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Sports Brands Communication in the 'COVID' Age: Strategies, Representations, Identity and Consumption¹

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Abstract

The paper investigates the role of brand communication during the first period of pandemic age, in which Sport and PA were also called to redesign behaviours, cultural and consumer practices as well as to answer new questions of meaning. The new spirit of the time we are living in, is characterized by the domination of the medical-scientific language, and by a strong contraction of the economy in which trends and fashions appear scaled down and subordinate to new goals of well-being. The pandemic has increased the digitized experiences of sports practices, bringing out more and more aspects of individualism, narcissism, which are combined with a continuous search for well-being, health, beauty, fashion. Sports brands therefore appear as social spaces to observe the changes in sports communication and its consumption practices.

The paper analysis how – during the first lockdown – the story-telling of sports brands has changed values, going to new socially responsible commitments in terms of global health and security. Following the multidimensional theory of communication, some emblematic cases of global sports brands are investigated through qualitative

¹The paper is the result of a shared work among the authors; in detail G. Russo authored of par. 1, 3, 4, 5; L. Tallarita par. 2. The Conclusions are in common.

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methods, in order to highlight the emergence of new issues: representations, identities, rules and consumption as innovative aspects of sports cultural production.

The aim is to show sport and PA as a sort of pandemic “domestication” of the social reality we are experiencing.

Keywords: brand communication, sport practices, narcissism consumption.

1. Introduction

It is now certain that we are experiencing an “extraordinary” time (Evans et al., 2020) in which, following the spread of COVID-19, many changes have occurred. And with the spread of the virus, information on the effects and risks of the pandemic in all its areas has also increased very quickly.

In this framework, digital media have become the main places to rewrite our daily lives horizon, consequently also the categories useful for understanding the everyday social world must be rethought. In everyday life, therefore, new objects of sociological observation and investigation emerge, born from the coexistence of new social representations and styles of thought that assume the function of common sense (Zerubavel, 2019).

The sport’s world has also been heavily involved in these changes, not only in social practices, but also in the symbolic sphere connected to it.

First, the health crisis and the confinement of people and relationships (Bourdon, 2020, Klein 2020); then the defrosting options decided at national level. In Europe, all nations have experienced several weeks of “imprisonment”, physical expulsion, even curfew, with enormous impacts on behaviours, lifestyles, health and well-being, but also negative effects on the economy of companies, sporting events and businesses sports. The COVID-19 pandemic has also caused an unprecedented closure of borders and a halt to social activities: economic, cultural, sporting and so on. And a change in the motor practices of citizens of each country, followed - in parallel - from an increase in physical inactivity¹.

¹ The 2016-19 data from Italian Surveillance Systems (Report “Passi” on 18-69 y.o., and “Silver Steps” over 65 y.o.) published after the difficult period of COVID-19 show how Italian adults are increasingly sedentary and overweight, especially in the South. More than half of the over 65s do light physical activity but 1 out of 10 has walking problems. According to the report, a sedentary lifestyle is more frequent among adult women and among the most disadvantaged people (low level of education, or economic). In Southern Italy, sedentary people exceed 50% of the population. See <https://www.iss.it/>.

However, the national treatment of the health crisis was different from country to country², which involved, for example, a differentiated management of the resumption of sports competitions in European countries, and of the actions on the pitch regarding the possibility of managing sport and PA in the individual territories (Evans et al., 2020).

But especially in this period, the pandemic has increased the digitized experiences of sports practices, bringing out more and more aspects of individualism, narcissism, which are combined with a continuous search for well-being, health, beauty, fashion. In accordance with the current context in which people must be constantly connected to the flow of hypermedia communication and learn to be protagonists of situations as much as possible (Codeluppi, 2008), in this work we want to show how sports brands communication has changed their narrative, in order to spread the adoption of best practices for healthier and safe lifestyles.

