

DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS AS SPORTS PROMOTION INSTRUMENTS

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Abstract

The paper explores the role of digital media and social networks as key instruments for promoting sports in the modern communication environment. It is based on the assumption that the process of digitalization is changing the way sports organizations, clubs and athletes communicate with the audience, sponsors and the media, and that presence on digital platforms significantly affects the visibility, reputation and economic potential of sports. The theoretical part of the paper considers the basic communication models in sports marketing and the specificities of digital communication (interactivity, two-way, content personalization, analytics). The empirical part analyzes the use of social networks (primarily Facebook, Instagram, X and TikTok) and other digital tools (websites, streaming, newsletters) in the promotion of sports events and the branding of sports entities. Special attention is paid to strategies for building relationships with fans, creating engaging content and measuring the effects of digital campaigns. Based on the analysis, guidelines are proposed for more effective planning and management of digital communication in sports, with an emphasis on an integrated approach, brand consistency and long-term community building around sports organizations and athletes.

Keywords: *digital media; social networks; sports marketing; sports promotion; sports organizations*

INTRODUCTION

In modern society, social networks play a key role in promoting various social, cultural and sporting phenomena. Sport is an indispensable segment of modern society, and its role goes beyond physical activity and the competitive aspect. It is a kind of universal language that connects people of different cultures, religions and social backgrounds, creating bridges between communities and offering space for the development of tolerance and mutual respect. Through sport, important social values such as teamwork, discipline, perseverance and fair play are shaped, while at the same time a healthy lifestyle is encouraged and a sense of community and identity is strengthened within local and national communities.

At the same time, sport is also a significant economic sector that generates significant revenues: from the organization of sports competitions, television and streaming rights, ticket sales and sports equipment, to sponsorships and a wide range of sports-related products and services. In this context, sports marketing is becoming a key tool for building the recognition of sports organizations, clubs and athletes, but also for attracting and retaining fans, sponsors and business partners.

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The development of digital technologies and the spread of the internet have led to profound changes in the way sports are promoted and consumed. Social networks have become one of the most important communication channels for sports promotion, as they enable direct, fast and relatively cheap contact between clubs, athletes and fans and the creation of global communities of followers. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok provide sports organizations with the opportunity to continuously inform, promote events and systematically build their image. The use of social networks enables two-way communication with fans, which further strengthens their loyalty and emotional connection with the club or athlete. Advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and data analytics, further expand these possibilities through content personalization, targeted advertising and a deeper understanding of audiences. Football, as the most popular sport globally, has a particularly strong potential for promotion through digital channels. Due to its wide distribution and number of followers, football clubs can create powerful marketing campaigns through social networks and reach millions of people around the world. In this sense, social media is not only a means of information, but also a platform for creating and strengthening a brand, increasing revenue and long-term strategic positioning in the sports market. In today's sports environment, a presence on social media is no longer a choice, but a strategic necessity. Major events such as the World Cup and the Champions League further increase the media visibility of football, while individual clubs seek to use this increased attention to strengthen their market and communication positions.

1. THE CONCEPT OF PROMOTION

1.1. Promotion in sports

Promotion in sports encompasses a whole range of activities aimed at increasing the visibility, recognition and attractiveness of sporting events, clubs, individual players or sports brands. It is a systematic process that includes various forms of communication such as advertising, public relations, sponsorship and digital campaigns. In the digital age, promotion is increasingly moving to online platforms that enable direct and quick contact with fans.

Quality sports promotion not only attracts the audience, but also creates long-term relationships, stimulates the sale of products and services and increases the commercial value of sports entities.

As Smith and Stewart (2015) point out, sports promotion is not a one-time activity, but a continuous and strategic process of building an image and creating and maintaining interest among fans and commercial partners. In this way, promotion contributes not only to increasing attendance at sporting events, but also to strengthening the emotional connection of the audience with the sports entity.

In the digital age, sports promotion has been significantly transformed and is increasingly moving to online platforms: social networks, mobile applications and streaming services that enable direct and two-way communication with the audience (Boyle & Haynes, 2009). This provides fans with the opportunity to actively participate in communicating and sharing sports content, which further increases their engagement and loyalty.

Quality sports promotion has multiple effects: it attracts audiences to events, creates long-term relationships with fans, encourages the consumption of sports products and services, and increases the commercial value of clubs and athletes (Beech & Chadwick, 2013). Therefore, it is an indispensable component of modern sports management and marketing.

1.2. Social networks as a communication tool

Social media has revolutionized the way sports are communicated. It has allowed sports organizations to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with fans. According to Hambrick et al. (2010), platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, and YouTube have opened up new opportunities for creating visual and interactive content that engages fans on unprecedented and new levels. The use of social media allows athletes and clubs to bypass traditional media channels and directly address their audiences, thereby gaining greater control over their own image (Pegoraro, 2010). In addition, social media provides the ability to collect real-time feedback, analyze audience engagement, and track fan trends and preferences. As Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015) state, it is this interactivity that makes social media a key tool for building community, increasing loyalty, and creating a sense of belonging among fans.

