

Meters Wide: A Failed Mediatic Annexation of Sporting Heroes During Pandemic Times?

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Abstract. *This sports media research uses a single case study approach to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mediatic consumption of sports heroes. The case of airing the “3mm” documentary film about WTA tennis player Simona Halep on Romanian television is being analyzed. The theoretical framework is set around the concept of parasocial interaction specific for the mediated relationships between sports fans and their favorite sports brands. The research question asks about the factors induced by the COVID-19 pandemic that might have influenced the rather low audiences of the broadcasted documentary. Results show that, indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic might have well had a considerable impact upon audience figures, mainly because, due to the pandemic situation, the patterns of parasocial interaction between sports fans and sports brands have been altered. The paper discusses the changes in parasocial interaction which occurred due to the pandemic.*

Keywords: parasocial interaction; sports marketing; sport brands; mass-media; tennis; documentary

Introduction

On December 1st, 2020, the documentary film “3mm” about WTA tennis player Simona Halep premiered on Romanian television. The mediatic event was loaded with cultural significance. It was the first documentary ever made about Halep, 29 years old and ranked second in the WTA circuit at the moment of airing, former world number one, Grand Slam winner at the French Open (2018) and Wimbledon (2019), holder of 22 career titles and of a 70% W/L career record. The documentary promised to show what a day of training looked like in Halep’s life, “one of the greatest athletes in Romania”, as per the official description of the YouTube re-post [1]. The documentary aimed to highlight that Halep’s successes were “not a mere “happening”, but a “result” – [...] of [hard] work and dedication”, as presented on the broadcaster’s official website [2]. Undoubtedly, Simona Halep is one of Romania’s heroes, having exceeded the boundaries of sports. She is not only a sporting performer, but a “[national] treasure” (Kiarash, 2020). Apart from the symbolism of the documentary’s main performer, the socio-cultural context was charged with a set of other factors that seemed ready to boost the mediatic impact of “3mm”. December 1st is the National Day in Romania. Airing a show about a national hero on the National Day can be interpreted as a narrative to induce patriotic feelings. There is a fit of image between the sports brand Simona Halep and the country brand Romania that can be leveraged: each of the two derives meaning and significance from the other, which can reciprocally improve brand identity and increase acceptance with fans, followers or customers. The high involvement status of spectators is activated when two such compelling brands are aligned. Then, the documentary has been broadcasted in the early fringe, at 4 p.m., a propitious time for audiences, especially since, in 2020,

due to the restrictive measures meant to slow down the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, people were mostly sitting at their homes, “cocooning”. The National Day in Romania is usually marked through the military parades across the country, broadcasted live on TV. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, though, such parades have been canceled in 2020, with televisions losing an important mediatic product, able to skyrocket audiences. As such, “3mm” might have been a good mediatic replacement, especially since it was aired on ProTV, one of the country’s top commercial broadcasters, on the exact day of its 25th anniversary.

As demonstrated by research studies, national rhetoric can help construct cultural symbols and, thus, can attract large audiences (Löfgren, 1989; Sörlin, 1999). Premiering the documentary on December 1st was intended as a visual manifestation of patriotism, which Nüesch and Franck (2009) identify as a main trigger of TV sports audiences.

However, according to audience data collected by Kantar Media, copyrighted by ARMA (The Romanian Association for Audience Measurement) and published by specialized website www.paginademedi.ro, the “3mm” documentary attracted 94,000 viewers on the commercial segment (2.2% rating, 10.3 share) [3]. Comparatively, on the same segment, 103,000 viewers watched “By the Sea” (2015), a love drama starring Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, aired by the same broadcaster, but in late fringe and overnight, between 12.15 a.m. and 3.00 a.m. [4]. Moreover, according to the daily rating tops, the broadcaster had nine other shows, spread throughout the entire day, which drew larger audiences than did the documentary.