2. Literature scientific review: active lifestyles and consumptions in the hyper-mediated society

During the lockdown, science, expertise and common sense have been involved in a negotiation on the meaning of the ongoing experience, in which traditional media dictate the official communication agenda and social media acted as an “emotional exchange point” for people. The medical-health experts (virologists, hygienists, epidemiologists, clinicians) had the task of maintaining the difficult balance between concern or alarm in communicating the risk, and reassurance in managing its control. This revealed two social phenomena: the coronavirus crisis is not only a medical-health fact, but above all a “total social fact” (Mauss, 2012) and therefore a social construction.

In brief, the health crisis has intensified the transition to a new sporting era marked by digital innovation and by the enhancement of individual physical activity, carried out for the purpose of physical maintenance and fitness activities, in an increasingly accentuated context of “spectacularization” of the body.

²A recent study on the effects of COVID-19 (isolation, sedentary lifestyle and physical activity) conducted in Italy on 184 families with 215 children aged 0-12 years (online questionnaire) has investigated adults and children's lifestyles during lockdown. The results indicate that: 1) physical activity levels were reported to be reduced in 77.2% of the children; 2) sedentary time (tv, pc) increased in 62.8% of the children; 3) in 74.9% of the families there was increased interaction between children and adults; 4) distant/home working involved 53.90% of the adults. See Tortorella, Schembri, Fumagalli (2020).

This means that the well-known characteristics of hypermediated-society are amplifying and the SARS-CoV-2 is encouraging digital nomadism also in many sporting practices. The boundary between public and private tends to blur and the digital dimension of individualism evolves simultaneously (Riesman, Glaser, Denney 1969) with the personalisation of training styles through fitness, Health apps (Lupton, 2014, 2015, 2017), and gamification (Luminea, 2013) in sport context (Zichermann, Cunningham 2011), while narcissism (Cesareo, Vaccarini, 2012) also declined in sports consumption.

Cultural nomadisms (Tallarita, 2008) in the COVID period (Hammami, Harrabi et al., 2020), orient our relationships (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017) and the virtual cyberspace is a privileged observatory of changes and trends in the sport and health context as an expression of advanced capitalism (Baudrillard, 1974, 2010). Choosing and sharing *virtual milieus* in the digital age (Castells, 2001) generates unprecedented behavioural and consumption practices, especially in the sports sector recently intertwined with trend of fashion (Calefato, 2007, Cappellari, 2011). New emotional experiences are evolving, which are more ephemeral and less demanding than offline experiences, and the expansion or compression of space and time is reflected in the intensification of information flows.

The website offers us a wide range of choices that give the individual greater freedom: of knowledge and of choice among the various sports brands, stimulating consumer behaviour thanks to *e-commerce*, which has developed further in the SARS-CoV-2 era and is destined to become a privileged channel for enhancing and disseminating new values, creating new meaning for consumers. The choice options offered by web do not constitute a stable scenario within which to build the meanings of daily life or social ties, but it represents a valid point of reference within which to create mechanisms of identity belonging that are declined in fashion and sports consumption. Nomadism on the web constitutes a way of thinking before being, a way of life through which we collect experiences and emotions, promoting ourselves narcissistically. The multiply relationship in the website tend to become depersonalised. The website is a connective tissue within which links and forms of sociability are created that redesign the trajectories of relationships and desires for emotional consumption, giving a new order to hierarchies of experience.

If postmodernity is the age of hedonistic and (Lasch, 1999; Lipovetski, 2007) narcissistic (Cesareo, Vaccarini, 2012; Tallarita 2013) individualism of social fragmentation (Maffesoli, 1988), in the new digital milieu people experience and consume experiences, are put on display (Codeluppi, 2015) and testing one's fluid and multiple identities (Bauman, 2000) through the deconstruction of real boundaries and conventions that bind offline identity.

Sport is a field in which communities become social spaces in which realize one's own wellbeing project (Russo, 2018) and show one's narcissistic identity and where subcultures are generated (Billing, 2017) that influence lifestyles and consumption.

