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Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences
Doctoral School of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising

Extended abstract of the PhD thesis

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Strategic communication in sport

**Communication, branding and public relations for Romanian handball, basketball
and volleyball teams**

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1. Introduction

The situation of Romanian sport is a subject of debate. Romanian society seems divided between those who promote performance potential and critics of the current system. However, this duality can be seen as a key argument to get more clarity on how we approach this topic.

Managing sport holistically is a complex endeavour involving knowledge of management, logistics, public relations (PR), finance, sponsorship, marketing and more (Haba, 2020). This paper aims to address the topic of strategic communication in Romanian sport and to contribute to a scientific approach to the subject.

Among the problems identified in the field of sports communication are the need for more professionals in sports institutions, the lack of public interest in sports participation and related topics, and the lack of corporate appetite to invest in sports (Adrenallina Media, 2016; Ilioni, 2019). There is also a significant disparity in popularity between football and other sports such as handball, basketball and volleyball (IRES, 2014; Diaconu, 2023).

This work contributes to the professionalisation of communication specialists. The documentation of scientific and statistical material on the subject can lead, in the long term, to the creation of new jobs in public relations and sports communication. This field has great potential for development in Romania, especially with the new government proposals focusing on best practices in strategic sports communication (MTS, 2022a).

In the same context, the paper argues that it is important to follow successful models from abroad, but adapt them to the local context, taking into account the advantages and limitations imposed by the geopolitical, socio-economic and historical context (Constantinescu & Roşca, 2011; Ilioni, 2019).

2. Innovative character and applicability of the work

This work contributes to the expansion of the sports communication literature in Romania, as it comprehensively covers all three areas of strategic communication and includes under its umbrella communication policies, brand identity and public relations (PR), which until now have always been treated separately in the literature.

The applicability of the paper is demonstrated by the conclusions which directly address communication experts in sports teams. In addition, financial, political and social factors are considered in the writing of this thesis and are included in the first part of the thesis.

Operational, journalistic and management perspectives are presented in relation to these in the practical part of the thesis.

The chosen aim is to provide practical solutions for sports organisations in terms of strategic communication. The paper identifies and exemplifies five concrete tactics to provide a framework for improving strategic communication for local sports teams in Romania.

The main beneficiaries of this work are local sports clubs, who will have access to better trained specialists and communication experts who can inform and improve their field. Companies interested in understanding the benefits of sports sponsorship and sports brand association can also benefit from the results of this analysis.

In view of the above situation, a study on strategic communication of sports teams is justified. In Romania, there is currently no clear framework for sports teams to ensure a communication strategy that brings them material and image benefits. Experts working in this field confirm that, at present, teams must either follow Western models or experiment to choose a communication path. This is not done in a consistent way in Romania.

3. Theoretical foundations

The chapters comprising the scientific and theoretical foundations of the paper initially define the fundamental concept of strategic communication in sport, the magic triangle of sport communication (Beck, 2008), and the strategic communication model (Pedersen, Miloch & Laucella, 2007). The first chapter explains the relevance of the topic and the context of the research, while the second chapter delves into the concept of strategic communication in sport.

Next, the three components of strategic communication are presented, together with the main related concepts: The particularities of communication policies (McCarthy, 1960; Freyer, 2004; Beech & Chadwick, 2006; Shabani, Gharekhani & Naderi, 2018) and sponsorship (Kloss, 2012; Cutler, 2019; Gough, 2022), public relations (PR) along with the role of a public relations (PR) expert (Halemba, Juchimiuk & Kucharski, 2013; Şerbănică & Constantinescu, 2016; Kotler, Keller & Opresnik, 2017), as well as media aspects (Funk, 2008; Ritchie, Shipway & Chien, 2010; Khodadadi, Pourranjbar, Bejani & Sarlab, 2015), cyclical stages of sport brand identity development (HKTDK, 2005; Florea, Barbu & Barbu, 2018; EH Branding Consultants, 2020) and key branding issues. Chapter three examines the

different dimensions of strategic communication, including communication policies, public relations (PR) and brand identity in the sports industry.

Chapter four focuses on developing communication strategies for sports teams at the organisational level, including techniques and objectives. Chapter five provides specific examples and techniques for strategic communication within sports teams in Romania, such as developing a recognisable brand identity, associating with positive attributes and promoting athletes and sponsors. Chapter six summarises these scientific and theoretical foundations of the work.

Girginov and Collins (2004) are of the opinion that interest in the Eastern European region has been manifested over several centuries, which contributed to the founding of Eastern European states and the affirmation of their national identities. However, research on sport in this context is limited, which has led to the perpetuation of a dichotomy between East and West. However, Parks and Zwicker (2020) suggest that countries such as Romania have played an active role in shaping sport, as the political regime and economic influences have pushed the country towards new Western European trends and standards (Suciu, Balota & Oana, 2002; Molnar & Doczi, 2020).

Hoberman (2017) and Smolianov (2020) point out that, despite these changes, the fundamental philosophical and organisational values of previous regimes remain present in Eastern European sport today. Eastern Europe has preoccupied generations of scholars over the centuries, contributing to the founding of Eastern European states and the affirmation of their national identities (Girginov & Collins, 2004).

In order to understand the strategic communication of sports teams in Romania, it is necessary to carry out a study to analyse this topic. This requires an understanding of how teams can promote and communicate taking into account political, economic, social and technological factors. It looks at how sports teams in Romania can use strategic communication to improve their image and obtain image and material benefits through sponsorship.

At the moment, there is no clear framework providing a way forward for sports teams. Experts in the field agree that teams currently have to experiment to choose a way forward or follow Western models.

Another essential element is to verify and classify the factors in Romanian sport that influence strategic communication, which can be adapted to the Romanian geographic specificity and other political, economic, social and technological factors. It is also important

to understand that it is not possible to copy exactly a model that does not fit the specificity of Romanian sport.

The lack of a comprehensive and harmonised strategy between internal and external communication is another weakness identified. It can be seen that most communication managers take inspiration from the best performing teams, even if they are in football, ignoring the fact that the high budgets in football are also reflected in marketing and communication spending and that the specifics of one sport cannot be transferred to others. Kloss (2012) provides an insight into how sport can be used as a catalyst for positive image transfer as it is associated with positive attributes. This has led to interest from organisations and companies around the world to promote themselves through sports teams (Cornwell, 2008), and Wilson (2020) and Haba (2022a) outline the fundamentals of a sports strategy, which include clear goals and identification of intrinsic values.

The purpose of strategic communication in sport is to represent these attributes, such as success, achievement, dynamism, vitality or youth (Kloss, 2012). Organisations and companies use strategic communication in sport to position themselves in the public eye and build image capital. In this respect, Beck (2001, 2008) presented a model of strategic communication, the *magic triangle* of sport, which describes the interdependence between the three parts of strategic communication in sport: sport itself, the business environment and the media.

The three-dimensional model of communication can be enhanced by adding the complementary theories offered by Mullin, Hardy & Sutton (2007) and Pedersen, Miloch and Laucella (2016). This extension of the model included audiences as a separate entity, leading to the idea that its application in practice can only be achieved by involving fans and consumers of sports content. This improved model can be used to plan communication processes and techniques in a sports organisation and provide an organised approach to the phenomenon of strategic communication in sport. Pedersen, Miloch and Laucella (2016) provide a conceptual analysis and systematically describe the relationships between key variables in the model, such as applied theories, context and communication itself.

As Hambrick (2017) points out, public relations (PR), marketing and branding are important components of sports communication. According to Freyer (2004), Mullin, Hardy and Sutton (2007) and Davis and Hilbert (2013), sports product marketing can be defined as the value-added activities undertaken by organisations that include sports entities, with the aim of increasing their market presence, satisfying the needs and desires of sports consumers and stimulating interest in the sports organisation. McCarthy's (1960) model, later

successfully used by Mihai (2013), sets out the defining elements of communication policies. Beech and Chadwick (2006) add to the extension of this model, and Shabani, Gharekhani and Naderi (2018) add an additional element to Freyer's (2004) model: partnership policy.

Today, sports sponsorship has become one of the most important sources of revenue for the industry, as evidenced by growing industry figures (Nielsen, 2022). Abratt et al. (1987) define sponsorship as an agreement between parties whereby the sponsor provides support to the beneficiary in order to attract benefits derived from activities based on its promotional strategy. Kloss (2012) explains that the sports sponsorship decision-making process has several dimensions, among which the type of sport is leading. Football, tennis, motor sports and handball are at the top of sponsors' preferences.

The sponsorship decision-making process in sport is based on two key issues: technology and the fact that sponsors in sport most often come from the ranks of companies and product distributors (Deloitte, 2019). Social platforms and digitisation have had a significant impact on this field, providing new opportunities for brand exposure (Kafka & Molla, 2017; Nielsen, 2022). However, there are also risks associated with this change (Roy & Cornwell, 1999; Johan Cruyff Institute, 2017).

A comparison of the definitions provided by Hopwood, Skinner and Kitchin (2010), Stoldt, Dittmore and Branvold (2012) and L'Etang (2012) shows that public relations (PR) in sport can be treated as an organisational function in the management of sports institutions that, through communication, builds, manages and maintains the organisation's relationships with key audience segments to enhance and sustain a positive image. In addition, the public relations (PR) expert plays a diverse role within a sport organization, including helping to create and maintain a positive organizational image, improve public relations (PR), and promote the organization's activities and products through the roles of referrer, facilitator, mediator, and technician (Halemba, Juchimiuk, & Kucharski, 2013; Ruyhley, Pratt, & Carpenter, 2016).

Another interesting aspect related to the image of sport is that people show a strong interest in sport, but it seems to be stronger for some sports and less strong for others (Gantz et al., 2006). Șerbănică and Constantinescu (2016) state that the target groups of public relations (PR) for a sport organisation are internet users, sport consumers and fans, sponsors, commercial organisations, state institutions, leagues and federations, the local community and the media. Funk (2008) names the factors that determine the attraction to a particular sport as personal, psychological and environmental factors that interact to generate interest

and sympathy. Madrigal (2006) argues that preference for sporting events is driven by self-interest and sympathy. Bee and Havitz (2010) characterized attraction, as described in the sport context, as a person's interest in a particular sport. Sedky, Kortam and AbouAish (2020) examined how sports marketing and communication activities can influence the level of consumption of sporting events and demonstrated that public interest and preference for a particular sport can be increased through advertising.

According to a 2014 IRES survey, the least popular sports in Romania are skiing, boxing, Formula 1, table tennis, rugby and snooker. Also, 7% of respondents said they did not have a preferred sport, and the formation of sport preferences is influenced by age, education and gender (Martin, 1996; Shank & Lyberger, 2015). In addition, most respondents who did not have a preferred sport were women (11.2%), young people aged between 18 and 35 (10.8%) and with primary education (15.4%). These data also indicate that the most popular sports in Romania are those in which young athletes participate and matches are played in teams (Martin, 1996; Shank & Lyberger, 2015). Thus, gymnastics, skating and tennis are the preferred individual sports in Romania. Team sports such as football, volleyball, handball and basketball are also popular among Romanians (IRES, 2014; Diaconu, 2023). They encourage participation of young athletes, especially in the case of football (Shank & Lyberger, 2015).

The media plays an important role in presenting themes, successes and issues in sport (Halemba, Juchimiuk & Kucharski, 2013). Through it, people have access to information and opinions about sport, athletes, teams and events. The media provides a platform for discussion and debate on various related topics (Novitaria, 2017). This makes managing media relations one of the main tasks of the public relations (PR) expert in a sports team. Media coverage can contribute to a team's image capital and provide the framework for building its reputation (Abiodun, 2011). It can also help engage and build relationships with fans, as well as provide valuable feedback on team performance and areas for improvement (Novitaria, 2017).

To maximize the benefits of media communication, sports communication professionals must ensure that their team is portrayed in a positive light (Kloss, 2012). This does not mean avoiding negative situations but highlighting the positive aspects of any situation. They also need to create interesting and engaging content for fans (Pfahl et al., 2012). On top of that, sports communication professionals should build relationships with members of the media. Finally, sports communication professionals should use the media as an opportunity to get feedback on their team's performance (Pfahl et al., 2012).

Kunkel and Biscaia (2020) argue that brand is one of the most valuable assets of a sports organisation. Its positioning is the element that binds all of a team's strategic efforts and is the initial and final benchmark of any organization's successful initiatives (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kloss, 2012). Crawford and DiBenedetto (2008) advance the idea that positioning is an attempt to create, change or promote a particular image in the minds of consumers. Dębski (2009) underlines the same idea, stating that the sports brand positions itself based on the unifying aspects of its identity. The result of communicating this positioning is called brand image (Crawford & DiBenedetto, 2008; Kloss, 2012).

In order to determine what factors influence how the sports organization presents itself to the public, elements such as economic factors, social environment, technology, trends and competition must be considered (Parkhouse, Turner & Miloch, 2012). Relevant sport and consumer market attributes must also be considered (Beck, 2008; Shank & Lyberger 2015;

In terms of brand identity and brand image, their life graph can be analysed using the model introduced by Vernon (1966) and later modernised by HKTDK (2005) and EH Branding Consultants (2020). It is based on the dimensions or attributes of sport schematised by Martin (1996), which define the identity of a sport, such as dynamics, technique, type, category, age and gender of participants. The updated model comprises seven phases: construction, introduction, growth, maturity, decline, revitalisation and post-revitalisation. These phases are important for understanding how perceptions of brand identity and image may behave over time, and communication goals and techniques are specific to each phase (Shank & Lyberger, 2015; Aaker, 1991; Sirgy, 1982).

Strategic communication plays an important role in gaining the attention, admiration, affinity and devotion of their audiences (Hallahan et al., 2007). It provides an integrated perspective on how organizations can influence their target audiences (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). These audiences can include fans or customers, employees, investors and sponsors, government representatives, interest group leaders, and the general public. Communication strategy refers to the goals that an organization wants to achieve through its communication (Smith 2009), and strategy techniques refer to actions that contribute to achieving the long-term goal (Salgado, 2021). In sports communication, techniques need to be tailored to the specifics of the field, such as people's passion for teams, competitions and athletes.

Santiago (2020) identified two types of communication tools, traditional and digital, and proposed seven general objectives for sports organisations: improving the organisation's

credibility, attracting quality players and coaches to the club's main teams, attracting young talent to the organisation's youth teams, better engagement with fans and affiliates, creating image capital to become a reference point in the sports field, creating higher spectator attendance at matches or sports events, and leveraging competitive advantages.

With this in mind, communication strategy is key to building and maintaining a strong brand identity. This involves analysing the brand, its life graph, segmenting consumers, building the elements of the brand identity and corroborating the message with this identity (Santiago, 2020; HKTDK, 2005; Florea, Barbu & Barbu, 2018; EH Branding Consultants, 2020). Strategic communication planning also includes defining communication and PR roles (Halemba, Juchimiuk & Kucharski, 2013; Ruihley, Pratt & Carpenter 2016) communication objectives (Beck 2008), communication channels and tools (Santiago 2022) and success factors (Taylor 2017). Strategy implementation is achieved through specific techniques and constant evaluation of the message and techniques (Halemba, Juchimiuk & Kucharski, 2013; Ruihley, Pratt & Carpenter 2016). The evaluation of the sport organisation's image is achieved by collecting feedback from consumers and comparing the expected outcome with the achieved one (Madriral, 2006).

In the ever-changing world of sport, Romanian teams need to adapt to keep up with the demands of society. Strategic communication plays a key role in ensuring a positive image and the resulting competitive advantage (Adrenallina Media, 2016). Although the literature delineates communist and post-communist communication (Rusu, 2016), the discussion now revolves around the importance of communication experts in sport (Adrenallina Media, 2016). To promote this field and inspire the population to become more active, five concrete techniques were presented and exemplified through Romanian basketball, handball and volleyball teams.

Developing a recognizable brand identity is the first essential technique for a sports entity to achieve the desired commercial and visibility impact (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006; Kloss, 2012). Aaker & Joachimstahler (2000) argue that presenting a brand image to the public is a commitment that the organization and that influences how the brand value will create equity and achieve desired image outcomes. A relevant example of building a recognizable brand identity in Romania is the rebuilding of the brand identity (rebranding) for the Romanian Handball Federation (FRH) and the Women's and Men's Handball Leagues in 2016-2017.

