The role of strategic communication in sport events

The challenges of the PR RACE in attracting amateur athletes to distance running events in Romania

Master Thesis, 15 hp
Media and Communication Science with Specialisation in International Communication

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Semester: VT 2018
This year will be the 110th since the first time that athletes ran the exact distance of 42.195 km at the Olympic Games in London, the length known today as the standard distance for a marathon. Since then, the world of distance competitions has gone through remarkable transformations in structure, vision, strategy and location. Attending distance running events is a social global phenomenon, and thousands became hundreds of thousands in terms of participation rate. Starting 1980 the sport communication research experienced an exponential growth due to fast technological changes in sport events organization and promotion channels. The aim of this current research is to study the role of strategic communication in attracting amateur runners to engage in distance races, and the concept of Intelligence-led PR and its functionality during the challenges faced by PR practitioners. The concept is part of strategic communication theory and it has a key role in the communication process due to the significant social and economic impact of these events on the participants’ life and on the local markets. The study will focus on the content and data analysis of two distance running competitions organized in 2016 in Romania. The data collection was made by conducting two interviews with the representatives of the biggest sport event organizers in Romania - Bucharest RUNNING Club Association and Media Production Group, and examining several market reports. The main conclusions of this Master thesis are that research and planning, as well as using modern communication tools and new technologies, as part of strategic communication, have helped the big sport event organizers to reach targeted audiences, form and shape public’s perception about recreational activities and engage people to participate in running competitions. Another finding is that PR Intelligence, as a concept of strategic communication, is represented by a set of knowledge that can be gained both by education and relevant practice and makes this type of communication essential for an organization becoming one of the essential managerial functions.
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1. Introduction, aims and motivation

1.1. Introduction

Running a long-distance or a distance race has become, with predilection in the last three decades, a life target for millions of people worldwide. Whether they go alone or in a group, choosing indoor or outdoor environment like parks or forest trails, lots of people put on their running shoes and exercise or “jog” almost daily. And this activity has become an important side of human lifestyle and communities (Scheerder et al., 2015). Today, there are thousands of distance running races registered in the annual global calendars, apart from the Olympics editions, and a few nations remain that don’t have their own marathon. People around the world are embracing the running philosophy and are willing to travel and compete in some of the most iconic cities in the world. They plan their training, budget and their entire life a year ahead or more just to have the satisfaction of living the runner’s dream, crossing the finish line, proudly wearing the medal and telling the world about it.

This Master thesis considers the role of strategic communication in the running events for amateur athletes and the analysis will focus on communication plans and how they were implemented by the biggest Romanian sport event organizers in relation to the empirical cases chosen: two distance running competitions, road and trail. The first goal of this study is to closely investigate the local market from the perspective of these two events, which represents a novelty in terms of research in the field of sport communication. Secondly, the desire is that the analysis will bring more insights into the social dimension of the local running phenomenon and to outline the profile of Romanian amateur runners. Finally, the goal is to argue in favour of the idea and necessity of strategic thinking and action in sports communication, with the hope that the results and findings of this document will serve as examples and knowledge for PR specialists in the field.

The first part of Introduction includes a background consisting of: a quick overview of the birth of the running phenomenon in the 20th century and its social, cultural and economic dimensions; a brief introduction of the mass events spread in Romania, the biggest country and market in the South-Eastern Europe and of the main sport event organizers. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to the research purpose and questions, emphasizing on the role and value of strategic communication in running competitions and briefly illustrates some of the challenges met by the PR practitioners during the communication process. The third part consists of a subjective overview of the Romanian market and my personal motivation for choosing this topic, as a research theme.
1.2. Background

The evolution of running in public, from an unusual or even ‘frivolous’ recreational activity to a social phenomenon that attracts masses of runners today, started with “the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s” (Scheerder et al., 2015; Horne, 2015). In the book “Running across Europe: The rise and size of one of the largest sport markets”, that broadly presents the two running boom waves and their American roots, Jereon Scheerder et al. explained that the phenomena have started with the process of ‘informalisation’ during which time “informal manners and attitudes would become more and more accepted and gain importance in public life”. As a natural effect, people have become confident in exercising and running in the streets (Scheerder et al., 2015).

Even if the trend was followed mainly by men, as “a middle-class pursuit to reduce the risk of heart attacks”, by the 70s the running started to be appealing both for men and women, who were concerned “as much with their psychological wellbeing as their physical appearance and health” (Herrick, 2015).

Even if during 1980’s and the beginning of 1990’s the phenomenon faced stagnation in terms of popularity, giving the severe global recession effects, on the 21st century’s eve the number of runners started to increase again. This time the phenomenon had spread globally, not only in North America and Europe, described by Scheerder et al. (2015) as “the second wave of running”. Consequently, due to the participants’ growing need to compete in an organized environment, the event market expanded from dozens to hundreds of sport competitions. In terms of distance running, more than 150 marathons are held every year in the U. S., and over 800 are run worldwide (Day & Thompson, 2010, July; Running USA, 2017, March 23).

Moreover, in the last decade the running phenomenon has manifested through different organizational structures and aims, being profit or non-profit oriented or having a charity component, and it developed into manifold systems. There are no longer simply road or park calls for a run or just distance running events but also trail, cross-country and mountain races on routes with various lengths and features (Roche, 2003, March; Bale, 2004; Herrick, 2015) and dedicated to different segments of the public, professional and amateurs, corporate teams, family teams e.g.

1.2.1. Running phenomenon in Romania

Eastern European societies, such as Romania, are consistent with the approach of segmenting runners and their motivations for practicing the sport. The rise in the number of participants at running events in Romania has roots in both running waves, with the observation that the phenomenon had a large expansion mainly in the last decade (MPG, 2017; Scheerder et al., 2015). Scheerder et al. underlined that Europe took the leading role with 46% share of the global sport events market (2015). About participants’ motivation and interests, the Europeans favour running above other
sports due to its flexibility and simplicity but also because is financially affordable (Scheerder et al., 2015).

A less competitive attitude and a growing orientation towards participation for fun and social interaction have been noted, and these features became benchmarks for organizers and communicators. Therefore, average finishing times have got slower over the last decades. To this end, “slogans like *Slow is the new fast* and *The fun is in the back of the pack* have recently showed up marking new market segments and perhaps also a new running era” (Scheerder et al., 2015; MPG, 2017).

Romania is the biggest country in the South-Eastern Europe, with an economic growth mainly characterized as private-consumption driven (European Commission, 2018). With more than 20 million inhabitants, the Romanian market is representing a huge potential regarding sport event consumption and participation. An essential fact to consider is that sport is an important part of country’s culture. Recent statistics highlighted that the revenue in the sport events segment amounts to 16 million US dollars in this country (Statista, 2018). The forecast is highly positive; this value is expected to show a 12.9 % annual growth rate resulting in a market volume of 27 million US dollars in 2022. Also, the user penetration will increase from 1.8 %, this year, to 2.6 % in 2022, according to The Statistical Portal Statista (2018).

The local sport industry is predominated by football, handball and basketball, the most featured sports in mega-events which attract millions of spectators, media viewers and fans. In the last 10 years, following the European and global trend, local and foreign private investors noticed the market’s potential with an unmet demand and started organizing running and cycling competitions targeting amateur participants (CeSport, 2018).

The biggest players as considering the number of the events per year, participation rate and public engagement are Bucharest RUNNING CLUB Association and Media Production Group, a sports marketing company. Both entities are organizing distance running events and competitions dedicated to recreational activity and they are promoting an active and healthy lifestyle. During the study, a clear radiography of the sport systems coordinated by the two organizers will be performed and the main characteristics of running communities, including examination of profiles and motivations, essential for a strategic communication will be presented (Charest et al., 2016).

There were two study cases chosen and being considered relevant for the present research: Bucharest International Marathon, the biggest running event in the country, held in the last decade in the Romanian capital, with two long distance race options: 42
km and 21 km; and RACE TO NATURE Trail and Family Run, a competition offering a semi-marathon as the longest route for competing, which was organized 3 years in a row in a forest near Bucharest, as a representation of the market segmentation and PR challenges met in the process of communication.

The relevance of choosing distance events as the empirical cases in the current research is given by the new boom in mass participation running registered in the last 8 to 10 years in many parts of the globe, which could be also noticed on the Romanian market. Marathon and semi-marathon running has increased in popularity among amateur athletes, as many recent comprehensive studies (Andersen, 2015, May; Running USA, 2017, June 15, 20; BRC, 2017, September) are highlighting.

1.3. Research purpose and questions

In order to differentiate its image, value of products and services and messages in an overcrowded market of sport events, an organizer needs a well-designed and effective plan to reach the target public, in which communication holds an essential role (Arcos, 2016; Charest et al., 2016; McKie & Heath, 2016). The studies performed by several scholars in the field showed how valuable the communication is in promoting the right messages to masses, and how a strategic plan can make the difference in terms of efficiency of the communication, budget expenditure and results.

The main purpose of the research carried in this Master thesis is to study the role of strategic communication in promoting running events for amateurs, the running events for amateur athletes, and the concept of Intelligence-led PR and its functionality in the communication process. This concept highlights how Public Relations area can “benefit from the intelligence support to strategic planning, implementation and evaluation of PR campaigns” (Arcos, 2016; McKie & Heath, 2016). During the research, several communication theories will be explored in connection to the empirical cases chosen, to present how those fit into current practice and reality. One of the most used communication models will be reviewed as the Public Relations RACE scheme (Stacks, 2011), and it will be analysed to what extent it was used by the two event organizers to attract participants to their competitions.