Contemporary sporting culture is permeated by individualistic values that combine well with the narcissistic values of the protection of the body, health and psycho-physical well-being. The values that circulate in sporting circles represent the final result of a long and complex evolutionary path of experiences around the body (Porro, 2010).

At the same time, it constitutes the culmination of a journey that has come to an end, in order to overcome the limits of the body set by nature. Narcissism and vanity drive the aesthetic cult of the body, of which the web is the main "stage". The body is the new protagonist of the most important contemporary consumer phenomena, both in the field of fashion and in that of entertainment and consumption. Capitalist society nurtures the culture of body aesthetics and the cult of measuring athletic performance. Training is transformed into a ceremonial celebration of the religion of the beauty of the body, which in today's society obsesses all social categories: from the élite to the masses, who access the web more and more easily (Featherstone, 1982). The digital aestheticization of the body is shaped by a cultural atmosphere that highlights a narcissistic society that celebrates new forms of protagonism on the web, as if to satisfy an intimate, hedonistic need for emotional pleasure, which crosses the inner dimension of sensation-seeking (Zucherman, 1979, Lipovetsky, 2007), a fascinating aspect of contemporary individualism, given by the relationship between the sensuality, eroticization and desirability of the body. Exercise fully meets emotional and narcissistic needs ranging from healthiness to self-care, to the possibility of exhibiting an aesthetically perfect body. The close relationship between the body and the emotions, between the exterior aesthetic dimension and the interior one (Tallarita, 2013, Porro, 2010) is achieved with a compromise between spirituality and the modification of the body through training and effort. This makes eudaimonia live in digital spaces dedicated to sport.

The eroticization of the body (Tallarita, 2013) is a process that has recently penetrated the sporting sphere as well, and web advertising stimulates and influences new types of cultural consumption oriented towards aesthetic beauty. The body is transformed into a consumer good and becomes itself a canon of aesthetic-functional reference, an index of bio-political transformation of the brand (Ritzer, 2018). The web emphasises brand visibility and distinction, associated with the perfect sports body. Many sports champions have lent themselves to well-known brand and product advertisements to capture a certain consumer target. The sports body in the new narcissistic dimension

(Twenge, Campbell, 2009), has put performance capacity in second place to conveying the beauty of the athlete's body. Athletes narcissistically wear underwear and advertise perfumes and sporting goods for well-known fashion brands. The new values highlight a substantial change in lifestyles, expressed through the numerous demands for narcissistic window dressing of the body, which is displayed in digital communities in increasingly sensual and glamorous versions. The image of a beautiful, sensual body, with balanced and harmonious forms, is transmitted and shared on the web, it attracts and is desirable and the viewer wants to identify with that body. That image is able to capture the innermost desires of the consumer of emotional experiences, desirous of a lifestyle based on beauty, power and attractiveness. The world of narcissists, of individualists, of those who are centred on themselves has become increasingly communicative, and the meanings conveyed by this new visual culture (Mirzoeff, 1999) are also promoted on the web. The purpose of digital communities is not only to bring together fitness lovers but to promote engagement and loyalty and to multiply the social effect motivating people to practice sport. The imperative to achieve the ideal of the perfect body and aesthetic beauty is to train together and always be inter-connected (Boccia Artieri et.al., 2017, Bennato, 2011). The digital community is the new point of reference and represents a social space where to share images of trained bodies and compare the results of the performances achieved, where to exchange information and build social bonds, even narcissistic ones. Within the communities, a series of images are collected that have a powerful narrative value and testify to the levels of training and aesthetic results of the body achieved. This highlights an individualism, sometimes exasperated in the management of training practices with the use of digital spaces, and an increasingly demanding and personalised attitude of self-tracking (Crawford, Lingel, Karppi, 2015), and *Quantified Self Practices* (Lupton, 2016).

On these latest trends, sports brands tend to specialize. Digital communities are on the rise, especially at this stage where the blockages imposed by SARS-CoV-2 have increased the use of digital technologies.