A point which should not go unnoticed is the fact that the “3mm” documentary was commissioned by one of Halep’s main commercial sponsors, Banca Transilvania / BT [5], with the short film being dubbed a “motivational documentary for all Romanians” [6]. It followed a much-publicized advertising campaign under the title “Let’s get down to business, Romania!” which ran in 2018-2019 and portrayed Halep as a role model for the emerging, forward-looking generations, but also as a shining light for Romanian society as a whole [7]. Incidentally, the first promotional campaign of BT featuring Halep was also launched around the National Day in Romania, a day of even more significance in 2018 as it marked 100 years since the Unification of Greater Romania after the First World War [8]. That BT, a private bank whose designation references the name of the most treasured Romanian province (Transylvania) chose to build their communication strategy around nationalistic imagery (the National Day of Romania; Halep as the most prominent national sports icon of the last 30 years) goes to show a conscious effort on the part of the bank to gain nationalistic credentials on the back of such annexations.

This commentary reflects on the possible causes of the rather low audiences of the “3mm” documentary, whose ex-ante mediatic construction seemed to have all what was needed in order to make the airing a highlight of the day. A mixed research methodology is applied, mainly focusing on the case study approach, employing a constructivist research philosophy, with a narrative-interpretive focus. We maintain that a considerable portion of the mediatic failure surrounding the documentary can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic situation met throughout 2020. Our research purpose is to find out if and how the Covid-19 public health crisis has changed the relationship between sports fans and their beloved sports brands. The research question asks what Covid-19 related factors have influenced the low audience of the “3mm” documentary? The documentary is used as a case study in an attempt to extrapolate the findings over the wider relationship between sports fans and sports brands.

This paper can make a significant contribution to the already existing body of sports media consumption research, as it investigates the patterns of mediatic sports consumption during unprecedented times such as those generated by the Covid-19 crisis. The main limitations of the

research are generated by the research method used, namely a single case study analysis. The method has indeed led us to what Maoz (2002) called a freeform research: we did not follow a thorough methodological guideline with systematic procedures, but rather tried to examine and understand why and how the wider public reacted to the airing of the documentary as it did. Second, being a single case study, reliability and replicability are questionable (Street, Ward, 2012). The broadcasting audiences might have been such as they've been due to a certain context at that particular moment when the documentary was broadcasted, without necessarily involving any particular sort of theories that might be replicated to explain a certain behavior which should affect other audiences as well. Therefore, last but not least, questions can be raised about the validity of the research results and their generalization to other situations or cases, unlikely to be so similar in detail to the one chosen in this paper (Yin, 2013).

Literature review

Sports fandom plays such an important role in contemporary societies that it has come to be described as a lifestyle: consuming sports, either live or through media, is central to the lives of people (Babazadeh and Najafzadeh, 2021; Levy, 2005). Sports enthusiasts are not only fans, but also consumers or spectators who engage with their favorite athletes through various means of expression, such as purchasing merchandised products, or watching / following the athlete through mass media or social media (Toder-Alon et al., 2019; Parry, 2009). Identification with an athlete transcends the act of watching a particular sporting event (i.e., a match) as it takes place and extends into the rest of the past time of the fan, thus becoming a way of life, up to the point where the fan comes to worship the athlete and make him or her into a personal hero (Burca et al., 2015; Levin et al., 2004).

In the mediated world of professional sports, parasocial interaction offers a possibility to develop a relationship with the favourite athletes. Parasocial interaction describes, at large, the relationship that is being created between media consumers and media figures (Giles, 2002). The seminal study of Horton and Wohl (1956) laid the foundations of parasocial interaction, describing it as the long-term, intimate relationship that develops between a media consumer and media personae. Parasocial interaction is rooted in the traditional, face-to-face interaction between humans, but it differs from these by the facts that it is not direct, but mediated, and that, unlike a face-to-face relationship where both persons meet or share values, in this case, the media consumer develops a relationship to the mediated sporting hero, but the latter does not return the involvement. If direct interactions are one-to-one and reciprocal, in a parasocial interaction, a media figure is followed by a mass of people whom it does not know personally. On the other side, the media consumers perceive a sense of attraction and of belonging to the mediatic figure. Therefore, parasocial interaction can be interpreted as one-sided, since only the media consumer is invested in the relationship, but not the media personae as well.

