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Published in the USA
International Journal of Media and Information Literacy
Issued since 2016.
E-ISSN: 2500-106X
2024. 9(2): 370-376

DOI: 10.13187/ijmil.2024.2.370
<https://ijmil.cherkasgu.press>



Social Media in Sports Marketing

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Abstract

Social media are playing an increasing role in today's society, and sports industry is not an exclusion. The study explores how exactly social media affect the sports sphere. The analysis shows that several directions of this influence can be underlined. They include an impact on fans/consumers, sport clubs and organizations, players' and athletes' personal brands and sport-related businesses. Social media has changed the way sports content is consumed in many ways. Previously, broadcasts were conducted only on official channels such as television. The study concludes that fan engagement is the key channel that allows clubs and organizations to monetize this attention using several models. Also, the study suggests the ways of enhancing the interaction between sport brands and their fan base.

As clubs and particular players have become brands, fans want to know more about them, and clubs should satisfy this demand. Organizing activities such as charity meetings, autograph sessions, presentations, issuing special video content are other methods for enhancing fan engagement.

Keywords: social media, fan engagement, sport brand, sport marketing, marketing mix.

1. Introduction

Sports has always been an object of public interest. It is interesting to watch sports even for those who do not make sports themselves. The roots of this attractiveness lay deeply in the human psychics as athletes in high-achievement sports act at the peak of their physical and mental abilities while spectators compensate their inability to perform at the same level by supporting and cheering for the athletes (Filo et al., 2015).

Sport has become a global industry with revenues of hundreds of billions of dollars. As of 2023, its revenue was estimated as \$512bn, and it is expected to grow at a 5 % rate in the period 2023–2028 annually (BRC, 2023). The main drivers of this growth are expected to be the general economic growth in in both developing and developed regions and unquenchable people's interest to the sphere of entertainment in general and the sports sphere in particular.

The main reason why sports has gained global outreach is the media and internet. Sports competitions were held throughout the entire 20th century, but it was the media, and later the Internet, that made them massive and ensured the interest of the public. Since the competitions are held in a specific location, many people do not have the physical opportunity to attend them, but media coverage allows them to be watched remotely. And while earlier broadcasting was conducted only through official sources and was one-sided, which made it impossible to discuss events on the same sites, then the heyday of social networks allowed for creating networks of communication and multiplied the amount of content created around the events themselves.

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The aim of this article is to disclose how exactly social media affect the development of the sports industry, what channels contribute to it and how this process can be enhanced.

2. Materials and methods

The study is conducted using the analysis and synthesis as main research methods. The theoretical basis of the study is the existing theoretical literature on the topic as well publications in thematic journals and on websites.

Along with that, it is necessary to explain some prerequisites to the topic analysis. First of all, it is necessary to explore how the Internet and media in particular turned into the main instrument of sports promotion. This increase in the influence evolved with the development of the Internet itself.

Oddly enough, the very definition of Web 1.0 came into use after the advent of Web 2.0. The comparison showed that the Internet has become completely different and it was possible to highlight the features and differences of the previous "version". Web 1.0 can be explained by one phrase – “read-only”. That version of the Internet was quite similar to traditional media such as TV or radio as the communication was unilateral. Users only had the opportunity to browse the pages and interact with the content. The Internet has not yet developed the possibilities for users to participate in the creation of content, they only consumed what appeared on web resources. No authorizations, trackers, or registrations existed.

The term Web 2.0 belongs to Tim O’Reilly who issued an article ‘What is Web 2.0’ in 2005 (O’Reilly, 2005). This stage has been lasting nowadays. At this stage, large corporations recognized new great perspectives and opportunities to present themselves, form their image and reach their customers. Along with that, users were given permission to create their own content (UGC, user-generated content) and create their profiles on different websites and platforms. This can be characterized as Read/Write web.

Finally, the emergence of social networks has become as much a breakthrough innovation as the mass Internet itself. Although social networks remain within the framework of the Web 2.0 concept, they have radically changed the interaction in many industries. Not only ordinary users received an opportunity to communicate when they wanted and where they wanted, but also various types of content have become available. Moreover, it soon became clear that social media can be effectively used for running and supporting businesses as they allowed for personalizing information provided to users, gather tons of information about users, their characteristics and preferences, and reach users directly.

