Social media as a 'service' for value co-creation by integrating sponsoring companies, sports entities and fans

Harri Jalonen

Abstract – Social media has changed the ways we communicate, collaborate and connect with each other. It has also influenced our habits of consuming sports. Social media has allowed direct interaction between sponsoring companies, athletes/players and fans. Drawing on the service dominant logic of value co-creation, the conceptual paper identifies three operant resources which are beneficial for value co-creation: i) social identity and sense of community, ii) congruence and brand personality, and iii) participatory culture and fan activation. The paper contributes to the theoretical discussion on how social can be media used for value co-creation purposes in the sports industry.

Keywords – sport, value co-creation, social media, service

1 INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed the sports industry. In 2003 we were not aware of Facebook; thirteen years later it had inspired about 1.6 billion monthly active users. Nowadays Facebook has grown into the world's largest community of sports fans by providing a platform for 650 million people to connect with sports pages. Without exaggeration, it can be argued that Facebook has become the world's largest stadium. Obviously Facebook is not the only social media platform which inspires sports spectators. YouTube and Twitter amongst many other sites have changed sports consumption. Providing sport live streams and on demand videos, social media platforms have expanded to encompass contents previously broadcasted almost exclusively by television channels. As social media has lowered the threshold for contacting and personalized communication, it has enabled sports spectators to connect directly to their favourite team(s) and player(s). The rapid growth of mobile social media usage means that many of these connections happen on a real-time basis.

Sports raises strong emotions. Many athletes and players have love-hate relationships with their audience. They are either admired passionately by their supporters or declined fiercely by their opponents. The stakes get higher when the occasional spectator becomes a fan. Sports fans are sensitive souls who don't like to be treated as consumers of sports. Instead sports fans see themselves as an integral part of their fandom object. Their role is not just to watch the game and cheer when their team scores but to live their life through the ups and downs of their team.

In addition to the relationship between a sports entity (team, athlete or event) and sport fans, sports is a context for wide variety of businesses. Brands use sports for direct business benefits such as increased brand equity and sales. Companies have also used sport indirectly for expressing their involvement in corporate social responsibility and good citizenship. In order to be successful and avoid to be blamed as intruders, it has been argued that companies need to understand and respect the subtle relationship between sports entities and fans.

Drawing on the understanding that social media has transformed the sports industry, the aim of this paper is to explore on what grounds and in what ways social media can be seen as a 'service' for value co-creation by integrating sponsoring companies, sports entities and sports fans. Theoretically the paper leans on *service dominant logic of value creation* [1]. The idea of S-D logic holds that value is not created by any single actor embedded in "goods" or "services" to be delivered to customers [1]. Instead, the creation of value arises through interactions between various actors.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the nature of sports industry shortly. Section 3 focuses on value and value co-creation in the contexts of value creation spheres and the service ecosystem. Section 4 identifies three sets of critical factors for value co-creation. Finally, Section 5 concludes the findings.

II SPORTS INDUSTRY – BUSINESS AS USUAL OR IDIOSYNCRATIC CULTURAL INSTITUTION?

Whether sports is distinctive from other socio-cultural activities is debatable. On the one hand, there is a great body of literature, which describes sport as a unique institution. Stewart and Smith [2], for example, reviewed the distinctiveness of sport from other businesses and concluded that there are features (such as intense emotions and tension

between on-field success and economic profitability) that make sport a special enterprise. Furthermore it has been suggested that sports' three sectoral landscapes, the corporate, the non-for-profit, and the public make it a special case [3]. It is believed that the social (e.g. sense of community and social inclusion) and public (e.g. health benefits) value of sport makes it a unique cultural institution that, albeit operating in a commercial environment [4, 5], should be addressed as a distinctive sport management discipline [6, 7]. The need for sport management has been emphasized by stressing that in contrast to (traditional) business, sport is significantly more concerned with beating rivals, winning trophies, sharing revenue and channelling the passions of both players (the employees) and fans (the customers) [8]. On the other hand, many scholars have pointed out that although sports may contain some special features, it fundamentally does not differ from other (entertainment) industries. One of the strongest arguments against the idiosyncrasy of sport comes from Smith and Stewart themselves [9] who critically revisited their original thoughts [2]. Smith and Stewart [9] conclude that although "sport leagues and competitions still have many idiosyncrasies that demand considered and strategic responses" it is difficult to defend that "sport has a monopoly over the delivery of intense emotional experiences, tribal belonging and strong interpersonal relationships".