1.3. Specificities of sports marketing in the digital environment

Sports marketing in a digital environment differs from traditional marketing in its emphasis on emotions, experience, and a sense of community. Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2014) point out that fans represent a unique group of consumers because their loyalty often exceeds rational purchase motives. Therefore, digital marketing strategies must be focused on creating personalized content, interaction, and long-term relationships. Clubs must develop strategies that will build long-term trust and loyalty, while using tools such as analytics and artificial intelligence to optimize campaigns. The application of artificial intelligence and predictive analytics allows for content optimization, precise ad targeting, and monitoring the effectiveness of promotional activities (Ratten, 2016). Innovative content formats such as live streaming, e-sports, virtual reality, and interactive applications are also increasingly important, which further increase audience engagement. All of the above makes sports marketing in the digital age extremely dynamic, adaptable, and focused on creating value for fans and sponsors.

2. SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SPORTS

2.1. Development of social networks in the context of sports

In the last twenty years, we have witnessed a profound transformation of sports marketing thanks to social media. Initially, sports and media were connected mainly through television and printed newspapers, while today clubs, athletes and organizations have the opportunity to communicate directly with fans through digital channels. This change is not only technical, it is cultural, emotional and strategic.

Social media has enabled the creation of content in real time, the transmission of emotions and the building of a global community.

Football clubs can now launch campaigns that reach millions of people in a matter of hours, which was previously unthinkable. For example, the #WeAreAllBlues campaign launched by Chelsea FC on Twitter/X and Instagram, garnered over 10 million interactions in less than 48 hours (Greenfly, Social Media in Sports, 2024).

According to the Rolling Stone Culture Council's article, *Social Media in Sports Marketing: Changing the Game* (2024), social media has significantly changed the way people connect, share information and experience sports, and athletes are increasingly becoming active participants in digital communication and content creation.

Clubs are building their own media ecosystems and thus more control over the message, a trend enabled by social networking platforms that is changing sports marketing. Social networks are not just a tool - they are a space where sport is lived, shared and reinterpreted. Their impact on the sports industry is just beginning, and the future brings an even deeper integration of technology and emotion.

2.2. Most commonly used platforms in sports

In the digital age, sports content is distributed not only through television and portals, but also through a series of social networks that have specific functions and audiences. The most commonly used platforms in sports are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Most commonly used platforms in sports

FACEBOOK	Ideal for a wider and older audience and for advertising and organizing events, clubs use it for announcements, livestreams and interaction with local communities.
INSTAGRAM	Focused on visual content, attractive photos and short videos, athletes share moments from their private lives, training and matches, thereby building a personal brand.
TWITTER/X	A platform for breaking news, real-time reactions and communication with the media.
TIKTOK	Increasingly popular among younger audiences, it is used for short and creative video formats, and clubs and athletes use it for challenges, dance trends, and humorous content.
YOUTUBE	A platform for longer videos like documentaries, interviews, analysis and vlogs, and clubs publish exclusive content, training sessions and behind-the-scenes stories.

Source: Greenfly (2023) 'Social media in sports: driving fan engagement'. Available at: <https://www.greenfly.com> (Accessed: 7 February 2025).

According to the 2024 Greenfly report, 51% of global sports fans use Facebook for sports content, 46% use YouTube, 31% use Instagram, and 25% use Twitter/X. TikTok is growing fastest among younger generations, especially in the football and basketball segments.

Each platform requires tailored content and strategy to achieve maximum engagement. Clubs need to understand the demographics, algorithms, and trends of each network to optimize their presence. The success of digital communication depends not only on the quantity of posts, but also on the quality, authenticity, and interaction with the audience (Bussse & Damian, Commercialisation of European Football, 2024).

2.3. Advantages and challenges of digital promotion

Digital promotion in sports brings numerous advantages, including global reach, two-way communication, low cost of content distribution and the possibility of precise audience targeting. The main advantages are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Main advantages of digital promotion

GLOBAL REACH	Content can be marketed to millions of people around the world in seconds.
TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION	Fans can comment, share, and react, creating a sense of community.
LOW DISTRIBUTION COST	Unlike traditional media, social media posts do not require large budgets.
PRECISE AUDIENCE TARGETING	Algorithms allow content to reach a specific demographic.

Source: Cavrić, N. (2024) "The role of social media in the marketing of small businesses", *Be Your Own Boss (BYOB)*. (Accessed: 3 July 2025).

However, with these advantages come challenges such as negative comments, loss of control over the message, and crisis situations that can quickly spread virally and pose serious risks. For example, an inappropriate announcement of a player or club can cause an avalanche of reactions and damage to reputation (VDG Sports, 2024).

Rolling Stone Culture Council (2024) points out that digital promotion requires constant presence, creativity and analysis. Clubs must monitor engagement metrics, adapt content to trends and quickly respond to changes in the digital environment (Social Media in Sports Marketing, 2024).