Sports industry is not an exclusion. Given long-lasting interest of the audience to sports, it would be a crime not to use social media for popularizing sport content, involving new people into fan clubs and selling more merchandise goods such as sports apparel, shoes, souvenirs among many others (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2020).

3. Discussion

The analysis shows that the key function of social media in the context of sports marketing is involvement of fans and customers into interaction with sport brands, be it clubs, athletes or producers of apparel and equipment (Stander, 2016). Social media have changed the marketing mix strategies substantially. Su et al. (Su et al., 2020) suggest that the traditional marketing 4P model has already evolved into the 4S model: Product is replaced by Consumer as it is consumers who decide what to consume, when and by what means. Price is replaced by Cost as customers and fans compare how much the good, be it new experience, impressions, or physical goods, will cost for them and whether they are ready to pay for it. Place is replaced by Convenience as social networks and new technologies allow customers to have almost the same experience from virtual presence and live broadcasts instead of being at the stadium. Finally, Promotion that had been a unilateral message turned into Communication as brands are interested in feedback and reaction of the audience to better tailor their product to consumers’ preferences.

The strategy of involvement is also in line with the model by Fowler and Wilson (Fowler and Wilson, 2016) that has four dimensions: (1) hosting fans even in non-match days; (2) connect the fans beyond the stadium in non-match days; (3) improve and extend spectator experience in match days; (4) give fans opportunities to touch the match live even if they are not at the stadium. The latter three dimensions of involvement can be ensured by using social media. Discussion of matches including user generated content, virtual stadium tours, contests, lotteries and sweepstakes become possible due to social networks.

Engaged fans contribute to development and prosperity of their favorite clubs as clubs' revenue largely depends on cash streams received from the fan base (Wann, James, 2019). Based on data received from the fan base including personal data, preferences, set of preferred activities, frequency of purchases, clubs have an opportunity to personalize their messages and offerings. In the recent years, social media have become the main channel of interaction with customers (Vale, Fernandes, 2018). Being a new phenomenon and an innovation only a decade ago, social media have turned into a must-have tool for collaboration with fans and co-creation of development strategy. Clubs take into account feedback from fans when designing their products and services in order increase value which ultimately will turn into larger revenue streams (Thomas, 2018).

The ways of monetizing social network activities are diverse. Mohammadkazemi (Mohammadkazemi, 2015) suggests 5 main channels of monetizing customer attention:

1) Freemium (free + premium) model that divides all the content into two types – some portion of content is provided for free but if consumers want to get some exclusive content, they have to pay for it.

2) Affiliate model implies that a service generates traffic due to interesting content and redirects customers to sponsors' or partners' websites. A typical example for the sport industry is the partnership between sport news portals and betting organizations.

3) Virtual Goods model is used for around-sport activities including the sale of virtual points, statuses, clothes and other insignia. Also, virtual contests such as forecast contests and fantasy leagues are directed at popularizing sport support.

4) Subscription model requires users to pay fees for a period of access to specific content. NBA League Pass and streaming service subscriptions are examples of this model.

5) Advertising model merely implies placing banners and other ways of mentioning products or services on social media platforms.

4. Results

The analysis shows that social media have a great impact on the way sport marketing activities are currently conducted. At the same time, several directions of this influence can be distinguished. These are the impact of social media on fans, sport teams, particular athletes and players, and on sport brands.

Impact of social media on fans/consumers

Social media has changed the way sports content is consumed in many ways. Previously, broadcasts were conducted only on official channels such as television. This meant that there was a centralized content producer, and the viewer received exactly as much content as the producer intended. At the same time, most of the broadcasts were conducted once, and therefore the user did not have the opportunity to watch them at another time. The Internet has given new opportunities – to see statistics and have constant access to them, discuss the results of sports events remotely, generate your own sports-related content, and conduct your own broadcasts. However, it was social networks that made interaction with other users and direct participants in sports events so simple and convenient that the number of people willing to participate in such interaction began to grow continuously.

Moreover, if at first different channels coexisted and viewers could watch sports broadcasts on TV and then discuss on the Internet, now there is a tendency to replace the "old" broadcasting methods with more modern ones (Figure 1).

