


# The Impact of Social Media on Sports Marketing and Consumer Engagement

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**ABSTRACT.** The Impact of Social Media on Sports Marketing and Consumer Engagement. **Objectives:** This paper investigates the role of social media in sports marketing, analyzing how digital platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, influence fan engagement and consumer behavior. The study aims to determine the effectiveness of online marketing strategies over traditional methods and assess consumer preferences for specific social media platforms in the sports context. **Materials and Methods:** A qualitative research design was employed, with semi-structured interviews conducted among 20 social media-active participants aged 18 to 26. Responses were analyzed to identify major themes regarding platform preference, credibility of athlete endorsements, and consumer attitudes toward authentic and interactive content in sports marketing. **Results:** Findings reveal a clear preference for online over traditional marketing due to its accessibility, interactivity, and measurable results. Instagram and TikTok were favored for their engaging, fast-paced content, while athletes' credibility and emotional storytelling were seen as key factors for successful sports marketing. Relevance and creativity in campaign content also emerged as crucial for sustaining consumer interest. **Conclusions:** The research confirms that digital platforms have transformed sports marketing, enhancing audience reach and fostering deeper connections with fans. Social media's influence is expected to grow with advancing technologies, providing sports marketers with expanding opportunities for innovation and consumer engagement.

**Keywords:** social media, sports marketing, consumer engagement, digital platforms

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**REZUMAT. Impactul rețelelor sociale asupra marketingului sportiv și implicării consumatorilor.** **Obiective:** Această lucrare investighează rolul rețelelor sociale în marketingul sportiv, analizând modul în care platformele digitale, în special Instagram și TikTok, influențează implicarea fanilor și comportamentul consumatorilor. Studiul își propune să determine eficiența strategiilor de marketing online în comparație cu metodele tradiționale și să evalueze preferințele consumatorilor pentru platformele specifice de social media în contextul sportiv. **Materiale și Metode:** A fost utilizat un design de cercetare calitativ, cu interviuri semi-structurate realizate în rândul a 20 de participanți activi pe social media, cu vârste între 18 și 26 de ani. Răspunsurile au fost analizate pentru a identifica principalele teme legate de preferința pentru platforme, credibilitatea sportivilor în calitate de ambasadori de brand și atitudinile consumatorilor față de conținutul autentic și interactiv în marketingul sportiv. **Rezultate:** Rezultatele indică o preferință clară pentru marketingul online față de cel tradițional datorită accesibilității, interactivității și rezultatelor măsurabile. Instagram și TikTok au fost preferate pentru conținutul captivant și dinamic, iar credibilitatea sportivilor și povestirile emoționale au fost considerate factori cheie pentru succesul marketingului sportiv. Relevanța și creativitatea conținutului campaniilor s-au dovedit, de asemenea, esențiale pentru menținerea interesului consumatorilor. **Concluzii:** Cercetarea confirmă că platformele digitale au transformat marketingul sportiv, sporind raza de acțiune asupra publicului și facilitând conexiuni mai profunde cu fanii. Influența rețelelor sociale este de așteptat să crească odată cu avansul tehnologic, oferind marketerilor sportivi oportunități tot mai mari pentru inovație și implicare a consumatorilor.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** rețele sociale, marketing sportiv, implicarea consumatorilor, platforme digitale

## INTRODUCTION

Online marketing has revolutionized how sports organizations, athletes, and fans interact, reshaping the relationship between sports and marketing in the 21st century. This paper explores the critical role of digital marketing in sports, highlighting the ways in which online platforms, particularly social media, influence fan engagement, revenue generation for sports organizations, and the sports sector overall. Adapting to the digital environment is now essential for the long-term growth and success of sports organizations (Beech & Chadwick, 2007). The rapid development of digital technologies and the popularity of social media platforms offer significant opportunities for marketing and promotion, though they also bring new challenges related to competition and capturing consumer attention (Desai, 2019). At the same time, technology allows for more

precise segmentation of target audiences, providing fans with personalized experiences and facilitating direct interactions (Ferrell, Hartline & Hochstein, 2012). Beech and Chadwick, (2007) define marketing as a continuous process of generating competitive events with unpredictable outcomes, offering all participants: customers, sports businesses, organizations, and individuals, fair opportunities to achieve direct and indirect objectives. Thus, sports marketing exercises a pervasive influence on daily life, appearing in various forms, from media broadcasts and magazines to street advertisements.