As this paper's aim is not to study the nature of sports, but to explore value co-creation through social media, in the following sections the paper focuses on those features of sports which presumably have an influence on the ability of sports to bring together sponsoring companies, sports entities and fans.

III FROM VALUE CREATION SPHERES TO SERVICE ECOSYSTEM

Value has been a focal concept both in economics and business literature. Although its importance (or perhaps due to that) the concept is rather heterogeneous and elusiveness [10]. Traditionally value has been conceptualized on the individual level as an assessment of trade-off between benefits and sacrifices [11] or as means-ends-models [12]. For a company, value means financial benefits such as lower costs, higher productivity, increased revenues, a smaller asset or capital base, whereas at individual level value manifests either psychologically as greater job satisfaction, feelings of appreciation and higher self-esteem or financially as higher earnings, the acquisition of skills or opportunities to advance [13]. More recently many authors have introduced a more holistic and experiential perspective to value. It has been emphasized that value is created and experienced in the social context which brings together various actors, particularly companies as value providers and customers as value beneficiaries [14, 15, 16].

One important landmark of value creation literature was the article Evolving to a new dominant for marketing by Vargo and Lusch [1] who emphasized customers' role in value creation. Vargo and Lusch argued that the customer is always a co-creator of value whereas companies' role is to offer value propositions. In S-D logic, as it is called, "the roles of producers and consumers are not distinct, meaning that value is always co-created, jointly and reciprocally, in

interactions among providers and beneficiaries through the integration of resources and application of competences" [17]. Companies propose value through market offerings, and customers continue value-creation process through use [17].

As intriguing as these statements may sound, the problem that arises is that value creation is seen as too an all-encompassing process. The danger is that value creation becomes an empty concept without content, and when this happens, no rigorous theoretical or managerial implications can be drawn [13]. To avoid these pitfalls and understand the value creation process, the roles of value providers and value beneficiaries and the value creation context, Grönroos and Voima [13] developed three value spheres, i.e. provider sphere, customer sphere and joint sphere (Fig. 1). The provider sphere consists of various activities such as design, development, manufacturing and delivery, whereas the customer sphere, closed to the company, consists of independent value creation through the integration of resources provided by companies and other stakeholders. In the case the two value spheres overlap, it is reasonable to argue that value is co-created in a joint value sphere. However, Grönroos and Voima [13] underline that it is the customer's role and privilege to invite companies into the joint value sphere. Companies can provide resources and facilitate the value creation process but they cannot control it. Through direct interactions companies can aspire the access to the closed customer sphere. For Grönroos and Voima [13] value co-creation is a function of interaction between actors.
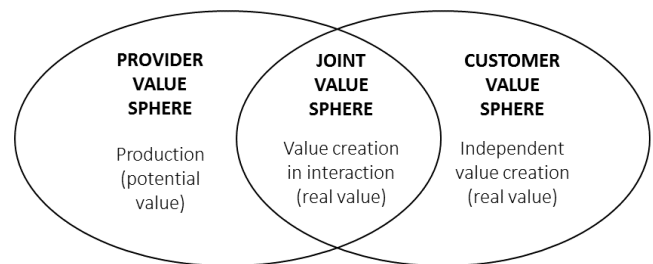

Fig. 1. Value creation spheres [13].

It is worth noting that Vargo's and Lusch's original article [1] was only a starting point in understanding the role of service in economic exchange. For Vargo and Lusch [18], service means a transcending concept, referring to the process of doing something beneficial for and in conjunction with some entity, rather than units of output – immaterial goods – as implied by the plural services. In the S-D perspective, products are seen as mechanisms, mediums or vehicles for delivering service [19]. The value proposed in the form of service is actualized in use. Value-in-use (opposite to value-in-exchange) highlights that value is realized through the integration and application of resources in a specific context [17].