The analysis will focus on communication plans and how they were implemented by the biggest Romanian sport event organizers in relation with the empirical cases chosen: two distance competitions, road and trail running.

The current research seeks to answer the following questions:

• How have each of the companies developed a strategic communication in relation with the two events studied?
• How were their goals formulated and what kind of communication strategy did they design to build the event brands?
• How did they organize the PR plan for promoting the distance running events? What are the pillars they built on their messages for engaging audiences?
• How did they reach their target to attract the audiences? What were the main challenges? How did they evaluate the results?

The first goal of this study is to closely investigate the local market from the perspective of two distance running events, which have never been studied before as individual cases in the field literature. Secondly, the desire is to bring more insights into the social dimension of the local running phenomenon and to outline the profile of Romanian amateur runners. Finally, the objective is to argue in favour of the ideas of strategic thinking and of strategic action in sport communication, with the hope that the results and findings of this research will serve as examples and knowledge for PR specialists.

1.4. Personal motivation and arguments for the specific topic

After having spent the last 9 years working as a Communicator and Public Relations Manager in various areas, and before that being an Economic Journalist for almost 10 years, in different companies and organizations, I believe that strategic communication represents a big part of the activity of every PR specialist. In the last decade, there has been a grown emphasis, both in the literature and seminars dedicated to the development of this profession, on the fact that strategic communication is playing a key role in the organizational structure of a company for building a successful and strong brand reputation and notoriety (Oliver, 2009; Falkheimer, 2014; McKie & Heath, 2016; Falkheimer et al., 2017; Dudo & Kahlor, 2017). Therefore, an efficient communication plan cannot be pursued without starting with a strategic thinking, perceived as a mindset, and usually highly correlated with the business strategy and the management activity of the entity represented (Falkheimer, 2014).

Without going into details in this part of the paper, for it will be offered further, my aim through this thesis is to argue in the favour of the fact that carrying on a communication activity plan to reach a target has to rely on intelligence-driven ideas that can be conveyed into a strategic communication design by the PR specialists. Of course, this activity requires an entire set of values and skills which need to be well comprehended and demanded by the organization’s management. Simply put, in this digital and fast-forward reality we are living in, a good PR must be like a military strategist. Equally important in this equation is for CEO’s to understand the true value of having a good strategist in the PR Manager’s chair.

I approached the sports communication area of research as I had the chance to ‘live and breathe’ for the past 4 years in this world of sport event organizing and promoting,
while I was performing as a PR and Communication Manager for one of the biggest Romanian sports marketing company. Therefore, I was a close observer of the latest development of the running market; I was learning actively discovering the gaps and, in the meantime, I was facing the challenges of the communication process in this area.

During this Master thesis, my purpose is to make the connection between the strategic communication concepts and theories and the current realities and needs of the sport communication area. By conducting an empirical research and analysis of the Romanian market and of two distance running events, I will highlight that a successful long-term result in sport event communication and promotion is based on a thoroughly conceived and implemented strategic communication.

2. Research review

There is an extended body of literature focused on mega-events like the Olympic Games and the Football World Cup, which discusses manifold subjects about sport communication and ways of reaching a broad public’s engagement (Real, 2013; Roche, 2003, March; Horne, 2015). Nevertheless, the diversity of research is not so high when referred to the recreational running competitions and their expansion in the last decade. Several notable publications regarding communication and Public Relations, strategic communication, sport communication and event organizing, and 22 articles concerning different aspects regarding the topics of the current research were studied and reviewed, and some relevant findings are highlighted in this chapter.

2.1. The running boom waves

After the processes of “deinstitutionalisation and desportification”, Scheerder et al. (2015), citing Crum, underlined that the activity of running evolved to a recreational stage. It started to attract not only sport-oriented people but also amateur runners who could enjoy it as a leisure-time pursuit. The club-organized sport became only “a smaller part of the total mass sport picture” while a lot of outdoor activities grew in popularity, like “street soccer, (...) recreational cycling, gym spinning, mass running” (Scheerder et al., 2015, p. 17).

The roots of this “recreational revolution” come from the United States (U.S.) and due to another development phase called “fitness revolution”, defined as “one of the most obvious social and cultural changes”, it became a mass movement attracting from hundreds of thousands to millions of people across U.S. and the Europe (Scheerder et al., 2015).

In parallel with the people’s orientation towards sport activities, the innovations and new technologies have led to the swift development of the sport industry and
businesses related to event organization. The concept of orientation has been explained as starting from the needs and values of the individual: “in the case of sporting events, the motivation component refers to the event’s ability to satisfy specific needs of the individual, which can be met most suitably by this product” (Pons et al., 2006, February).

During the 1980’s, the recreational long-distance running extended to a popular leisure-time pursuit embraced by a substantial number of participants (Bale, 2004; Scheerder et al., 2015). However, this momentum was broken by the global economic recession that started to affect developed nations in those years, followed by rising inflation and unemployment (Moy, 1985).

2.2. The link with distance running events in Romania

After 1990, more global economies started to recover and the number of sport events rapidly escalated and even doubled in many developed countries by the eve of new millennium. The annual study of Running USA, published in 2017, shows that the totals of runners who finished the local road races grew from 5 million to over 19 million during 1990-2013. A slight decline of finishers’ number was noticed after 2014, but the report about the American market emphasizes that more organizers focus “to increase value and create better experiences for their runners, partners, charities and communities” (Running USA, 2017, March). By the end of 2016, U.S. had 9,300 competitions with running distances between 10 km and 42 km, points out the same study.

In 2015, Jens Andersen, a competitive runner and statistician from Copenhagen Business School, did an extensive research looking at the popularity of marathon running more generally and average finishing times across the world among amateur athletes. During 2009-2014, with the help of the platform RunRepeat.com, Andersen studied a database of 2,195,588 marathon results and conducted a thorough analysis, considered the largest in the history. The main conclusion was that the marathon running has become popular all over the continents with a worldwide growth of +13.25%, in the period analysed, but in different proportions across the nations. On the top of the list is Russia with a growth of 300%, followed by China and Philippines as it can be noticed in Table 1 (Andersen, 2015, May; List of Appendix Tables).

Romania is riding the wave as well, being on the 9th place of the list with a growth of 152.78%, and leaving behind the countries in the region like Hungary and Poland. On the further end are Switzerland, Finland and Italy, countries that had the largest declines in marathon participation, over 20% (Table 1, List of Appendix Tables).

The most spectacular is the raise of female participation rate in these sport competitions around the world, the total growth being 26.90% while men’s attendance only hiked with 7.80%. Regarding gender distribution Romania is on the last place in
the top 30 nations, a result that is far away from the gender equality desideratum: only 21.02% of women racing on the 42-km route, the big part of the participants being represented by men (Andersen, 2015, May; Table 2, List of Appendix Tables). On the other hand, this outcome leaves plenty of room for development and women as targeted audience represent a huge potential for the sport event organizers and communicators (Scheerder et al., 2015).

During this time though, marathon participation in Europe has grown less than in the rest of the world, with only 10.30%, as resulted by Andersen’s research (2015, May). This outcome is quite surprising considering the history of the running booms (Scheerder et al., 2015; Bale, 2004) summarized in the beginning of this thesis.

In terms of distance preferences, recent studies revealed that the largest number of participants chooses semi-marathon and 10 km race for competing in an event (Running USA, 2016; BRC, 2017, September).

2.3. Social world of amateur athletes

The global expansion and the diversity of this phenomenon has created an entire social world, with important structural and interactional characteristics, highlighted Shipway et al. (2012), and has developed both horizontally and vertically. Citing Wenger, Shipway et al. pointed out that by sharing the same values people became even more interested in their activities “for which they feel commitment and passion” (2012). The core of this world was created from the need of getting out from the sedentary mode of existence and become a healthier individual, and this need became more salient in the 21st century as a reflection of the world’s stage of development and evolution. Many scholars considered it represents a subculture, because it is organized based on a defined unanimous accepted set of values (Shipway et al., 2012).

In his book, “Running cultures. Racing in time and space”, John Bale brings to discussion concepts such as “lines, segments, directions, landscapes, environments, movements and interactions”, all representing great interest for understanding the dynamics of the runners’ world (2004). At this moment of expansion, the running world started to cross-communicate with entertainment industry (Bale, 2004). Moreover, following the process of the market segmentation, Scheerder et al. (2015) introduced five segments: individual runners (41%), social competitive runners (26%), companionship runners (18%), fitness runners (9%), and individual competitive runners (7%). This structure is in line with other typologies, as illustrated by Scheerder et al. who refer to distance runners as divided in three segments: holidayers (travel oriented, explorers), socializers (more self-aware of their image and the impact an event has on their social presence, physical and virtual), marathoners (competitive runners, focused on the next challenge).
The recreational running events have multiplied, diversified and grown throughout the world, as an effect of the increased awareness of people regarding the healthy habits as a natural effect of consciousness of these needs (Scheerder et al., 2015; Horne, 2015). These latest social changes together with technological evolution, which sometimes are occurring more rapidly than one can get used to, are bringing even more challenges to communication specialists (Coombs et al., 2016).

