

## ORGANIZING SPORTS EVENTS BASED ON FREAK FIGHTS – ASSESSMENT OF DEVELOPMENT TREND AND ANALYSIS OF MARKETING ACTIVITIES OF ORGANIZERS

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to assess the development trend of organizing sports events based on freak fights in Poland and to identify related marketing activities.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Achieving the objectives of the study was based on a desk research method and required the collection and arrangement of quantitative and qualitative data gathered from combat sports industry portals. The theoretical objectives of the paper included explaining the concept of sports events, identifying sports federations as the organizers of these events and explaining the marketing mix concepts 4P and 4C. Furthermore, the concept of freak fights was described. The paper also identifies and justifies the moment when the first freak fight federation appeared in Poland.

**Findings:** An analysis of the data revealed a growing trend of organizing this type of event on the Polish market. The most active entities in this matter were identified and their marketing activities were described.

**Research limitations/implications:** In acquiring data to assess the developmental trend of the phenomenon, it was noted that there is a lack of academic literature covering freak fights. Data extracted from industry portals was thoroughly selected and transferred to the academic field.

**Practical implications:** The discussion of the results showed a pattern of activities undertaken by the federations, including hiring media persons for the fights, organizing live broadcasts from the arena or carrying out promotional activities especially on the Internet.

**Originality/value:** The value of the paper is its uniqueness on a national scale. It is aimed at those willing to explore the subject of freak fights on the Polish market. It can be a starting point for further research.

**Keywords:** freak fight, mixed martial arts, sports events, marketing mix.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## **1. Introduction**

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is considered the fastest growing sport in the world (Farrer, Guam, 2016). On the Polish sports market, it is possible to notice the increased activity of federations that organize events based on an extraordinary formula such as a freak fight (Danielewicz, 2022). Contributing to the increased interest in such events are their organizers, who apply promotional strategies focused on their product. The MMA sport, which has so far received little publicity, is now reaching an increasingly wide market area especially in Poland through freak fighting (Bernacik, 2022). Freak fights have occurred at MMA events in the past. However, no events based entirely on this formula have been organized in Poland. Demonstrating the developmental trend of organizing freak fight sports events and identifying the marketing activities undertaken by their organizers in the academic literature can be a first step towards systematising research in this area. Gathering information from industry portals and grounding it in the academic literature may allow future researchers to move more freely in this area.

The purpose of the article is to assess the development trend of organizing events based on freak fights in Poland and to identify the marketing activities of entities organizing such events. The article consists of 6 parts - introduction, theoretical part, methods, analysis of results, discussion and conclusions. The discussion suggests recommendations for entities organizing events with similar themes, and the conclusion provides answers to the research problem posed, as presented in the methodological section of the article.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Sports event as a product of sports federations**

The core product of the sports market is the sporting event, which by its impact determines the existence and creation of many other products, not only in the home market. Important characteristics of this product include intangibility, lack of uniformity and the impossibility of standardisation as well as acquisition of ownership (Sojkin, Michalak, 2018). Although it is impossible to offer two sporting events that are the same, they are usually based on a chosen sport whose popularization and development has led to the creation of unified, official rules and principles of competition around it (Tadini, Gauna Ruiz de Leon, Gandara, 2019). Audience communication about the product of a sporting event should take into account the three aspects of attraction, imagery and perfectionism (Babicz, 2018). Access to modern communication channels means that properly promoted sporting events can achieve very high reach among audiences around the world (Tadini, Gauna Ruiz de Leon, Gandara, 2019). The use of modern

promotional and distribution tools is an opportunity for the event organizer to make its product successful, and the success of the event indirectly represents at least a social, promotional or business value for the co-organizer of the sporting event, which is the local government unit (Sojkin, Michalak, 2018).

The offering of sports events takes place in the specific conditions of the sports market. Actors in this market are obliged to respect top-down, political and legal regulations, which is a fundamental requirement for event organizers to meet. It is important to recognise the duality, i.e. the interaction of actors with individual customers in the sports market and institutional customers in the advertising and sponsorship market (Sznajder, 2007). Delivering satisfying sporting event products to a selected target group in a given market can lead to changes in the purchasing behaviour of the audience that are positive from the organizer's point of view. These changes are manifested, among other things, in repeat and even regular participation in future events organized by it (Mostahfezian, Nazari, Sarrami, 2012). The objectives of sports event organizers are considered to be financial gain, management success, achieving sporting results, developing young sportsmen or creating relationships with local communities (Sznajder, 2007).