Vargo and Lusch [20], somewhat ironically, agreed with the critiques by Grönroos and Voima [13] concerning the confusion of value co-creation. Nevertheless, their conclusions contradict one another. Grönroos and Voima [13] emphasized that value co-creation can only happen through direct interaction between the company and customers, whereas Vargo and Lusch 20] stressed a network structure for

value co-creation. Of particular interest is the *actor-to-actor* (A2A) approach to the discussion on value co-creation [20]. A2A orientation was introduced in order to disassociate actors from predesigned roles of companies as value providers and consumers as value beneficiaries. Vargo and Lusch [20] opposed the idea that one actor produces value and the other destroys or uses up value. Instead of fixed roles, they [20] argued that "all actors fundamentally do the same things: integrate resources and engage in service exchange, all in the process of cocreating value".

Vargo and Lusch [20] compressed their elaborated value co-creation framework into the following figure (Fig. 2).
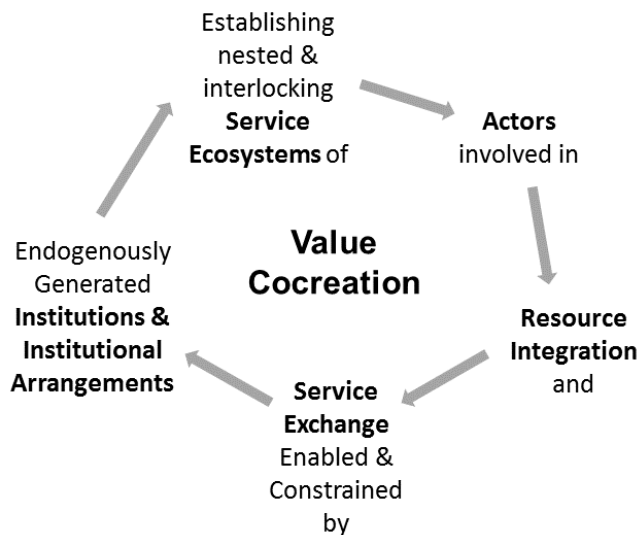

Fig. 2. The narrative and processes of S-D logic [20].

The fundamental difference between the value creation spheres [13] and value cocreation within the service ecosystem [20] is that the latter provides more dynamic and contextual orientation to value creation. Vargo's and Lusch's elaborated framework highlights that value creation is a multi-actor phenomenon in which actors are not predesigned as value producers or consumers. Quite the contrary, the key is resource-integrating and reciprocal-service-providing actors who co-create value through holistic and meaning-laden experiences in nested and overlapping service ecosystems enabled and constrained by their institutional arrangements.

In order to happen, *value co-creation activities require a context for integrating operant resources* (e.g., knowledge skills, culture). Contrary to the 'pipeline business model' in which value is created by controlling a linear series of activities, this paper takes a view that value co-creation is arranged around platforms in which services are offered in collaboration with many actors [21, 22]. It has been argued that a 'platform' exists "when there are common standards and interfaces that permit the elements of the ecosystem to innovate independently while advancing collectively" [23]. Although platforms have existed for decades, it is the digitization that has made them pervasive. Digitization has reduced the need to own physical infrastructure and offered low-barriers to join value creation [22]. Platforms may vary from business to business, however they all have the same basic structure and comprise four types of actors – i.e. owners, providers, producers and consumers.