2.4. Strategic communication in organizations

In an attempt to show the importance of a market-oriented thinking in the Public Relations, several scholars’ approaches have been observed. In the peer-reviewed studies, the existence of a common agreement on the role and value of the strategic communication is noticed, as many specialists showed the connection between “the intellectual capital and value creation” (De Beer, 2014). In the context of digitalization and because a big part of the communication act is taken place on social media, communication is considered as a “key resource for future business” and it will hold responsibility for the business success. The value of communication is consisting in “means of images, conceptions, stories and experiences” (De Beer, 2014).

The sociologist professor Rubén Arcos (2016) defines strategic communication as: “the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies or to achieve objectives”.

Lately, many researchers have started to underline the close relation between strategic communication and management, and some consider that the running events should be addressed by specialists working in a singular PR and marketing department in the companies due to their interconnected purposes (Sherrick, 2012, September; Charest et al., 2014). The progress in this direction has been detailed and debated by some scholars and after empirical research it has gained a strong support among PR practitioners (Falkheimer, 2014).

Furthermore, Bütschi & Steyn analyse the need of effectiveness of the communication as a management function which is being assimilated as an activity of corporate communication (2006). The authors militate for a redefinition of this field, new concepts and theories and “a new pattern of thinking about and studying organisational and communication problems, and of evaluating practice” (Bütschi & Steyn, 2006), which are relevant to 21 century corporate communication and should be inspired from the current problems in practice. Bütschi & Steyn argue that nowadays CEO’s have high expectations from PR practitioners: “to be pro-active and play a strategic role at the macro organisational level by interpreting strategic issues and providing strategic guidance with regards to stakeholder communication” (2006).
In the sport communication area, PR holds a key role in connecting the organization and its events with the public, its stakeholders, sponsors and media. The term of organization refers to private companies, associations, authorities, formal networks or different interest groups in which this activity is required (Falkheimer et al., 2017). While promoting a sport competition addressed to a large audience and aiming to gain mass participation, a PR specialist conceives and implements a communication plan that is focusing on media, sponsors, authorities and partners to reach its target and engage public activity. The communication strategy must consider the social, economic and political dimensions of the society and conduct an in-depth research to send the right messages to the right audiences. Therefore, the PR role is bigger and more sophisticated than just being a promotion and communication tool as it was considered by the traditional literature (Șerbănică & Constantinescu, 2016).

For a long time, this role was not clearly understood in many organizations, the requirements were low and the importance of this activity was reduced or neglected (Falkheimer et al., 2017). This reality could be seen also in the studies conducted by some authors that saw public relations as a support activity for the marketing function (Șerbănică & Constantinescu, 2016; Oliver, 2009), and this perception is still present in a lot of small and medium companies. Șerbănică and Constantinescu explained that sport literature has given little attention to the significance of PR in a sport organization, focusing more on professional sport, financial resources and economic and political context. However, the latest running boom and its swift development as a “global business embedded in cultures as a social practice and as a form of communication” cannot be ignored, underlined Șerbănică and Constantinescu, and further research needs to be developed upon the direct influence of PR and communication in “commodification of lifestyle, values and relationships” of people (2016).

3. Theoretical framework and concepts

3.1. PR and theories of communication

Public Relations are all about image and reputation; this would be the simplest and shortest way to describe the sum of complex activities involved by this domain. Over one and a half century there were many struggles to define and understand the world of PR and communication, its continue transformation, evolution and demand for a better position in the hierarchy of an organization. Although the origin of Public Relations dates to antiquity, the attempts to theorize this area of research are much more recent starting with the beginning of the 20th century.
The first person associating publicly the term of PR with the image of a specialist able to influence audiences and build notoriety was Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud (Butterick, 2011). In 1919, after the World War I ended, he opened his own practice in New York and presented himself as a PR counsellor. He was interested in developing theories about this activity, considering PR as a ‘scientific’ practice. Six years later, Bernays wrote the first PR book entitled “Crystallizing Public Opinion”, the most influential publication in the field literature, which starts with: “A new phrase has come into language – counsel on public relations” (Butterick, 2011; Kunczik, 2003).

Among his techniques of serving interests of corporate and political entities are modern propaganda tactics based on theories of mass psychology and persuasion. His belief was that through these techniques the public would be convinced to buy anything (Butterick, 2011).

Since 1950’s when it gained independence and recognition as an individual field of study, the PR definitions have varied a lot. And despite of its important position in the current society and market, there is not a single universally accepted theory that illustrates the roles of public relations and their functionalities (Șerbânică & Constantinescu, 2016). One of the premier definitions of PR claimed to be ‘the first all-inclusive’ belongs to American academic Rex Harlow, cited by Butterick (2011), after performing a careful examination of no less than 472 definitions conceived in eight decades.

“Public Relations is the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems and issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends, and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools.” (Butterick citing Harlow, 2011, p. 6)

Considering such diverse activities attributed to this profession, critic voices argued at the time that the PR area can’t be reduced to one definition. Butterick (2011) underlines that, close to Harlow moment, in 1978 The World Assembly of Public Relations agreed on a common statement known as ‘The Mexico Definition’.

“Public Relations is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation’s and the public interest.” (Butterick citing Warnaby & Moss, 2011, p. 6)
In search for a comprehensive translation of PR dimension it can be generally accepted as every organisation no matter of its size “ultimately depends on its reputation for survival and success”, according to Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), a British professional body, well renown in the global communication field.

“Public Relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public Relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.” (CIPR, 2018)

All these definitions are relying on the same idea: the focus of Public Relations is to conceive the right message and find the best tactics and suitable channels for this message to reach the targeted audience and to produce the expected reaction. Based on this activity is the theory of communication that, in a broad sense, is the study of the way people communicate to each other (Butterick, 2011). This general theory consists in many other interpretations and developments of communication as significance and process, and serves to the natural comprehension of reality and why some actions work or not. Furthermore, the relations developed between the senders - those who transmit the information, and the receivers - people, who are meant to accept and decode it, are representing the purpose of the research in this field (Butterick, 2011). From this reality one of the basic PR theory was developed, known as ‘publics’ and representing “the recipients in the process of communication between the sender and receiver”, after 1960’s being named as the theory of ‘mass communication’, as it is explained by Butterick.

For a PR specialist it is most essential, if not even critical, to understand the meaning and the value of ‘publics’ addressed in his or her profession. Every organization has a series of publics, as represented by general audiences - the masses, but also by stakeholders, partners, sponsors, authorities and other regulatory bodies, professional associations, nongovernmental and independent entities, and not the last by its shareholders. The success of the organization depends both on the quality of communication and on how the messages are perceived by the ‘publics’. Franklin et al. state that there are 6 categories “widely accepted” in which publics divide: customers (past, present and future); staff (past, present and future), investors (past, present and future); politicians and regulators; neighbours, and business partners (distributors, suppliers etc.) (2009).
Going further, other definitions from literature review emphasize on the importance of planning ahead the action, which implies an analytical process (Kunczik, 2002), and the mean to reach the target is considered a strategy (Oliver, 2009). The phenomenon of globalization changed the simple way of interpreting strategy as a way chosen by organizations to fulfil their goals and mission. Oliver states that the word ‘strategy’ has now five uses: a) a plan describing an intentional, conscious action; b) a tactic aiming to overcome competitors; c) a pattern represented by a succession of actions; d) a position, referring to a certain tool of placing an organization in an environment; e) a perspective, an integrated way to perceive the world (2009).

Along this evolution, Oliver noticed that many organizations decided to use “management of corporate communication” as a way of expressing the new role of Public Relations departments in the internal structure. The requirements changed as well. PR practitioners must learn and apply basics models of a strategy, considers White cited by Oliver. These are consisting in 4 approaches: a) Classic – analysis, planning and implementation; b) Evolutionary – keeping the costs to a minimum level and be open to opportunities; c) Procedural – playing by the rules; d) Systemic (Oliver, 2009).

3.2. The value of strategic communication in running events

In the contemporary studies, more and more attention is given to the value strategic communication and its core concepts that can be used in every economic activity developed by an organization. Regarded as a field of knowledge, strategic communication has become an important organizational asset, which is “challenging borders between functions such as human resource, marketing, information technology and communications” (Falkheimer et al., 2017). This type of communication helps management to more smoothly face the challenges and the changes occurring in the society and to understand the direction they need to follow (Kuchi, 2006).

Even if there are now hundreds and thousands of running competitions in the annual international calendars for amateur athletes, not all the events benefit from the same force of promotion, have a visible communication direction or consistent media coverage. These causes are directly related to the PR activity and how it is conducted for reaching target audience and gaining reputation, the size of communication budget and the type of campaigns launched on the market. In order to explore the connection between strategic communication and sport events, running competitions for amateur athletes, the subject must be perceived through the global filter to understand the real dimension of the sport area and its value in people’s everyday life.
In an attempt to define sports public relations and its purpose, several authors underlined that organizations have to include this function from the very beginning in the management structure. Stoldt et al. cited by Șerbănică and Constantinescu (2006) considered sports public relations as representing: “a managerial communication-based function designed to identify a sport organization’s key public segments evaluate its relationships with those segments and foster desirable relationships between the sport organization and those segments”.