## **2.2. Foundations of marketing activities**

Any entity focusing its activities on the organization of sporting or entertainment events consciously and deliberately involves its resources in the marketing process. Among the most important activities in this process are defining markets, identifying and satisfying the needs and desires of the audiences present in the markets or providing solutions and value to selected target groups at the right place and time (Kotler, 1994). The dominant marketing tool, even fitting into the characteristics of the marketing paradigm, is the marketing mix concept. Comprehensive literature reviews on this issue indicate more than 20 evolutions of this concept since its debut in the literature (Przedworska, 2023; Hassan et al., 2022; Lee Goi, 2009). Changing in form over the decades, expanded upon by many authors and adapted to turbulent market realities, it has consistently found a hearing among practitioners and its use is evident in the marketing activities of actors across a cross-section of industries (Coutinho Da Silva, Las Casas, 2017). The views of authors in the academic community are divided: some of them unanimously consider the original marketing mix concept obsolete, but many authors from the opposite camp point to its timeless utilitarianism and simplicity of use (Dominici, 2009; Londhe, 2014; Nikbin, Iranmanesh, Ghobakloo, Foughi, 2022). The 4P marketing mix concept consists of four elements, which are the activities and strategies undertaken by an entity in the areas of product, price, distribution and promotion (Candemir, 2017).

The 4C marketing mix concept, described in the literature since 1990 and authored by Robert Lauterborn, is considered a complement to the concept described in the previous paragraph (Yadav, Sota, Chaudhary, 2023). According to this concept, the entity organizing marketing activities around its offer should first of all carefully examine and take into account

the problems, desires and expectations of the target customer (client). The essence is to match the offer to the customers financial possibilities (cost), expectations of the highest possible comfort in acquiring the product in the distribution process (convenience) and to provide the customer with the opportunity to interact with the product provider in the communication process (communication) (Fei, Zhang and Deng, 2021; Du, 2023).

### **2.3. Controversial sports events based on the freak fight formula**

MMA is a sport discipline that combines technical elements from various combat sports. Participants entering mixed martial arts disciplines develop their skills with a focus on teaching technical aspects in the so-called 'stand-up' (e.g. boxing, kickboxing, muay thai) and 'ground' (e.g. Brazilian jiu-jitsu, wrestling). The objective of any participant in mixed martial arts fights is to knock out, submit or defeat their opponent on points (Souza-Junior et al., 2015). In 2018, the register of new words, maintained by the Language Observatory of the University of Warsaw, received the keyword freak fight submitted by Tomasz Dec. The year in which this entry was submitted to this register is no coincidence: it was in that year, on 30 June, that the first event organized by the Fame MMA federation took place in Koszalin, Poland. The definition proposed in the above-mentioned source states that a freak fight is: "in combat sports: a fight between well-known individuals (e.g. celebrities, athletes from other sports) who are not professionally involved in combat sports or a fight that arouses interest because of an otherwise unusual choice of opponents". The divergence from the rulebook standards of professional MMA, the aforementioned lack of professionals taking part in the event and the presence of media personalities as participants in the fights - these facts allow us to conclude that this event was based solely on freak fights. At the time, it was an unprecedented event on the Polish combat sports market.

Despite the undoubtedly sporting element of such events, many market observers do not recognise these events as sporting events. It is significant that even the discipline of mixed martial arts itself is considered too violent to fall within the framework of sport (Andreasson, Johansson, 2018). The disparity of skills between fighters, the lack of unified rules and rankings in the federations, or inter-gender fights are just the tip of the iceberg of controversy that these events arouse in public opinion. Market analysts point to their vulgarity, psychologists blame them for the normalisation of peer violence among young people, and figures from the combat sports community point to their demoralising aspect. The competitors, i.e. participants in these events, are often people with a tarnished reputation in the light of the Polish justice system, but also online creators who promote unethical behaviour in virtual reality, also within and during such events (Fudala, 2022; Dankiewicz, 2023; Stabach, 2023). Despite the alarming signs, a study conducted by PSMM Monitoring & More showed a massive increase in one federation's advertising equivalent for 2022 to 255 million (PSMM Monitoring & More, 2023). Such cash flows also affect the payouts of participants in such events and are typically higher than the earnings of professional athletes at purely sporting events (Kolodziejcki, 2022).

The strength of their attraction is evidenced by the participation of the former world champion of two weight categories in professional boxing, Tomasz Adamek, who openly criticised the organization of such fights on industry portals, only to sign a contract with the associated federation Fame MMA within months of his statements (Zimny, 2023).