Sports marketing encompasses two distinct dimensions: “sports marketing” focuses on promoting events and sports entities, such as the Olympic Games, Romania’s SuperLiga, or football teams like CFR Cluj. The second dimension, “marketing through sports,” involves promoting other products and services by associating them with sports events, teams, and renowned athletes, leveraging their appeal and credibility to enhance the visibility and attractiveness of promoted products. This distinction between sports marketing and marketing through sports is essential for understanding the strategy and impact of marketing within the contemporary sports context (Kaiser & Breuer, 2015).

Much like major corporations, sports teams and organizations function as complex entities, employing financial specialists and operational leaders to ensure operational efficiency and effectiveness. A fundamental task in sports management is identifying and responding to consumer expectations, prioritizing their needs. Within this context, the sports marketer plays a crucial role, with the primary objective of promoting the brand and image of a team or individual athlete using a wide range of channels and strategies tailored to an increasingly diverse market (Kotler & Keller, 2019). Although marketing terminology often refers to products and services, the emphasis is actually on consumer emotions and experiences, as the primary aim of sports marketing is to create an emotional bond between fans and the sports entity, transforming mere participation into an engaging and memorable experience (University of Florida, 2021).

Social media has emerged as a crucial channel for online sports marketing, providing ample opportunities to connect with fans. According to a report by Datareportal, over 62% of the global population -more than 5 billion people- are using social media platforms in January 2024. For sports marketing, this digital medium is ideal for creating an authentic connection with fans and delivering relevant experiences. Social media marketing involves using digital platforms to achieve marketing and business objectives. To maximize the potential of this channel, a well-thought-out strategy based on in-depth insights is essential. Wordstream recommends the following measures for optimizing efficiency:

- Creating audience-specific content: Companies must have a deep understanding of their target audience and produce consistently relevant and updated content to meet their needs.

- Engaging with the audience: Social media facilitates the formation of digital communities, and constant engagement (responding to comments, sharing, and reacting) is essential to foster a sense of belonging. Regular updates on product information also help maintain an active and informed community.

- Repurposing content and using paid advertising: This strategy extends reach by reusing materials across platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. Additionally, social media advertising offers a cost-effective method for reaching audience segments with high potential interest in the offered products.

- Assessing content quality: Statistics are essential for determining the effectiveness of a marketing strategy. The success of a social media campaign cannot be evaluated without clear and relevant data. Current technology enables companies to respond quickly to market changes, adjust strategies based on feedback, and continuously improve content quality (Kotler & Keller, 2019). This adaptability helps organizations optimize impact and remain competitive in the dynamic digital landscape.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The objective of this research is to determine the most effective social media platform and the types of marketing campaigns most favored by consumers within the sports context. Accordingly, specific aims were set, including a comparative analysis of consumer preferences for online versus traditional marketing campaigns, and an evaluation of consumer attitudes toward different social media platforms employed in sports marketing.

## **MATERIAL & METHODS**

The research sample consisted of 20 participants aged 18 to 26, randomly selected from active social media users. This age group is recognized for its high engagement with technology and digital platforms, making it a representative segment for current online consumption trends (Pew Research Center, 2021). This research benefits from access to opinions and behaviors relevant to social media usage for marketing purposes, as younger generations are typically more receptive to new digital marketing trends and actively engage on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook (Smith et al.,

2020). The random sampling method minimizes potential biases in participant selection, thus ensuring a diversity of perspectives. In the context of sports marketing, insights from this age group are essential, as young consumers tend to respond differently to marketing campaigns compared to other demographics, often showing distinct preferences for interactivity, authenticity, and dynamic visual content (Kotler & Keller, 2019).

The research methodology is designed to understand consumer preferences and attitudes toward online sports marketing. To analyze these aspects, a qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. According to Malhotra and Birks (2007), qualitative research is predominantly exploratory and provides an in-depth understanding of attitudes and perceptions within a limited sample. The interviews were conducted either in person or via the Zoom platform, with an average duration of 15-20 minutes.

Data analysis followed the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The first stage involved extracting and coding key terms to eliminate redundancy and structuring the information in alignment with the research objectives. In the data display stage, responses were condensed and organized thematically, and in the final stage, primary trends and patterns were identified, forming the foundation of the final conclusions.