On the other hand, acting like a PR strategist supposes to understand the fundamental principles of the management systems (Oliver, 2009). Oliver thinks that the most relevant theories in PR management are: 1) theories of relations – evaluate relationships and structure in connection to the whole; an objective and professional approach of tensioned relations or conflicts; 2) cognitive and behavioural theories – group activities offer a deeper understanding on how people think; public reactions can be predicted based on granted rewards and organizational costs; people accept a new idea after an increased awareness and interest, and after evaluating, testing and adopting it; social learning helps in explaining and anticipating perceptions and actions; prediction of the next steps; decision making based on repetition and reward, and trustworthy influencers; 3) mass-communication theories – people are active media users and make choices based on satisfaction; media followed by people is setting the social agenda (2009).

In practice, not all principles are applied as in textbook; however, the empirical research shows many event organizers rely on strategic planning, as vital before action. Falkheimer (2014) gave four main arguments to justify the power of strategic communication for organizational development: 1) contributes to organization effectiveness and trust; 2) maintains, changes or strengthens organization’s image among stakeholders; 3) serves as tool for enforcing, enhancing or changing the organization’s identity among employees and the organizational culture; 4) it may favour openness and transparency between members of the organization and between the organization, stakeholders and the public sphere.

The content, as resulted from strategic planning, can reach various publics through different communication models and techniques. Șerbănică and Constantinescu (2016) listed seven categories of PR techniques used in sport communication, classified according to the audiences targeted or activities carried out: a) publications - annual reports, articles, newsletters, magazines edited by the company; b) events - press conferences, seminars, trips, fairs, exhibitions, contests and competitions; c) sponsorships; d) news - constitutes one of the main tasks of public relations professionals, aiming to persuade journalists to accept press releases and attend press
conferences; e) speeches - management representatives answer questions or give speeches to enhance company image; f) public service activities - monetary and time contribution to social causes; g) identity communication instruments - sending products with company logo to customers and business partners.

The most appealing campaigns produced in sport communication relies on tactics of persuasion using strategic storytelling and narrative messaging in media, which are usually accompanied by attractive and suggestive visuals like pictures, videos and creative layouts (Dudo & Kahlor, 2017).

3.3. Intelligence-led PR concept
Following the previous research and aiming to show the importance of the strategic thinking in planning the communication activity, the study introduces the concept of Intelligence-led PR (Arcos, 2016). Lately, this ideology has often been connected to the Public Relations field: “communication challenges can be faced only through a strategic communication, which implies the concepts of Intelligence-led PR and PR Intelligence” (Arcos, 2016). Arcos defines the concept of intelligence as including several operations as: “the systematic scanning or collection of environmental information, research, analysis, and communication of strategic information to decision makers” (2016). In the aspect of PR Intelligence, this need is perceived as an amount of “specific expert knowledge and intelligence on strategic communication and relationship management as a component of intelligence together with market intelligence, competitor intelligence, customer insights, business intelligence, and other segments” (Arcos, 2016). These operations were included in the category of professional activities by many scholars, based on “theory of practices” (Charest et al., 2016). In addition, other researchers considered public relations as being “a strategic intelligence for managing uncertainty reduction needed to make society fully functioning” (McKie & Heath, 2016).

On the other hand, the definition of PR Intelligence concept could be noticed almost four decades ago illustrated in Public Relations Society of America’s (PRSA) Public Statement on Public Relations (PRSA, 1982), even if it was not given under this title. PRSA considers PR to be part of the management functions and it includes, among other operations, the following ones: “anticipating, analysing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues that might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organization” (PRSA, 1982).

3.4. PR - a systematic cyclical process conceptualized as RACE
As a function of an organization administration, strategic communication needs to bring reliable information to the management to insure a qualitative decision making. There are many patterns which can be followed in this regard.
One of the most known models in Public Relations field is based on the PR RACE scheme, defined by Don W. Stacks (2011) in his book as a “systematic cyclical process” which is described as “RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation), ROPE (Research, Objectives, Programming, Evaluation) or RPIE (Research, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation)”. The author offers a broad perspective on varied research methods which can be implemented by PR specialists.

The Stacks’ PR RACE model shows the existence of four stages in building a strategic communication plan: Research - that would concern documenting the audience’s interests and values, and preferred communication channels; Action – the decisions are made regarding the target, the communication structure and messages and channels which will be used; Communication – sending the messages to the chosen audience based on the strategy; Evaluation – an essential phase in appreciating the efficacy of the PR activities (Stacks, 2011; Figure 1, List of Appendix Figures).

After Stacks model, in the Figure 1 (List of Appendix Figures) it is exposed the RACE scheme in a graphic representation to illustrate the main characters of this process: repetitive, as an activity that is systematically used during the communication course, and normative meaning that is an integral part of profession’s practice and acts as a rule inside the organization or the company where the PR specialists are working.

Additionally, it has been underlined that the communication process must be interactive and to comprise a continuous flow of messages from the senders to receivers, and back and forth. PR practitioners must understand “how perception affects interpretation of messages and the ability of the organization to measure and monitor transfer of meaning or understanding of spoken or written communication, non-verbal and graphic communication” (Oliver, 2000). In this regard, the steps of monitoring and evaluating the medium and the message hold a great importance and contribute to the future increasing of the performance standards.

In the chapter Data presentation and analysis of this thesis, it will be examined how theories and concepts exposed above are relating to the current practices of Public Relations and communication departments of the two sport event organizers.

4. Methodology

4.1. Methodological background

There are multiple angles and methods available when starting a research in communication area and try to find how theory connects with practice, and how new
theories can be developed based on practitioners’ experiences and society’s transformations.

Pursuing the field of research in strategic communication in connection with sport industry and reviewing some of the newest theories brought up by recent literature, there are several aspects that must be pointed out. The analysis of the role of strategic communication in a market can be carried out from the organizational or from the societal perspective (Falkheimer, 2014). The first one is following the strategic communication processes in relation with their importance for the organization, regarding efficiency, but also culture and management. From the societal perspective, the study of strategic communication focuses on the effects produced by this activity in society and on the influences caused on public’s opinion, behaviour and culture or on democracy level (Falkheimer, 2014).

This thesis approaches the analysis of the role of strategic communication in running events for amateurs from the organizational angle, but comprises some general observations regarding social changes and trends. To support the research goals, qualitative methods for data collection were selected because they allow acquiring a more in-depth understanding of the running phenomenon on the Romanian market, of the events, facts and people observed in their environment, and to get insights about organizers’ opinions and knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In this regard, the content analysis helps the most to depict the research results of PR RACE challenges on the local market and the communication strategies applied for distance running competitions. Considered as “one of the core methods in media and communications research” (Hansen & Machin, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2012), the content analysis will be performed to interpret both the qualitative and quantitative data obtained by interviewing two local sport event organizers and examining market reports provided by the companies, as main sources. This method is considered by specialists and scholars as the most efficient for the systematic and quantitative analysis process (Hansen & Machin, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

In an attempt to present some interesting findings about sport communication and the cases selected to investigate, the current study will also use some elements of discourse analysis as they are considered useful for examining the content produced by interviews.

“A discourse is a way of talking or writing about something to make it meaningful. It is underpinned by assumptions about what we know to be “true” with regard to how we conduct ourselves what and how we communicate, and
what we understand. Although language is a major feature of discourse, a discourse is more than language because it constitutes, or produces, a particular view of social reality.” (Daymon & Holloway 2011, p. 166)

4.2. Methods and data collection

4.2.1. Interviewing the biggest sport event organizers in Romania

For a deeper understanding of the running phenomenon in Romania and how it was managed by the long-time players, the analysis part will rely on the information and statistics obtained during the interviews with Bucharest RUNNING CLUB (BRC) and Media Production Group (MPG) managers. These organizations have the biggest experience on the local market regarding the implementation of mass running events in Romania and by exploring practitioners' perspectives relevant and information rich data is provided about: competitions’ organizing process, sport communities and valuable insights of the communication strategies applied.

A qualitative method of inquiry was used in both cases, respectively a semi-structured interview based on 14 to 16 questions, which provided a base for the following discussions. During the meetings, both predetermined questions and queries were used to follow-up on subtopics developed by the interviewed person (Feuerstein et al., 2018).

In terms of structure, the interviews aimed at obtaining information about: a) general data – the company’s history, organizational scheme and individual responsibilities; b) technical details – information about the online platforms and their structure, communication channels and the implementation of a sport event; c) market and financial data – types of events, number of participants, runner’s profile and community, statistics and trends recorded during the competitions, study case presentation and evaluation, budget size; d) business and communication strategy – the mission, values and vision of the organization, business and communication strategy insights, design of communication plans, targets and techniques of communication, evaluation procedures and results.

The first interview was conducted with Oana Năstase, Managing Director of Bucharest RUNNING CLUB Association (BRC), on December 4, 2017, in a business hub place in the centre of Bucharest, and lasted an hour and a half. On the 23rd of April 2018, the second interview was carried out with Sanda Mocuța, General Manager of Media Production Group (MPG), at the company’s headquarters in the Northern of Bucharest, and the meeting lasted two hours. Both discussions were relaxed, open and produced
useful arguments in the favour of the importance of strategic communication in sport events and organization reputation.