### 3. Methods

The research problem of this paper is to identify specific entities involved in the organization of freak fight sport events in Poland. An integral part of the research problem is to verify the entities most strongly involved and then to demonstrate the marketing activities undertaken by the organizers most active on the market. In order to solve the research problem, the author assumed that, in order to determine the development trend of freak fight event organization, it was necessary to show the number of organized events in each year since the first organized event in this convention was established. Secondly: the number of federations involved in organizing events of this type and the number of events organized by each federation in each year included in the analysis. The compilation of these data made it possible to identify the entities most strongly involved during the period under study and to indicate the activities they undertook. The final element of the analysis was to identify the marketing activities undertaken by the organizers of this type of event and relate them to the 4P and 4C marketing mix concepts, and then to relate these activities to the objectives of the sports event organizers.

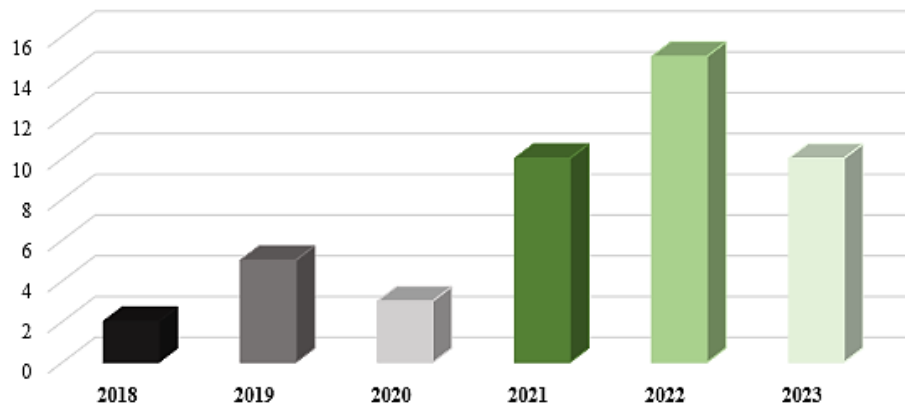
Conducting the research was based on the desk research method and required collecting and ranking quantitative and qualitative data collected from industry portals such as [lowking.pl](http://lowking.pl), [mmarocks.pl](http://mmarocks.pl), [mma.org.pl](http://mma.org.pl). The quantitative data concerned the number of any organized events and the number of events organized by individual federations, fitting into a subjective definition regarding a 'freak fight' organization. Qualitative data concerned activities undertaken by selected federations bearing the hallmarks of the aforementioned marketing concepts. Due to the specific nature of the federations studied, the period of analysis includes data from 2018 to September 2023.

Currently, there is very little academic literature on specific events based on the freak fight formula, especially in a marketing context. For this reason, a significant part of the work consisted of online sources. The author took all possible measures to avoid obtaining and processing data from unreliable sources and limited himself to industry portals and sports sections of transparent news sites.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Analysis of the number of organized freak fight-based sport events in the period 2018-2023

Figure 1 shows the number of events organized between 2018 and 2023.

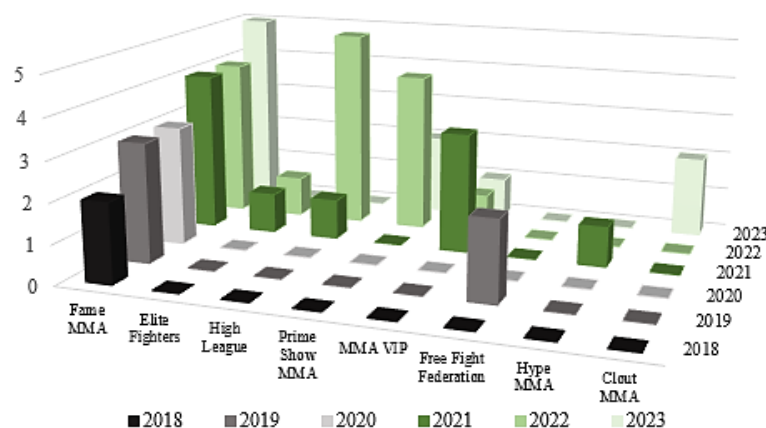


**Figure 1.** Number of organized sports events based on the freak fight formula by year in the period 2018-2023 in Poland.

Source: own compilation based on data from: lowking.pl; mmarocks.pl; mma.org.pl.