In terms of the technique of associating with positive attributes, an example of a sports brand that has gained popularity in recent years is the Cheetahs youth basketball club.

The project initiated in 2018 organizes countless events to grow and promote basketball among children (Haba, 2022b). The Cheetahs claim that they are the first club established in Romania to individualize youth basketball and that all basketball players have the right to progress (Cheetahs, 2022). The organization's identity is governed by positive attributes such as enthusiasm, love for sport and basketball, improvement of young athletes and performance (Haba, 2022a).

Another example is SCM Craiova. The questionnaire administered by Barbu et al. (2019) shows that the public associates the team with a young, high-performing team and the pride of the city. The team's reputation and fan support are its most important assets, and notoriety is based on the sponsors with whom the team associates (Barbu et al., 2019).

The third technique is the digitisation of sport. From wearable devices and social platforms to real-time content and data analytics, we use methods of communication that are directly related to this field on a daily basis. These new developments also serve sport, as technology has completely changed the way sport is practiced, studied and developed today (Weston, 2018).

From monitored physical tests to training regimes, athletes can improve their results with apps. From the fans' point of view, new digital tools help them see real-time match results, athletes' stats, behind-the-scenes content and provide feedback on social platforms. Moreover, they are able to connect with sports beyond their devices and experience the game organically (Xiao et al., 2017).

Xiao et al. (2017) name the components of sport industry digitization, which include organizational component, technological component, symbolic component and educational component. Ráthonyi et al. (2018) provide an example of FC Barcelona's mobile app, which provides up-to-date team news, match results, team statistics, match schedule and more for fans in one place. This sports app also includes a mobile shop and ticketing system.

In Romania, few teams seem to adopt digital means, such as apps or data analytics. Currently, Romanian teams are trying to adapt to the changing environment and offer their audiences at least a presence on websites and social media, as recognised in the National Strategy for Sport in Romania (MTS, 2022b).

An example of a sport that is actively working on its online presence is volleyball. The Romanian Volleyball Federation launched a new website in 2021, which includes new features that were missing from the old platform. From up-to-date articles and news to comprehensive information, Romanian volleyball has a more welcoming interface for the

public (FRV, 2021). It is also present on social media, where it posts information, images and audiovisual content on its Facebook and Instagram pages.

The fourth tactic for sports organisations is to promote an iconic athlete. Athletes need more than just talent to play professionally, as promoting and building personal reputation can combat many of the difficulties on the road to success (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Barbu & Popescu, 2018). Currently, most content and advertising is geared towards online personalities (influencers) (Cornwell, 2018), and athletes are among the most influential personalities in this medium (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

A Nielsen Company study (2022) shows that more than a quarter of sports fans follow teams' social media just to find out about them. Hoegel, Schmidt and Torgler (2014) defined an iconic athlete as a player who excels and has outstanding popularity. Turcu et al. (2020) infer that promoting an iconic athlete such as Cristina Neagu can become a personal brand that the athlete can put to the service of the team she plays for and the sport at the national level.

The fifth technique for sports organisations is sponsor promotion. Abratt, Clayton and Pitt (1987) put forward the idea that most sponsors want to be promoted through all types of media. Smolianov and Aiyeku (2009) showed that sponsors' objectives are based on criteria such as exposure levels, audience response and effects on audience behaviour. Vale, Serra and Carvahlo-Viera (2009) described how sports teams' communication departments can translate these preferences into sponsorship packages. These packages include various promotional techniques, such as advertising materials with sponsors' names, the presence of sponsors' names in press releases issued by the team, etc. Turcu et al. (2020) showed how the Romanian Handball Federation attracted strong sponsors through its results at the World Championship. An example of a Romanian team attracting significant sponsorship for its development is U-BT Cluj-Napoca, with an annual budget of three million euros and funding provided by the Cluj-Napoca City Hall of 300 000 euros (Nazare, 2022; Popa, 2022).

Given the scientific and theoretical background presented above, as well as the five techniques identified in the literature and exemplified in the context of the three team sports of basketball, volleyball and handball, comparing them with aspects of practice is the next necessary step. In the next chapter, the methodology of the study is described in order to link academic and empirical considerations.

4. The scientific approach

The second part of the paper presents the methodology of the study, the research objectives and questions, and the sampling procedure for the analysis. The research methods applied are content analysis and semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of sports communication. Chapter seven details the research methodology, qualitative and quantitative research, data categories.

The complexity of strategic communication in sport and the many aspects that need to be taken into account to describe Romanian sport led to the empirical part of this paper, which includes research on team sports in basketball, volleyball and handball. They aim to provide local sports clubs with arguments to accelerate the process of improving strategic communication, including access to better trained communication specialists, finding companies interested in offering sports sponsorships and for building professional relationships with journalists, media trusts and content creators.

The objectives of the research include evaluating the five strategic communication techniques used by sports teams in the selected sports, identifying the position of each team on the life chart of sports brands, analyzing their social media communication, comparing the results with the opinions of sports communication specialists and formulating arguments for the implementation of strategic sports communication in Romania.

The research questions aim to investigate how strategic communication is carried out in Romanian handball, basketball and volleyball sports teams, where they are positioned on the life chart of sports brands, how they communicate in social media, how communication is perceived by specialists and what are the main arguments for implementing strategic sports communication in these sports.

The sampling of the research is based on several criteria. In this case, team sports were selected and only handball, volleyball and basketball, which are the three most popular team sports in Romania after the elimination of football, were considered. The distinction between men's and women's teams is made only formally, as both categories are included.

The exclusion of football is due to the disproportionate media coverage and exposure it receives in Romania compared to other sports (Diaconu, 2023). In addition, both women's and men's teams are not equally represented in the media and are not equally in the public eye, which contributes to the visibility problems of women's football teams compared to men's teams. Furthermore, when it comes to the literature on strategic communication in

sport, especially in Romania, there is a significant disparity in the number of scientific studies dedicated to other team sports compared to men's football.

The selected teams are local teams with a track record of performance, meaning they have won the most first place medals in their respective leagues. This criterion ensures the relevance of the units of analysis and that the chosen teams have already demonstrated excellence in their respective sports.

The study focuses on nine teams for each sport: teams from the Flower League (Oltchim Râmnicu Vâlcea, Știința Bacău, Universitatea Timișoara and CSM București, Rapid București), teams from the Bulgarian League (Steaua București, Rapid București, Dinamo București, CSM Constanța and CS Minaur Baia Mare), teams from the National League for women's volleyball (Dinamo București, Rapid București, SCM Universitatea Craiova, Volei Alba Blaj, CSU Metal Galați) and men's volleyball (Dinamo București, Steaua București, Rapid București, CSM Constanța). Men's Basketball teams (Dinamo București, Steaua București, Asesoft Ploiești, U-BT Cluj-Napoca) and the top teams in the National Women's Basketball League (CS Universitatea Cluj-Napoca, CSM Târgoviște, FCC Baschet UAV Arad, CS Rapid București, BC Politehnica București).

The selection of these teams is based solely on their performance history and does not take into account any socio-demographic characteristics of their home cities.

In order to fulfil the purpose of this paper, the need for local sports clubs to have arguments to accelerate the process of improving strategic communication should be considered. This process involves access to better trained communication specialists, finding companies that understand and are interested in the benefits of sports sponsorship and sports brand association, and developing relationships with journalists, media trusts and content creators.

Based on these premises, four research objectives and research questions were formulated for this paper.

Research objectives of the work

The research objectives of the paper are:

- O1. Evaluate the five strategic communication techniques of selected sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball
- O2. Identify the location of each of the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams on the sports brand life chart

- O3. Analyze the social media communication (Facebook) of the sports teams in the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams
- O4. Compare the results of the analysis with the opinion of specialists in the field of sports communication in Romania
- O5. Formulate arguments in favour of implementing strategic sports communication techniques in Romania

Research questions

The research questions of the paper are:

- Î1. How does the strategic communication of Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball take place?
- Î2. At what stage of the sports brand life chart are selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams?
- Î3. How do Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball communicate on Social Media, on Facebook?
- Î4. How is the strategic communication of Romanian handball, basketball and volleyball sports teams perceived from the experts' perspective? What are the experts' main recommendations in this respect?
- Î5. What are the main arguments for strategic sports communication of Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball?

Given the lack of studies and empirical observations in Romania, it is difficult to draw hypotheses regarding these research questions. Given the lack of collected data to influence preliminary estimates, this paper aims to explore the field of sports communication in Romania and will be based exclusively on the five research questions presented.

Sampling procedure

In order to form the sample for this study and identify sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball, several selection dimensions were considered. The procedure was carried out systematically by non-random techniques, using quota sampling and unit representation of a population based on socio-demographic characteristics.

Sampling is done starting from the choice of the Romanian geographical space as the first selection criterion, given the specificity of the work and its purpose. A second relevant characteristic for this research is the type of sport, because due to the specificity of

the various types of sport, a distinction has to be made between individual and team sports. In the context of this paper, team sports are dealt with and individual sports are excluded.

In the field of sports communication in Romania, the fact that there is a huge difference in popularity between football and other sports such as handball, basketball and volleyball (IRES, 2014; Diaconu, 2023) is a situation that still needs attention.

However, interest in other sports is not lacking. An experiment by Sedky, Kortam and Abou Aish (2020) showed that there is likely to be interest in sports other than football. Of the 479 participants, 78.5% expressed a desire for attention to be directed towards sports less popular in the news. The reason for this is the fact that most news and broadcasts focus around football.

This could also be true for Romania, if the communication strategy is done properly and through the right channels. In Romania, the most popular team sports, according to IRES (2014) and Diaconu (2023) and excluding football, are handball, basketball and volleyball. The lack of a harmonised strategy in these sports is another identified vulnerability. It is observed that most communication managers take inspiration from teams that perform well, even if they are in football, ignoring the fact that high budgets in football are also reflected in marketing and communication spending and that the peculiarities of this field cannot be transferred to other sports (Girginov & Collins, 2004).

Therefore, effective ways of communication should be considered to increase visibility and attract positive attention by handball, basketball and volleyball teams. One option is, of course, social media, which is one of the most useful and cost-effective ways of communicating as a brand today. In this case, Facebook could be a good starting point for a communication manager of a sports team in Romania.

According to the IRES study (2014) and as written by Diaconu (2023), the classification of team sports according to Romanians' preferences results in the following sports being mentioned in the following order: football, handball, volleyball and basketball. Starting from the most popular sports in Romania, football was excluded and the following three sports were chosen: handball, volleyball and basketball.

Football was excluded on the basis that, compared to other sports, it receives a disproportionate level of media coverage and exposure in Romania (Diaconu, 2023). In addition, in terms of visibility, women's and men's teams are not represented in a balanced way in the media and public perception. Also, in the literature dealing with the subject of strategic communication in sport, at least in Romania, other team sports do not benefit from a significant number of scientific studies in comparison.

The distinction between female and male teams on the basis of socio-demographic characteristics is made only at the formal level, not at the content level. Both categories are considered for this paper. Another criterion is that the team should be locally present, so national teams were excluded.

The reason is that local teams are closer to the community in the city and the national teams' flagship athletes usually come from these teams. In addition, local teams do not receive the same communication budgets and attention as national teams, so the importance of public relations in this context is even more worth emphasising.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the teams' home localities, such as city size, number of local teams per county or year of establishment, are not taken into account. Instead, the criterion on the basis of which teams were chosen is performance.

This criterion ensures the relevance of the units of analysis and ensures that sports teams already meet a criterion of excellence that is a communication advantage in their strategy. For this study, the teams that have taken the most first place medals in the most important competition for the sport since its inception were chosen.

Specifically, for women's handball it is the teams that have won the most prizes in the National Women's Handball League or Flower League (established in 1958 with 63 editions), and for men's handball it is the National Men's Handball League or the Juniper League (established in 1958 with 63 editions).

In the case of the other sports, the women's volleyball A1 Division (founded in 1950 with 73 editions) and the men's volleyball A1 Division (founded in 1931 with 87 editions), respectively the women's basketball National League (founded in 1950 with 72 editions) and the men's basketball National League (founded in 1950 with 72 editions).

Research methods

The first research method used for this study is **content analysis**. In this study, the communication of sports teams is analysed in relation to strategic communication techniques. Content is sampled at team level (N=27) on official communication channels such as the team website and social media pages dedicated to team promotion. The content analysis is instrumented using a univariate analysis grid and is conceptual and descriptive research. The study uses generic units of analysis, such as information themes, positioning and place of content on official pages, as well as specific units, such as phrases, sentences and words.

The coding process was done inductively and the categories used for content analysis are partially predefined, with the possibility to add categories during the coding process. The study provides flexibility for potential new content categories that may have implications for answering the research questions. Some units of analysis are coded conceptually, while others are coded based on the frequency of occurrence of certain words or other criteria. The study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of communication strategies and techniques of sports teams.

The first phase involved descriptive coding and interpretation, while the second phase involved attributive coding and interpretation. The study incorporated quantitative and qualitative criteria for reliability and validity. The analysis was performed on narrow units of analysis, including morphemes and lexical families. The analysis grid was segmented into categories specific to communication policies, categories specific to public relations in sport and categories specific to sport brand identity. The study analysed each of the 27 teams for the period from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022 across their official online communication channels. The sports teams were selected based on the sampling process and include teams belonging to multidisciplinary clubs such as Dinamo, Rapid, Steaua, Steaua and University of Cluj. The study also operationalised communication strategies into categories specific to brand identity, categories specific to the technique of associating with positive attributes, digitalisation of communication, and categories specific to the promotion of an iconic athlete.

The second research method is the analysis of online communication. In order to understand the communication strategies of sports teams, the focus is on their online presence, especially on Facebook. The aim of the analysis is to objectively and systematically describe the communication content. The sampling was carried out by analysing a total of N=10313 public posts published in the period 01.01.2022 - 31.12.2022 on the official Facebook pages of 21 sports clubs out of a total of 27, where six of them are not present on the Facebook platform, or in the case of clubs such as Steaua or Rapid, their page on this platform is used by several teams from different sports belonging to the same club. The data was collected using the Google Looker Studio platform.

Variables relevant to strategic communication and promotion policies, including quantitative data such as date of post, type of post, number of user reactions and number of comments were analysed. Qualitative data such as the sport featured in the post and the subject of the post were also considered. The analysis was performed using predefined categories, with one exception made for the topic of the post, which was coded using

predefined flexible categories in two coding phases. The analysis used a combination of conceptual and quantitative approaches, with the units of analysis determined by the type of data examined.

Sampling for the semi-structured interviews was carried out using the segmented sampling technique, precisely to cover the complex context of sports communication in Romania. The experts interviewed included sports marketing and communication managers, strategic communication consultants for sports teams, sports journalists, high performance athletes with formal training in sports club management.

Interviews were conducted using a predefined interview guide with 13 questions, covering the dimensions of strategic communication in sport, the role of communication experts in sports teams, and future perspectives or proposals for improvement. The different perspectives brought by experts are important to cover all aspects of sports communication, such as brand identity, media relations and public image management of teams.

The interview guide has been designed to cover all the methods and activities that communication experts practice to promote sports teams, connect with the business environment and meet consumer needs. The questions in the interview guide are categorised based on the dimensions of sports communication, the role of communication experts within sports teams, and the results of the content analysis.

Chapter eight presents the results of the content analysis of the handball, volleyball and basketball teams, together with a comparative analysis. Chapter nine examines the communication strategies used by sports teams online, including a comparative analysis.

Chapter ten includes interviews with professionals in the sports and communications industry, including a sports manager, a strategic sports management consultant, a sports team communications manager, a financial and sports journalist, and a university professor of sports journalism. The interviews with the experts highlighted a number of problems and solutions related to sport in Romania and formed the basis for the arguments presented in the conclusion chapter.

Chapter eleven presents the conclusions of the research, its limitations and future perspectives.

In order to achieve the research objectives mentioned above and to answer the research questions, a multi-faceted analysis of the issues related to the teams chosen and presented in the chapter on sampling procedure is necessary.