One of the aims was to understand how the organizers designed their strategies to attract audiences, which are the pillars they built on their messages for engaging audiences, and which challenges they met in the process. Another purpose is to evaluate to what extent they applied the principles of strategic communication during their activity to gain runners’ trust (Sherrick, 2012, September; Herrick, 2015; Arcos, 2016).

4.2.2. Market reports used for qualitative analysis

Both the examined organizers BRC and MPG use annual reports to observe the dynamics of their systems and to establish the next year’s objectives. Although the purpose is similar the data variables are not the same. The research conducted by the organizers was based on different models, and therefore the communication plans include dissimilar visions and various targets.

The study also includes the data provided by both Romanian organizers for the activity of two distance running events in 2016. The detailed statistics realized, completed for that year, provide a deeper understanding of the runners’ profiles which will serve the purpose of this research. There are two digital documents containing a market radiography of the runners, starting from different considerations and using multiple variables: “Profile of the runners attending Bucharest RUNNING Club events”, a qualitative and quantitative survey performed by Quantix Marketing Consulting for Bucharest RUNNING Club Association, in September 2017; and “RUNFEST system data analysis for 2016 activity”, an online quantitative study with qualitative interpretation of data performed by the Media Production Group in January 2017.

In the study was included also a market report that aimed to identify the general trends and people’s perceptions and habits related to sport activities, which was realized on a national level by three marketing agencies (Quantix Marketing Consulting, SMARK and Inovactive, 2015).

The examination of the information and statistics provided by the two big players in the Romanian market will help understanding the characteristics of sport communities and how these are influencing the cyclic scheme of communication process.

A. Bucharest International Marathon

Bucharest RUNNING CLUB (BRC) is an association established in 2007 and the organizer of the biggest street running competitions in Romania, in terms of number of participants, with a calendar of three annual events: UNIQA Insurance 10 K & Family
Run, in April, Volkswagen Bucharest HALF MARATHON, in May, and Raiffeisen Bank Bucharest MARATHON, in October (ABRC, 2018).

The first event organized was Raiffeisen Bank Bucharest MARATHON or Bucharest International Marathon (BIM), as it was known from the beginning, in 2007. The event invited athletes, both amateurs and professionals, to compete on the Romanian capital’s boulevards as a mass movement against urban sedentarism, to encourage people to exercise and give the teenagers the opportunity to access and gain sport experience. BRC’s goal was to put the country on the global map of marathons. A lot of local athletes felt motivated and reacted to the national call of this annual event. Since 2008, Bucharest has been included in the international marathon circuit, joining the other European capitals that host such competitions every year, and gained celebrity (BRC, 2017, September).

Now, simply named Bucharest Marathon is the largest annual running event in Romania gathering thousands of participants at the start line. Every October, the event offers local or foreign athletes the opportunity to run the streets in the very heart of the city, while surrounding the Romanian Palace of Parliament known also as the biggest building in Europe. Since 2008, Bucharest has been included in the international marathon circuit, joining other capitals that host such competitions every year, and gain celebrity (BRC, 2017, September).

The study realized by Quantix Marketing Consulting for BIM organizer highlighted the main characteristics of the 9th edition of the event. There were several options to compete: individual races at marathon and semi-marathon, relay of 4 people each running 10, 5 km, but also shorter distances as fun race and kids’ race. In 2016, 14,000 participants attended the competition and 680 were coming from other 65 countries (BRC, 2017). It is notable that the number of female runners was almost 40% (Figure 2, List of Appendix Figures), which gets Romania closer to the desired gender equality.

The Bucharest RUNNING Club’s competitions are accredited and enrolled in the international calendar of AIMS (Association of International Marathons and Distance Races) and IAAF. BRC also organizes other competitions, as mass sports events for companies and NGOs, and has implemented over 100 running events in the last 11 years, consisting of outdoor exercise, mass sports, volunteering, education, communication and community development activities (ABRC, 2018).

B. RACE TO NATURE Trail and Family Run
Media Production Group (MPG) is the largest independent investor in recreational sports events in Romania, coordinating the biggest community of amateur athletes, consisting of over 100,000 members. The company has designed and implemented
concepts of multi-sport competition systems, using complex IT communication platforms. MPG coordinates five sport and entertainment projects, with more than 750 events held in 70 cities of Romania, Bulgaria and the Republic of Moldova, offering Sportainment experiences, as stated in the company’s presentation (MPG, 2017; MPG, 2018).

Founded 20 years ago, MPG’s purpose was to create, innovate and develop successful media projects and sports concepts on the Romanian market, designed to attract the public to recreational sports as a healthy and fun way of spending leisure time. Among those projects are: Riders Club, a system of national mountain bike competitions and one international multi-stage event – Carpathian MTB Epic, recently launched; RUNFEST, a system of running events, from road to trail races; Tenis Partener and Tenis10, national tennis tournaments for adults and children; Romanian Corporate Sports, a system of competitions aimed at employees of companies. Each project has an annual calendar of events which are promoted on national level on different channels. In the last decade, MPG has implemented more than 4,000 sport events (MPG, 2017).

The RUNFEST platform was launched in 2013, with two competitions in the beginning, and it was designed to become a system of various running events for amateur athletes. One of MPG’s targets included the expansion of trail running segment, as a sustainable way to promote outdoor exercise in a natural environment. In the annual calendar there are two distance races organized in the forests near Bucharest, and four road and fun run events set in the urban parks or on streets. Trail running has increased in popularity and more than 1,700 participants were registered at this type of events organized by MPG in 2016, according to the report “RUNFEST system data analysis for 2016 activity” (Media Production Group, 2017). In this regard, the analysis of the event RACE TO NATURE Trail and Family Run, performed for this research, will introduce valuable insights of this running segment.

C. Communication channels
A preliminary investigation of data analysis of the running systems dynamics in 2016, offered by BRC and MPG as digital documents, showed that the main communication channels with their participants are online platforms, respectively the official events websites and social media pages: www.bucharest-marathon.com, Facebook Bucharest MARATHON; www.runfest.ro, Facebook Run Fest. The websites are complex IT platforms used for communicating with the public, and even if they have different structures they perform multiple functionalities which are common: competition pages, event calendar, news and event documents, users’ profiles, online registrations and payment, race rankings and links to the social media pages.
As it has been shown by the previous studies, the channels of communication play a key role in the communication and evaluation process of reaching, connecting and engaging the public (Sherrick, 2012, September; Shipway, Holloway & Jones, 2012, April; Hambrick, M. E., 2017). Therefore, further research will include evaluation of the communication strategy used for these channels and the participants’ feedback.

5. Data presentation and analysis

The running phenomenon in Romania started to be noticed later than in other European countries, but the increasing was bigger and it recovered rapidly from the possible delays. On the eve of new millennium, a demure appetite for running was observed and gradually some modest road running races appeared, scattered around the country. But the real impulse was given in 2007 by the Bucharest Marathon, an ambitious project launched by a very small group of people. The moment was very favourable, because in that year Romania officially entered the European market as a new member of European Union, and suddenly a lot of opportunities were available. The effects were observed in statistics as well, during 2009-2014 Romania recorded a 152.78% growth in marathon participation rate, the biggest in the region (Andersen, 2015, May; Table 1, List of Appendix Tables).

For a deeper understanding of this social phenomenon on the biggest market in the South-Eastern Europe, this chapter of analysis will rely on information and data obtained by interviewing two long time players and the most important on the Romanian sport events market, the managers of Bucharest RUNNING CLUB (BRC) and Media Production Group (MPG), with some relevant examples from their market reports.

5.1. Bucharest Marathon: from pioneering to strategic communication

The first discussion on the topic was carried out at the end of the 2017, while interviewing Oana Năstase, Managing Director of BRC, one of the two founders of this association. The Bucharest International Marathon, as it was entitled in the beginning, was a project that began with the creation of Bucharest RUNNING CLUB Association with the purpose to launch a long-distance running event in the capital city of Romania, similar to famous competitions around the world.

“This was the initial purpose coming from the President of the Association, Valeria Răcilă van Groningen, who is an Olympic athlete and a passionate runner. We associated both with this goal, and my role was to build and implement the event’s strategy, to manage the project and all the activities that were not related to sports. We went down together on this path.” (Oana Năstase,
Valeria Răcilă van Groningen, the President of Bucharest RUNNING Club, is a former professional rower, an Olympic gold medallist athlete at Los Angeles, in 1984, and passionate about running (Ungureanu, 2013, February 15). Oana Năstase has a project management, corporate affairs and communication background in the financial and energy fields (2017, December 4).

In the first part of Bucharest Marathon history, the founders of BRC faced a lot of challenges which can be considered to be common among pioneering activity in every market. The first edition of the marathon was organized with the help of the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, but next year BRC started the event from zero, explained Năstase. Two factors shaped the idea BRC chose to follow: the economic crisis that escalated in 2008 and the trend of ‘down-shifting’ influencing people’s lifestyle; secondly, the international model of marathon, that involved civic movement, sport performance, mass sports, volunteering, social contribution and charity contribution.