According to Van Alstyne et al. [22], the move from pipeline to platform involves three keys shifts. Firstly, there is a shift from resource control to resource orchestration. Orchestration involves identifying the critical assets, investing in them and the coordination of their use in productive ways [24, 25]. In a case of platform, the critical (and inimitable) assets are the community (the network of producers and consumers) and the assets its members own and contribute [22]. Secondly, there is a shift from internal optimization to external interaction. As Vargo and Lusch [1] among others have pointed out, the resources used in value co-creation reside largely outside of the company with suppliers, customers, and other key stakeholders. Instead of controlling the activities and dictating the processes within the value chain, platforms create value by facilitating interactions between external producers and consumers, and by persuading various participants [22]. Thirdly, there is a shift from a focus on customer value to a focus on ecosystem value. For Vargo and Lusch [20], the integration of resources for value creation happens in the service ecosystem – i.e. in "a relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange". Contrary to pipelines, in which there are recognizable customers at the end of a linear process, platforms aim to "maximize the total value of an expanding ecosystem in a circular, iterative, feedback-driven process" [22]. Ecosystems permit the actors to innovate independently while competing collectively against other companies and/or ecosystems [26, 27].

Consistently with the new economic sociology [28], the paper suggests that nothing is valuable until it is made valuable. Value is not an objective feature of the entity neither a subjective opinion of the evaluator, but a phenomenon that emerges from the interaction. In practice and particularly within sports, value can take various manifestations such as economic (the difference between returns and costs), functional (the instrumental benefits, such as the utility, convenience, and control provided by the consumption of something), symbolic (in expressions of showing togetherness or distinctiveness), emotional (the utility derived from the feelings, or affective states that is generated by the consumption of something) and social (wellbeing of communities and increased social capital).

IV Social media as a service for enabling interactions between sponsoring companies, sports entities and sport fans

In everyday language, service is seen distinct from product. Also within academic literature the dominant narrative has differentiated services from products. Products are conceptualized as tangible objects with various attributes, whereas services are seen intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable, and perishable [29]. Along with the increasing importance of services, however, the more nuanced framings of service have evolved. Grönroos [30], for example, has defined a service as "a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not necessarily always, take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or

systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems." Seemingly the difference between products and services is blurring. In S-D perspective, the concept of service is broadened further to include the idea that service is the fundamental basis of exchange. In practice, service realizes as applying resources (particularly knowledge and skills) for the benefit of others or oneself.

Defining service as the process of integrating resources for doing something beneficial is consistent with IT service concepts such as software as a service [19]. Seen through the S-D lenses, social media can be conceptualized as a service that enables deeds, processes and performances for the benefit of another actor or the actor itself [1]. Through social media, companies can acquire inspiration from their customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. Social media means new possibilities for testing the ideas that are being developed within the company before their launch on the market. Social media has also enabled customers an effective medium to voice and share their opinions about products and services. Social media allows customers to acquire review information and interact with their peers and companies. In short, social media has transformed the A2A interactions and enabled the platform for co-creating value.

A2A interactions in social media can take several forms. For communication purposes, social media provides new tools to share, store and publish contents, discuss and express opinions and influence. Communication is executed through blogs and microblogs, photos and videos, media sharing sites, discussion forums and instant messaging. Communication is a two-way process of exchanging ideas and information. It is a process of sending and receiving contents. In collaboration, social media enables collective content creation and edition without location and time constraints. Empowering the users is consistent with the S-D logic: users co-create value by integrating resources (knowledge and skills) and engaging in service exchange. Social media blurs the line between producers and consumers. For connecting purposes, social media sites offer new ways of networking with other people, socializing oneself into the community and creating virtual worlds. Social network sites connect people with similar interests and enable the creation of communities around these interests.

A great body of literature has shown that social media has transformed the ways we communicate, collaborate and connect. However, social media is not a panacea for value co-creation. As always, the changes have introduced both new opportunities and challenges. In the following three subsections, the paper discusses the grounds and the ways in which social media can be seen as a 'service' for value co-creation by integrating sponsoring companies, sports entities and sports fans. In particular, the attention is focused on social media's ability to i) *provide identity and increase sense of community* (sport entity–sport fans), ii) *ensure congruence and develop brand personality* (sponsoring company–sport entity), and iii) *foster participatory culture and activate fans* (sponsoring company–sports fans).