For this study we will use methodological triangulation between analysis of strategic communication elements, quantitative analysis of online communication and semi-

structured interviews with experts. Given the complexity of the topic and the specific nature of the research theme, a mixed-methods research approach was used, where data is collected and interpreted using both quantitative and qualitative tools. Such an approach can provide a clearer and more complex view of the phenomenon or topic under study, being instrumental, explanatory, heterogeneous and multi-layered.

In the conceptual analysis (Berelson, 1952), the concept of strategic communication, operationalized by the existence of the five techniques of strategic communication, is chosen for examination, and the analysis involves quantifying and counting their presence in the targeted content. The main purpose is to examine the occurrence of the terms or their adjacencies in the data. In this context, terms can be both explicit and implicit. Explicit and implicit terms and their coding will be explained below.

Therefore, this part of the thesis analyzes empirically how the selected sports teams present themselves in terms of strategic communication, what are the public relations (PR), sponsors and media, what does the sports brand of local teams in Romania look like and how arguments for strategic sports communication in Romania are formulated.

In relation to the research objectives and questions, the five strategic communication techniques of the selected sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball will be identified using content analysis in order to answer the research question *How does the strategic communication of Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball take place?*

Following this content analysis, the next objective is to place each of the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams on the sports brand life graph, thus answering the research question *In which stage of the sports brand life graph are the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams?*

Also, the communication on social media, on the Facebook platform of the selected sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball will be analyzed quantitatively to answer the research question *How do Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball communicate on social media?*

In order for the conceptual analysis to be presented in a sustained manner and in accordance with the reality of the studied phenomena, the next objective is to compare the results of the analysis with the opinion of specialists in the field of sports communication in Romania and thus answer the research questions *How is the strategic communication of Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball perceived from the experts' perspective? What are the experts' main recommendations in this respect?*

The purpose of this approach is to formulate arguments in favour of the implementation of strategic sports communication techniques in Romania by answering the fourth research question, namely, *What are the main arguments for strategic sports communication of Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball?*

The empirical research starts with a content analysis of the strategic communication techniques resulting through the official communication channels of the sports teams, by checking the official website and social media channels they manage. This analysis is supported by a detailed foray into the dimension of strategic communication illustrated by the digitisation of communication as reflected in social media.

That's why the next step is to conduct an analysis of online communication on the Facebook platform. This aims to understand how sports teams implement their communication strategy, in order to see the concrete application of strategic communication elements in the online environment.

The research is continued by applying semi-structured interviews with experts in the field of strategic sports communication based on an interview guide. Their aim is to anchor the results of the two content analyses and to provide an overview of the situation of Romanian sport.

The first research method used for this study is content analysis. According to sociologists, content analysis is a research technique that aims to objectively, systematically and quantitatively describe the revealed content of communication. Therefore, it is an objective method of describing and analysing the content of any communication artefacts (Berelson, 1952).

From an analysis of the building blocks of the team's communication strategy to that of concrete techniques, an overview is needed to determine the real state of the team's strategic communication.

As Brosius, Haas and Koschel (2012) suggest, through content analysis we can identify intentions, underlying elements and communication trends of an individual, group or institution. In the case of this paper, these aspects are dealt with in relation to sports teams that are considered as individual organisations or entities.

The sampling of the units for the content analysis was done at team level (N=27), on their official communication channels: Website and Social Media, on the pages and posts dedicated to promoting the team such as *Description, About the Team, Club History*, etc. Also, a special attention was paid to the pages or sections where the brand elements mentioned in the previous chapters are found, i.e. *Team Mission and Vision*.

The instrumentation of content analysis was conducted at the level of a unitized analysis grid, and the level of conceptual analysis (Berelson, 1952) for this study is conducted at the multi-faceted level, from thematic content to semantic entities such as words. This is due to the idea promoted by Elo et al. (2014) that any unit of analysis that is too loosely defined or too general will be difficult to manage and may affect the validity and reliability of the study. Too narrow a unit of significance can, however, lead to fragmentation.

The identification of the most appropriate unit of analysis considered for this study must be sufficiently generic to be considered a representative whole, but at the same time sufficiently narrow to be a relevant unit of significance. Graneheim and Ludman (2004) argue that it is important to fully describe the unit of significance when reporting the analysis process so that readers can assess reliability. In this sense, the levels of analysis here are: the theme of a content, the positioning of a content in relation to other elements, the analysis of the phrase, sentence or word. These include both quantitative and qualitative data, as well as descriptive and attributive features.

Levels and characteristics of the units of analysis in this paper:

- Generic units: content theme (descriptive and attributive characteristic), position of a content in a whole or in a ranking (descriptive characteristic), appearance of a content (descriptive characteristic)
- Specific units: phrase, sentence, word (attributive features)

Coding was done inductively and the categories used for content analysis were partially predefined, with the possibility to add categories during the coding process. This is motivated by a desire to provide the flexibility to allow for possible new content categories that may have implications for answering the research questions (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013)

Some units of analysis were coded on a conceptual basis and some units were coded on a frequency or valence basis. In the former case, the existence of a concept was quantified on the basis of confirmation of its existence among the analysis units by a present/absent binomial. In the second case, the frequency of concepts was counted each time a relevant unit of analysis was identified in the content under analysis. In the case of valence, the analysis was based on the validity assessment of qualitative research (Koch & Harrington, 1998).

The first aspect taken into account to ensure validity is the coding procedure, which took place in two steps. Being an inductive approach, the first round of coding was based on

exploratory units of analysis in order to delineate concepts specific to strategic communication and strategic communication techniques, while the second round of coding was focused on information and scaling in order to raise the analysis to a higher level of abstraction (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013).

In the first round of coding, following the recommendation of Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019), descriptive coding and interpretation was pursued, and in the second round, attributive coding and interpretation was pursued. The same authors explain that, in the case of the flexible inductive approach, coding and interpretation are overlapping and complementary procedures in order to be able to analyse the contents, which is also valid for this paper.

Another consideration is that both quantitative and qualitative or, as in this case, mixed studies use reliability and validity criteria when assessing study credibility (Ryan-Nicholls & Will, 2009). These terms are mainly based on a positivist paradigm of research (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Continuing the point made in the previous chapter, Schreier (2012) also suggests that there is no definitive division between qualitative and quantitative content analysis, and similar terms and criteria for reliability and validity are often used.

In this respect, it is necessary to mention that the restricted analysis units have been analysed at the semantic level, including by assimilation the morphemes and the lexical family of the terms and taking into account the lexical field of the terms in the grid interpretation process.

The segmentation of the analysis grid was achieved by operationalising strategic communication using its five techniques. For each of the five techniques, based on the literature, categories were created in the analysis grid

The operationalisation of the concept of strategic communication was carried out as follows:

- Specific categories of strategic communication and promotion policies
- Specific categories of public relations (PR) in sport
- Specific sports branding categories

Based on this proposed methodology, the first part of the content analysis takes the form of a point-by-point analysis of each of the 27 sports teams in basketball, handball and volleyball presented in the sampling chapter.

The analysis was carried out on N=27 sports teams, as at least one official online communication channel can be identified in relation to them. The time period dedicated to

the analysis was chosen between 01.01.2022 and 31.12.2022. The sports clubs considered are the following, presented in alphabetical order, also with the mention that for some of them, as is the case for Steaua and Rapid, they share communication channels between several sports: Asesoft Ploiesti, BC Politehnica București, CS Dinamo București, CS Dinamo Handball, CS Dinamo Volleyball seniors and juniors, CS Minaur Baia Mare, CS Rapid București, CS Rapid București, CS Universitatea Cluj-Napoca, CSM București, CSM Constanta Handball, CSM Târgoviște, CSU Metal Galați, CSU Universitatea de Vest Timișoara, CSM Constanța, Dinamo București, FCC Baschet UAV Arad, Handbal Rapid București, Oltchim Râmnicu Vâlcea/ Chimistul Râmnicu Vâlcea, Steaua București, Știința Bacău, U-BT Cluj-Napoca, Universitatea Craiova Oficial, Volei Alba Blaj, Volei Rapid.

The operationalisation of strategic communication techniques was carried out as follows:

- Specific subcategories of recognisable brand identity (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006)
- Subcategories specific to association with positive attributes (Schade & Piehler, 2015)
- Specific subcategories of communication digitisation (Xiao et al., 2017)
- Subcategories specific to the promotion of an iconic athlete (Hoegele, Schmidt & Torgler 2014)
- Specific subcategories of sponsor promotion (Kloss, 2012; Deloitte, 2019)

Specific variables of recognizable brand identity (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006) are represented in the analysis grid by the existence of a unified visual identity across all communication platforms, the existence of a mission, vision and team description on the official communication platform (Shank & Lyberger, 2015) or a differentiator based on organizational culture or values (Parkhouse, Turner & Miloch, 2012; Haba, 2022a).

When discussing specific variables associated with positive attributes, these are those defined by Schade and Piehler (2015), namely the identification of the following characteristics: extraversion, traditionalism, loyalty, sociability, family orientation, humour, optimism, rebelliousness, courage, tolerance, openness to internationality, demandingness, social responsibility, future orientation, industriousness, fighting spirit, efficiency and strength. Digitalization of communication (Xiao et al., 2017; Ráthonyi et al., 2018; Weston, 2018; Kaced, 2022) is represented in terms of variables by the social media presence of the team, the existence of an updated website of the team, the presence of information and

contact methods online, the option to purchase products to promote the team from an online store.

Variables representing the promotion of an iconic athlete (Hoegel, Schmidt & Torgler 2014) are the identification of an athlete who is presented in a way that is differentiated from the collective through visual or narrative techniques and the frequency with which he or she is promoted through team communication channels.

In the case of sponsor promotion (Kloss, 2012; Deloitte, 2019), the variables analyzed are the presence of sponsors on official team communication channels, the presentation of sponsors in differentiated ways through visual or narrative techniques, and the frequency with which they are promoted.

Being a mixed study, as mentioned, both quantitative and qualitative data are relevant to the analysis. The quantitative units that have been analysed are the identification of the elements listed in the subcategories presented above (such as the existence of a unified visual identity, the existence of contact modalities, etc.) and the frequencies (with which iconic athletes or sponsors are promoted). The qualitative units that have been analysed are the attributes with which the team associates itself through textual analysis at the level of narrow entities, the recognisability of the logo and the identification of cultural differentiators, and the team's brand characteristics and values.

The reliability of the content analysis should also be considered, as suggested by Neuendorf (2016). In this regard, both the steps taken to conduct the content analysis and the related time period and operationalization of the proposed categories and subcategories in detail is necessary.

The steps in the content analysis are the creation of preliminary categories in relation to the main research questions, coding of the categories and creation of the preliminary analysis grid, the first round of coding and descriptive interpretation of the units of analysis, and the addition of additional categories and subcategories according to the inductive method.

The next round of coding was carried out as follows. Initially, the analysis structure for the evaluation of units was created, into which the categories and subcategories of the analysis were imported. Subsequent steps included reviewing the online presence of the teams, searching for social media profiles and posts on the most used platforms, and reviewing and refining the results against the categories created to standardize the results.

Written items were identified on the team's website: Mission, Vision, About Us, Description, as well as sponsors, partners and iconic players and placing them on the home or dedicated page followed by reviewing and refining the website results against the

categories created to standardize results. This was followed by the identification on the website of the visual elements of the brand identity: logo, colours, fonts, etc. Finally, a team-specific code was created based on the results and a team profile in the form of a team sheet was created.

As a procedure, a multi-stage examination of the data was carried out. First, the closed questions on whether or not the above mentioned online profiles existed were answered binomially with yes/no, whether the website was active and whether sponsors were present. The next step was to count the quantitative data to know the frequency of postings and the number of responses. Finally, qualitative data, such as the attributes with which the team identifies (Shank & Lyberger, 2015) were assessed by analyzing the description, mission and vision.

Reiterating the category of developing a recognizable brand identity for a sport organization (Parkhouse, Turner & Miloch, 2012) along with sport-specific brand elements (Shank & Lyberger 2015) creates a necessary inventory of branding elements in sport organizations:

- Mission and vision define the work of the organization, explaining what the organization does and who it serves (Shank & Lyberger 2015)
- The written elements, of which Shank and Lyberger (2015) rate the name and description of the team as the most important elements
- Visual identity, including logo, colours, etc. (Shank & Lyberger, 2015)

However, for some subcategories and variables, additional operationalisation is required, which is presented below.

Having a recognizable and unified brand identity means, first and foremost, a degree of ease with which stakeholders find a brand online (Shank & Lyberger, 2015). It was checked whether teams have the same name on all online communication channels and exceptional cases were highlighted, such as the case of HC Dobrogea Sud, a team found under the website hcdobrogeasud.ro, but with a Facebook page as CSM Constanța Handbal - official page. In this case, an inconclusiveness was identified in terms of presenting the brand in a unitary way, and for the HC Dobrogea Sud team, the hypothesis of a unitary brand presentation was rejected. The same research method was used for the comparison of logos.

Logo recognition suggests that a team has a consistent visual identity and provides differentiation from other teams, especially those from the same hometown (Shank & Lyberger, 2015). Old logos with blurred fonts and the combination of red and blue, which

are the most commonly used colours (of the teams analysed, six teams use red, three use blue and five teams combine the two colours) were marked as difficult to differentiate, as is the case for the Știința Bacău team. On the other hand, teams with a visual identity described as being represented by modern graphics with clear and minimalist lines were identified, as is the case of the team University of Timisoara.

Mission and vision (Shank & Lyberger, 2015) are important differentiators in terms of sports brand identity. Their presence was also investigated and both teams that have the expected information, such as CSM Targoviste, and teams whose written elements cannot be identified on official communication channels, such as FCC Basketball Arad, were identified. Moreover, for some of the teams a clear differentiator can also be identified when looking at mission and vision.

In addition, it also examines whether an iconic athlete is promoted (Hoegel, Schmidt & Torgler 2014) and whether the athlete's image is recognizable to the public. This includes how often an athlete is mentioned in texts such as statements, press releases on official communication channels or whether there are more photos of him or her, or whether existing photos are highlighted by visual procedures.

The presence and promotion of sponsors is also important (Kloss, 2012; Deloitte, 2019). It is analysed which sponsors are present on official communication channels and whether teams mention them in their releases, as is the case for CS Steaua București. However, in the same example, sponsors that are not present on the website (Leier company) are communicated on social media. Therefore, consistency is also sought, as well as the positioning of the logos of the sponsors present.

Assessment of the attributes with which the team associates (Schade & Piehler, 2015) is based on written and audiovisual content published on the team's official channels in the descriptive or Mission and Vision sections. Semantic analysis was carried out through direct self-descriptions, such as in the case of the HC Dobrogea Sud team: *In a short time we managed to create a sports club with a wide opening and a European vision* or CSM Bucharest: *C.S.M București's mission is to contribute to the education of Bucharest citizens for physical and mental health, to increase the quality of life and to develop sports performance through sport-specific means.*

In relation to the research objectives and questions, content analysis will be used to *meet the first objective, which is to evaluate the five strategic communication techniques of the handball, basketball and volleyball teams* chosen for the study to answer research question *Q1. How is strategic communication carried out by Romanian handball, basketball and*

volleyball sports teams? Subsequently, each selected team will be placed on the sports brand life chart to achieve the objective of O2. *Identify the location of each of the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams on the sports brand life graph and answer question Q2. In which stage of the sports brand life graph are the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams?*

As mentioned earlier, content analysis needs to be informed by a detailed foray into the strategic communication techniques of sports teams. In order to understand how they carry out their communication activities, it is necessary to pursue **content analysis on social media**.

Berelson (1952) explains that the purpose of content analysis is to objectively and systematically describe the contents of communication. In the case of quantitative analysis, as can be seen in the case of this stage of the study, he mentions that it is about interpreting in a factual way the manifest content of the communication.

In terms of online communication analysis, it is an extension of content analysis to study communication on the official platforms of sports teams. In order to be able to capture in detail the characteristics of strategic communication and the concrete techniques that teams use when interacting with their audiences, we need to look at the actual ways in which, as Beck (2008) presented, top-down strategic communication processes are put into practice.

It is also interesting to note that the systematization of quantitative analysis provides more uniformity and a better chance to understand the trends and topics addressed in the communication process (Berelson, 1952). This type of analysis can also be useful when researching the presence of sports teams on Facebook in Romania.