Thompson et. al. (2018) emphasize that digital promotion in sports is not only a tool for sales and that it also serves to build relationships, community and identity. Clubs that successfully balance the advantages and challenges of digital communication have the opportunity to create a long-term emotional connection with fans.

3. COMMERCIALIZATION OF SPORTS

The commercialization of sports, especially football, is one of the key processes in modern sport, transforming it from a game into a global industry generating billions of euros annually. The main sources of revenue include TV rights, sponsorships, ticket sales, digital campaigns and online stores. Large clubs generate significant revenues through digital platforms that offer exclusive content and personalized products (Barišić, 2021).

According to Busse and Damian (2024), commercialization has a two-way effect on fan engagement. On the one hand, it increases the global reach of clubs and encourages interactivity and audience involvement in digital activities. On the other hand, an intense commercial presence can lead to a decrease in the sense of authenticity and a weakening of local belonging of fans. In the modern digital environment, clubs increasingly function as brands, while players position themselves as ambassadors of these brands, which increases the value of commercial content and strengthens the recognition of clubs in the global market. However, the focus on profit and dependence on sponsors can negatively affect fan sentiment, which requires careful brand and audience relationship management (Zvekić, 2025). Such a strategy carries certain risks. Too much emphasis on profit, the constant presence of sponsorship messages and increasing dependence on commercial partners can negatively affect the perception of fans, especially those who prefer traditional sports values. From a sports marketing perspective, it is necessary to emphasize that the long-term success of clubs depends on the balance between commercial goals and preserving brand credibility. If the commercial dimension is overemphasized, there is a risk of alienating part of the fan base and undermining the club's identity.

4. THE ROLE OF FANS AND COMMUNITY

Fans today represent key and highly active participants in the digital sports ecosystem. Unlike the traditional one-way communication between clubs and the audience, modern digital platforms allow fans to get involved in creating, modifying and sharing content, thereby significantly contributing to the visibility and global reach of clubs. Their engagement is measured through various forms of interaction – comments, shares, reactions, but also increasingly the creation of their own media formats such as fan videos, analyses, meme content and thematic profiles dedicated to the club or individual players. Clubs encourage this participation by organizing prize games, campaigns and challenges that involve fans as brand promoters (Brenčić, 2025). Such engagement creates an emotional connection and strengthens positive sentiment towards the club. Sabir Ahmed (2024) points out that the relationship between football stars and fans is based on identification and digital interaction, which directly affects the loyalty and behavior of the audience. Players who share content from their private lives, current successes, personal attitudes or motivational messages become closer to their followers, which strengthens the loyalty and long-term commitment of the audience. Fan activity today is not limited to following matches and club announcements. It is expanding to humanitarian initiatives, social campaigns and local projects, which makes football take on a broader role and become an instrument of social cohesion. Fan communities often participate in fundraising campaigns, support for local sports clubs, donations and activities that contribute to social good, which further confirms that sport and digital platforms can together create positive social effects. On the other hand, negative media portrayals of fans as hooligans can distort public perception and create a distorted image of fan behavior (Brenčić, 2025). Media generalization of extreme cases often leads to misinterpretations, which can make communication between clubs, fans and sports institutions more difficult and result in a decrease in trust. In this context, it is crucial to view fans as a heterogeneous community in which positive forms of engagement prevail, while negative incidents do not reflect the real state of fan culture.

CONCLUSION

The digital ecosystem has enabled the creation of completely new relationships between clubs and their fans. While traditional media offered one-way communication, social networks enable two-way, interactive and personalized exchange of information. Fans are no longer passive observers, but active content creators, campaign participants and brand promoters. Their participation in the online community contributes to creating a sense of belonging, but also to increasing global reach. It is through digital platforms that clubs manage to communicate with fans from different cultural backgrounds, age groups and levels of sports interest, which allows the construction of a highly heterogeneous but connected community. The commercialization of sports, especially football, has further enhanced the importance of digital platforms. Revenues from sponsorships, TV rights, digital advertising and online stores make up a significant part of the clubs' financial income, and social networks serve as a key tool for presenting products, campaigns and exclusive content. Real Madrid strategically uses these platforms to increase profitability, attract new fans and maintain a competitive advantage in the global sports environment. This business model requires continuous innovation, creativity and professional management of digital communication channels.

In addition to the commercial aspect, the digital presence of sports clubs also has an important sociological dimension. Fans on social networks express identification with the club, share their own emotions and participate in the creation of a collective sports culture. Their activity often goes beyond the sports field and extends to social, humanitarian and cultural initiatives. This makes sport a platform for broader social cohesion, and digital platforms a space in which this cohesion manifests itself on a daily basis. At the same time, negative media portrayals, hate speech and extreme forms of fan behavior can damage the reputation of sports organizations, which is why professional management of the online community is of crucial importance.

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