This trend will only grow, and the next generations will be increasingly immersed in social networks or interaction formats that will replace them. Moreover, this trend is typical for any content. And it would be strange to expect that younger generations consume content on social networks, and sports broadcasts will be an exception. This is largely due to the change of generations and the rapid development of new technologies. With much more advanced technology at their disposal, young viewers will no longer want to watch broadcasts the way their parents did.

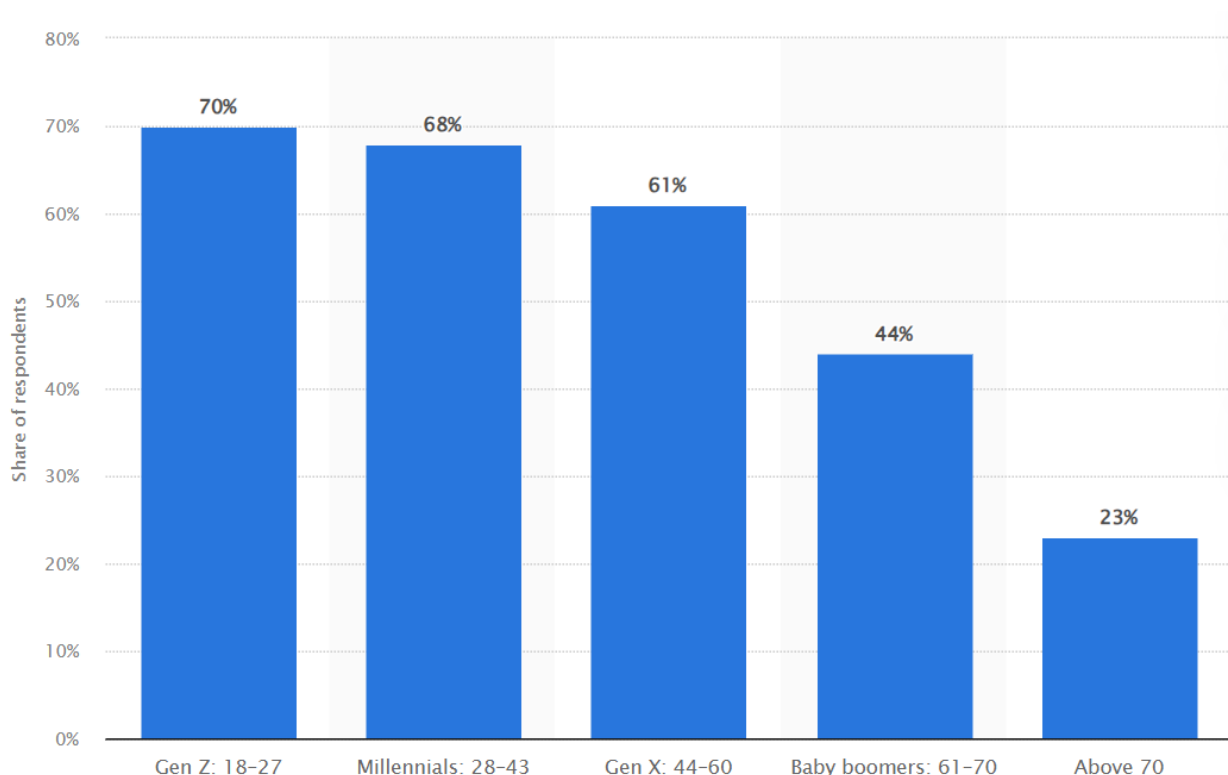


Fig. 1. Share of fans who prefer to watch sports on social media worldwide as of April 2023, by age
Source: [Statista, 2023](#)

Impact of social media on teams

Social networks have also become an important development tool for sports clubs, which have realized their commercial potential in time. The Internet and social media have become the key to clubs' access to international markets. If in the pre-Internet era, sports clubs were most often objects of interest to local fans, now the market for large clubs has become global. The European and American markets have been saturated for a long time, and clubs should not expect rapid profit growth here. But the markets of developing countries are a huge growth driver for leading sports teams. In the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the general standard of living is gradually increasing, people are gaining access to new benefits, which means that the population of these countries is becoming more solvent. Residents of developing countries are ready to spend part of the increased income on entertainment, including the consumption of sports content and the purchase of sports symbols (McCarty et al., 2014).