By analysing the numerical data, it is possible to identify the key topics in the posts of Romanian handball, volleyball and basketball sports teams, but also to measure the frequency with which they are addressed. It can also be used to compare the presence of different sports teams on Facebook, as well as to compare their interest in promoting themselves on this platform, as will be presented in the following chapters.

A *Digital 2022: Romania* study by Datareportal shows that in January 2022, the number of social media users in Romania will reach 13 million, equivalent to 69.7% of the country's total population (Kemp, 2022). The analysis also reveals that social network users in Romania increased by 1.3 million, or 10.8%, between 2021 and 2022. This is an undeniable argument of the relevance and importance that social networks have in all fields of activity, including Romanian sport.

Published data indicates that Facebook had 9.90 million users in Romania in the same month of 2022. The audience figures mean that Facebook ads in reach 51.9% of Romania's total population.

Facebook is the social network that still attracts the highest online popularity in Romania, followed by YouTube with 13.3 million users and Instagram with 5.4 million users (Cojocaru, 2022). It thus provides the right context for organisations to solidify their online presence and remain relevant in the eyes of all generations.

Some of the advantages that this platform offers to content creators, including those in the field of sports, are that it is a powerful promotional tool, providing companies and institutions with an environment conducive to implementing their communication strategies, providing socio-demographic and psychographic data of the audience and offering countless possibilities for paid customization of user content, such as add-on elements, HTML or Flash, as explained by Abrudan and Balaban (2009). The authors also note that posts can be scheduled in advance, regardless of whether or not they are paid and how often they are published, and that diversification and updates in terms of user interaction tools are constantly developing.

In order to highlight the analysis of communication in the online environment, based on these considerations, it was decided to carry out an analysis of the presence of teams and their communication on the Facebook platform. Sampling was done by analysing N=10313 posts published between 01.01.2022 and 31.12.2022. The data were collected using the Google Looker platform from the official Facebook pages of 21 out of 27 sports clubs, as six of these are not present on the Facebook platform, or, in the case of clubs such as Steaua or Rapid, the page on this platform is common for several sports.

In order to balance the sampling of this analysis, the following sports clubs have been considered, presented in alphabetical order by club name as presented on the platform: Rapid Basketball, CS Dinamo Bucharest, CS Dinamo Handball, CS Minaur Baia Mare, CSM Bucharest, CSM Constanta Handball, CSM Constanta Volleyball, CSM Targoviste, CSU West University Timisoara - Handball, Dinamo Bucharest Basketball, Dinamo Volleyball, FCC UAV Arad, Handbal Rapid Bucharest, Oltchim Ramnicu Valcea, SCM Craiova, Steaua Bucharest, Știința Bacau, U-BT Cluj-Napoca, University Cluj Women's Basketball, Volleyball Alba Blaj, Volleyball Rapid.

The tool for this analysis is the univariate analysis grid, and the level of conceptual analysis is carried out at the level of multiperspectivalism, the units of analysis being the posts within the Facebook platform. Again following the recommendation provided by Elo

et al. (2014) regarding the granularity with which the elements of analysis are selected, it should be noted that these units are assigned both metrics in the form of quantitative data and elements that can be interpreted through the lens of qualitative analysis, such as text, images or audiovisual elements.

The operationalisation of the concept of strategic communication was carried out as follows:

- Specific categories of strategic communication and promotion policies
- Specific categories of public relations in sport

The variables that are relevant for strategic communication and promotion policies are represented as follows: quantitative data associated with posts on the Facebook platform chosen for this analysis are: date of post, type of post, number of reactions received from users, number of comments from users; qualitative data relevant for this analysis are the sport targeted by the post and the topic of the post.

Also, the perspective provided by Graneheim and Ludman (2004) related to the exhaustive description of the unit of meaning in the analysis process reveals the following description of the levels and characteristics of the units of analysis for the Facebook platform:

- Generic units: post type and date (descriptive characteristics), sport found in the post (descriptive characteristic),
- Specific units: posting metrics (descriptive characteristics), posting theme (attributive characteristic)

Coding was done deductively in this case, with one exception, and the categories used for content analysis were predefined, with no possibility to add new categories during the coding process. The reason for this is the focus on examining the data in relation to specific concepts (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013), and the fact that the units associated with a Facebook post are pre-defined.

Exceptionally, for the unit of analysis representing the theme of the post, coding was done inductively with flexible predefined categories in two steps, following the procedure proposed by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013). In this case, since coding was done on an attributive variable, the procedure of Linneberg & Korsgaard (2019) was not followed, but the two coding rounds were limited to the framing of the units of analysis in the identified themes. The second coding round aimed to add new categories that would decrease the number of posts that would not fit into the predefined categories.

Again, some units were coded on a conceptual or valence basis through qualitative interpretation and others on a frequency or quantity basis through quantitative analysis.

The operationalization of the types of variables analyzed on the Facebook platform is based on the description of functionalities in the platform's help and information pages (Facebook, 2023):

The date of the post marks the day and time the post was published on the platform; if the post has been edited in any way, this is visible by marking the post with the *Edited* indicator.

There are five types of posts: text posts or visual or audiovisual material with or without text can be published on Facebook. Facebook pages can also create Live Video material, which can be watched in real time. Another option is to share material from other Facebook Pages or links to other websites.

Feedback is a tool provided by the Facebook platform for users to easily express their opinions about content. Since the introduction of the Like functionality in 2010, new reactions have been added to Facebook such as Love, Wow, Angry etc. These reactions can be analysed quantitatively and provide an overview of how users interact with and engage with posts.

Comments provide an opportunity to express your views widely on Facebook content. Unlike reactions, which represent a simplified opinion, comments can be analysed both quantitatively by counting them to deduce the level of user interaction with posts, and qualitatively by interpreting the text in them. Qualitative analysis of comments is not the purpose of this paper, as exhaustive interpretation of the very large number of comments present in many of the N=10313 posts is an individual analysis in itself, which is not relevant here.

The sport mentioned in the post is an identifiable variable after analyzing the post. Given the specifics of the paper, as well as the team sports relevant to this study, the units of analysis were divided into four categories: handball, basketball, volleyball or other sports.

The theme of the post is a qualitative variable that can be inferred from the interpretation of text, visual or audiovisual material published on the Facebook platform. For this analysis, a grid of four predefined themes was created based on the literature presented in the previous chapters: promoting the sports team, promoting an iconic athlete, promoting sponsors, branding materials and tickets, which were used as the basis for the first round of coding.

At the end of both rounds, the inductive process resulted in 24 themes, presented in alphabetical order as follows: other, training or training camp, tickets or branded material,

qualification, competition or fan events, press conference or interview, social events, promoting an iconic player, communicating team results, posts about football or other sports, posts during matches announcing a goal or score, club or sports history, youth or academy, posts about the leader, captain or coach, posts about anniversaries, birthdays or holidays, posts about management and administrative decisions, posts announcing matches or competitions, posts with a medical theme or related to the COVID-19 pandemic, tributes to historical personalities, team promotion, team results and upcoming matches, promotion of sponsors, transfers, private lives of athletes.

At the level of these variables, an analysis was conducted both at the team level, to highlight the specifics of strategic communication on the Facebook platform at the organizational level, and a comparative analysis at the sport and sample level.

In order to determine whether there are significant differences between the roles of sport for each individual club in terms of Facebook promotion activity, a Chi-square analysis was performed for the number of posts N=10313 posts from the period 01.01.2022 - 31.12.2022 chosen for analysis.

To achieve the *O3 objective. To analyse the social media communication of sports teams in selected teams in the sports of handball, basketball and volleyball* and answer the research question related to *Q3. What is the way Romanian handball, basketball and volleyball sports teams communicate on social media*, a quantitative analysis of online content will be carried out. This analysis will include examining the social media communication of selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams. It will focus on the number and types of posts and the themes of the topics discussed.

Sampling for the **semi-structured interviews** was carried out using the segmented sampling technique (Kyngäs et al., 2011) in the Romanian context, which is characterized by a small number of experts and specialists in the field of strategic communication in sport.

Regarding the criterion for choosing the specialists, this sampling method was chosen because of the need for the interviewed specialists to have a well-developed background and direct contact with the sport field and relevant sport teams, in order to adequately cover the complex context of sport communication in Romania and its organizational, geopolitical, economic, social and technological factors.

The professionals we identified for interview for this paper include marketing and communications managers for sports teams such as basketball, handball and volleyball, strategic communications consultants for sports teams, sports journalists, and performance athletes with academic and formal training and experience in sports club management,

branding and communications. These sources will provide information on best practices and strategies for successful sports team management and communication.

The existence of these different points of view is important because they all bring different experiences and perspectives to the discussion (Jankowski & Jensen, 1991). Marketing and communications managers, for example, will be able to provide insight into how effective branding and promotion techniques can be for a sports team, as well as related to managing a team's public image. Strategic communication consultants will be able to offer advice on how to create and manage values-based brand awareness and effective digital communication.

Sports journalists will be able to provide information about the relationship between teams and the media, as well as explain macro-level social phenomena based on objective information. Performance athletes with academic training and experience in strategic communication management will be able to provide a two-way perspective on the best ways to manage a sports team and offer practical advice on the best ways to manage and promote a sports team. This is because the roles they perform are consistent with those relevant to the interaction with public relations (PR) roles described in the dedicated chapter (Halemba, Juchimiuk & Kucharski, 2013; Ruihley, Pratt & Carpenter, 2016).

These interviews were instrumented on the basis of a predefined interview guide, which contains 13 questions and is based on the concept of strategic communication understood as the combination of communication policy, public relations (PR) and branding perspectives for the purpose of managing relations with the business environment, the media and the public. Under this umbrella are all the methods and activities that communication experts practice to promote sports teams, connect with the economic environment and respond to the desires of sports consumers.

The categories to which the questions in the proposed interview guide are subordinate are: questions about the topic of the paper and the context, questions about the dimensions of strategic communication in sport (Shein, 1991; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Shank & Lyberger, 2015), questions about the role of a communication expert in sport teams (Hopwoods, 2010; Stoldt, Dittmore & Branvold, 2012; L'Etang, 2013; Pratt & Carpenter, 2016), questions based on the results of the content analysis and questions for future perspectives and short-, medium- and long-term improvement proposals and best practices. All questions refer to the three team sports, basketball handball and volleyball, and the questions disregard the form of team organisation such as NGO or LLC, publicly run clubs as well as the identity of the ownership.

The interview guide was pre-defined but the discussions were conducted in a semi-structured way starting from the contexts and questions described above and adapting the discussion to the respondent's experience and field of origin. Discussions lasted 60 minutes with written or audio recording of the discussions, depending on the agreement received.

The analysis is thematic. Being a qualitative analysis method, the generic units that were analysed are content themes from both descriptive and attributive perspectives, but also specific units such as attributive elements related to the team values of the need for digitisation (Xiao et al., 2017), the promotion of an iconic athlete (McCracken, 1989; AbouAish, 2011; Hoegele, Schmidt & Torgler, 2014; Deloitte, 2019) or the visibility of sponsors, etc. (Shank, 1999; Beck, 2008; Halemba, Juchimiuk & Kucharski, 2013),

At the time of analysing the experts' responses, their coding in the interview grid was done inductively and the categories used were taken from the content analysis and were partially predefined with the possibility of adding new categories during the analytical process. In line with the literature, consideration was given to providing the flexibility to add new insights to existing partial day conclusions (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013).

Most variables and units of analysis were interpreted on a conceptual basis but some units were analysed in terms of intensity when, for example, an expert was ranking the importance of certain issues.

To ensure the validity of the semi-structured interviews, the operationalization of terms and the creation of context were carefully planned. This allowed the discussion to reflect the proposed concepts and units of analysis. To ensure understanding of the term strategic communication, the findings of the scientific and theoretical underpinnings of this paper were briefly presented. Thus, the concept was translated into a mix of three essential dimensions.

Communication, public relations and branding policy perspectives were also operationalized with interview respondents prior to the interview. In addition, experts were given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions about the taxonomy used (e.g. the use of the term *marketing* in practice to encompass communication and public relations (PR) issues was discussed and the scope of this paper was delineated as focusing only on the communication and public relations, PR perspective), which facilitated the introduction of the interview in relation to the topic and context of the paper. The advantage of this approach is supported by the fact that the sources provided internally by the experts who participated in the interviews had previously been used in the bibliographic base presented in the first chapters, which ensured a correct understanding of the terms.

The segmentation of the interview guide into the five categories outlined above was operationalized into concrete questions as can be seen in the interview guide in the appendix.

For the implementation of this research method a number of $N_0 = 15$ experts were approached for interviews, of which interviews with a number of $N = 5$ experts were carried out.

Interviews were conducted with $N=5$ experts between 01.01.2023 - 01.04.2023, both face-to-face and online via the Google meet platform depending on expert availability and location.

With regard to the ethical aspects of conducting interviews, as suggested by Mack et al. (2005), the possibility of anonymity was ensured from the first approach to the experts. If they opted for this option, agreement was sought that the individual would be represented in this work by name and by the capacity or position held in their organisation. In addition, it was noted that all data and information processed for this paper will be used strictly for academic purposes and only within this thesis. Consent was also sought for audio or written recording and processing of responses, which was expressed verbally by the respondents.

In relation to the objectives and research questions of the paper, through this research method, we aim *O4. To compare the results of the analysis with the opinion of specialists in the field of sports communication in Romania* in order to answer the research question *Q4. How is the strategic communication of Romanian handball, basketball and volleyball sports teams perceived from the experts' perspective? What are the experts' main recommendations in this respect?*

5. Content analysis

Based on the results of the analysis, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the presentation of a recognisable brand, digitisation of communication, promotion of iconic athletes and promotion of sponsors within the sample of 27 sports teams:

The majority of the teams in the sample display their names (25 out of 27) and logos (24 out of 27) in a uniform way. However, some teams still have room for improvement in terms of having a unique differentiator (4 out of 27) and a vision (2 out of 27). Most teams in the sample have a social media presence (24 out of 27) and a website (21 out of 27), indicating a moderate level of digitisation of communication.

However, having an online shop is less common, with only 9 teams out of 27 having one. Only one of the 27 teams in the sample has an iconic athlete who is both easily identifiable and actively promoted, suggesting that there is room for improvement in this

area for most teams. Although the majority of teams in the sample have sponsors mentioned on their communication channels (17 out of 27), there is potential for increased sponsor promotion by some teams.

In terms of teams with the most criteria met, CSM Bucharest is the team with the highest number of criteria met in all categories (7 out of 7), followed by CSM Constanta (6 out of 7). In terms of specific categories, several teams met 4 out of 4 criteria for digitization of communication, while CSM Bucharest and CSM Targoviste met 2 out of 2 criteria for promotion of flagship athletes. Teams with the fewest criteria met: BC Politehnica București and Oltchim Râmnicu Vâlcea are the teams with the fewest criteria met in all categories (1 out of 7 and 2 out of 7 respectively). In terms of specific categories, CSU Metal Galați, BC Politehnica București and Asesoft Ploiești did not meet any criteria for the digitisation of communication, while Oltchim Râmnicu Vâlcea and Asesoft Ploiești met only 1 out of 4 criteria for the promotion of the emblematic athletes.

It can be seen that the handball, volleyball and basketball teams show a varying degree of compliance with the criteria established for the sports brand, with CSM Bucharest and CSM Constanta being the teams with the highest scores in terms of brand image. On the other hand, BC Politehnica București has the lowest score. It can also be seen that on the basis of the criterion of presenting a unified name, this is the best met, followed by the presentation of the logo and team history. The least met criteria are those related to the team's mission, differentiator and vision.

The results of the analysis also show that most handball, volleyball and basketball teams in Romania have a brand image that can be improved in terms of compliance with the criteria for brand presentation on communication platforms. However, there are also exceptions, such as CSM Bucharest in handball and CS University Cluj-Napoca in basketball, which achieved top scores, indicating a strong brand image and consistent presentation on communication platforms. For this category, the sports ranking is led by handball, which scores an average of 4.4 out of 7 criteria, followed by volleyball with an average of 4 out of 7 criteria, and last place is basketball with an average of 3.6/7.