The upward trend of 2018 (2 events) and 2019 (5 events) was slowed down in 2020 (3 events). In 2021 (10 events) and 2022 (15 events), an upward trend can again be observed and there is a clear increase in the number of events organized relative to the previous upward trend in the cited period. In 2023, a return to the number of 10 events organized is noted (as of December 2023).

Figure 2. shows the different organizers of sports events based on freak fights between 2018 and 2023.

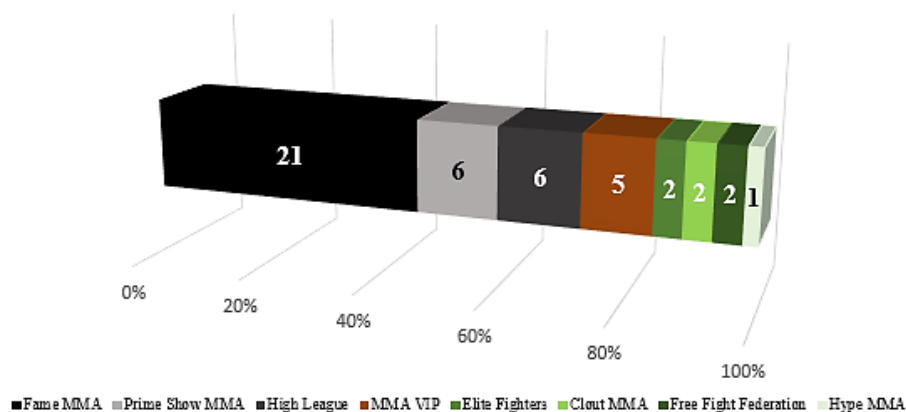


**Figure 2.** Number of sports events based entirely on freak fights organized by selected federations in each year of the 2018-2023 period in Poland.

Source: own compilation based on data from: lowking.pl; mmarocks.pl; mma.org.pl.

Fame MMA was the only federation organizing events in 2018. However, the following year already saw competition in the form of the Free Fight Federation (FFF), which organized 2 events that year. In 2020, the only organizer of freak fight events was Fame MMA with a number of 3 organized events. In 2021, there were four new entities organizing freak fight events. The Elite Fighters, High League and Hype MMA federations each organized 1 event, while the MMA VIP federation organized 3 events and in this respect was the second most frequently organizing federation. The following year, Fame MMA organized 4 events. The Prime Show MMA organization organized 4 events in its debut year. The same result was achieved by the Fame MMA federation, which has organized the most events to date. The High League federation organized as many as 6 events. Elite Fighters and MMA VIP organized 1 event each - the latter did not show a similar organizational drive to the previous year. The Hype MMA federation, on the other hand, did not organize any event. In the last year of the analysed period, the organizers of events were the federations Fame MMA (5 events), Prime Show MMA (2 events), Clout MMA (rookie, 2 events) and MMA VIP (1 event).

Between 2018 and 2023, 45 sports events based on freak fights were organized. The share of each federation in this phenomenon is shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Number of all sports events based entirely on the freak fight formula organized in Poland, divided by selected federations in the years 2018-2023.

Source: own compilation based on data from: lowking.pl; mmarocks.pl; mma.org.pl.

The leading federation in terms of the number of events organized between 2018 and 2023 is Fame MMA with 21 events to its credit. Second place belongs ex aequo to Prime Show MMA and High League with 6 organized events. The MMA VIP federation has organized 5 events, while Elite Fighters, Clout MMA and FFF have each organized 2 events. Hype MMA has only organized 1 event so far in the period under review.

#### 4.2. Analysis of the marketing activities of federations organizing freak fight sports events

Table 1. shows selected marketing activities undertaken under the 4P concept by the most active entities, shown in the previous subsection of the analysis.

**Table 1.**

*Selected marketing activities of entities organizing sports events based on freak fights embedded in 4P marketing mix concept*