“It was the beginning for everybody to have other preoccupations besides the job or business, like taking more time for other activities with the family, in the society; ‘down-shifting’ was a switch of interests from material things to those more related to personal development, meant to increase the quality of life. (...) The marathon served as a platform where social, educational and sport elements met. This is what amazed me mostly and I liked the idea of building such a thing. The construction of the event moved in parallel with the designing of communication plan, overlaid on the business strategy”. (Năstase, 2017, December 4)

The first step in building the event was to perform research on the global trends and international mass events, like Budapest, London, Amsterdam and Rotterdam marathons, and their communication methods. Năstase deemed the London Marathon to be the most impressive one (2017, December 4).

The aim of BRC was to position the Bucharest Marathon as a quality event with an international classification. The second step was to fulfil the criteria imposed by Association of International Marathons and Distance Races (AIMS) in order to organize the competition and adhere to the professional body. The conditions were to have: a) performance, meaning a certain number of runners with a race performance standard; b) diversity by organizing other distance races besides the marathon; c) sport-tourism consisting in foreign runners competing at Bucharest Marathon; d) NGO
format and social causes supported through running activity; e) big prize pool; f) volunteering activity. All these objectives became gradually communication pillars and basis for the PR plan (Năstase, 2017, December 4).

Although the communication was an important component of the business plan, the financial aspect was essential: “I am more pragmatic, what mattered the most for the beginning I think it was the sponsor”, emphasized Oana Năstase. On the other hand, the event was new and sponsors wanted results before investing in such enthusiastic plan on paper. In order to make the implementation possible, Năstase started in 2008 by designing a communication structure and finding support among business relations and friends to create the website. The human resource she could gather made a huge difference - being represented by people who worked pro-bono in the very beginning of the marathon architecture - as it is considered one of the costliest in an organization. The efforts were rewarded after the first editions, and consequently the team was completed by people responsible with event organization, implementation and communication.

In the first 4-5 years, BRC relied on sponsors and partners’ contributions, donations, barters and different partnership to organize every edition of Bucharest Marathon. The competition failed in covering all the costs from the entry fees and it wasn’t profitable, according to the Managing Director of Bucharest RUNNING Club. Also, the communication plan was carried out on media partnerships and barters basis, without having a dedicated budget for promotion. The communication with the public wasn’t much elaborated either, the messages generally addressing: masses, local and international professional athletes, and corporations’ employees. It can be noted that in this phase, only three steps from Stacks’ scheme were followed: research, planning and implementation (2011). To attract foreign participants, BRC formed partnerships with different international organizers and sent flyers to promote the marathon. Additionally, online partnerships were established including promotion through web banners, in newsletters and social media.

“We limited to our neighbours in the first stage. After we realized the direction wasn’t the right one, we tried to reach countries with similar cultural and language affinities like Italy, Spain, but also nations with big appetite for running, like England and Germany. But to bring international professional runners we had to pay them.” (Năstase, 2017, December 4)

BRC considered the Bucharest Marathon to be entirely successful only after the 5 years, when it could allocate budgets for dedicate advertising campaigns and towards competition’s development. In parallel, the team evaluated the results by detailed
analysis and used questionnaires for getting people’s feedback about the: process of
information, communication channels, sport interests and running races attended.
From 2014, to get a more consistent feedback from their public, BRC turned to quality
analysis questionnaires to build runner’s profile. Năstase believes that this step made a
significant difference because it offered insights about the participants’ motivations,
preferences and perceptions in relation with a competition and Bucharest Marathon. It
was revealed that the marathon runner uses newsletters, online publications and social
media to get information; he appreciates and reacts to messages coming from
influencers who are sportsmen, with a sport background or achievements.
Furthermore, the BRC team better defined the publics and used amateur and
professional athletes or key opinion leaders as event ambassadors. These measures
improved the image and visibility in social media and in sport or fan communities.

“We changed the strategy based on these verified facts, based on the studies we
realized about our public. Also, we made an evaluation, a new research for our
communication strategy and reallocated our resources and focused more on the
online platform, on social media, to create a mobile responsive site, the race
subscription to be done quickly via mobile phone.” (Năstase, 2017, December 4)

Due to the running boost and market segmentation, BRC decided to launch another
two events, first one focused on half marathon distance and the second to 10 km and
short races for families and children.

In the meantime, Bucharest International Marathon succeeded in becoming the biggest
national running event. In 2016, there were 14,000 runners at the starting line and
among 680 foreign runners (Figure 2, List of Appendix Figures), and the event budget
was reaching around 700,000 Euros, according to Năstase. The total budget was based
on cash and non-cash resources and BRC dedicated a significant part, consisting of
130,000 Euros, to promotion and advertising campaigns: IT and online promotion –
15,000 Euros; advertising, other than online - 15,000 Euros; and almost 100,000
Euros (non-cash) representing services in PR and press conference (10%), print (40%),
radio (20%), TV (20%), online content, other promotion events (10%) (Năstase, 2017,
December 4).

5.2. Taking runners out of the city: RACE TO NATURE Trail & Family Run
A pioneering activity was conducted as well by Media Production Group, a marketing
company with more than 20 years of experience in creating sport media publications
and recreational events. The organization was founded by Sanda Mocuța and Cătălin
Mocuța, a couple with professional background in management, finance and
marketing, who developed a family business.
Sanda Mocuța, the General Manager of MPG, was involved in the product creation from the very beginning when the company was publishing a tennis and golf magazine (2018, April 23). Then, her husband joined the company and had a business-oriented approach. The first competitions started in 2008 with the launching of Romanian Corporate Sports, a system of championships addressed to corporate employees, and Tenis Partener, a national system of tournaments in big and medium cities of Romania, dedicated to amateur and professional players. In 2012, the company invested in a system of mountain bike races for amateur athletes, and next year MPG decided to enter the running market.

“In Romania, the sport event market was developed by passionate people, most of them acting in sports industry, like professional runners and cyclists, business owners with connection to this market. (...) Mainly the focus was on the routes of the races and performances. In these cases, the participants are coming from the familiar environments like friends, acquaintances and the communication relies on the word of mouth mostly. There was a low promotion of these events and even less advertising, and they increased slowly in terms of participation rate.” (Sanda Mocuța, 2018, April 23)

Mocuța noticed the same trend on the local running market, namely that the participants gathered around people considered role-models in the industry and influencers, either professional runners or riders, with proven sport results in competition, who shared their values and formed small communities where they promoted healthy activities, nutrition diets and free training. She believes that communication is very significant in sport industry, even vital to reach audiences.

“It regards two plans: direct communication with the possible partners – because if people don’t know about the existence of this event, what is it about and how it is different from other, why should they attend it, then you can’t expect people to come; on the other hand, you need to finance and communicate this event – create content and communicate about the sponsors, partners, and the event’s brand.” (Sanda Mocuța, 2018, April 23)

The path of MPG towards sport events creation, development and brand communication was not easy and it had a complex character due to the number of projects coordinated. Even the management had previous consistent experience in marketing and brand building and promotion, the decision was to keep communication activity on lower level. The organizer chose to transmit direct messages towards the sport communities created through several channels: newsletters, mobile messages, online platforms and social media pages, without investing in mass-communication
tools. The argument is that MPG preferred to invest first in building the sport systems and communities.

“This was our main investment area and goal, to have complex IT structures for the online platforms, each one serving separately one of the sport systems we created able to offer: structured information and multimedia section, page events, news, photos and videos, registrations in competitions, complex data base administration, individual player/cyclist/runner profiles, results, statistics and rankings, discount options, track performance record, virtual reward system, online diploma.” (Sanda Mocuța, 2018, April 23)

In 2013, when the RUNFEST system was launched, they began by promoting a calendar of running races. After a year, they realized that from the marketing and communication perspectives the events must be conceived as individual brands in order to differentiate themselves in a crowded market. Sanda Mocuța explained “there was a confusion related to the way we communicate these events” (2018, April 23). Then, the company decided to apply a detailed SWOT analysis to evaluate the strengths, the weaknesses, opportunities and threats; and then conceived a marketing and communication strategy aiming to increase visibility of event brands. They discovered that people are attracted by brands which are sending a message supported by a background story they can connect to. On the other hand, MPG concluded that the company entered the running market too late for the big road races because the events promoted by BRC recorded an exponential growth. However, the MPG team tried to identify niches in this industry and included various races in RUNFEST calendar which became quite popular, with a range of 900 to 1,400 participants: Bucharest Fox Trail Half Marathon, RACE TO NATURE Trail & Family Run, Gabriela Szabo RUNFEST, URBATLON, Hot Chocolate Race 10/5 k. As in the previous case, the financial aspect was also an important concern since most of large and medium companies had chosen to invest in another big event that already gained notoriety (Mocuța, 2018, April 23).

