites of the world’s leading airlines it is easy to see the role sponsorship has in the communication and marketing tactics of the airline. Many of the leading global carriers have dedicated sponsorship pages across the sport and other cultural activities the airline is engaged in. For this exploratory review an examination of the Top 50 airlines as presented in the “World Airline Rankings - 2016” published by Flight Airline Business (2016; page 11) was conducted in the spring of 2017. Of the Top 50 airlines, sixteen of the airlines (32%) have dedicated web pages on the airline’s web site to present the sports sponsorships involved with at this time.

Table 3: Airlines with sports dedicated sponsorship pages

Emirates Airline	Southwest Airlines
Lufthansa	Air France
Ryanair	Turkish Airlines
Etihad Airways	Qantas
Aeroflot	Korean Air
JetBlue Airways	Malaysia Airlines
China Airlines	Swiss
Avianca	EVA Air

In terms of the individual sport, the three sports most sponsored by the airlines are football (soccer) by 16 airlines; basketball by 14 airlines; and golf by 13 airlines. Besides the individual

sports, 16 airlines either on the web sites sponsorship page or in the airlines press releases presented sponsorship involvement in the Olympic movement, often by being the countries' official airline for the national Olympic team. While not the focus of this review, it is of note that in the area of corporate social responsibility, focusing on either charitable and / or environmental - sustainability issues, 30 of the 50 airlines (60%) had dedicated pages on these areas on the airline's web site. Therefore, while spending is heavily focused towards sports sponsorship activities found based on the existent data, due to the regulatory and social climate, airlines now focus more attention on the web site on the air carriers corporate and sustainability efforts.

One public source does provide an overview of the leading US airlines and the sponsorship activities engaged in by the carriers. Examining US airlines data from 2015 (IEG, 2016b), Table Four shows the amount spent by US airlines across the major categories and with whom the largest deals are.

Table 4: The five biggest spenders among the U.S. Airlines for Sponsorships in 2015

Spending Categories

	Est Total Millions	Sports	Arts	Entertainment	Cause	Festivals	Other
United	\$35-\$40	45%	24%	18%	8%	4%	1%
Delta	\$25-\$30	58%	15%	4%	17%	6%	
American	\$20-\$25	26%	30%	4%	26%	12%	1%
Southwest	\$10-\$15	57%	3%	0	29%	11%	
JetBlue	\$5-\$10	60%	3%	0	30%	7%	

Source: <http://www.sponsorship.com/iegsr/2016/07/25/Sponsor-Profiles--The-Five-Biggest-Spenders-In-The.aspx>

Top Sponsorship Deals in 2015 for U.S.Airlines

United: Chicago Bears, PGA Tour, San Francisco 49ers, United Center - Chicago, U.S. Olympic Committee

Delta: Los Angeles Lakers, Madison Square Garden, New York Mets, New York Yankees

American: AA Arena - Miami, AA Arena - Dallas, Dallas Cowboys, Los Angeles Clippers, Race for the Cure

Southwest: Denver Nuggets, Phoenix Suns, Texas Rangers

JetBlue: Boston Red Sox, Boston Bruins, New England Patriots, University of Southern California

The table clearly shows the commitment to sports sponsorships among the US airlines. Most of the top deals are clearly with teams that either are in an airline hub city or focused on key cities for the airline network and growth. Examining the web sites of the US airlines above, it is of note that only Southwest and JetBlue clearly identify sponsorship partners on their web

sites on a dedicated page, while Delta promotes the airline's sponsorships in the recently revised Delta NewsHub (<https://news.delta.com>).

5. SPONSORSHIP ACTIVATION AND LEVERAGE

Besides the spending for the rights, for the sponsorship to be effective the firm must engage in activation and leveraging of the sponsorship. Leveraging encompasses all sponsorship marketing communication while activation relates to those activities and messages for audiences to interact and become involved with the sponsor (Weeks, Cornwell, Drennan, 2008). It is through the various forms of leverage and activation that many of the goals for sponsorship, such as creating positive perceptions, brand image building, and for some low involvement purchases increasing the likelihood of purchase, are accomplished (Carrillat and d'Astous, 2013; Herrmann, et. al.; 2016). Table Five presents the many ways a sponsorship can be leveraged across promotional and distribution networks (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013). The table demonstrates that depending upon the marketing strategy and tactics to be utilized, sponsorships can be utilized to do outreach in variety of means, both traditional broadcast and person to person or across social networks.

While rates for spending beyond the rights acquired may vary by the activity selected, these spending categories typically include traditional media uses such as advertising and public relations with a focus on the need to track dollars and show a marketing return. Activation activities such as having on-site hospitality, web sites and social media utilization are more often being engaged. As the range for leverage spending can be anywhere up to 7 times right fees (O'Reilly and Horning, 2013), the spending must be able to demonstrate its value.

As has occurred in much of the marketing field, the addition of social media networks and digital communication tools has influenced the tactical applications of sponsorship. Research into sponsorship leverage has demonstrated the benefits of traditional promotional and communication tools, such as advertising, for meeting firm goals and engaging the audience (Carrillat and d'Astous, 2013). The additional aspect that the sponsorship and leveraged activities possess today is the ability to measure the responses and track data from the social media networks utilized (Rashid, et. al., 2017). Concepts such as big data and data analytics of traveler's behavior (Kahn, 2016) have become topics of concern. Sponsorships and the associated additional promotion and media tactics that can be leveraged can build data and relay to the airline aspects such as trip purpose, other transport modes utilized and other socio-cultural and demographic data.