Social identity and sense of community

The social identity theory explains group membership, group processes and intergroup relations [31]. The basic premise of the theory is that the identity functions as a social representation of bonding that helps individuals to form attachments with others who share similar interests, values and practices. Identity is also a means to segregate groups from each other. Both aspects of identity – togetherness and distinctiveness – is well reported in sports studies. Research has shown that identifying with a sport entity (athlete or team) has numerous positive effects such as increase in attendance [32] and spending [33], positive word-of-mouth [34], reduced levels of price sensitivity [35], increasing longevity of the fan's relationship and lifetime value to the sport organisation [36], decreasing switching behaviour and loyalty [37] and fostering resistance to negative press [38]. On the other side of the coin, many studies have explored the counter-productive behaviour which is at least partly engendered by the social identity. Giulianotti et al. [39] for example, have edited a book focused on the role of social identity in fan violence around football. The book suggests that strong identification with a football club and the feel of socio-political exclusion lay the basis for hooliganism.

Social identity cannot be created without communication. Identity is enacted through social interactions with others and our relationships with them. Identity is self-strengthening in a sense that as the identification gets stronger, the more likely it is for an individual to be motivated to ensure the wellbeing of the group, usually relative to other groups. Given the interactive nature of identity, it can be argued that social media is potentially ideal for building social identity and the sense of community.

Several studies have shown that sport fans are keen to express their experiences and engagement with athletes and teams. Wang [40], for example, has found out that the use of social media help sports fans to express their social identity and foster social interaction beyond the immediate environment. According to Highfield et al. [41], social networking sites such as Facebook are widely used by sports fans in engaging with each other while watching televised sports events.

Fan engagement is important in building social identity and a sense of community. It emerges and returns to cognitive and behavioural practices that are performed by sports fans. Fan engagement can be categorized into three types: functional, emotional and communal engagement [42]. Functional engagement refers to sports fans' interactions with each other in the process of co-creation, conversing and sharing the content in social media platforms. For instance, on Twitter, functional engagement is conducted through retweets, replies using @mentions, and hashtags [42]. Emotional engagement is based on joy and excitement and occasionally on frustration and disappointment elicited by sports experiences. Many studies have pointed out that fans use social media for sharing their positive and negative feelings with other fans [42, 43]. Social media has also been seen to lower the threshold between athletes and fans, and therefore increasing the feeling of closeness [44]. Communal engagement differs from other types of engagement in terms of its teleological aim. Communal engagement aims to create communities between the sports entity and sports fans. Hajli & Hajli [45] have suggested that social media can be used for creating social capital within the fan community. It has also been

argued that sports fans who feel strongly engaged are useful advocates who collaborate with other fans and defend their athletes and teams when a crisis arises [46]. Similarly Stavros et al. [47] have found out that due to the investment in the team, sports fans can "feel a strong need to deal with views that violate their self-perception" which motivate them to use social media as a forum "to come together to counter-argue information that runs contrary to such perceptions". Feeling togetherness in bad and in good times can create camaraderie – a desire for identification and interaction within the community, including knowledge seeking and preserving the group from negative influences [47].

Congruence and brand personality

Spending on sponsorship has increased steadily in recent years. It has been assessed that total global sponsorship spending exceeds 60 billion US dollars in 2016 [48]. Sports sponsorships takes precedence over other forms of sponsorship with the market share of 70 percent. As discussed in the previous section the popularity of sports sponsorship is based on sports' ability to engage sports fans and create meaningful experiences. Sponsoring companies are eager to take advantage of fans' emotional attachment to athletes and teams [49]. It is expected that many affects, such as passion, hope, esteem and camaraderie [47] experienced by sports fans can be transferred from them to sponsors' brands.

To ensure beneficial outcomes of sports sponsorship, and to avoid counter-productive ones, the paper argues in favour of fit between the sponsoring company and sports entity. The need for the fit can be explained by the congruity theory. Congruity theory is based on the premise that people have a need for harmony among thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and they are motivated to maintain uniformity among these elements. In the case of incongruity people feel confused and evaluate information negatively. Congruity (and incongruity) influences on consumers' choices and behaviour [50, 51].