The relationship with the media figure can occur at different levels of involvement. At first, there is a mediatic exchange, as the consumer follows the appearances of the sporting hero in the media. Moving on, the exchange can transform into identification, when the consumer perceives a situation of closeness that leads to the adoption of certain behaviors of intimacy with the media personae. As such, parasocial interaction has a direct impact on quality of life. The mediatic relationship that the consumer enters into offers a sense of belonging that can increase happiness and the perceived value of one's life (Kim, Kim, 2020). There is a special link between parasocial interaction and quality of life especially during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. As direct, face-to-face interactions between people have been reduced due to the restrictive lockdown measures,

entering a relationship with a mediatic hero can supplement a person's social needs of belonging and of identification (Jarzyna, 2021).

Discussions about parasocial interaction need to be linked with the social impact theory, according to which beliefs, behaviors or emotions of people are modified as a result of the real or imagined presence of others (Latané, 1981). These "others" possess physical or psychological abilities that can impinge upon human fellows, directing them towards acting, feeling or thinking in a particular way. To this extent, social impact theory is closely linked to the force field theory, by which the behaviors or feelings of an individual are shaped by the interactions to which this individual is exposed in his field (Roşca, 2020: 88-91). Judging by the social impact theory, some of the "others" with most significant impact upon people in the social field are athletes, especially if they are mediatic figures as well.

During 2020, athletes have been ascribed with particular role modelism, their power to influence, especially over youth and teenagers, being considered as a lever with sufficient capacity to praise certain behaviors needed in order to efficiently carry out the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic (Scerri, Grech, 2020). As soon as the pandemic broke out in spring 2020, the internet was invaded with text or video messages from athletes asking their fans to behave appropriately and to follow the instructions of the public health authorities. At the same time, apart from positive messages, the role of the media has also been underlined when it came to displaying what was deemed as inappropriate behavior of athletes (Leng, Phua, 2020; Sato et al., 2022).

Methodology

A case study method with a single unit of observation has been used for this paper. The case study research aims to explore the socio-cultural settings surrounding the "3mm" documentary about Simona Halep and its audience figures. The exploration is done into detail, thus ensuring the research "thickness" (Cousin, 2005), trying to advance understanding on how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted upon the mediatic consumption of sports and sports heroes. The case study method is used as we attempt to analyze the specific circumstances of the mediatic sports consumption during the pandemic, to understand its contextual factors and to provide specific insights (Ingemarsdotter et al., 2020). The information analyzed and used in this study is closely related to the specific case. We use an interpretive approach to make sense of that information. Interpretive research is rooted in ethnographic studies (Jackson, 2011), helping the researcher to gain deeper understanding of the settings observed. Case study research is not necessarily methodologically bound, but allows for mixed-method processes to be used (Cavaye, 1996), whichever makes sense for the researcher to better understand the settings. Therefore, case studies can be related to the bricolage method in field research, which allows the researcher to use enough flexibility in order to navigate through various areas, to draw on different sources and to try to construct an interpretation based on any information existing in the context of the study. We also opted for the case study method as it offers enough room for transdisciplinarity (Klein, 2004; Schmidt, Pröpper, 2017), which is needed as the situation analyzed in this paper is a mixture of sports, media, epidemiology, public health, marketing, society, culture etc., thus we need to extract meanings from multiple theoretical areas.

Discussions

In this section, which aims to find an answer to the research question, several factors that might be related to the low audiences of the "3mm" documentary will be discussed:

(1) Loss of spectator interest for sporting events during the Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has led to the cancellation or postponement of major sporting events, such as the Tokyo Olympic Games, the European Football Championships, much of UCI's cycling season etc. (Davis, 2020; Hayes, 2020). With people forced to isolate themselves at home and with the sporting events cancelled, the relationship between fans and their favourite athletes has had to suffer. First, in that the genuine, direct contact of attending a sporting event live from the stands or from the terraces has been made impossible, due to both lockdown and cancellation of the events. Even after sports have resumed towards the end of the summer 2020, most events have been carried out behind closed doors, thus distancing fans even farther. Second, even if the events were broadcasted on TV or streamed live on the internet, the parasocial interaction between fans and their beloved athletes had to suffer. On the one hand, people didn't feel like following sports any longer, since 2020 had burdened them with other thoughts. Their minds and their attention reached towards other focal points of interest, such as their own health and the health of the beloved ones. Moreover, since many people had to face dramatic situations in 2020, being seriously ill or grieving for the lost ones, they were not concerned with mediatic sports entertainment any longer. While it is true that sports can have a cathartic role of emotional purification, acting as a *débouché* to help forget about worries, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have brought too much to endure even for the most fanatical supporters (Black, 2021). On the other hand, sports without fans in attendance lose their spectacularism. That spectacularism is one of the key ingredients of mediatic attendance. Fans cheering and singing in the stands, waving flags, displaying banners, clapping or even booing or swearing at the opponents are part of the salt and pepper of the mediatic sports product, which has the gift to attract mediatic viewership as well. But the joy of watching sporting events in mass-media dilutes when one gets to see a gloomy, dull picture of empty seats, or seats covered by sponsoring meshes.

This situation has also been met in the WTA circuit in mid-spring 2020, when strict sanitary protocols, including a generalized quarantine and worldwide restrictions, prompted leaders of tennis bodies to abruptly suspend activity (Burnar, 2023). Although some lower-key events were still played, sometimes to hazardous effect, it was just in the second half of the year that tennis resumed, only to do it without spectators. Notably, Wimbledon was canceled for the first time in history, while Roland Garros was moved from summer to October, capping a chaotic year for tennis and its fans, who now had more stringent matters on their mind.

(2) Lack of continuity in the relationship between sports brands and fans. As underlined by Bilgili and Ozkul (2015), continuity is an important factor in brand positioning and in maintaining long-term relationships between brand and user. A sports brand such as Simona Halep that aims to remain a top choice in the awareness of consumers and fans needs to take part in competitions and to be active on the court. Due to the Covid-19 crisis, many WTA tournaments have been called off, with Halep playing less, and earning considerably less (Šimić, 2021), than in usual years. This diminished participation in tournaments has also cooled down the relationship with the fans, impacting upon the awareness of the Halep brand.

(3) The emergence of heroes other than athletes during the Covid-19 pandemic. For the wider public, the heroes of the 2020-2021 pandemic have not been athletes, but medics, doctors, epidemiologists, physicians, nurses, technicians and any other type of health care workers who have constantly risked their own health and their own lives by confronting the virus up-front, in the first row of interventions, often ill-equipped and without the necessary, basic resources, in order

to care for patients in critical conditions (Greenberg, Gnanapragasam, 2020; Shojaei, Masoumi, 2020). The media headlines of 2020 and, to a lesser extent, 2021, were not any longer so much about sports, but rather about what Bauchner and Easley (2020) have called the health care heroes of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of them have been unsung heroes: people who simply continued doing their jobs, with diligence and professionalism, but at a much higher level of risk. Then there were also the mediatic heroes, a handful of medics in nearly each country of the world, whose contributions to fighting the epidemic have been either acknowledged or (and?) annexed by the media, either as a sign of genuine appreciation or (maybe?) as a need to create mediatic heroes to boost consumption or audiences.

(4) “3mm” as a TV “panic buy”? The need of “filling in the gap” left by live sporting events.