In fact, it is possible to carry out our personalized body wellness projects, with the support of interactive trainers who suggest the best way to exercise, stimulating us to pursue fitness and health goals. Digital “rituals” tend to pursue a “high quality of life” idea by orienting lifestyles towards high-level experiences for body and beauty care. The web makes standardized aesthetic types to emulate. The digital apps allow you to customize the participation of the sports communities that crowd the web and not only concern fitness but many sports specialties (Martelli, Matteucci et al., 2019).

The speed of circulation of content on the web and the multiplication of visual products contribute more effectively to the construction of an almost

perfect virtual world in which seductive and captivating content circulates for the users of this type of experience. The visual languages transmitted if crossed with the potential of the network are able to produce effects on users-consumers. The visual image of the commodified sports body (Codeluppi, 2015) shown on the web is shaped within the new mechanisms of sports brands. The sports body is not a static image but a dynamic image that combines the results of performance and those of the aesthetics of the body. The image proposed on the web is a flow that changes over time and is modified in its relationship with the external social reality of which it is the privileged testimonial. Compared to the past, sports consumption is driven by new values that involve the body in a holistic way, without neglecting care for the aesthetic dimension. An objective that goes well with the values of an increasingly individualistic and narcissistic society and with the interest in psycho-physical wellbeing and attention to diet and the sharing of active and healthier lifestyles. The sports industry is increasingly glamorous and *trend-conscious*. In an age dominated by hedonistic and increasingly individualistic cultural models, the body is essential in the construction of identity, standing at the intersection between nature and culture, between fashions, trends and consumption. The individual has realised his own identity project of (re)appropriation of the body, through sport and on the basis of increasingly individualistic aspirations. The picture that has just been sketched out is that of an industry that is increasingly attentive to the cultural changes in demand and to the realisation of individualistic desires that can be achieved through the practice of sport.

The analysis of some well-known sports brands shows the progressive influence of the 'sporting world' in the fashion system and social culture as well as in the contemporary imagination. Sport is able of re-interpreting the trends that have consolidated in the digital world. The big brands interpret the tendency of individuals to be protagonists in every aspect of daily life: to feel always *in the shop window*, continuously connected in the network and exposed to processes of manipulation of the body. The predominant cultural trait, expressed through the various forms of re-appropriation of the body by the individual, has highlighted the influences of these values on the consumer behaviour that revolves around it and stimulates different interests in objects, products, places and quality experiences. The ongoing search for happiness has led individuals towards the construction of a *sui generis* social identity, more centred on personal choices based on aesthetic ideals and hedonistic body care (Tallarita, 2013). Such behaviours are evident in digital sports consumption, which represents that much desired lifestyle and is responsible for the formation of an individualistic-narcissistic model within sport.

The sporting body has embodied and shared the values of narcissism, taking on completely new characteristics: acquiring great visibility and social

legitimacy on the web, becoming the protagonist of advertising, entertainment and consumer phenomena.

Starting from these reflections, our work was born in order to describe the transformed communication of sport brands during the COVID lockdown (2020) in which a new collective storytelling has emerged. The core of sporting communication goes beyond the commercial and spectacular dimension, towards a new consumption styles that mean resilience, aesthetics and self-care.

3. Methodology

This work starts from these more general theoretical considerations on the sports body in the digital age, to then orient the observation – conducted with the phenomenological and naturalistic method – on the communication strategies of some sports brands, in order to verify a change paradigm in the representation of consumption styles. Following the multidimensional theory of communication (Alexander, 1982-83; Lazarsfeld, 1966), every communicative phenomenon is characterized by 4 main dimensions, the following: persuasive, cognitive, community, identity³. Therefore, the advertising communication of sports brands is configured respectively as: convincing, informative, adhering to the rules of the community in which one lives, and finally, consistent with ideas, values, discourses circulating in the global social context.

Consequently, the general hypothesis was formulated: in the COVID era, the sports brands with greater communication skills are those that have adopted a digital narrative more frequently “identity” based on the values of health and well-being, physical distancing as a security tool, resilience and a sense of belonging.