In order to promote their brands in foreign markets, clubs are becoming more open and producing more and more sports-related content. Separately, it is worth highlighting films for leading streaming services such as Amazon Prime and Netflix – *All or Nothing: Manchester City*, *Sunderland 'Til I Die*, *Being: Liverpool*, *All or Nothing: Brazil National Team*, *Take Us Home: Leeds United* and many others. They show the inner life of the teams, their training, daily routine, and staff work. In addition, the clubs additionally hold contests on social networks, charity and sponsorship events, shoot short videos about the life of the club, cut the most memorable events, inform fans about important events and remind them of memorable dates. On match days, the clubs work with the spectators at the stadiums, holding additional events and competitions. Here, the standard of work is American professional leagues such as the NBA, NFL, NHL, MLB, MLS. All these activities strongly attract viewers and make them empathize with these teams even more.

The transformation of high-performance sports into a show has become a major trend especially in the 21st century, and social networks have played a special role here. Sports-related content is actively published, and most of it is produced not by the teams, but by the viewers themselves. Thus, the effect of word of mouth is also connected, when interest in such an atmosphere of competition spreads and grows like a snowball.

There is also a kind of competition between the clubs to attract the attention of the fans. It has long been proven that loyal fans are the most profitable customers who bring huge amounts of money

to clubs. Therefore, clubs are looking for ways to increase the degree of fan engagement, to give them more opportunities to participate in the life of the club, which then pays off many times.

The model in which the team and the audience interact only during the competition is outdated. It has been replaced by a more advanced concept, according to which the club's brand and user experience are considered as an object of consumption (Gantz, 2013). Therefore, clubs should maximize the frequency and depth of audience engagement, give them the opportunity to interact with their brand not only during competitions and matches, but almost constantly. And social networks combined with new technologies, including augmented and virtual reality, are an effective tool for implementing a new understanding of the work of sports clubs.

Impact of social media on athletes and players

The era of personal brand development began before social networks appeared. You can recall Michael Jordan, who signed a "shoe" contract with the then little-known Nike company. As a result, the company gradually turned into a world leader in the sportswear industry, and Jordan himself became a billionaire not so much due to the money earned by basketball, but thanks to the creation of a personal sub-brand under the wing of Nike and a lifetime contract with the company.

However, it was social networks that made possible a giant leap in the salaries of top athletes, the massive development of personal brands, but at the same time the strategy of athletes' behavior in the public field. If earlier information about how athletes spend their time outside of competitions was extremely scarce, then with the advent of social networks it became known about almost every step they took. It has become extremely difficult for athletes to hide from prying eyes – everywhere you can find a camera pointing at you with a desire to photograph a celebrity. On the one hand, athletes began to complain about the consequences of total publicity, such as panic attacks and multiplied stress. But on the other hand, with competent PR work, athletes have the opportunity to become much more recognizable, and therefore receive much higher fees outside sports grounds. The personality of the athlete has become a personal brand, and now, when moving from one club to another, in addition to age and potential achievements, the transfer amount necessarily takes into account the marketing potential.

Many viewers, especially in cities that are not spoiled by a large number of stars, go not so much to the competition itself or the match, but rather to see a particular athlete. It would not be a big exaggeration to say that it is the stars that assemble stadiums, and it is the stars that are the main assets of the teams. Sometimes this leads to excesses when a star player begins to dictate his terms to the club – to lobby or directly approve the appointment of a coach he likes, to force the club to transfer the right players, to set additional conditions. For example, the NBA is already directly called the "league of stars", meaning that coaches and even owners of many, especially clubs not from large media markets such as Los Angeles or New York, having got a star in the draft, will make any sacrifices just to keep it. How are social networks involved in this? Sometimes a single tweet or hint on Instagram is enough to encourage the team to make serious changes in the composition or coaching staff.

It is no coincidence that perhaps two of the most famous athletes of our time – Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo – are competing not only on the football field, but also on social networks (Figure 2).