It has been noted that the Coronavirus pandemic has forced the television industry to adapt in the wake of a decline in television advertising (Buehler, 2020), an important chunk of it being formerly driven by the broadcasting of live sporting events. As such, television networks around the globe, Romanian ones included, had to resort to different strategies to “fill in the gap” not only money-wise, but also content-wise. That was also the case with ProTV, one of the heavyweights of Romanian media, which has a long tradition of broadcasting sporting events of national importance, such as Champions League football games (of Romanian teams but not only), the matches of the national football team, or even finals played by Romanian champions on the world stage, such Simona Halep at Grand Slam tournaments. However, as the pandemic unfolded and live content was scarce if non-existent, substitute programming was put in place by Romanian TV stations, with sport a convenient, morale-boosting choice: from the re-airing of Romania’s national football team famous matches at World Cup 1994 (as seen on TVR, the Romanian national public channel, at the beginning of the pandemic) to that of 3mm’s broadcasting, mimicking ESPN’s tried and tested tactic that same year to address the challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic with the aid of sporting documentaries (Buehler, 2020). We argue that, seeing ProTV was a generalist network and not a sports-centric one, the airing of “3mm” by the TV channel was more of a “panic buy” (notwithstanding the fact that Banca Transilvania paid for its promotion) than a firm strategy of alternative programming (as was the case of ESPN), its isolated airing thus setting the stage for its ultimate failure. Buehler (2020) notes that, with few notable exceptions (as for example *The Last Dance*, a sports documentary mini-series about Michael Jordan), alternative programming struggled to obtain proper rating numbers. 3mm’s abysmal figures, therefore, fit into this pattern of public neglect and underachievement by pandemic TV content.

(5) The lack of tradition in sports documentary production and consumption. The tradition of producing sports documentaries is relatively new in the West, tracing back to ESPN’s influential 30 for 30 series, which started in 2009 and is credited with having developed a new audience (Lavelle, 2015). The series, initially focusing on mainly North American sporting heroes and stories, were innovative in that they employed various creative filmmakers and went beyond the “conventional” biographical sketch by blending ESPN archival footage with cultural perspectives of sports (Vogan, 2012). In the summer of 2013, a spinoff of the series premiered under the title *Nine for IX*, featuring female athletes (Lavelle, 2015), with the first movie in the series (*Venus vs.*) focusing on tennis player Venus Williams, and the last one (*Branded*) analyzing the sexualization of female athletes in sport marketing (Antunovic & Linden, 2020) – prominent amongst them, former tennis player Anna Kournikova (Ewing & Rachel, 2013). One can remark that, while “3mm” traces its lineage to these pioneering sports documentaries, it lacks the social, racial or

feminist commentary that pervade many of those – its main, stated goal, being to provide a glimpse into the making of a “Romanian champion” and, indirectly, to promote Banca Transilvania as a supporter of such societal role models.

In addition, the Romanian sports mediatic landscape lacks tradition in the production and consumption of sports documentaries¹. Although some recent sports documentaries with local production exist², these are isolated cases rather than part of a market avid for such productions, which would demand and consume such genres. Also, most such documentaries are distributed through YouTube, since TV stations are not a preferred distribution channel for this type of media product.

One of the reasons why the “3mm” Simona Halep documentary was a flop in terms of TV ratings may also be the low production value of the documentary, i.e. its perception as an “advertisement documentary” [9]. As for the first observation, contrary to the director’s claims, the production did not represent neither “a risk” nor an artistic innovation, being limited to the juxtaposition of filmed scenes of the player's physical workouts, her training sessions and Halep's statements on her trade. Secondly, it should be noted that the director denied the documentary was an advertisement, stating that the intervention of the sponsor only consisted in presenting their cartboard at the end, apart from that, the whole production being an idea of observational documentary which the tennis player really enjoyed [9].

The documentary ran only once on television. In addition, it was uploaded to YouTube, where, in two years, it gathered almost 1.3 million views. Thus, it can be said that the media value of the documentary differs depending on the broadcast channel. If, on TV, the factors of the moment led to a low audience, in the perpetual environment of YouTube, the documentary continues to gather views.

(6) The commercial context. The context surrounding the production and the timing of the launch of “3mm” is also to be taken into consideration when debating the dismal failure of the film to attract viewers. On the one hand, Banca Transilvania (BT) has a vested interest in sports sponsorship, with the Halep deal being only one, and maybe the most eye-catching, of such partnerships (Blog Banca Transilvania, 2021). For example, since 2015, the bank has sponsored a plethora of sports, from basketball to rallying to gymnastics, either as a sponsor of sporting events (such as the flagship event Sports Festival, which featured Halep in 2019) or of national sporting champions. Furthermore, since 2018, it has also lent its name to the multipurpose arena in Cluj, which was branded BTarena (Blog Banca Transilvania, 2018). More recently, alongside the