The specific intent of the qualitative approach was to verify the change in the “brand’s narrative” in four selected brands (Nike, Adidas, The North Face and Vans) towards new socially responsible commitments in terms of global health and security. The observation of chosen brands has been conducted during the first lockdown (march-april-may 2020) on website in order to exploring their reputation in terms of information capacity, prevalent topics,

³These aspects emerge from the use of the 4 functions of the Agil scheme (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, Latency) considered a sort of “compass” for sociology, an analytical tool for studying every social phenomenon (Parsons, 1964), starting with the functions that it plays in the social system. In this case it is used for its heuristic function which allows to identify the forms of advertising communication. See Donati (2012); Martelli (2010).

attractiveness, functionality, hospitality, interactivity, brand recognition, originality, consistency (Martelli, 2002).

4. Results

How has sport advertising changed in the first phase of the Coronavirus emergency? Faced with a constantly changing scenario, and consumers increasingly alarmed and insecure, brands have had to rethink their social function (more than commercial) and at the same time strengthen their reputation. According to Boero (2020) the main trends that have guided the transformation of the communicative imaginary in the COVID era are four, the following ones:

1. The representation of ordinary life;
2. What happens outside the domestic space;
3. The reference to the sense of national belonging;
4. The practice of physical (and/or social) distancing

On this basis, the change in direction of advertising communication took place in order to strengthen the relationship between brands and consumers, and build a permanent conversation on new emerging social priorities, due to the uncertain subjective experience. The intent is to build a model of “other sociality”, that is open to transformation, in addition to the contrast between “pre” and “post-pandemic” (Giorgino, 2020). This is way in order to define the new horizon of meaning, which oscillates more and more between fear and suspicion on the one hand, and trust and hope on the other.

The emergence of the virus redefines the “values world” brands’ (Codeluppi, 2008, Semprini, 2006), that broaden their social function towards common objectives of social responsibility and sustainability, confirming their reputation.

The brands communicative power defines a real cultural imaginary that develops from the existing social one. In fact, brands identify a specific social value to found their own communication and identity. As stated by Marcel Danesi (2006: 84), brands are able to create powerful “macro-texts” (different, but coherent with each other) that circulate, in a convergent way, for the progressive digitization of messages. The brand communication enters in public discourse, produces data, identifies trends, immerses itself in the pandemic culture in order to have something to tell, manage the narrative of present time and “generate engagement in the public and strengthen the sense of belonging to one's community of reference. The digital touch becomes a tool to feed the need for physical touch” (Semprini, 2006: 212).

Starting from these considerations we have tried, through a qualitative approach, to analyse the communicative dimension of famous sports brands mentioned above. The starting hypothesis is that the brands with greater communication skills in the pandemic period, are those that have conveyed a sports imagery aimed on the one hand at enhancing the "resilient" dimension of sport (both individually and as a team); on the other, to confirm the aesthetic dimension, of well-being and care. In this perspective, faced with a constant demand for luxury, the global economy appears to be in sharp decline and consumption is turning towards ethical choices and social responsibility, an attempt was made to verify the change from "brand narratives" to "bio-brand" (Codeluppi, 2008). This is a process in which brands progressively occupy the social culture and blend with the surrounding environment, engaging with current events. According to Naomi Klein (2007), brands have progressively become viral in contaminating social culture. Brands mix their own texts with those already circulating. Doing so, in addition to sponsorship, they are transformed into autonomous cultural expressions and become part of everyday life.

Alongside the well-known global communications #StayHomeSaveLives, sports brands have nurtured their storytelling with other local hashtags, such as the Italian #leregoledegioco. In this way, the "glocal" experience of the pandemic becomes a new commodity for the market, imposing new social behaviours. The concept of "bio-brand" concerns the visual, performative and experiential metamorphosis of the consumer, who contributes to the construction of the brand, to its narrative dimension and co-invents it. The analysis of the selected cases (Nike, Adidas, Vans, The North Face) has gone in this direction. According to Martelli (2002) it was created on the basis of the following three aspects:

- 1) brand recognition (characterizing function);
- 2) its originality (distinctive function);
- 3) coherence of the brand to its own communication style (homogenizing factor).