It is important to note that a uniform name across all communication platforms and a recognisable logo are criteria that are largely met by most teams. However, criteria such as the presentation of the team's history and identity, as well as the mention of a team mission, can be improved in terms of compliance.

Overall, the average of handball, volleyball and basketball teams in terms of compliance with brand presentation criteria is around 4/7, indicating that there is still room for

improvement in terms of consistent presentation of the brand image on official communication platforms.

In the future, sports teams are advised to pay particular attention to branding and communication strategies to improve their brand image and create a consistent presentation on communication platforms, which can help increase the recognition and awareness of sports brands among fans and the wider sports community.

The results of the analysis also show a significant variation in the level of digital communication of sports teams in Romania. Only a few teams scored high, indicating that they use digital channels effectively to communicate with their audience, while others scored lower or even zero points, suggesting that they do not take advantage of digital means to communicate effectively.

Social media presence and website communication are the most met criteria in this analysis (more than 20 teams out of 27), but only a few teams have an online shop (9 out of 17). In this case, handball is once again first in the sports ranking with an average of 3.3/4 criteria, while volleyball and basketball are in the same place with an average of 2.7/4.

The teams with the most criteria met are CSM Bucharest, Rapid Bucharest, CSM Constanta, Minaur Baia Mare, U-BT Cluj Napoca (4/4), followed by U Timisoara, Dinamo Bucharest, SM Craiova, Volleyball Alba Blaj, Steaua Bucharest, CSU Cluj-Napoca, CSM Targoviste (3/4). The teams with the least criteria fulfilled are CSU Metal Galați, BC Politehnica București (0/4) and Oltchim Râmnicu Vâlcea, Asesoft Ploiești (1/4). The promotion of an iconic athlete is visible in only one team, which meets the criteria of having a recognisable iconic athlete promoted on official communication channels. In the case of CSM Bucharest this is the team captain, Cristina Neagu. For the other teams, no intense promotion of a main athlete can be observed.

In the top sports, basketball teams meet 1.6 of the two criteria, on average, and volleyball and basketball teams meet none of the two criteria analysed. Also, in terms of the presence of sponsors, most teams promote them on their official communication channels. 17 of the 27 teams have sponsors visible on them, and the top sports are: handball with 0.88/1, basketball with 0.75/1 and volleyball with 0.5/1.

The teams promoting and displaying their sponsors are Oltchim Râmnicu Vâlcea, Universitatea Timișoara, CSM București, Rapid București, Steaua București, Dinamo București, CSM Constanța, Minaur Baia Mare, CS Dinamo București, SCM Craiova, CS Dinamo București, Steaua București, CS Universitatea Cluj-Napoca, CSM Târgoviște, FCC Baschet UAV Arad, Dinamo București, Steaua București.

The last category of analysis is that of associating the team with positive attributes, as defined in the theoretical part of this paper. Values range from 0 to 6, indicating the number of positive attributes identified out of a total of 17 possible attributes.

The most common positive attribute that teams associate with seems to be social responsibility, as 12/27 teams chose to showcase their community involvement. In second place is loyalty to history and club, as 10/27 teams rely on their heritage and past results to promote themselves, and in third place is fighting spirit, which 9/27 teams report. In fourth place is openness to the international environment, which 8/27 teams declare. Other attributes found in the content analysis are extraversion with 5/27, traditionalism with 3/27 and sociability or courage with 2/27, and demandingness with 1/27.

Findings from the analysis of the brand life graph of Romanian sports teams indicate that these teams are at different stages of the brand life graph. Some teams are facing difficulties and decline, while others are in a growth or revitalisation phase, and others are in a mature or post-revitalisation phase.

Handball teams, such as Oltchim Râmnicu Vâlcea and Știința Bacău, are in a phase of decline, due to financial difficulties, players or management. On the other handball teams Universitatea Timișoara and CSM Constanța are in a revitalisation phase, while Rapid București is in a post-revitalisation phase.

In volleyball, most teams are in a mature phase, except SCM Craiova and CSM Constanta, which are in a revitalisation phase. Volleyball team Volei Alba Blaj is in a growth phase, while CSU Metal Galati is in decline. In basketball, CS Universitatea Cluj-Napoca is in a post-revitalization phase, while CSM Târgoviște and FCC Baschet UAV Arad are in a revitalization phase. CS Rapid București is in a mature phase and BC Politehnica București is in decline.

In general, understanding a brand's life chart can help sports teams develop appropriate strategies to maintain or improve their strategic communications position. It is important for teams to consider context and adapt to changes in the market and industry to maintain their popularity and long-term success.

In conclusion, although most of the teams in the sample have a unified brand and logo, as well as a social media presence and website, there is room for improvement in terms of differentiation, promoting iconic athletes and maximising sponsorship promotion. Some teams have a clearly higher level of meeting the criteria compared to others. All teams can make further efforts to improve their brand awareness, digitisation of communication,

promotion of flagship athletes and sponsorship promotion to maximise their visibility and impact in the sport industry.

In the light of the results and conclusions presented, it can be stated that the research objectives *O1. To evaluate the five strategic communication techniques of sports teams in selected teams in the sports of handball, basketball and volleyball* and *O2. To identify the location of each of the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams on the life graph of sports brands* have been fulfilled. By achieving these objectives, the research questions can be answered as follows.

For the first research question *Q1. How does the strategic communication of Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball take place*, associated with the first objective, the answer is that this communication takes place in a differentiated way at sport level, but also at team level within the same sport. At sport level, handball communicates strategically best, followed by volleyball and then basketball. However, none of the sports and none of the teams exhaustively meet the experts' recommendations on the techniques they need to implement to communicate strategically in an effective way. There are both teams that meet most of the experts' recommendations and teams that meet none of them. In terms of recognisable brand identity (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006), the three sports tend to present a consistent visual identity across communication platforms, with some exceptions. However, the existence of a mission, vision and team description on the official communication platform (Shank & Lyberger, 2015) is only partially present, and a differentiator based on organisational culture or values (Parkhouse, Turner & Miloch, 2012; Haba, 2022a) is only present in very few of the teams and cannot be generalised to any sport.

When discussing the variables associated with the positive attributes defined by Schade and Piehler (2015), they are only partially fulfilled and a clear preference for certain attributes such as social responsibility or loyalty to the club's history can be observed. Attributes that are not represented at all are optimism, rebelliousness, tolerance and efficiency. In this case, at sport level, handball leads, followed in this ranking by basketball and then volleyball. However, at team level, the results are different, with teams from basketball and handball competing to meet the number of criteria. Overall, the experts' recommendations are not followed, as no team is identified in its communication with more than three positive attributes out of the 17 proposed. The digitalisation of communication (Xiao et al., 2017; Ráthonyi et al., 2018; Weston, 2018; Kaced, 2022) is represented in terms of variables by the presence of the team on social media, the existence of an updated website, the presence of online information and contact methods, and the possibility to purchase team

promotional products from an online shop. Here too the technique is not followed as proposed in the literature, but it is the chapter where teams and sports are best in the order handball, volleyball basketball, in terms of social media presence and the existence of contact information. Very few teams have an online shop and no team offers other digitised means such as apps or platforms for supporters and partners. The promotion of an iconic athlete (Hoegel, Schmidt & Torgler 2014) is not carried out in any sport by any team, with the exception of the intense promotion of handball player Cristina Neagu. This tactic recommended by experts should be considered by all three sports.

In the case of sponsor promotion (Kloss, 2012; Deloitte, 2019), the variables analyzed include the presence of sponsors on official team communication channels, differentiated presentation of sponsors through visual or narrative techniques, and the frequency with which they are promoted. The order handball, basketball, volleyball implies a fairly well-defined presence of sponsors on official communication platforms.

Sports teams, especially basketball and volleyball, should focus on implementing effective strategic communication techniques, experts recommend. They should learn from the best practices of most handball teams and some basketball teams in and communicate differentially, depending on the identity of the team or club. All teams should also consider ensuring a consistent visual identity across all communication platforms and develop a clear mission, vision and description of the team on official communication platforms. It is also recommended that teams establish a differentiator based on organisational culture or values. They may consider incorporating attributes such as optimism, rebelliousness, tolerance and efficiency to facilitate a desirable positioning.

In terms of digital communication, teams should ensure that they maintain an active presence on social media platforms, that the team's website is regularly updated and that it provides comprehensive information and contact methods. Another recommendation is to set up an online shop for the team's promotional products and extend digital initiatives through apps or platforms. The promotion of iconic athletes is recommended by experts even in team sports and exemplified by the intense promotion of handball player Cristina Neagu. All three sports (handball, basketball and volleyball) should prioritise the promotion of their flagship athletes.

Answer to the second research question, *Q2. At what stage in the life graph of sports brands are the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams?* is that most of the teams analysed are in the brand decline or revitalisation phase, implying that until recently, strategic communication has only been considered by the strongest sports clubs in Romania,

which has been to the detriment of teams with very good results but who have not been able to promote themselves. Teams that have realised the importance of this approach and are in the mature or already post-revitalization phase are represented in the minority in the sample of this study.

Based on the conclusion that the majority of the teams analysed are either in the brand decline or revitalisation phase, several recommendations for sports teams can be offered based on the literature. During the decline phase, when budgets and public attention are declining, teams should focus on minimizing costs and maximizing returns on existing resources. However, if the brand reaches the decline phase, steps should be taken to revitalise it. At this point, it may be necessary to invest in brand revitalization, a strategy that can leverage the historical success the team has had, which would require fewer resources than subsequently launching a new identity from scratch (Florea, Barbu & Barbu, 2018).

It is desirable that the positive perception is sustained (HKTDK, 2005). The high level of public interest in sport will also encourage the media to publish information about sporting events. Another recommendation offered, based on the theory stated by Florea, Barbu & Barbu (2018), points out that revitalized sports brands face a major problem in terms of fan acceptance. However, the brand identity is not strictly related to the outcomes that led to the initial decline of the brand and therefore remains intact and equally valuable (Thomas & Kohli, 2009). Even if the sports organisation does not survive, the brand has considerable potential to do so (Stone, 2015).

On the other hand, the organization should also focus on improving the fan experience to ensure the team remains relevant and attractive to supporters. The level of public attention fluctuates depending on the phase the sports brand is in, which is why the revitalisation phase is the perfect time to capitalise on a crucial event in the team's life and attract the attention of existing fans as well as new generations.

6. Social media communication analysis

Conclusions related to the analysis of online communication can be deduced from several results regarding the frequency of posts published by sports teams on the Facebook platform for a period of one year. The data shows that some teams do not have an account on social media platforms, while others are managed under the same account depending on their sport or club. The analysis shows that Steaua Bucharest has the highest percentage of posts with a frequency of 1685, followed by U-BT Cluj-Napoca with a frequency of 1296.

The combined percentage of these two teams is 28.9%, indicating that they are the most common teams in the dataset. In addition, the analysis indicates that CS Dinamo București and Handbal Rapid București are the third and fourth team respectively in terms of the number of posts made. Together with Steaua and U-BT Cluj-Napoca, these teams represent more than half of the sample in terms of frequency of postings.

The data suggests that handball is the most popular sport within the dataset analysed, with almost 36% of all posts relating to the sport and garnering a 75% share of all units analysed. The high percentage of posts may be due to the fact that handball is represented by eight individual Facebook pages in this study, while basketball and volleyball are each represented by seven Facebook pages, which results from the fact that some pages span multiple sports.

Another possible reason for the high percentage of handball-related posts is that a cumulative 58.7% of posts associated with all teams in the N=10313 sample are from three handball teams or those that incorporate handball into their club page, while only two representations of basketball and volleyball are included in this percentage.

In addition, the large number of handball-related units could indicate that handball has a large and engaged fan base on Facebook, which could be valuable information for sports organisations and communication agencies looking to promote the sport.

Basketball is the second most popular sport, with a quarter of all sport-related posts. This high percentage may be due to the popularity of local basketball and the fact that it is increasingly played and watched in Romania. The popularity of basketball could also represent opportunities for sports organisations and promotion professionals to reach a wide and diverse audience on Facebook.

On the other hand, volleyball had a much lower percentage of posts compared to handball and basketball, with only 14.6% of all posts being related to the sport. However, it still had a significant number of posts, with a frequency of 1504, indicating that there is substantial interest in volleyball among the public.

The other sports category totalled 2530 posts and accounted for 24.5% of all posts. The sports included in this category ranged from football to niche sports.

In conclusion, the analysis of Facebook activity revealed significant differences in the promotion of different sports on social media. Steaua Bucharest had the highest frequency of posts, but the majority were related to sports other than those studied. U-BT Cluj-Napoca focused mainly on basketball, while CS Dinamo București had a varied range of posts, with a high percentage dedicated to other sports. CSM Bucharest had a significant number of

posts on handball, while Club Handbal Rapid București and CS Minaur Baia Mare focused almost entirely on handball.

Analyzing the number of posts and the level of user engagement with Romanian handball and basketball teams, we can draw some interesting conclusions. As far as handball is concerned, Handbal Rapid București, CS Minaur Baia Mare and CS Dinamo Handbal are the most discussed teams, and the most liked posts are those of Handbal Rapid București and CS Dinamo București. For basketball, U-BT Cluj-Napoca is by far the leader in terms of number of posts and level of user interaction, and the most liked posts are those of this team. It is interesting to note that some major teams, such as CS Minaur Baia Mare and CSM Constanta Handball, posted very little about their main sport, which may indicate a missed opportunity to engage fans on social media platforms.

All in all, on average, handball seems to be the most popular sport of the three, with an average of 198.7 reactions, 10.1 shares and 16.5 comments. The median values for handball (142, 6 and 8) are also higher than for the other two sports, indicating that the engagement is more directed towards handball teams.

Basketball ranks second with an average of 153.9 reactions, 5.8 shares and 6.8 comments. The median values for basketball are higher than those for volleyball, indicating that basketball has a more engaged audience than volleyball and less engaged than handball. Volleyball appears to be the least popular of the three sports, with an average of 92.8 reactions, 6.1 shares and 9.0 comments. The median values for volleyball, are the lowest of the three sports, indicating that volleyball does not receive as much engagement on the Facebook platform. Overall, it is clear that handball has the most engagement on this Facebook page, followed by basketball and then volleyball.

There are significant differences between the topics that are presented in the different types of posts for each sport analysed. In other words, there is some association between the topics presented and the types of posts for each sport, but this association is not very strong. At the sport level, basketball, handball and volleyball both post the most about team results, matches and competitions, and important players or athletes, numbers that total 1073 posts for volleyball (10%), 2099 for handball (20%) and 1572, 15% of all posts, for basketball.

By conducting the analysis on the Facebook platform, the third objective of the paper, namely *O3. Social Media (Facebook) communication analysis of the sports teams of the selected teams in the sports of handball, basketball and volleyball* has been fulfilled. By achieving this, research question *Q3* is answered. *How do Romanian sports teams in*

handball, basketball and volleyball communicate on Social Media, on the Facebook platform.

Communication on the Facebook platform is differentiated between sports and teams and is marked by substantial differences between them. Handball emerges as the most popular sport in the dataset analysed, with a high percentage of posts dedicated to it. Basketball follows as the second most popular sport, and volleyball comes last in this ranking.

The first recommendation to derive from these results is that some of the results presented above can be improved by hiring sports communications professionals who have the expertise to create engaging and effective social media strategies. As social media becomes an increasingly important platform for sports organisations to connect with fans, the need for social media professionals is likely to continue to grow in Romania.

Sports organisations, especially volleyball, need to adjust their social media strategies according to the level of engagement for their sport and try to attract as many fans as possible. Conducting social media analytics, as was done in this study, can provide valuable insights to target the right audience with relevant content (Xiao et al., 2017).

Sports organisations should take a more focused approach to social media. They should identify their core fan base and create engaging content to attract and engage them. This approach can help increase fan engagement so that fans can connect with sport beyond their devices and experience the game in a more organic way (Weston, 2018).

7. Interviews

Interviews with experts revealed various problems affecting the strategic communication of sport in Romania. There are a variety of issues currently facing the Romanian sports industry. Among the main problems identified were a lack of competent experts and education, political interference in sport, lack of public support, the tabloidisation of sport in the media and the lack of clear management, marketing and communication roles. Other challenges include lack of planning in sports clubs, inadequate legislation, ineffective sponsorship and lack of attention to less popular sports.