Benefits of congruence in the context of sports sponsorship have been reported in several studies. Demirel & Erdogmus [49], for example, have found out that fans who see a fit between the sponsoring company and sport team "are more likely to believe that the sponsor's motives are sincere and sincerity perceptions, in turn, positively influence attitudes toward sponsoring company and intentions to purchase sponsor's products". Similarly Gwinner & Bennett [52], Lee & Cho [53] and Close & Lacey [54] concluded that the stronger the fit between the brand and sponsored object, the more likely it is that sponsorship increases positive attitudes towards the sponsor and higher purchase intentions on the sponsor's brand.

Social media has not only changed peoples' everyday communication behaviour, but it has also affected their expectations toward sponsoring brands. Social media can be seen as an arena for showing congruence between brands and sports entities. Instead of traditional company–customer communication, social media emphasizes human–human interaction. Consequently, social media has enabled sponsoring companies to develop brand personality, i.e. the set of human characteristics (e.g. being fun, sincere, reliable, exciting) associated with the brand [55]. Through social

media presence sponsoring brands and top athletes/teams can create mutually beneficial relationships. Several studies show that social media platforms enable fans unparalleled access to the personal lives of sports stars in a manner that provides them opportunities to build their personal brand and attract sponsoring companies in the process [56, 57, 58, 59, 60]. A study, which analyzed social media profile and content created by well-known sports figures, showed that social media can be used for enhancing fan engagement and increase sports stars' and sponsoring companies' brand value and connectivity with consumers [61]. Many studies have provided recipes on how to leverage sports stars in building brand personality. For instance, sports stars have been advised to leverage their ties with sponsoring brands via subtle mentions on social media platforms in the form of status updates, pictures containing the sponsor's product, or links to other online content tied to the sponsor [59], whereas sponsoring brands have been encouraged to find a sport influencer, analyze his/her brand personality and if the fit between the brand and sport influencer exists, then try to get him/her involved with the sponsoring brand [57].

However lucrative the benefits of connections between sponsors and sports entities can be, they do not happen by themselves. Contrary, sponsors can be seen as intruders [62, 63]. There is always a risk that sports fans do not accept sponsors' messages. It is worth noting that social media has also allowed sports fans an effective channel to voice their discontent. Therefore, the significance of congruence cannot be overestimated. Metaphorically, it can be argued that the congruity and fit between a brand and sports entity's personality act as a vaccine against accusations that sport sponsors behave opportunistically [64].

Participatory culture within sports fans

Companies sponsor sports for several reasons. A short overview of the literature shows that investing in sports entities is an effective means to increase brand awareness [65], to build brand personality [66], to advance purchase intentions [67], and to communicate a company's corporate social responsibility [68]. Companies rely on sports entities as these provide channels to reach their existing or potential customers. Sponsorship is deemed effective because people are inclined to discern the benefits of sponsorship investment and therefore perceive sponsorship as less commercial than traditional advertising [69]. The nobility of sponsorship is conventionally supported by sponsoring initiatives that have societal objectives [70].

In principal, social media is a promising context for building a relationship between sponsoring companies and sports fans. Social media allows a direct channel for promoting brands. Smith et al. [71], for example, have studied alcohol brands' social media strategies and found out that social media has enabled brands an effective channel to speak to consumers in a way which is invulnerable to most forms of existing marketing regulation. As a result, they see a merger of sport and drinking cultures. However, the success is not always guaranteed. Quite contrary, things can go adverse. The main reason for undesirable consequences is that social media communication cannot be controlled. As Berthon et al.

[72], among others, have pointed out, social media has shifted the locus of power from the organization to the consumer. It is in consumers' hands whether they participate in the offerings provided by companies. While companies can decide the content of TV commercials, they cannot decide how their brands are treated in social media discussions.

Although social media is an uncontrollable context, it does not mean that companies cannot make use of it. They can, but it requires that companies are able to leverage participatory culture through social media. The chances are good as a strong inclination to participation has always been characteristic in sports. Sports fans are known as persons who readily demonstrate "intense collective passion" [73]. Adapting the concept of "produsage" it can be argued that sports fans are "active users and participants in the creation as well as the usage of media and culture" [74]. Jenkins et al. [75] have incisively argued that we live in a participatory culture which consists of relatively "low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices".