Although this rivalry is virtual, and the football careers of both are coming to an end, their global popularity does not blur. Facebook's list of the top 10 accounts with the largest number of subscribers at least includes companies and organizations such as Samsung, Real Madrid (football, again) and CGTN, Instagram's similar list consists of only world-famous show business stars who are side by side with these two players. Moreover, only these two players are present in the ratings of both social networks. This may indicate that they themselves have turned into stars not only of football, but show business stars. And social networks played one of the main roles in this evolution.

Without social networks that reflect every step of football players, there would not be this global popularity. Michael Jordan is almost unanimously recognized as the greatest basketball player in history, but his popularity still practically does not go beyond the circle of basketball fans. It remains to be seen how far his popularity would have gone if he had lived in the era of social networks.

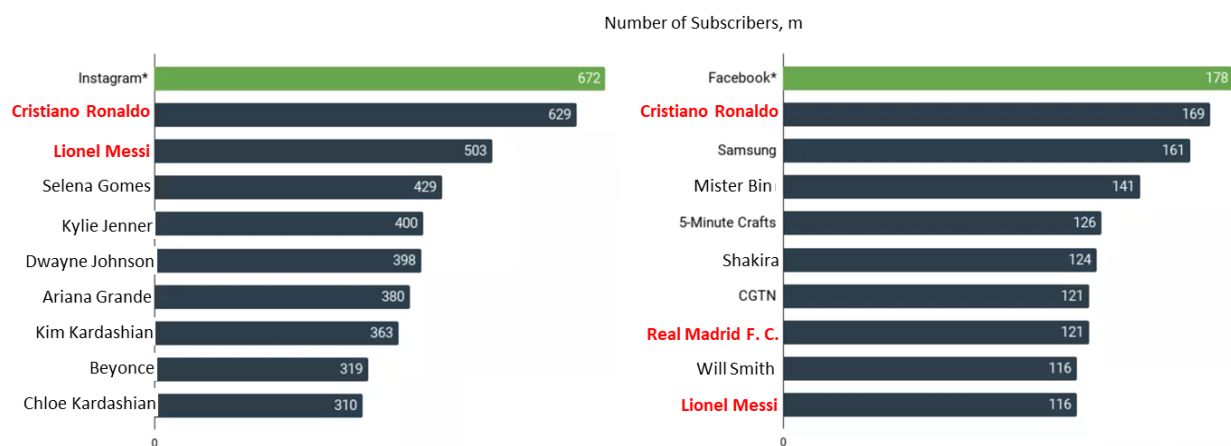


Fig. 2. Top 10 accounts by the number of subscribers in Instagram and Facebook

Source: [Social blade, 2024](#)

Impact of social media on sport brands

Finally, the sports industry as a whole should not be ignored as its popularity would be impossible without the popularity of clubs and individual athletes. Nike, Adidas, Gatorade and many others are strongly associated with elite-level sports. It can even be said that the most popular sports competitions are, on the one hand, a showcase of achievements in sports technology, and on the other hand, a field of competition not only for athletes, but also for the brands they represent.

The task of such companies is to create a dense associative link between the achievements of athletes and clubs and the equipment in which they perform. At the same time, athletes become brand ambassadors, sign advertising contracts under which they appear in public, perform and advertise specific brands on personal social media accounts.

5. Conclusion

The main conclusion that can be made from the article is that social media have become one of the main channels of communication between sport brands including clubs, athletes and players, and producers of sport-related goods. It is social media that increase the scope of information and impressions that spectators and sport fans receive. This, in turn, helps to raise the level of customer involvement that stems into revenue streams for sport organizations.

Social media marketing is here to stay. The content of marketing mix has changed significantly over decades. Digitalization and virtualization are common trends in the sports industry. It is not sufficient for fans to be at the stadium during the match. Pre-match and post-match entertainment, non-matchday activities, virtual services have great potential of monetizing, therefore sport organizations should account for them in order to be financially sustainable.

To enhance this communication, should further extent the density and deepness of contact with existing and potential customers. This can be done in different ways. Providing more information around the sport is one of them. As clubs and particular players have become brands, fans want to know more about them, and clubs should satisfy this demand. Organizing activities such as charity meetings, autograph sessions, presentations, issuing special video content are other methods for enhancing fan engagement. Although a lot has already been done on the way of integrating social media into marketing mix, this channel still has a great potential which has yet to be implemented.

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