Lack of competent experts and education is a significant problem in the sports industry and was named by all experts interviewed as having an impact on the development of sport in the country. The experts interviewed suggest that the education system needs to do more to prepare experts for the sport industry. There is also a need for formal training

that goes beyond the passion for sport to ensure the independence of sports structures and to diversify sources of income.

Political interference in sport is a common problem that has persisted over time. Experts suggest that it is necessary to ensure the independence of sports structures to eliminate political influence. This would help develop the sports industry and boost competition in the sector.

The tabloidisation of sport in the media is another problem affecting the sports industry in Romania. Experts suggest that the media should focus more on athletes' performances and values than on their personal lives. This would help promote the right values and maintain the dignity of the sports industry.

Lack of legislation is also a significant problem affecting the sports industry in Romania. There is a need for laws to regulate and promote sports sponsorship, which would help attract more sponsors to the industry. The lack of clear roles for management, marketing and communication has also hampered the development of the industry.

Experts also identified the need for effective communication strategies for less popular sports to improve their visibility. The lack of attention paid to less popular sports has led to a decline in their popularity, which affects their development. Experts suggest that the sports industry should develop clear communication strategies to promote these sports and attract more fans.

Sports clubs also need to prioritise management and strategic planning to improve their operations. Experts suggest that sports clubs should focus on developing clear strategies that align with their goals to ensure success.

Experts suggest that companies should also invest more in sports sponsorship and corporate social responsibility. This would help create a positive image for the company while promoting the development of the sports industry.

To address these problems, a number of solutions have been proposed, such as formal education, ensuring independence in sports structures and diversifying sources of income, marketing and communication measures to ensure visibility and a clear strategy to communicate and promote the team's values and objectives. Other solutions include improving communication strategies in less popular sports, prioritising strategic management and planning, introducing laws to regulate and promote sports sponsorship, creating strategic partnerships and implementing effective corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects.

In addition to these solutions, there are several other actions that could help improve the sports industry in Romania. These include creating a clear sports communication strategy to engage fans, using marketing to create a story and keep fans engaged, tailoring communication plans to team identity and goals, developing an intentional approach to online communication, encouraging private funding, using positive attributes to position teams, and learning from international examples and keeping abreast of trends. In addition, encouraging open communication with players and explaining the importance of media compliance could also help improve the sector.

It is important to note that improving the sports industry in Romania will not happen overnight. It will require a concentrated effort from a number of stakeholders, including sports organisations, media institutions, government and private companies. By working together to implement the solutions outlined above, it is possible to create a more dynamic and successful sports industry that benefits everyone involved, including athletes, fans and the wider community.

In conclusion, the Romanian sports industry faces many challenges, from lack of competent experts and education to political involvement in sport. To meet these challenges, clear communication strategies need to be developed, effective planning and management are needed, and laws to promote and regulate sports sponsorship need to be created. Businesses also need to invest more in the sport industry to ensure its growth and development. Ultimately, the success of the Romanian sports industry depends on the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders, including government, the private sector and the general public.

The discussion with Virgil Stănescu highlights the importance of strategic communication in the sports industry and the need for more effective communication and the creation of coherent brands aligned with the values and strategic directions of sports organisations. The main objective is performance, but in reality, sport sells emotions to the end customer, the spectator. Strategic communication therefore helps us to understand that we are ultimately promoting and marketing sport at the same time.

It also emphasises the importance of clear brand positioning for a sports team, and the need for this to be consistent with how the public perceives the team. Branding should not be limited to a logo, but should also include tone of voice, values and positioning of the team. The importance of aligning the entire sports club, including players, staff, management and administration, in terms of communication through appropriate operational and organisational procedures is also emphasised.

Digitisation is essential to a team's operation, and the possibilities of communication through technology are an important asset for any sports organisation. Before the advent of new media, the entire communication strategy revolved around matches. The fan or supporter had a certain experience in the gym or on the pitch and was limited by it. Now, through technology and social media, we can create many more specific characters and events, so we can overcome these limitations and give the audience the experience between matches, the voices of the athletes, information about how they train.

A major advantage seen by the expert in this new approach is that this type of communication can be non-invasive and does not interfere with the process of achieving performance. It is therefore imperative that teams use these communication channels to attract more people into the sporting community, regardless of size, and to provide them with an enhanced experience. This will lead to audience loyalty, which is the basis for the good functioning of any sports organisation.

In terms of promoting an iconic athlete, the expert points out that having role models in the community is the foundation on which the sports system is built. This creates a positive influence on young people, inspiring them to take up sport and adopt a healthy lifestyle. Finally, the expert stresses the importance of constantly evaluating and adapting communication strategies to stay relevant and keep up with changes in technology, public behaviour and the sports market.

The expert also highlighted the values they promote within their youth system, including curiosity, involvement and respect. These values are expected of every child who joins their organization and they seek to instill them through their staff, administration and through all aspects of their operations.

In addition, the organisation believes in the importance of continuous learning, training and play, which they describe as a circle of learning, training and play. They believe in creating a support system for children where they can learn, train, play and develop not only as athletes, but also as individuals with skills such as public speaking and time management.

The expert also noted that they are interested in increasing participation and promoting the reputation of their organisation, rather than focusing solely on high performance or attracting more sponsors. He aims to build trust with athletes, coaches and parents and create an environment where everyone feels involved and engaged.

However, educating future athletes is not the only pillar for a better sporting environment in Romania. A second crucial point is the improvement of sports clubs' administrative teams.

There is a need for sports organisations, especially in the Romanian context, to develop their administrative teams alongside the sports teams. The expert stressed the importance of recognising the distinction between the sporting and administrative aspects of a sports organisation, as well as the need to have within the administrative team specialists in various fields, such as legal, accounting, finance and communication.

It is suggested that too often sports organisations do not have enough specialists on their administrative teams, which can lead to challenges in managing branding, communication and positioning concepts. It is also mentioned that the branding process should be implemented by specialists who can conduct research, understand the identity and values of the organisation and determine the appropriate tone of voice and positioning. While the vision and intent may come from the club owner or manager, the branding process itself should be carried out by specialists.

The expert also discusses the problem of a lack of competent staff in administrative positions in sports organisations, especially in cases where the organisation is publicly sponsored. He suggests that the availability of public funds can sometimes create a sense of disaffection, as there may be less pressure to perform or to be accountable for results. This lack of competition or accountability can lead to a lack of focus on competence and efficiency in administrative roles.

In addition, he highlights the problem of financial management in Romanian sports organisations. While athletes' salaries may be comparable to those in other countries, it is suggested that the biggest financial problem is the lack of financial management education among administrative staff.

Examples are given, such as Romanian basketball players who earned high salaries but did not receive them on a regular basis because of mismanagement. Thus, improving financial management skills within administrative teams is crucial to ensure sustainable growth of sports organisations in Romania.

Based on the interview with Iulian Haba, it can be concluded that the current situation of strategic sports communication in Romania is determined by the popularity and performance level of sport in international competitions. Football, basketball and volleyball have a greater presence in the media, with basketball being the best communicator internationally and in Romania. However, if football had been included in the study, the situation would have been different, as football has a better strategic communication than other team sports in Romania. The expert notes that some sports have higher communication standards, especially those with international experience, such as basketball and handball.

The better the competition, the higher the standards imposed, which raises the quality of communication from a participating team's perspective.

Basketball is the best communicated sport both internationally and in Romania, followed by handball and volleyball. Handball and volleyball have a good media presence. However, basketball beats them in terms of participants, spectators and consumers.

Regarding the development of sports clubs in Romania in comparison with neighbouring Eastern European countries, the expert notes that communication within Romanian clubs has not been driven by well-planned management or business strategies, but rather by ad hoc requests or mandates from external sources, such as international federations or the public.

The expert also compares the state of sports clubs in Romania with those in neighbouring countries, noting that Romania is generally lagging behind in terms of overall development. While there may be some Romanian clubs comparable to those in neighbouring countries, countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria and Serbia have a more developed sports culture.

Another conclusion is that there is a lack of legislation to regulate and encourage sports sponsorship in Romania, which leads to the fact that personal relationships often lead to sponsorship decisions that can be opaque and potentially unethical. Clubs should make it a priority to find ideal partners that align with their values and mission, rather than accepting any sponsor that comes their way. In addition, few companies are willing to sponsor sports teams, and even fewer teams know how to activate sponsorships effectively beyond advertising banners and logos on jerseys.

The importance of communication in sports clubs was discussed and the role of a communication expert in a sports team was highlighted. The main responsibilities of a communication expert should be to create a comprehensive communication plan including marketing, crisis management, public relations (PR) and internal communication. The communication plan should align with the club's existing brand or the brand it wants to develop. Roles in management, marketing and communication have become blurred in recent years, and communication should be directed to all levels of the club, not just one department. The communication expert should therefore have a global vision of the club, similar to that of a manager, and should translate management and marketing decisions into the environment around the club, while conveying the essence of the club in that environment.

Most sports teams in Romania do not have a clear strategic positioning, primarily due to the lack of a real need for strategic positioning in Romanian sport, which is mainly organized

around non-profit organizations. Without a real need, there are no specialists to address this issue, and without specialists, there is no vision. Private clubs tend to be more strategic because they need to differentiate themselves and be attractive to potential sponsors. Digitalisation is also a factor, but it is not relevant if there is no real interest in branding and competitiveness. The root of the problem is the way sport is funded exclusively by the state, which does not help its development.

Finally, the reasons why most teams do not promote a key athlete were discussed, which may also be due to a lack of vision and brand definition. There could also be financial reasons, but it is not believed that lack of finances is the main cause. Professionalism in sport and mobility also play a role, as athletes tend to move frequently.

The interview with Simona Oțel highlights the importance of having a clear communication and marketing strategy, adapted to the team's identity and objectives. Copying what others are doing is not enough and a deep understanding of the team's identity is essential to communicate effectively. It highlights the need for a thoughtful and intentional approach to online communication, rather than simply copying what others are doing.

It is also noted that basketball in Romania is in a better situation compared to other sports such as football or handball, as teams like U-BT Cluj are mainly supported by private funds. On the other hand, other teams rely on public funds for 90% of their support. This lack of private funding can lead to a lack of control over team personnel and can result in unqualified people taking over important roles, negatively affecting team performance. This is a common problem in publicly funded sports.

There seems to be a lack of vision in sports communication in Romania, and teams seem to do things without a clear strategy. Simply reporting scores and match information is not enough to create a community and engage fans. The expert believes that sports marketing is key to creating a story and keeping fans engaged, which ultimately leads them to become consumers.

She also notes that her university education did not adequately prepare her to apply her skills and knowledge in the real world, which could be due to a lack of know-how in the education system. However, she has had positive experiences with recent university graduates who have joined their team as volunteers, indicating that there is potential for change.

The lack of a clear strategic communication plan is a common problem among sports teams in Romania due to the lack of know-how among communication managers. Even with specialised education, there is no guarantee that anyone knows how to effectively put all the

pieces together. In some cases, teams may not see the value of investing in a communications expert and prefer to focus on other areas.

To gain more knowledge and insights, communication experts can look at international examples and learn from successful cases abroad. Following industry leaders and keeping abreast of the latest trends can also help keep communication strategies fresh and effective.

In conclusion, the role of a communication expert within a sports team is crucial to success. He or she must create a strategic communication plan that aligns with the team's goals, implement it effectively, monitor KPIs and continuously optimise the plan. While managing social media can be time-consuming, having a team behind the effort can help create better quality content. Communication experts can learn from international examples and keep abreast of the latest trends to continuously improve their strategies.

Various aspects of sports management are discussed, such as how to communicate with players, the importance of media obligations and how to monetize a sports team's strategy in the short, medium and long term.

A key aspect is how to communicate with players. The importance of open communication and of not simply telling players what to do, but explaining why it is important to do so is stressed. For example, how players have media obligations and it is important that they fulfil these obligations in order to contribute to the growth of the club's brand and reputation with stakeholders. Players may sometimes be tired or unwilling to attend media events, but it is important to have a dialogue with them and explain the importance of their participation.

Media obligations are a crucial part of sports clubs' obligations and it is important to fulfil these obligations to help enhance the club's brand and reputation with stakeholders. It emphasises the importance of having interviews with the coach, the best player at half-time, two players after the match and again with the coach. These interviews help to engage fans and fulfil media obligations.

In conclusion, the interview highlights the importance of a clear online marketing and communication strategy, tailored to the team's identity and objectives. It also highlights the importance of private funding for sport and the lack of vision in sports communication in Romania.

Based on the interview with Miruna Diaconu, it is clear that the importance of context and journalistic perspective in strategic communication is particularly evident in sport and business. The expert stresses the need to decipher context in understanding articles and

studies on sports communication, especially given Romania's unique economic and social situation.

The specialist also stresses the need to focus on what happens on the field rather than off the field in sports reporting. She suggests that sports outside football should get more attention and a voice in sports reporting, as they are often overshadowed by football.

In addition, effective communication strategies by federations can create interest in their sport and athletes, which can contribute to their popularity. However, federations should also be aware that the media is not the only way to promote their sport. Working with local communities can also encourage participation and develop talent.

The interview highlights the importance of focusing on context, lesser discussed sports and effective communication strategies from federations to promote sports. By focusing on these areas, journalists can help create a more diverse and nuanced view of sports culture, promote less talked about sports and develop talented athletes.

Finally, the expert stresses the need to increase the funding of sport in Romania. The Ministry of Sport has one of the lowest budgets allocated from the state budget, which she says is insufficient to support the development of sport in the country.

Based on the interview with Lect. Dr. Mihai Lisei, it can be concluded that the context of strategic communication in sport in Europe is a complex issue that requires an understanding of historical and social factors. The political tensions that emerged after the changes in the geopolitical landscape in Europe have had a significant impact on sport, especially in countries that were part of the former socialist bloc. Matches between Serbia and Croatia in basketball, handball and volleyball, for example, have become violent events rather than sporting competitions.

The expert also points out that the historical performances of Romanian sports teams were largely due to the favourable conditions and opportunities offered by the communist regime, better training facilities and a strong fan base. Although there has been little success in Romanian sport since 1996, there is a strong culture of communication in sport and fans remain respectful and enthusiastic.

Overall, the interview highlights the importance of understanding the historical and social context in which sporting events take place and the need for strategic communication to promote fairness, respect and peaceful coexistence. The expert suggests that positive fan behaviour is a good sign for the future of sport in the region.

The fourth objective of the work, *O4. Comparing the results of the analysis with the opinion of specialists in the field of sports communication in Romania* is represented above

to answer research question *Q4. How is the strategic communication of Romanian handball, basketball and volleyball sports teams perceived from the experts' perspective? What are the experts' main recommendations in this respect?* The comparison of the results of the interviews with the literature can be made by highlighting the most important aspects resulting from the discussions with the experts.

Lack of competent experts and education (Adrenallina Media, 2016; Ilioni, 2019), was confirmed by experts as one of the main issues identified. This problem has a negative impact on the development of sport in the country, not only at the level of strategic communication, but also at a fundamental level in all areas of sport and requires improvements in the education system to train competent specialists in the sport industry.

Expanding on the theoretical framework presented, the experts also note that political interference in sport is a significant problem. Political decisions can negatively influence the management and strategic communication of sport, affecting its development and independence.

The lack of public support mentioned by Diaconu (2023) is also confirmed. Lack of public involvement and interest may hamper the promotion and development of sport in Romania. The experts also point out that the lack of clear management, marketing and communication roles can be a hindrance to making strategic communication of sport more effective. A clear coordination and structure in these areas is essential for the promotion and development of sport in Romania (IRES, 2014; Diaconu, 2023).

The literature also argues that it is important to follow successful models from abroad (DeVous, 1994; Graham, Goldblatt & Neirotti, 2001; Pedersen, Miloch & Laucella, 2016), but to adapt them locally and to take into account the specifics imposed by the geopolitical, socioeconomic and historical context (Constantinescu & Roşca, 2011; Ilioni, 2019), a fact also confirmed by experts.