The first competitions launched in the market were dedicated to trail running, one being organized in the autumn and the other in spring. Events in the nature are distinctive from road city races, and there are some key aspects that must be taken into consideration: taking people out of the city is difficult because the contemporary individual is more sedentary, so less participation can be expected; the distance and the time spent to get to the starting line in a forest near Bucharest can be a challenge as there is no public transport to get there. Though, Cernica forest, the location chosen for RACE TO NATURE Trail & Family Run, was attractive: the start/finish area was set by the lake in an adventure park, which also has a restaurant near with different facilities, the forest and fields area was suitable for developing a semi-marathon race, the longest
distance of the event, detailed Sanda Mocuța (2018, April 23). The public’s feedback was positive, but the number of runners remained under 1,000 people. There was an advance from an edition to another, but the growth of participation rate was small. In 2016, RACE TO NATURE Trail & Family Run registered a bit over 900 runners and people were satisfied to compete in the nature. One of the arguments was that the children races were free as they were supported by one of the event’s sponsors. Mocuța explained that although the communication campaign addressed targeted audiences had good results, it was really hard to convince companies to keep investing in this type of competitions. The main reason was that coming from the city to the forest and make brand activations during the sport event is requiring more logistic efforts from sponsors and partners. And brand activation is an important element to communicate for attracting both sponsors and participants (Mocuța, 2018, April 23).

The budget of organizing a trail running competition is estimated to around 15,000 Euros including cash and non-cash resources. The communication and advertising expenditures represent 15% of it, being the second as size after human resources costs which are around 22% (Mocuța, 2018, April 23). The communication plan was structured by taking into account each segment of the public, analysed by social identifiers and, in particular, by sport abilities and personal motives: professional athletes, experienced amateur athletes who are looking to compete in an organized environment, runners who look to improve their personal results – adults and young athletes, people who run for fun and personal health and satisfaction, families and children who are looking to spend quality time together. The messages were focused on brand communication based on storytelling technique, and on the services provided with emphasis on the quality and standards imposed by MPG on the market. The most important part of the message referred to the special experience set for people during the event. The experience offered by MPG comprises standard services for the event combined with an entertaining atmosphere: information and registrations point, race pack pick-up; training before the race; hydration and nutrition points; medical and technical assistance; music and MC for keeping the ambiance, reminding information and race rules and promoting sponsors and partners; specialized staff & timing of the competition; emergency communications; volunteers to support different activities; reward festivity and prizes; raffle with prizes; live online results; media services – photo, video, photo booth or photo corner, instant social media communication like Facebook live transmissions from the event; recovery meal after the race; various entertaining activities for adults and children – face painting, drawing, T-shirt painting, short engaging contests, partner and sponsor’ various activations like tasting new products or receiving vouchers; cleaning service, toilets and lavatories.
The main characteristic, and the most notable aspect, is the company’s efforts to keep updated the technologies used and to follow the digital market trends. Sanda Mocuța considers this an essential feature in differentiating from competitors. In this context, the investments in RUNFEST and Riders Club online platforms were of 50,000 Euros from the moment of launching until present days.

5.3. PR challenges in attracting people to distance running events

From the content analysis of the statements made by the two event organizers, it can be noted that the current practices generally fit into the theoretical frame and recent assertions in the strategic communication area. However, the particularities of each organization detailed above, the specific context in which these actors acted and the level of market development led to different approaches of the running phenomenon. In the next part the thesis, the analysis will focus on examining how the communication process was carried out from the theoretical perspective.

Following the Stacks examples of the models (2011) in building a strategic communication, it can be stated that Bucharest Marathon was promoted in the beginning by using first the RACE scheme - Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation, as it was more important to launch the event, according to Oana Năstase, the Managing Director of BRC (2017, December 4).

During that period, the new content produced in sport communication helped in shaping people’s perception about recreational activities; they became more involved and connected to the sport habits, begin to form and join communities, set training objectives and respond to messages of sport engagement. It was a natural course starting from the needs and values of each individual and satisfaction obtained from this activity, as Pons et al. described it referring to sport events (2006, February).

Given to the technological transformations and the channels provided by BRC to its audiences the feedback became more consistent and diverse. However, this couldn’t be analysed in-depth and understood better without applying specialized methods of market research. As presented during the research review, in the second chapter of this thesis, the constant evaluation of the market segmentation is part of any strategic communication activity, as a management function (Șerbănică & Constantinescu, 2006). It is also an operation that shows that the practitioners are acting based on the concept of Intelligence-led PR (Arcos, 2016), which is essential in setting a business strategy that serves best to the organization’s interests (Bütschi & Steyn, 2006).

Apart from education and holding a specific set of skills, PR specialists rely on practice to gain experience and knowledge which will help them further to offer valuable
information and contribute to management decisions (Bütschi & Steyn, 2006; Falkheimer, 2014). Therefore, it is logical that the “systematic cyclical process” (Stacks, 2011) can be always improved in order to produce better results. This can be observed from the progress recorded in the communication process of BRC team. After the 4-5 years of promoting Bucharest Marathon, the communication activity became more goal-oriented and involved more planning before the action, based on the repeated evaluation of the market, and it can be associated to the definition of RPIE scheme - Research, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation (Stacks, 2011). This is considered part of the natural evolution of professional practices due to social changes and market amplification, based on “theory of practices” (Charest et al., 2016). In terms of communication channels, Năstase underlined that technological development and people’s choices for modern devices determined to approach new tools:

“We had to take in consideration more the communication through a smart phone, social media, SMS, newsletters, web site and race subscription through the mobile phone. Although, we tried to go along with the other traditional communication channels, for the masses, for non-runners, for the sponsors and for general notoriety.” (Năstase, 2017, December 4)

By comparison, the MPG business and communication decisions were based on strategic thinking and evaluation of the market before implementing their projects. A reason for this is the larger experience of the company's management in implementing sport events and building brands. As seen in the content analysis of the interview with Sanda Mocuța, General Manager of MPG, the organization followed a strategic communication scheme that involved: Research, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation (RPIE) (2018, April 23; Stacks, 2011). On the other hand, a strategic decision was to keep the communication oriented towards audiences, by mediated or direct interaction, using modern communication tools and digital technology, and less to involve traditional media. The RUNFEST online platform served as main channel to inform, educate and engage sport communities. The market report performed by MPG (2017) showed that in 2016 the mobile platforms account for 55% of total traffic and indicated the need for site efficiency for this category of devices. As concerns the traffic origins, the study revealed that social channels are the most important sources, followed by organic search and direct access to the site, mostly by registered users. So, the company decided to intensify the investment efforts in this direction. In this context, the communication also has become more digital media oriented (MPG, 2017).

The communication strategy paid attention to the characteristics of participants, taking account of social identifiers. In case of RACE TO NATURE Family & Trail Run, it can be noticed the next aspects: more than 50% of the participants were men; 42% of the
runners were aged under 14 years; and that a third of the people who competed in the races of 5 km, 10 and 21 km were aged 30 to 39 years (Figure 3, List of Appendix Figures). The same percent of adults within the range of 30-39 years old is noticed to be present in all events included in the RUNFEST calendar. The data helped to position better the communication subjects and messages, as a strategic action, stated Sanda Mocuța (2018, April 23), to increase the segment of participants. She considers that children races have a great growth potential and sponsors should invest more in supporting this segment, as they are the future individual consumers as adults.

During the first 5 years of pioneering – 2007-2012 – in running events and industry transformation and growing in Romania, and based on the two study cases, several critical challenges were observed in the PR activity, which required intensive efforts: 1) general lack of education about large sports events involving direct participation of the public through competition; 2) the lack of experience of organizers in dealing with mass events and applying strategic communication principles; 3) communication relied mostly of a repetitive action to create habit; 4) the awareness of health benefits by involving in recreational sport activities is still low, as well as the importance of medical check before such effort; 5) market research as a tool is not exploited effectively; 6) Bucharest market can’t support more than 3 big long-distance running events per year in terms of mass participation; 7) the investment budgets must be concentrated to develop new communication tools and tactics given to intensive use of modern devices (Năstase, 2017, December 4; Mocuța, 2018, April 23).

As resulted from the content analysis, strategic communication played an important role in overcoming these challenges, and developed better techniques to engage masses in distance competitions.

5.4. Effects of “breaking out” and public engagement

To motivate passionate runners and engage larger audiences some key messages were used in the process, as objectives of strategic communication.

During the interviews, some discourse elements were noticed as expressing the managers’ view over the market. BRC had a communication more oriented to “competition and performance”, in the first years of activity. The main target was to communicate to mass runners, among professional and amateur athletes and corporate employees. Later, BRC decided as a business and communication strategy to focus also on family and children segment by launching other events.

As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, MPG entered later the sport events market and after the market research the organization decided to create competitions
for the segments less developed, like runners who are open to new experiences, like trail running or themed races, and families and children eager to test various ways of spending quality time together. The communication plan was focused on promoting the events’ themes and the entertaining atmosphere, as part of the ‘special experience’ people will have, to differentiate from other events.

“This experience is a well-arranged package of services of sport for amateur athletes and entertainment for which we used a marketing concept to define and promote it: Sportainment. After positioning under this concept on the local events market, the brand image becomes clearer for our public and competitors, and we owned entirely this concept.” (Sanda Mocuța, 2018, April 23)

Messages that embedded key words like ‘performance’ and ‘experience’ became communication pillars for the communication strategy (Sherrick, 2012, September; Herrick, 2015; Arcos, 2016). From the theoretical perspective, of discourse analysis, it is important to observe the ideas that formed the communication messages and helped in developing the strategy which are revealed by the language used by the two-people interviewed (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006; Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

6. Results and discussions

6.1. Implementing strategic communication in running events

The qualitative results of documenting the practitioners’ experiences in the sport communication and local running events market brought up some reflections on the changes they produced in society and how they see the running phenomenon, which can serve as findings for the current thesis.