| <b>4P</b> | <b>Selected marketing activities from the perspective of the organizing federation</b>   |
|-----------|--|
| Product   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A sporting event based on freak fights signed with the federation's (organizer's) brand and event number, and a special fight of the evening of selected participants of current interest.</li> </ul>   |
| Price     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting the price at a differentiated level depending on the capacity and organization of the seats at an arena in a given city and the subjective division of seats into more attractive (more expensive) and less attractive (cheaper) ones.</li> <li>• Consistent for all audiences for streaming in the Internet channel.</li> <li>• A number of available payment methods on the official website of the organizer - traditional transfer, quick transfer, card payment, BLIK, mobile payment.</li> </ul>  |
| Place     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization of the event at the chosen indoor arena.</li> <li>• Streaming of the event via the organizer's official website, available upon purchase.</li> </ul>   |
| Promotion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using influencer marketing strategies and hiring broadly defined influencers to actively participate in their events: artists, celebrities, actors, coaches, opinion leaders, athletes coming from combat sports but also footballers, volleyball players and many others fitting the above definition, without focusing on a specific industry.</li> <li>• Sponsorships and partnerships, e.g. with industry portals, sports nutrition manufacturers, clothing manufacturers, bookmakers, retail chains.</li> <li>• Organization of a press conference on YouTube during which an announcement of the event is made and participants are introduced. Subsequent conferences are held in time a few days before the event. At that time, event participants have the opportunity for confrontation and discussion and are subject to the weigh-in rules common in the discipline.</li> <li>• Making the first two fights available for free in an open live stream on YouTube.</li> <li>• Advertising the event with fight previews in the form of trailers, announcing fight cards (event content) via the organizer's social media and on participants' social channels.</li> <li>• Live concerts by popular artists at events.</li> <li>• Providing opportunities and easily accessible information on forms of contact, posting answers to frequently asked questions.</li> </ul> |

Source: own elaboration based on information obtained from industry portals and official websites of recognized organizers.

Table 2. shows selected marketing activities undertaken under the 4C concept by the most active entities, shown in the previous subsection of the analysis.

**Table 2.**

*Selected marketing activities of entities organizing sports events based on freak fights embedded in 4C marketing mix concept*

| <b>4C</b> | <b>Reference to selected marketing activities from the customer's perspective</b>  |
|-----------|--|
| Client    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The events are held in Poland in physical form and remotely via Internet streaming. The audience is made up of people over the age of 12 as can be seen from an analysis of the rules and regulations of the events formulated by the individual organizers, but people under 16 are allowed to participate only in the presence of an adult. The visuals, transcripts, messages of announcers, journalists and commentary are provided in Polish. The product is offered to audiences who are not only fans of combat sports, but are eager to cheer on their idols who are participants in these events, while professional athletes are not and come from very diverse backgrounds. The events are held periodically, satisfying the need for entertainment in the form of the excitement of sports competition, but also the need to belong by supporting their favorites.</li> </ul> |



Cont. table 2.

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| Cost          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The customer has a choice of preferred seating in the sports hall, with cheaper tickets usually located in the upper floors of the arena, more expensive tickets on the main floor of the arena, under the ring, and the most expensive tickets in the VIP area. Tickets are available on the organizer's website or on intermediaries such as eBilet.pl. The most active organizers announce online ticket sales a few days before, as demand is huge on the day of the sale. Stationary sales of tickets on the day of the event may be difficult, depending on interest in the federation.</li> <li>• Purchasing access to the event is possible via pay-per-view service through the organizer's official website.</li> <li>• After selecting a convenient payment method and paying for the order, the customer receives a dedicated link to the event.</li> </ul>   |
| Convenience   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in the event may involve travel to the city in which the event is held. Typically, these are cities with county rights over 100,000 residents in Poland.</li> <li>• Access the event via a mobile device with an Internet connection and a video display option, with no need for network registration in Poland.</li> </ul>  |
| Communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influencers share information in their communication channels, willing to answer questions from their audiences or redirect them to the right sources of information about the events they are participating in. Choosing "influencers" from different industries, diversified in terms of target groups, allows the federation to communicate with the market in a very broad area (e.g. Piotr Lisek - athlete and national team representative at Fame MMA, Tomasz Hajto - former Polish national soccer team player at Clout MMA or Don Kasjo - celebrity appearing at Prime Show MMA). It is also important to select event participants in terms of the social media channels in which they operate: TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook or Twitch are the most popular. The result is multi-channel communication covering the entire digital market.</li> <li>• Sponsors and partners provide information on upcoming events in exchange for financial support and exposure of their brands and products during galas, e.g. during fashion shows between fights (Lucky13.com.pl for Fame MMA), providing current odds on the bookmaker's website (BetClic for Fame MMA, Fortuna for Clout MMA) or in the form of media patronage (Radio Eska for High League). This is a way to reach the widest possible audience and build brand awareness, which has a two-way effect on the partnership relationship.</li> <li>• These are the events that undoubtedly arouse the most excitement among viewers, who actively contribute during these events by participating live - physically in the studio or watching and expressing themselves in real time in the chat option on the YouTube platform. This has to do with conflicts between participants, acts of violence between them but also controversial statements. The aftermath of conference events can be seen in industry, entertainment and gossip portals, social media or forums. All sorts of "streamers" are eager to invite their audiences to watch and comment on the events together on their channels, for example, internet creator Paris Platynov on the Twitch platform.</li> <li>• The live broadcast is displayed on the homepage of the YouTube platform and serves as a reminder to those who may have forgotten about the event but also encourages those undecided to attend.</li> <li>• Informing audiences about the details of the event in separate broadcasts, often in the form of interactions in the comments section under added posts on the Instagram and Facebook platforms, engaging users, for example, to express their predictions about the selected fight, previews of fights in the form of videos on the YouTube platform, interviews with federation executives and engaging media personalities on the companies' boards (celebrity Wojciech Gola in Fame MMA, analogously former footballer Slawomir Peszko in Clout MMA, rapper Malik Montana in High League).</li> <li>• Contact with the federation can be made via social media, official websites, email address, telephone contact. The purpose of the contact may be to report a complaint about a purchased event in the form of an online broadcast - there are signals from the market that the quality of the broadcasts was sometimes of poor quality, for example, in the case of the broadcast of the Fame MMA 9 event.</li> </ul> |