Another match between the theories presented in the paper and expert opinion relates to other problems identified in this area. Paraschiv (2018) lists the following: lack of access to adequate sports facilities, insufficient qualification of coaches, low staff, lack of interest from the media, poor integration into the social life of the community, and lack of strategy from associations and the ministry. All these issues were also raised by experts in the discussions. The focus was on the financing of sport in the discussions with them.

The importance of investing in players and team staff to keep the team competitive (HKTDK, 2005; Florea, Barbu & Barbu, 2018; EH Branding Consultants, 2020) is confirmed and extended by the mention of the need for formal education for both players

and administrative staff in sports teams. This was also supported in theory by the fact that while performance remains an athlete's top priority, promotion and reputation building can compensate for many professional shortcomings. In addition, sporting talent alone is not enough to achieve performance (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Salgado (2021) argues that sports branding has the attribute that people develop a passion for teams, competitions and athletes that transcends reason. This interesting and unique specificity can also be deduced from the interview results.

In addition, for all these identified issues, the experts offer solutions and proposals for improvement, which were presented in the previous chapter.

8. Conclusions of the paper, limitations and research perspectives

This work represents a scientific contribution to the understanding and application of how strategic communication is carried out in contemporary Romanian sport, with a focus on team sports. The findings are based on a comparison of the literature with the results of applying a complex methodology, including content analysis, quantitative social network analysis and expert interviews. The paper focuses on the communication perspective of sports clubs through the analysis of their websites and social networks.

This paper aims to define and detail the concepts of strategic communication in sport, the *magic triangle* of sport communication (Beck, 2008) and the *strategic communication model* (Pedersen, Miloch & Laucella, 2007), as well as their associated techniques and roles. Subsequently, through content analysis of N=27 men's and women's handball, volleyball and basketball teams, as well as analysis of N=10313 Facebook posts and interviews with N=5 experts, the empirical part of this paper is outlined.

The final aim of the work is *O5. To formulate arguments in favour of the implementation of strategic sports communication techniques in Romania* and can be achieved based on the answer to research question *Q5. What are the main arguments for strategic sports communication of Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball?*

To achieve this, the research objectives and questions presented above are brought together and corroborated for a sustained argumentation of the final conclusions. Having an overview of the three sports, we were able to observe the current situation and how the strategic development of sports communication in Romania should be put into perspective. The partial and final conclusions of the paper contribute to the formulation of a best practice guide for a sports team to communicate more effectively and benefit from better management of relations with fans, media and business.

Theoretical implications

The main theoretical contribution of this work is that the scientific foundations from the various areas of the communication field are brought together and correlated into a unified whole that incorporates all relevant aspects of communication processes. The concepts of communication policy, branding and public relations (PR), which have been treated individually in the past, are brought under the umbrella of the concept of strategic communication and present an extension of the theoretical framework identified in the literature at the beginning of this research.

Building on Beck's (2008) ideas, we have extended the strategic communication model to the context of sport organisations. The first essential component in the communication process of these organisations is personal and organisational communication. This component includes intra-personal, inter-personal and group communication, as well as intra- and inter-organizational communication (Pedersen, Miloch & Laucella, 2016). In terms of external communication in sport, this includes the relationship with the sport community, fan culture (Billings, Butterworth & Turman, 2018) and the particularities of sport content consumers (Beck, 2008). These models are also supported by the reasons behind the implementation of strategic communication (Jinga, 2009), as these are techniques used to combat fierce competition and lack of differentiation between clubs.

The second component is media communication, which includes communication with the media and social media. This is directly related to aspects of sports communication (Billings, Butterworth & Turman, 2018) and the arguments suggested by Jinga (2009), as this model encompasses communication and promotion through the media.

The third component involves communication activities in sport, such as communication policies, public relations (PR), crisis communication and research. In this category, crisis communication can be considered a common element within the strategic model (Pedersen, Miloch & Laucella, 2016) and aspects of strategic communication in sport (Billings, Butterworth & Turman, 2018). This component also includes the dynamics of constant change in the sport environment and the need for research, aspects highlighted by the reasons presented by Jinga (2009).

In relation to the magic triangle (Beck, 2008), we note that between the media communication component and the sports communication services component, the connecting element is the media. Likewise, between organisational communication and communication services, the specificity of sport is the focal point where bottom-up and top-

down processes intersect. These processes take place on three levels, encompassing the dimensions of strategic communication.

Moreover, an update of the concept of communication policies was necessary. The theories proposed by Freyer (2004), Mullin, Hardy and Sutton (2007) and Davis and Hilbert (2013) were compared chronologically to develop a deeper understanding of communication and promotion in the context of sports communication policies. These theories suggest that promotion and communication of sport as an entity derive from the communication policies of sport products and are activities that add value to organisations that include sport entities. The aim of these activities is to increase the presence of sport organisations in the market and to respond to the needs and desires of sport consumers in order to increase sales and interest in the sport organisation.

The review of the roles and activities of the communication and public relations (PR) specialist is also an update of the theories present so far. The public relations (PR) specialist occupies an intermediary position in the sports communication process, given the multiple stakeholders such as the market, consumers and the media. In this context, the public relations (PR) expert plays a crucial role in ensuring successful communication policies for the sports organisation. Therefore, public relations (PR) in sport can be defined as an organisational function within the management of a sport institution that uses communication to build, manage and maintain the organisation's relationships with key audience segments in order to enhance and sustain a positive image (Hopwood, Skinner & Kitchin, 2010; Stoldt, Dittmore & Branvold, 2012; L'Etang, 2012).

A contribution of the work in terms of branding is the updating of the theories on the life graph of the sports brand, starting from that of the product, continuing with that of the brand and up to its customization on the specifics of sports organizations (HKTDK, 2005; Florea, Barbu & Barbu, 2018; EH Branding Consultants, 2020). A particularly relevant aspect that emerges as a conclusion of this literature review is the substantiation of the idea that the sport brand benefits from value and continuity in a distinct and unique way, abstracted from the existence and continuity over time of the sport organisation or team. Specifically, a sports team that has achieved significant results during its lifetime creates a strong brand that transcends the team and remains valuable even if the team is disbanded. This is relevant because a sports brand can be revitalised by creating a new team that is a successor and associates through image transfer the historical success of the former entity.

These components of strategic communication are presented together with the main related dimensions and concepts: From the specifics of communication policy (McCarthy,

1960; Freyer, 2004; Beech & Chadwick, 2006; Shabani, Gharekhani & Naderi, 2018) and sponsorship (Kloss, 2012; Cutler, 2019; Gough, 2022) to public relations (PR) to the role of a public relations (PR) expert (Halemba, Juchimiuk & Kucharski, 2013; Serbănică & Constantinescu, 2016; Kotler, Keller & Opresnik, 2017) and media issues (Funk, 2008; Ritchie, Shipway & Chien, 2010; Khodadadi, Pourranjbar, Bejani & Sarlab, 2015), the sports brand life graph (HKTDK, 2005; Florea, Barbu & Barbu, 2018; EH Branding Consultants, 2020) and key branding issues.

Girginov and Collins (2004) argue that interest in Eastern Europe has contributed to the creation of Eastern European states and their national identities. However, research on sport in this context is limited, perpetuating an East-West dichotomy. Parks and Zwicker (2020) suggest that Romania and other countries have shaped sport due to political and economic influences. Hoberman (2017) and Smolianov (2020) highlight the enduring values of previous regimes in Eastern European sport.

Understanding strategic communication in Romanian sport requires studying how teams can promote themselves taking into account political, economic, social and technological factors. A comprehensive strategy is lacking and teams often imitate successful Western models. Kloss (2012) explains how sport can transfer positive image attributes and Wilson (2020) and Haba (2022a) outline the key elements of a sport strategy.

Strategic communication aims to represent attributes such as success, dynamism and vitality (Kloss, 2012). Organisations use it to position themselves and build their image capital. The communication model includes sport, business and media and can be enhanced by incorporating the perspectives of the public. Sponsorship plays a significant role, influenced by technology and the origin of sports sponsors. Public relations, marketing and branding are essential in sports communication.

In conclusion, understanding strategic communication in Romanian sport requires taking into account historical influences, adapting Western models and developing a comprehensive strategy to align internal and external communication. Sponsorship and public engagement are important and public relations (PR), marketing and branding play a key role.

Another important contribution of the paper is the translation of general concepts into techniques identified in the literature for strategic sports communication. Through this initiative, the relationship between generalist concepts related to strategic communication in sport and the concrete, initiated down to the granular level of strategy and technique can be highlighted.

People show a strong interest in sports, but the level of interest varies across sports (Gantz et al., 2006). Target groups for public relations (PR) in sports organizations include internet users, sports consumers and fans, sponsors, commercial organizations, government institutions, leagues and federations, the local community, and the media (Șerbănică & Constantinescu, 2016). Factors such as personal, psychological and environmental factors interact to generate interest and affinity for a particular sport (Funk, 2008). Personal interest and affinity determine preference for sporting events (Madrigal, 2006). Marketing and sports communication activities can influence the level of consumption of sporting events, and advertising can increase public interest and preference for a particular sport (Sedky et al., 2020).

According to a 2014 IRES survey, the least popular sports in Romania are skiing, boxing, Formula 1, table tennis, rugby and snooker. In addition, 7% of respondents said they did not have a preferred sport, and the formation of sport preferences is influenced by age, education and gender (Martin, 1996; Shank & Lyberger, 2015). Female respondents (11.2%), young people aged 18-35 (10.8%) and those with primary education (15.4%) were more likely not to have a preferred sport. These findings indicate that popular sports in Romania are those in which young athletes participate and matches are played in teams (Martin, 1996; Shank & Lyberger, 2015). Therefore, gymnastics, skating and tennis are the preferred individual sports in Romania, while team sports such as football, volleyball, handball and basketball are also popular among Romanians (IRES, 2014; Diaconu, 2023). These sports encourage participation of young athletes, especially in the case of football (Shank & Lyberger, 2015).

The media plays a crucial role in presenting sports themes, achievements and issues (Halemba et al., 2013). It provides access to information and opinions about sports, athletes, teams and events. Media coverage can contribute to a team's image capital and provide a platform for reputation building (Abiodun, 2011). It can also engage fans, provide valuable feedback on team performance and identify areas for improvement (Novitaria, 2017). Sports communication professionals need to ensure that their team is portrayed positively in the media (Kloss, 2012). They need to create interesting and engaging content for fans and build relationships with members of the media. Furthermore, they should use the media as an opportunity to receive feedback on team performance (Pfahl et al., 2012).

Branding is one of the most valuable assets of a sports organisation (Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020). Positioning, which connects all of a team's strategic efforts, is crucial to successful initiatives (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kloss, 2012). Positioning is the attempt to create, change or promote a particular image in the minds of consumers (Crawford & DiBenedetto, 2008).

Sport branding is based on the unifying aspects of its identity (Dębski, 2009). The result of communicating this positioning is called brand image (Crawford & DiBenedetto, 2008; Kloss, 2012).

Factors such as economic factors, social environment, technology, trends and competition influence how a sports organisation presents itself to the public (Parkhouse et al., 2012).

Strategic communication plays a crucial role in gaining audience attention, admiration, affinity and devotion (Hallahan et al., 2007). It provides an integrated perspective on how organizations can influence their target audiences (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). In sports communication, techniques need to align with domain-specific characteristics, such as people's passion for teams, competitions and athletes.

Santiago (2020) identified traditional and digital communication tools and proposed seven overarching objectives for sports organisations. These objectives include increasing credibility, attracting quality players and coaches, engaging fans and affiliates, building brand image, increasing spectator attendance and leveraging competitive advantage.

The findings of this work are reflected in providing a grounded theoretical framework for developing strategic communication strategies for sports teams at the organisational level, including techniques and objectives. Documented examples from academia and specific techniques recommended by specialists outline a cohesive framework for strategic communication in sports teams in Romania. The techniques mentioned are the development of a recognisable brand identity, association with positive attributes, digitisation of communication and promotion of athletes and sponsors.

Building and maintaining a strong brand identity is essential in strategic communication. This involves brand analysis, lifecycle assessment, consumer segmentation, building identity elements and aligning messaging with brand identity (Santiago, 2020; HKTDK, 2005; Florea, Barbu & Barbu, 2018; EH Branding Consultants, 2020).

Strategic communication planning includes defining communication and public relations (PR) roles, communication objectives, communication channels and tools, and success factors (Halemba, Juchimiuk & Kucharski, 2013; Ruihley, Pratt & Carpenter, 2016; Beck, 2008; Santiago, 2022; Taylor, 2017).

Implementation involves specific techniques and constant evaluation of messages and tactics (Halemba, Juchimiuk & Kucharski, 2013; Ruihley, Pratt & Carpenter, 2016). Evaluating the image of sports organizations involves collecting consumer feedback and comparing expected and actual outcomes (Madrigal, 2006).

In the ever-changing world of sport, Romanian teams must adapt to the demands of society. Strategic communication plays a crucial role in ensuring a positive image and competitive advantage and sports communication experts are becoming increasingly important (Adrenallina Media, 2016).

Methodological implications

The methodological framework of this paper brings to the fore a research model developed inductively, based on the literature consulted and which, at the time of writing, has not been identified in other studies or scientific articles.

The choice of research methods is based on the theories set out by Daymon and Holloway (2010), who consider both the interpretive and positivist paradigms to be relevant to a study of strategic sport communication. The argument is that both can provide valuable insights and methodologies in exploring the complexity of communication in this field. The interpretivist paradigm emphasises the cultural and social factors that shape communication practices in sport organisations, while the positivist paradigm identifies causal relationships between communication strategies and their impact on the national state of sport. According to the theorists, the combination of the two approaches provides a more comprehensive understanding of communication processes in sport organisations and the effectiveness of different communication strategies.

Also, both quantitative and qualitative research in sports communication and public relations (PR) are considered relevant. Qualitative methods are applied to gain an understanding of communication factors, themes and trends important to the development of effective communication strategies. Quantitative methods are used to measure metrics associated with different communication strategies (DeCoster & Lichtenstein, 2007; Daymon & Holloway, 2010). By combining methods, a holistic understanding of the state of Romanian sport communication has been obtained and best practices can be formulated for communication strategies that are effective, impactful and tailored to the specific needs and preferences of the audience.

The sampling for this paper is based on several factors. Firstly, the selection is based on the Romanian geographical space, as the paper focuses on sports practiced in Romania. The second important criterion is the type of sport, since the aim is to treat team sports, excluding individual sports.

In the field of sports communication in Romania, there is a significant difference in popularity between football and other sports such as handball, basketball and volleyball.

This situation needs further attention. However, there is also interest in sports other than football.

For the choice of team sports included in the paper, we took into account reports and articles by IRES (2014) and Diaconu (2023), which indicate that the most popular team sports in Romania, apart from football, are handball, basketball and volleyball.

Football was excluded on the basis that, compared to other sports, it receives a disproportionate level of media coverage and exposure in Romania (Diaconu, 2023). In addition, in terms of visibility, women's and men's teams are not equally represented in the media and public perception. Also, in the literature dealing with the topic of strategic communication in sport, at least in Romania, other team sports do not benefit from a significant number of scientific studies in comparison.

It is important to develop effective communication strategies to increase visibility and draw attention to handball, basketball and volleyball teams. Social media, especially Facebook, can be a good starting point for a communication manager of a sports team in Romania.

As regards the selection of teams for analysis, their performance was taken into account. Thus, the teams with the most first place medals in their main competitions since their establishment were chosen. For women's and men's handball, these competitions are the National Women's Handball League and the National Men's Handball League. For women's and men's volleyball, the competitions are the A1 Women's Volleyball Division and the A1 Men's Volleyball Division. For women's and men's basketball, the competitions are the National Women's Basketball League and the National Men's Basketball League.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the teams' home localities, such as city size, number of local teams per county or year of establishment, were not taken into account in the sampling process.

In order to achieve the objectives and answer the research questions mentioned, the study uses a multi-pronged methodological approach. Methodological triangulation is used, combining analysis of strategic communication elements, quantitative analysis of online communication and semi-structured interviews with experts. This mixed approach allows data collection and interpretation using both quantitative and qualitative methods, providing a clearer and more complex perspective on the topic under study.