The qualitative analysis was carried out through the phenomenological approach, according to which it is possible to describe a phenomenon "as it is", in order to grasp its essence, form, idea (Schütz, 1982). An attempt was thus made to enter the "value world" of the selected sports brands through a real-time survey that could give rise to a non-artificial collection of information. The phenomenological observation highlighted (for all the brands) an identity dimension based on strength, resilience, sense of belonging and community, for which the sports brand is no longer "just" logo, but above all a symbolic and relational value with the consumer, and secondarily economic value. The path towards the "bio-brand" in fact indicates a communication that is both

responsible and aesthetic, sustainable and healthy, digitalized yet continuously under the banner of an emotional ontology typical of the hyper-modern context.

The campaigns analysed, were created during the first lockdown that shocked the world's people and economies: this is why sports brands have launched, through hype film and social media channels, an optimistic global communication to greet a possible return to sporting events. The core belief was that sport can change the world and bring well-being, entertainment, optimism and resilience. In this framework develops the collective storytelling emerged from the launched campaigns "You can't stop us" (Nike), #Ready for sport (Adidas), or from the "Foot the Bill" (Vans), or #Explorefound initiatives (North Face). In general, their communication has underlined the duty of physical distance as a moment of suspension of everyday life, to draw trajectories of meaning of a new (regained) normality. These narratives emerged during the lock-down has translated the need for physicality into a new high tech/high touch relationship. Furthermore, the efficient and healthy conception of sport (a legacy of the ideals of productive efficiency typical of industrial society) emerges in the continuous work of building and improving the body, alongside a narcissistic dimension, at the limit erotic and seductive. Finally, the extra-sporting dimension develops a feeling of social responsibility and civil commitment to safeguard health. In this sense, following Vigoriti (2002) we can observe some specificities. If Nike appears as the "power" brand for offering its consumers a solution to the pandemic that concerns by "doing"; Adidas offers a communication more based on the representation of one's own identity (brand identity). Vans, on the other hand, turned to its own community of consumers (sense of belonging, brand community); finally, North Face has developed a more general communication, aimed at exploring new objectives to be achieved through physical distance (brand explorer).

In all these visions, halfway between the real world (the Coronavirus emergency) and the "values world" (the brand values), sports brands have chosen to adopt multidimensional communication. They spoke to individuals and families, institutions and the economy; they have promoted social cohesion against the fragility of the individual; they photographed the surrounding reality without feeding fear; they have told through their testimonials (individual athletes, or teams) the resilience capacity of sport in order not to surrender to the difficulties of life, returning the message of the courage of those who never give up, dignity, conscience and a sense of community - of a tenacious country able of going further. These aspects that emerged from the brand sentiment of the brands analysed (growth of up to 93% in e-commerce purchases in the period considered) is also an indication of the awareness and engagement of the consumers (through web traffic tracking, MediaCom, 2020).

There is therefore no doubt that the distances between brands, during the lock-down, have almost disappeared. Faced with an emergency framework they spoke the same language, sharing a single communication strategy aimed at building a message reassuring, aware of the restrictions of freedoms as well as the need to avoid contagion. In the context of global pandemic, the public role of sports brands is therefore to be traced in the co-participation in the construction of a great narrative aimed at all citizens (sports consumers and not) towards a great effort of shared solidarity.

In this sense we can affirm, respect to our working hypothesis, that the identity communication capacity characterizes all the brands considered. In the sports field in the Covid era, the “brands power” appears to be spread along a continuum of awareness, engagement, safety in order to show sport and Physical Activities as an area of pandemic “domestication” of the social reality we are experiencing.

5. Discussion

Exploring the social values of sports brands, is important for the identification processes established with consumers, who attribute to the world a “true existence”. It is therefore worth asking what cultural elaboration process takes place in the COVID age, since “brands have the potential to become new community centers” (Atikin, 2004: 200).