¹ Several sports documentaries have been produced during the Communist regime, yet they lacked the mediatic breakthrough needed to become popular products. Most notably, director Ervin Szekler (b. 1925, Timisoara – d. 1997, Bucharest) is known for the many sports documentaries produced at *Studioul de filme documentare și jurnale de actualități „Alexandru Sahia”* (“*Alexandru Sahia*” studio of documentary films and current affairs journals). A list of these can be found at: <http://aarc.ro/personalitate/view/erwin-szekler>

² „*UTA Arad - 70 de ani*” (“*UTA Arad – 70 years*”), produced by UTA Arad, 2015; „*În căutarea fotbalului pierdut*” (“*In search of the lost football*”), produced by Adevărul, 2016; „*Oina, sportul național al românilor*” (“*Oina, the national sport of Romanians*”), produced by Fundația Student Plus Timișoara, 2016; „*Petrolul nu moare*” (“*Petrolul won't die*”), produced by Damiano Benzoni and Gianni Galleri, 2018; „*Cea mai frumoasă formă de patriotism*” (“*The most beautiful form of patriotism*”), produced by Recorder, 2019; „*Henț, careu!*” (“*Hand ball, penalty box!*”), produced by ProTv, 2019; „*Un drum fără sfârșit: 100 de ani*” (“*A road without an end: 100 years*”), produced by Politehnica Timișoara and Druckeria, 2021; „*Rapid București – Renașterea*” (“*Rapid Bucharest – The Rebirth*”), produced by FC Rapid 1923, 2021; „*Povestea tobelor din Giulești*” (“*The story of the drums in Giulesti*”), miniseries, produced by OH, 2013-2022 etc.

Romanian Football Federation, BT has launched a financial education program aimed at young Romanian footballers (StartupCafe, 2021). Such ventures into the world of sport are of course nothing new in the international arena, yet on the national stage they have lately become symptomatic of a highly competitive banking landscape, where other private banks also use investments in sport as a promotional medium. One such example is the French-owned bank BRD, which has previously featured Romanian sporting greats in its commercials, most notably the golden trio of Romanian sport: Nadia Comăneci, Gheorghe Hagi, Ilie Năstase (Ghiseulbancar.ro, 2006), has supported an important tennis tournament in Bucharest for many years (BRD Năstase Țiriac Trophy) and also sponsors media outlets such as *treizecizero.ro* (a website covering tennis) and *lead.ro* (featuring some less popular sports), to name just a few.

Conclusion

The research results show that the Covid-19 pandemic had a considerable effect on the audiences for the “3mm” documentary. Apart from the latter two factors discussed, which have general validity, the first four factors are all related to the pandemic. These four factors had a considerable influence over the rating figures of the documentary. The same four factors indicate that the sports fans’ behavior and their parasocial interaction with sports brands was altered by and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The intimate (but still mediated) relationship of sports fans with their beloved brands or heroes has been modified by the contexts created by the Covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022. These were a couple of years with what might be termed as an unusual relationship / parasocial interaction of sports fans with sports brands, unmet before the pandemic. These unusual factors have also had a significant impact on the low audiences of the broadcasting premiere on TV. The fact that the documentary continues to gather views on YouTube even after the most crucial years of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022) might indicate that the documentary found its way to the public, yet in terms of TV airing, it might not have reached its potential. On June 9th, 2018, the same broadcaster, ProTV, and exactly at the same time of the day (4 p.m.) aired live the Roland Garros ladies’ singles final, in which Halep defeated Sloane Stephens to win her first senior’s grand slam title. The event was watched by 1.3 million people (Bunea, 2018), compared to the 94,000 who watched the documentary. This is a sign that the Romanian public is not a consumer of sports documentaries, but rather prefers sports events as such, broadcasted live. However, looking at the viewership of the 2018 final – which indicates an existing interest for Simona Halep among the Romanian public – we might assume that, had it not been for the Covid-19 pandemic context, the “3mm” documentary would also have reached higher ratings on TV. Unfortunately, the parasocial interaction circumstances that gathered a record viewership for the 2018 final were altered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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