The conceptual analysis focuses on the strategic communication of selected sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball. Content analysis is used to identify the five strategic

communication techniques and quantify their presence in relevant content. Explicit and implicit terms are analysed and coded in this context.

The study examines the strategic communication of Romanian sports teams from the perspective of public relations (PR), sponsors and media. It also examines how the sports brand of local teams in Romania is shaped and how arguments for strategic sports communication in the country are formulated.

The content analysis identifies strategic communication techniques used by sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball to answer the research question of how these communications take place.

The study also seeks to identify the life stage of sports brands for each selected team in handball, basketball and volleyball, thus answering the research question on their positioning on the sports brand life chart.

Communication on social media, especially on the Facebook platform, is analyzed quantitatively to answer the research question of how Romanian handball, basketball and volleyball sports teams communicate online.

The results of the analysis are then compared with the opinion of experts in the field of sports communication in Romania and the main recommendations of the experts are identified.

The purpose of this approach is to formulate arguments in favour of the implementation of strategic sports communication techniques in Romania, thus answering the research question regarding the main arguments for strategic sports communication of handball, basketball and volleyball teams.

Empirical research begins with content analysis of sports teams' official communication channels, including the websites and social media channels they manage. An analysis of online communication is then carried out, focusing in particular on the Facebook platform. Finally, semi-structured interviews are conducted with experts in strategic sports communication to validate and complement the results obtained from the previous analyses.

Practical implications

The practical implications of this paper are defined by the contribution of the empirical study conducted and brought to the field of strategic communication in sport through the application of the chosen research methods.

According to the results and conclusions presented, the first two objectives of the research *O1. To evaluate the five strategic communication techniques of sports teams in the*

selected teams of handball, basketball and volleyball sports and O2. To identify the location of each of the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams on the life graph of sports brands have been achieved. By achieving these objectives, the research questions can be answered as follows.

Regarding the first research question, corresponding to the first objective, *Q1. How does the strategic communication of Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball take place*, the answer is that this communication takes place differentiated at sport level as well as at team level within the same sport. At sport level, handball communicates strategically best, followed by volleyball and then basketball. However, none of the sports and none of the teams fully comply with expert recommendations on the techniques they need to implement to communicate strategically effectively. There are teams that meet most of the expert recommendations and teams that meet none of them.

In terms of recognisable brand identity (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006), the three sports tend to present a consistent visual identity across communication platforms, with a few exceptions. However, the existence of a mission, vision and team description on the official communication platform (Shank & Lyberger, 2015) is only partially present, and a differentiator based on organisational culture or values (Parkhouse, Turner & Miloch, 2012; Haba, 2022a) is only present in very few teams and cannot be generalised to any sport.

When discussing the variables associated with the positive attributes defined by Schade and Piehler (2015), these are only partially met and a clear preference for certain attributes, such as social responsibility or loyalty to club history, can be observed. Among the attributes that are not represented at all are optimism, rebelliousness, tolerance and efficiency. In this case, at the sports level, handball leads, followed by basketball and then volleyball. However, at team level, the results are different, with basketball and handball teams competing to meet the criteria. In general, the experts' recommendations are not followed, as no team is identified with more than three positive attributes.

The digitization of communication (Xiao et al., 2017; Ráthonyi et al., 2018; Weston, 2018; Kaced, 2022) is represented, in terms of variables, by the presence of the team on social media, the existence of an updated website, the presence of online information and contact methods, and the possibility to purchase team promotional products from an online store. This technique is also not followed as proposed in the literature. The chapters where teams and sports perform best are social media presence and availability of contact information. Very few teams have an online shop and no team offers other digitised means

such as apps or platforms for supporters and partners, at least from what can be seen on their official communication channels.

The promotion of an iconic athlete (Hoegel, Schmidt & Torgler 2014) is not done in any sport by any team, with the exception of the intense promotion of handball player Cristina Neagu. This tactic recommended by experts should be considered by all three sports analysed.

In terms of sponsor promotion (Kloss, 2012; Deloitte, 2019), variables analyzed include the presence of sponsors on official team communication channels, differentiated presentation of sponsors through visual or narrative techniques, and frequency of sponsor promotion. The order handball, basketball, volleyball implies a well-defined presence of sponsors on official communication platforms, indicating that this technique is respected by most teams.

Sports teams, especially basketball and volleyball teams, should focus on implementing effective strategic communication techniques, as recommended by experts (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006). They should learn from the best practices of most handball teams and some basketball teams and communicate differentially, depending on the identity of the team or club. All teams should also consider ensuring a consistent visual identity across all communication platforms and develop a clear mission, vision and description of the team on these. It is also recommended that teams establish a differentiator based on organisational culture or values (Parkhouse, Turner & Miloch, 2012; Haba, 2022a). They may consider incorporating attributes such as optimism, rebelliousness, tolerance and efficiency to facilitate desirable positioning (Schade & Piehler, 2015).

In terms of digital communication, teams should ensure that they maintain an active presence on social media platforms, that the team's website is updated regularly, and that they provide comprehensive information and contact methods (Xiao et al., 2017; Ráthonyi et al., 2018; Weston, 2018; Kaced, 2022). Another recommendation is to create an online shop for the team's promotional products and expand digital initiatives through apps or platforms. The promotion of iconic athletes is recommended by experts even in team sports and exemplified by the intense promotion of handball player Cristina Neagu (Hoegel, Schmidt & Torgler, 2014).

Next, Q2 was answered. *At what stage in the sports brand life graph are the selected handball, basketball and volleyball teams?* The majority of the teams analysed in the study are in the brand decline or revitalisation phase (Florea, Barbu & Barbu, 2018). Recommendations for teams in the decline phase include minimising costs and maximising

returns on existing resources. If the brand reaches the decline phase, an investment in brand revitalization based on the team's historical success may be necessary. It is important to sustain positive perceptions and improve fan experience to maintain the relevance and appeal of the team (HKTDK, 2005; Thomas & Kohli, 2009; Stone, 2015).

Thus, in the revitalization phase, teams can capitalize on crucial life events to attract the attention of existing fans and generate new supporters (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006; Parkhouse, Turner & Miloch, 2012; Haba, 2022b). By implementing effective communication strategies tailored to the team's identity, they can achieve digital success and strengthen the image and notoriety of their sports brand.

For the third research objective, *O3. Analysis of Social Media (Facebook) communication of sports teams from selected teams in the sports of handball, basketball and volleyball* answers research question *Q3. How do Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball communicate on Social Media, on the Facebook platform.*

The analysis of Facebook communication of Romanian handball, basketball and volleyball sports teams on social networks has been completed, fulfilling the third objective of the study. Facebook communication varies significantly between sports and teams. Handball seems to be the most popular sport in the dataset analysed, with a high percentage of posts dedicated to it. Basketball follows as the second most popular sport, while volleyball ranks last.

Based on these results, the first recommendation is that some of the findings presented above can be improved by hiring sports communications professionals with the expertise to create engaging and effective social media strategies. As social media becomes an increasingly important platform for sports organisations to connect with fans, the need for social media professionals is likely to continue to grow in Romania.

Sports organisations, especially volleyball, need to adjust their social media strategies according to the level of engagement for their sport and strive to attract as many fans as possible. Conducting social media analytics, as was done in this study, can provide valuable insights to target the appropriate audience with relevant content (Xiao et al., 2017).

Sports organisations should take a more focused approach to social media. They should identify their core fan base and create engaging content to attract and engage them. This approach can help increase fan engagement, allowing them to connect with sport beyond their devices and experience the game in a more organic way (Weston, 2018).

The fourth research question, *Q4. How is the strategic communication of Romanian handball, basketball and volleyball sports teams perceived from the experts' perspective?*

What are the experts' main recommendations in this respect? is directly linked to the fourth objective of the paper, *O4. Comparison of the results of the analysis with the opinion of specialists in the field of sports communication in Romania.*

The lack of competent experts and education in sports communication, as stated by Adrenallina Media (2016) and Ilioni (2019), was confirmed by experts as one of the main issues identified. This problem has a negative impact on the development of sport in the country, not only in terms of strategic communication, but also in all areas of sport and requires improvements in the education system to train competent specialists in the sport industry.

Extending the theoretical framework presented, the experts also note that political interference in sport is a significant problem. Political decisions can negatively influence the management and strategic communication of sport, affecting its development and independence.

The lack of public support mentioned by Diaconu (2023) is also confirmed. The lack of public involvement and interest may hinder the promotion and development of sport in Romania. The experts also point out that the lack of clear roles in management, marketing and communication can hinder the effectiveness of strategic communication of sport. A clear coordination and structure in these areas is essential for the promotion and development of sport in Romania (IRES, 2014; Diaconu, 2023).

The literature also supports the importance of following successful models from abroad, but adapting them locally and taking into account the specific geopolitical, socio-economic and historical context, as can be deduced from the contributions offered by DeVous (1994), Graham, Goldblatt and Neirotti (2001), Pedersen, Miloch and Laucella (2016) and Ilioni (2019), which is confirmed by the experts interviewed.

Another alignment between the theories presented in the study and the experts' views relates to other issues identified in this area. Paraschiv (2018) lists the following: lack of access to adequate sports facilities, insufficient qualification of coaches, limited staff, lack of interest from the media, poor integration into the social life of the community and lack of strategy from associations and the ministry. All these issues were addressed by experts in the discussions, with a focus on sports funding.

The importance of investing in players and team staff to maintain competitiveness (HKTDK, 2005; Florea, Barbu & Barbu, 2018; EH Branding Consultants, 2020) is confirmed and extended by mentioning the need for formal education for both players and administrative staff in sports teams. This is theoretically supported by the fact that, while

performance remains the main priority for an athlete, promotion and reputation building can compensate for many professional shortcomings. In addition, sporting talent alone is not sufficient to achieve performance (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Salgado (2021) argues that sports branding has the attribute that people develop a passion for teams, competitions and athletes that transcends rationality. This interesting and unique characteristic is also inferred from the interview results.

In addition, for all these identified topics, the experts offer solutions and proposals for improvement, which, in conjunction with the answers to the research questions presented above and the results of the content analysis and social media communication analysis, serve the final purpose of the paper: *to formulate an answer to the ultimate research question, Q5. What are the main arguments for strategic sports communication of Romanian sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball?*

The main arguments for strategic sports communication of Romanian handball, basketball and volleyball teams can be summarized as follows:

1. *Building a strong sports brand:* Strategic communication helps teams establish and strengthen their sport brand. By creating a compelling brand image and recognisable identity, teams can differentiate themselves from competitors, generate fan loyalty and attract potential sponsors and partners.
2. *Ensuring brand longevity and the possibility of revitalisation:* A sport brand that is involved in the community and has a positive image ensures longevity and relevance for the sport organisation with which it is associated. Even in the event of the dissolution of the organisation, the brand can be revitalised through its association and image transfer with historical success.
3. *Promoting and developing sport:* effective strategic communication plays a crucial role in promoting and developing sport in Romania. By using professional communication strategies and tactics, teams can increase visibility, attract sponsors and generate public interest, leading to the growth of the sports industry in the country.
4. *Funding through communication:* By ensuring the visibility of their sponsors, sports organisations can harness and use the positive image capital that sport has in exchange for financial support.
5. *Increase fan engagement:* Strategic sports communication allows teams to connect with their fans and build a dedicated fan base. By creating engaging content on the right social media platforms, such as Facebook, teams can attract and engage more fans, fostering a sense of community.

6. *Professionalism and expertise*: Hiring competent sports communication professionals can improve the quality and effectiveness of strategic communication efforts. These specialists have the expertise to develop engaging and effective social media strategies, ensuring that teams communicate effectively.
7. *Adapting successful models*: Studying successful models of sports communication from both national and international contexts can provide valuable insights for Romanian sports teams. By adapting and implementing effective strategies, teams can leverage the experiences and best practices of others to optimise their own communication efforts.

By making these arguments, the paper achieves its final aim which was set out in the methodology chapter and which is *O5. To formulate arguments in favour of the implementation of strategic sports communication techniques in Romania*. The transfer of research results is ensured by the public nature of the information, which can be used for academic or practical purposes.

The main beneficiaries of this work are sports organisations, especially local sports teams in handball, volleyball and basketball. By providing this information, their communication specialists benefit from adding value to their academic expertise in the field. Sports clubs will have access to better trained specialists in this way. In addition, companies interested in the benefits of sports sponsorship and association with the sports brand will be able to take advantage of the analysis presented in this paper to make their case.

In addition to these primary beneficiaries, other beneficiaries can be journalists, media trusts and content creators, who can use the findings of this work to create high quality sports content in Romania. The academic field can also benefit from expanding the list of papers dedicated to sports communication. The prestige and value of future investments can motivate communities and municipalities that support sports teams to continue supporting athletes and teams. In addition, the younger generation of athletes and sports fans will have access to better structured information and well prepared and communicated sports content.

Limitations of the work and future research perspectives

In order to highlight the importance of this study, we believe that more future research in the field of strategic communication in sport is essential. To this end, we wish to highlight the limitations of this work and how future studies can contribute to a more comprehensive approach to this field.

Limitations of the work include sample size and team selection. The analysis in this paper focused on a selected set of sports teams in handball, basketball and volleyball. A

larger and more diverse sample across sports could provide a more comprehensive understanding of strategic communication practices in Romanian sport.

Also, the findings of this study may be specific to the selected sports and may not be applicable to all sports teams or other countries. Future research should consider a wider range of sports and contexts to increase the generality of the findings.

The analysis incorporated expert opinions on sports communication practices, which are subjective and may vary depending on individual perspectives. Future research could explore different methods, such as opinion surveys or focus groups, to capture a wider range of opinions and ensure a more comprehensive understanding.

Moreover, the analysis focused on the communication strategies of sports teams, but only partially considered external factors that may influence strategic communication, such as financial constraints, legal regulations or specific events. Future research should explore in more detail the interaction between internal communication practices and external contextual factors.

The social media analysis in this paper focused exclusively on the communication strategies used on Facebook. However, strategic communication in sport also extends to other social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok. Future research should consider a multi-platform analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of sports teams' communication strategies.

The length of study may also be a limitation. The research conducted in this paper spanned a period of one year. A longer-term study would allow a more in-depth analysis of trends and changes in strategic communication practices over time, allowing a better assessment of their effectiveness and impact.

The paper did not explicitly compare communication strategies before and after COVID-19 and their implications for sports teams' communication practices. Future research could explore the effects of the pandemic on strategic communication and evaluate any adaptations made by sports teams during this period.

The analysis incorporated the perspectives of a limited number of experts. The inclusion of a larger and more diverse panel of experts would provide a wider range of perspectives and opinions, enriching the overall understanding of sports communication strategies in Romania.

As future research perspectives, an extended comparative analysis of strategic communication practices among Romanian sports teams in different sports, both team and individual (e.g. football, tennis, athletics), in order to identify commonalities and differences

in communication strategies and effectiveness would provide a better overview of the context.

Also, investigating the impact of social media engagement strategies on fan engagement and support for Romanian sports teams, exploring innovative approaches such as interactive content, live streaming and fan participation is necessary in the context of rapid technological change.

The research can also be extended to include a cross-cultural analysis of strategic communication in sport, comparing Romanian sports teams with teams from other countries, in order to gain insights into cultural influences on communication strategies and their effectiveness.

A longitudinal study would also be relevant to track the evolution over time of strategic communication practices among sports teams in Romania, assessing the impact of changing trends in technology, audience behaviour and sports industry dynamics.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of sports communication, future research could incorporate fan perspectives through representative surveys or opinion polls. This would provide insights into the preferences, perceptions, and effectiveness of sports teams' strategic communication efforts from a national and fan-centric perspective.

Experimental studies could also be conducted to assess the causal effects of specific communication strategies on fan engagement and support. Manipulating variables such as content format, timing or platform could help to identify the most effective strategies to promote fan engagement and support for sports teams in Romania.

The analysis focused on the current state of strategic communication practices, but did not assess the long-term effects of these strategies on fan loyalty, brand perception or team performance. Future research could explore the impact of strategic communication on various outcomes to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its effectiveness.

While efforts have been made to provide objective and systematic data collection and analysis, there may still be inherent biases or limitations in the interpretation and analysis process. These limitations should be acknowledged and addressed in future research to ensure robust and unbiased findings.

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