To build participatory culture and activate sports fans through social media, sponsoring companies can use a variety of tactics. Just to mention an example, Smith et al. [71] have identified four social activation strategies exploited by alcohol companies. The investigated companies aimed to stimulate their consumers through social media by calling to compete (leveraging the competitive nature of sport), collaborate (promoting user-generated content using sport as a common language), celebrate (using sporting victory and shared camaraderie) and consume (embedding drinking as part of a consumers' sport consumption practices). Although alcohol brands' success may have detrimental health consequences, the example shows how social media can be used in fostering participation and activating sports fans.

The key thing is that social media is not seen as one more (unidirectional) communication channel, but as a platform which invites sports fans to co-create content. It is also worth noting that social media gives companies detailed data (comments, likes, retweets, followers, interests etc.) on sports fans. This provides companies more means to engage fans cognitively and emotionally. Adapting the idea of the customer value sphere [13], it can be argued that social media offers companies a direct access to sports fans' value sphere. At best, the result is positive consumer responses such as increasing brand recognition [76], positive attitudes toward the sponsoring company [49] and finally a higher likelihood of purchasing from the sponsoring companies [57].

V CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored on what grounds and in what ways social media can be seen as a 'service' [1] for value co-creation by integrating sponsoring companies, sports entities and sports fans. Drawing on the service dominant logic [1], the paper has identified three critical operant resources for value co-creation through social media: i) *social identity and sense of community* (sport entity–sport fans), ii) *congruence and brand personality* (sponsoring company–sport entity), and iii) *participatory culture and fan activation* (sponsoring

company–sports fans). The paper argues that the three identified operant resources enable actor-to-actor relationships through social media in sports ecosystem. Figure 3 summarizes the findings.
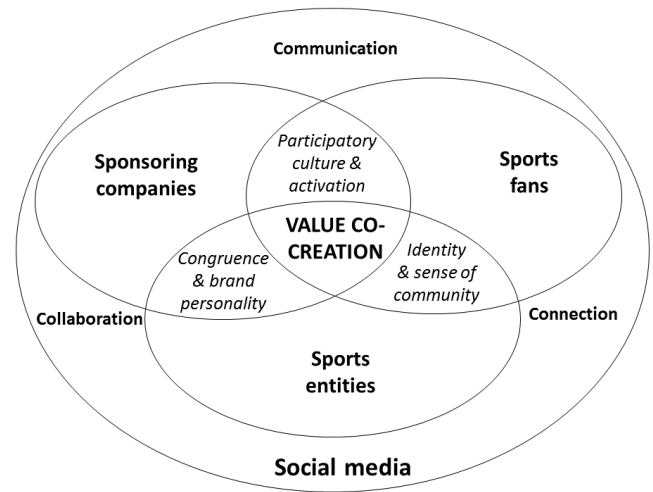

Fig. 3. Value co-creation through social media in sports ecosystem.

Consistently with the concept of ecosystem [26], the identified three resources are not separated, but intertwined. Firstly, in order to effectively speak to sports fans, sponsoring companies must ensure the fit between the brand of the sponsor and the entity sponsored. Companies can use sport in value creation if they are able to speak to sports fans in a way that the passion they feel over the sport is transferred to the companies' brands. Without congruence, there is a risk that the sponsoring company is seeing as intruder by the fans. Secondly, to foster participatory culture and activate sports fans, companies should focus on social media tactics which enable fans to enact their identity and express their belonging to community. This is because the value arises – if at all – when sports fans engage with the sponsored athlete or team in a way which creates positive buying intentions, inspires positive word-of-mouth or deepens customer loyalty. Thirdly, individual athletes and teams can best promote the brands which resonate with their own brand personality. Social media has humanized sports stars and made them more reachable. As a consequence, sports fans have become susceptible to brands promoted by their favourite athletes.

The paper contributes to the theoretical discussion on how social media can be used for value creation purposes in the sports ecosystem which consists of sponsoring companies, sports entities and fans. Obviously, empirical research is needed to test the claims presented in this paper.

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