This revealed two social phenomena during the pandemic:

- 1) the coronavirus crisis is not only a medical-health fact, but above all a “total social fact” (Mauss, 2012) and therefore a social construction;
- 2) the crisis has advanced digital innovation, with a progressive increase in the life time spent on the screen (through the screen?).

In these terms the “confinement” of sporting activity became a complex fact and has influenced sports consumers in a highly unequal way from multiple points of view. Just think, for example, of how the term “social distance” has been widely used by the media, overcoming physical distancing, even though this means that social distancing social distancing is most striking for some population groups (vulnerable subjects such as the elderly, disabled, socially isolated people ...). In a situation defined as “infodemic”, the mainstream media and social media have accentuated their role as constructors of reality by considering sport and physical activity as a “situation” (in terms of Goffman, 1959) – or microcosm of interactions between acting subjects that cannot be fully understood if the actors are not relocated to the social contexts to which they belong.

In other words, the narration and media conversation of sports practices during the pandemic has spread the awareness of sport and physical exercise as essential tools of resilience (Hammami et al., 2020), and the use of digital technologies to support these activities has stimulated innovative practices.

The worldwide expansion of the virus has spread and brought to light the value of physical activity for the well-being of all citizens (UK active, 2020; Potts, McKenna, 2020), showing the images and the potential of a sports model supported remotely by communication technologies (Gerrish, 2020).

In the sports world, digital media have played an important role of interconnection and non-separation between the online and offline components of our life. The new sports experiences, born from the connection between the power of digital (creation and dissemination of content and information on the Web) with the possibility of physically occupying the space with flesh and blood bodies, during the first period of lock-down, safeguarded long-distance relationships and social contacts otherwise destined to collapse, thus contributing to building an integrated world, both physical and digital.

Therefore, the attempt to observe and describe the experience of the pandemic through the lens of sports system raises new questions and several interpretations of the ongoing change that are useful and oriented towards future developments in the sociology of sport.

In order to counter the Corona Virus emergency traditional media in Italy hosted the institutional information, through a choral narrative summarized in the “#distantbutunit” campaign, while social networks have conveyed and supported practices and forms of a new sociality, often influenced by irony, strong emotions able to involve consumers in collective responsibility actions. From this point of view, the advertising communication of the sport brands highlights a “change of direction”, aimed at rethinking the relationship with its consumers through some main assets: creation of identity belonging, respect for the rules, awareness of “good health” as collective goal, power of endurance. A “different” public role of sports brands has emerged, in order to feed a collective imagination, made up of positive actions and strengthening the identity of consumers towards the pandemic emergency.

6. Conclusion

Never as in this period is it possible to affirm that the relationship between media and daily life has become decisive. If the new media produce a constant state of completely digitalized connection between selves, this implies that the relationship between social actors is increasingly based on the simulacrum (Boltanski 1973). This also happened in the sports world. The most recent

developments in contemporary sports culture in terms of digitization of practices, has shown one of the recent “great narrative” of public sphere and the main players of sports communication. Our observation concerned in specific the change in advertising and sports brands as means to communicate information and reassurance for the whole country. As we have tried to illustrate through our reflections, the scenario proposed by sports brands looks like a sort of “domestication” (Silverstone, Hirsh 1992) in which digitalized sports practice becomes an increasingly domestic tool, language, object and symbolic space. It is a process by which technology is ‘tamed’ or appropriated by its users into peoples’ lives, as the communication proposed by sport brands into the lockdown period.

In this sense, we believe that the “power of sports brands” during the Covid era emerges from its multidimensional communication. This means configuring the narrative of sports brands in a socio-value sense, in order to participate with “something of one’s own” (Silverstone, 1994) in the construction of a “moral economy” (Silverstone, Hirsh 1992), that is a set of knowledge, values and tastes oriented towards the construction of safety and a new sense of reliability (Giddens, 1990) among athletes, customers and consumers.

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