First, as a general perspective, it can be clearly stated that the sport projects implemented by BRC and MPG had a significant impact on the mass sport development in Romania. Their efforts, experiences and perseverance in opening new paths in local running industry resulted in boosting the running phenomenon on the market. By launching and creating strong sport event brands for amateurs, as well as positioning those events on a higher qualitative level, they shaped the perceptions over this activity; therefore, they can be considered trendsetters.

Secondly, as trendsetters they hold a high contribution to the social transformation of the society, with positive effects in the educational and economic spheres. Through communication campaigns and running events organized in the last decade, people learnt to value more the benefits of pursuing a physical activity. The numerous sport communities, as an effect of the sport market consolidation, created the new social
medium where the participants could find personal development and enjoy more quality time spent with families, friends or new acquaintances.

Thirdly, during the content analysis the connection was made between previous research in the communication area, with the focus on the current topic, and contemporary practices. It was shown that the strategic communication has a key role in the running events, with an extent to other sport competitions created for amateur athletes in the Romanian market.

The development was also analysed in an extensive market report conducted by three marketing research companies, during 2012 and 2014. Quantix Marketing Consulting, SMARK and Inovaction studied the mass sports development and trends with the focus on people’s perception and habits related to physical activity and sport competitions, targeting urban population aged 18 to 70 years, connected to sports (2015). The report highlighted that investments made by private sport organizers by implementing a large number of various competitions and broad media campaigns conducted to the rapid growth of the popularity of these recreational sports. More than 50% of the urban population interviewed stated that have practiced a sport in the last 12 months. The progress was noted by: increased number of courts - football, tennis, basketball etc.; increased number of indoor facilities & gyms; larger number of competitions for amateurs – running, biking, swimming, triathlon, tennis, football; inter-company competitions – organized by different organizations for various sports; more clubs - NGOs and organizations helping people practice; development in the sport retail – lots of foreign brands entering the market; higher involvement of companies (private sector) – supported the trend and associated their corporate image or brands to sports; internal programs in companies (private sector) – many organizations have initiated a cultural adoption of sports through engaging activities & programs (Quantix Marketing Consulting, SMARK, Inovaction, 2015).

Although, the country followed the European trends of the running boom, as the third wave, Romania presents a great potential for further development in the sport event industry. Currently, on the national level, there are around 750 of running events in Romania dedicated to amateur and professional athletes organized for competitive reasons or for fun and relaxation, including: distance competitions - road and mountain marathons and half-marathons, triathlons, 10 km, 10,5 km races mostly included in the big events; short distance races - 3 km, 5 km, 6 km and 7 km, with different attractive themes and entertainment features, according to Ro Club Marathon calendar (2018), which is the most comprehensive. Though the number could be higher because some running activities staged by local fitness companies are not included in this calendar, it is relatively small considering the country’s population (Statista, 2018).
There are also numerous media campaigns developed every month in the central and local newspapers, television and radio stations and on social media pages related to these events. Also, another effect of the running boom was the appearance of specialized media, like running, fitness and healthy lifestyles magazines and online publications to support the volume of information coming from different sport event organizers.

6.2. PR practitioners need to embrace technologic revolution

The latest challenges of PR practitioners are to adapt their communication messages and techniques to digital channels and to learn how to effectively handle new media tools. Researchers started to investigate in the last years the connection between media, market development and the modern democracy. Coombs et al. introduced the concept of ‘digital naturals’ in the communication field, which “describe actors who are comfortable in the new online environment, who possess a range of communicative and knowledge-gathering skills and who have sophisticated expectations for their relationships with organisations and institutions” (Coombs et al., 2016). This new concept needs further study and deeper analysis, as it is interesting to evaluate the impact of this activity in the results of the communication campaigns.

As it can be seen from previous research and arguments presented in this thesis, there is no doubt that the running phenomenon produced significant transformations in society and in people’s lives from social, educational and economic point of view. There are more interesting aspects related to this phenomenon and sport communication which are worth examining and discussing in further research.

Although the study focused on the biggest players in the sport events industry, it was limited as number of cases due to the short amount of time I had for pursuing this topic. In the last decade, the local industry of sport events grew consistently and considerably therefore there are other big organizations that are worth questioned and examined.

Regarding the societal aspect (Falkheimer, 2014), it might be interesting to further evaluate the people’s direct feedback related to social media channels and the spontaneous comments made after events. For theoretical debate, this future research will provide a better picture of how they perceived the communication campaigns and how effective were the tactics applied by the PR managers. For understanding participant’s perception over the events, a content analysis could be performed on social media pages considering the participants comments posted on the Facebook pages. From both micro and macro perspective on the public's opinion, it would be suitable to conduct a survey among runners attending distance competitions, either by
selecting them on relevant criteria basis and mailing online questionnaires, either by organizing social media polls over a longer period in Facebook running groups. These methods imply however a certain amount of time dedicated to collect the data relevant for the academic analysis.

This current study is only focusing on the event organizers’ plans and actions and how their communication strategies were implemented and evaluated, considering the limited size of the paper and the short period of time it was made.

7. Conclusions

During the analysis of the running phenomenon on the Romanian market and the strategies used by the biggest players, several conclusions can be presented in this final chapter.

There is a clear connection between old theories and current PR practices, but new media tools as an effect of digitalization require the diversification of skills. As a primer conclusion, the activities of research and planning, as well as using modern communication tools and new technologies, as part of strategic communication, have helped the sport event organizers to reach targeted audiences, form and shape public perception about recreational activities and engage people to participate in running competitions. During research review and current analysis, it was observed that digitalization creates new trends of lifestyle, and this could also be an interesting topic for further research because it produces significant changes in how people perceive recreational activities and how they engage in those. Therefore, it is an evident prove for stating that the sport communication needs to embrace the technological evolution in practice as well as in research area.

Another finding, as a confirmation to this thesis aims, is that PR Intelligence, as concept of strategic communication, is represented by a set of knowledge that can be gained both by specialized education and relevant practice. The study of the PR activities presented by the two Romanian sport event organizers showed that strategic communication played a key role in their businesses and market development. It strengthens the acknowledgement of this type of communication as an essential managerial function. The information provided by PR specialists approaching a strategic thinking contributes to set the business and communication objectives, to connect the organization with its audience and to obtain public engagement and notoriety. The research could be carried out further in relation with this topic. Theoretical knowledge must be improved by investigating how strategic communication, as a method of promoting corporate image and reputation, is breaking...
barriers regarding concepts and functions inside an organization. This conclusion comes as a logical consequence of the facts and gaps I discovered during my research and it has ground support in the literature review (Bütschi & Steyn, 2006).

At the end of this Master thesis, I would like to show my gratitude for the support I received from Bucharest RUNNING Club Association and Media Production Group in conducting this study. Likewise, I express my hope that this research will be a useful input to the current literature in the sport communication area and strategic communication and it will be considered as inspiration for further research, and at the same time it will bring additional knowledge to other PR practitioners.
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**Other sources**


Mocuța, Sanda, General Manager of Media Production Group (2018, April 23). Audio recorded interview performed by Elena-Maria Vavilov.

Năstase, Oana, Managing Director of Bucharest RUNNING Club Association (2017, December 4). Audio recorded interview performed by Elena-Maria Vavilov.

List of Appendix Tables

Table 1. Growth in Popularity of Marathon Running (Andersen, 2015, May)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Growth 2009 to 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
<td>300.00%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>259.47%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>211.90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Greece</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Israel</td>
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<td>Argentina</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>159.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>154.76%</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>152.76%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>134.04%</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Poland</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>47.92%</td>
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Table 2. Gender Distribution among Marathon participants (Andersen, 2015, May)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>%female</th>
<th>%male</th>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>New Zealand</td>
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<td>Iceland</td>
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<td>Denmark</td>
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<td>China</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>21.02%</td>
<td>78.98%</td>
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List of Appendix Figures

Figure 1. Strategic communication scheme using the R.A.C.E. model (Stacks, 2011)

![RACE - systematic cycle process diagram](image)

Figure 2: Info graphic of 2016 Bucharest International Marathon (BRC, 2017)

[Image of infographic showing marathon participants from different countries and genders]
Figure 3: Characteristics of RUNFEST participants in 2016 (MPG, 2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social identifiers</th>
<th>Race to Nature</th>
<th>G.S. RF Bistrita</th>
<th>Urbation</th>
<th>After9Cross</th>
<th>FOX TRAIL</th>
<th>Fuga pe Uita</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age 40-49 (%)</td>
<td>119 (14%)</td>
<td>61 (7%)</td>
<td>85 (13%)</td>
<td>102 (17%)</td>
<td>119 (15%)</td>
<td>85 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 50+ (%)</td>
<td>17 (2%)</td>
<td>13 (1%)</td>
<td>10 (2%)</td>
<td>31 (5%)</td>
<td>31 (4%)</td>
<td>19 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 (%)</td>
<td>8 (1%)</td>
<td>161 (19%)</td>
<td>39 (6%)</td>
<td>23 (3%)</td>
<td>14 (1%)</td>
<td>12 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 (%)</td>
<td>845 (99%)</td>
<td>672 (81%)</td>
<td>623 (94%)</td>
<td>619 (97%)</td>
<td>768 (99%)</td>
<td>470 (98%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Participants M = male; F = female