Table 5: Sponsorship Activation Methods

Advertising (TV, Radio, Magazine, Newspaper, Brochures, Outdoor)	Digital / Social / Mobile Media
Public relations / Media Coverage	On-Line campaigns (Websites, Blogs)
Signage / Logo Placement / Banners / PA Announcements / Logo on Scoreboard or Uniforms	On-Site Hospitality / Events / Client Entertainment / VIP Passes
In-Store Displays / Point of Sale Promotions / Coupons	Off Site Events
Samples / Product-Event Integration / Product Demonstrations / Event-Based Distribution	Sponsorship Tie-In Promotions
On-Pack Signage / Company Vehicle Signage Licensing / Merchandising	Direct Marketing / Business to Business Communications
Giveaways / Contests / Sweepstakes / Games / Memorabilia / Premiums	Internal Marketing / Employee Programs
Player Sponsorships / Meet and Greets / Product Use	New Product / Services
On-Site Personnel / research / Consumer Interaction	Cause Related Tie-ins

Source: O'Reilly, N and Horning, D. (2013; page 427)

Some forms of social media are easier to track than others. Micro blogs, such as Twitter, are perhaps the easiest to track as hashtags can be created that are tied to events and locations. Studies have already appeared tracking twitter use during sporting events (Jensen, Limbu and Spong, 2015) and using both visual analytics and the use of hashtags found the ratio of hashtags between the teams and sponsors involved in the event. Of note this was only the third research article found where an airline, Qatar Airways in this article, was identified as a sponsoring firm for Barcelona.

Social networks that utilize photographs (e.g., Instagram) or selfies (e.g., Snapchat, WeChat) and now live streaming (Facebook, Periscope) video taken by travelers may note the location and the purpose of the trip. Bowles (2016) found when examining the Instagram posts by member schools of the Southeastern Conference in the NCAA in the U.S. that 174 of the 1,599 images or videos posted (15%) clearly had a promotional focus including both sales promotion and sponsorship content. As other "theme" categories in the study including Fans and Landmark (stadiums and arenas), other common sponsorship content is likely present and can be analyzed. Monitoring systems now allows firms to scan the backgrounds details to see the nature of the event and the demographics of the participants at the event (MacMillan and Dwoskin, 2014). Whereas in the past some sponsorships may have been difficult to measure

the associated value (Shaw, 2004), the social network and analytical systems today allow specific measurements to be determined. With the ability to leverage the airlines web site and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WeChat, airlines are well positioned to offer contests and sweepstakes, travel prizes and create hashtags to engage with targeted customers on the social media platforms. With the data that may come from a sponsorship, targeted messages can be sent to find the right customer that may react positively to an offer from the airline (Yardley, 2016).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As the amount of public data on the spending by airlines is limited and not all sponsorship announcements include the total amount to be spent, including activation and leveraging activities, the exact amount being spent is difficult to determine. While internal budgets within the airline should be able to report the exact amount that leveraging and activation activities are costing, only general rules of thumb appear in much of the marketing literature. Whether such rules of thumb as guidance are correct for the strategic and marketing goals undertaken with the sponsorship are always debatable.

Another concern is the amount of 'fit' or congruence between airlines and the sponsored events. As a majority of sponsorship dollars are going to sporting events, there is research suggesting that transportation services and sports are not seen as very related or providing a good fit for the sponsorship (Gupta and Yousaf, 2015). To overcome the incongruence that may exist, firms may have to spend more and engage in multiple leveraging activities targeted towards the consumers (fans) of the participating teams in the event to build a positive attitude towards the sponsorship and the brand (Mazodier and Quester, 2014). Therefore, for airline sponsorships to meet the goals of the firm, additional spending beyond the rules of thumb that appears in much of the marketing literature may need to be engaged in to overcome the incongruence that may exist between the event and the sponsorship.

With the increase in the use of social media and influencers in sponsorship activities, research on the success and failures of sponsorship leveraging and activation needs to continue. Reports on social media usage show the rapid acceptance of the technologies and digital platforms among younger age groups. This only means more focus on how to engage with potential new fliers through the interaction of sponsorship, sales promotion and marketing communications is needed. Marketers like the use of social media as the networks allow firms to get personal data as never before and allows the ability to provide metrics that in the past were unavailable. Many

social media platforms have dedicated pages, forums, or channels that allow targeting of the consumers engaged in the sponsored activity or event that can aid leveraging opportunities that can assist in overcoming any fit issues. The number of likes, friends, followers and reactions to past messages and posts can be found. However, caution must be taken to make sure these metrics are legitimate. With the spread of bots, fake accounts and the use of hashtags that can be the target for spammer and bots (Valdes, 2018), the ability to derive meaningful metrics must be undertaken. More data and personalization are becoming possible, but whether the sponsorship is really engaged with a person, not a bot or fake account is now a concern.

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