Source: own elaboration based on information obtained from industry portals and official websites of recognized organizers.

## 5. Discussion

The marketing activities described in Table 1. and Table 2. can contribute to the creation of financial profits for the analysed federations. The most recent report for 2022 made available by the register.io portal shows the profits of the federations: Fame MMA (PLN 1.6 million), High League (PLN 18.4 million), and, as shown in Figure 3., these are the most active entities. In the context of management successes, it is worth mentioning the creation of recognizable and distinctive brands and the successful implementation of a market niche strategy (Gancarz, 2023). The achievement of sporting results can be demonstrated by the number of championship fights organized: Fame MMA - 15 fights, High League and Prime Show MMA - 2 fights. The direct impact of the regular flow of professional athletes as participants in these events can also have a direct impact on this objective. The purpose of developing young athletes is not directly realised by federations of this type, but the publicity of these events and the characteristics of the target group may lead to greater interest in combat sports among young people. Creating relationships with local communities does not seem to be the primary goal of organizers, but it is worth noting that several cities in Poland have served a significant number of organized galas: Łódź (7 events), Gliwice (6 events), Gdańsk (4 events). The frequent organization of events in selected cities may have a positive impact on the local business climate.

A pattern is evident in the actions taken among the organizers of such events. The most important common part is the employment of influential and media people for the fights, bringing together audiences from the widest possible market spectrum. The hiring of participants associated with and committed to the cultivation of combat sports is beginning to play an important role. It is common to establish a distinctive brand and a distinctive name referring to the MMA discipline. Distribution of an event is usually done in two ways - in the arena and through live streaming, available online. The fee for webcasting is competitive in the market, but the variation in price for the opportunity to physically attend an event may depend on the arena's layout and capacity, as well as the current demand resulting from the attractiveness of the event. Overarching promotional activities include a continuous online presence - especially on social media and through 'influencers', collaborations with industry portals, hosting live press conferences on social media, as well as partnerships and sponsorships.

## 6. Conclusions

Analysis of the number of organized events in 2018-2023 showed an increasing trend in the number of organized events of this type in the Polish sports market. The emergence of new federations organizing similar events over time was shown. By determining the shares of individual federations within the number of all organized events based on freak fights, it was shown that the Fame MMA federation organized the most events of this type during the period under study. The activity of the organizers of such events bears the hallmarks of marketing activities according to the 4P and 4C marketing compositions analyzed. The demonstrated activities lead to the realization of the goals of sports event organizers.

In the course of the study, a number of implications have emerged for a deeper examination of federations organizing freak fight sporting events. A more detailed analysis of the marketing activities of organizers of events of this type can be demonstrated by relating them to the 16P model of 2022 by Mir and Sadaba.

The author plans to conduct a case study of the most active federation, which turned out to be Fame MMA, based on the aforementioned concept. An important topic of research could be the examination of the effectiveness of promotional activities used by selected federations. A contribution to conducting research in this matter could be the identification of persons responsible for the marketing activities of such events in particular federations and conducting in-depth interviews with them. It also seems reasonable to try to formulate a business model for federations organizing freak fight events. A good direction for research seems to be the study of consumer behaviour, especially their motivation to consume this type of event and the degree of their interest in the sporting aspects of this type of event.

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