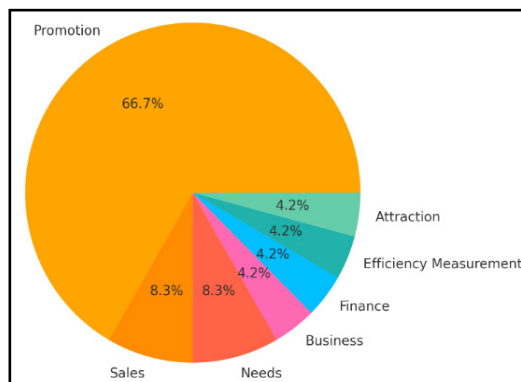
**Table 1.** Interview used in research

| Reference Framework of Questions  | Questions  |
|---|--|
| <b>I. Consumer Preferences Related to Marketing.</b>                      | 1.1 What comes to mind when you hear the word “marketing”?<br>1.2 What is your opinion of traditional marketing?<br>1.3 What is your opinion of online marketing (social media, email, display advertising, etc.)?<br>1.4 Which of these do you prefer? Why?   |
| <b>II. Consumer Attitude Toward Different Social Media Platforms.</b>     | 2.1 What are your favorite social media platforms? What do you like about each of them?<br>2.2 Which platform do you spend the most time on? What sets it apart from the rest?<br>2.3 Which social media platforms do you dislike? Why?<br>2.4 On which platforms do you tolerate marketing campaigns? |
| <b>III. Consumer Attitude Toward Types of Sports Marketing Campaigns.</b> | 3.1 What is your favorite type of social media post (image, video, audio, text, story, etc.)? Why?<br>3.2 What do you understand by sports marketing?<br>3.3 In your opinion, what is the difference between marketing of sports and marketing through sports?   |

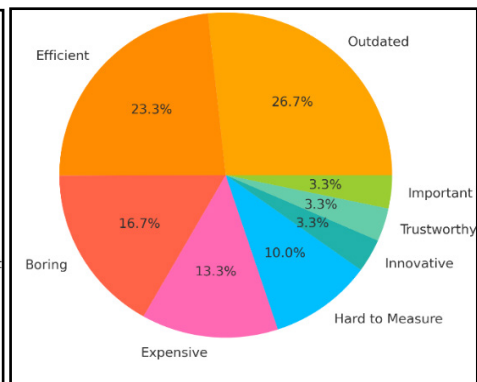
| Reference Framework of Questions   | Questions   |
|--|---|
|  | 3.4 When it comes to sports marketing, do you prefer the same type of post? (What type of post related to sports marketing do you prefer?)  |
| <b>IV. Consumer Attitude Toward Types of Marketing Campaigns Through Sports.</b> | 4.1 Do you follow any athlete or sports organization online? What sets them apart from the competition?<br>4.2 Have past marketing campaigns through sports convinced you to form or change an opinion about a product? What were the elements that influenced your final decision (credibility, appeal, strength)? |
| <b>V. What Attracts Consumers to a Marketing Campaign.</b>                       | 5.1 What attracts you to a marketing campaign?<br>5.2 Do you think these elements can be incorporated into sports marketing? How?   |

## RESULTS

The analysis of responses collected during the interviews revealed consumer preferences regarding online marketing and the social platforms used in sports marketing. The analysis was structured according to the five major themes discussed in the interviews: preferences for online versus traditional marketing, attitudes toward social media platforms, preferred types of campaigns, the influence of sports marketing campaigns, and the key attraction factors within a marketing campaign.

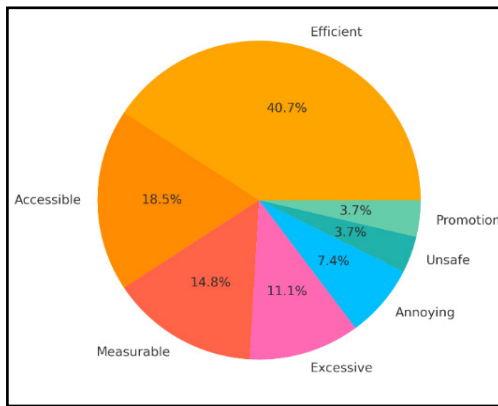


**Fig. 1.** What comes to the minds of participants when they hear the word "marketing"?

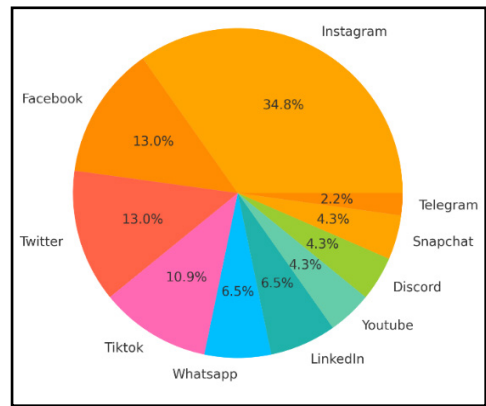


**Fig. 2.** Opinions about traditional marketing

The preponderance of respondents showed a clear preference for online marketing due to its accessibility and interactivity. They highlighted the benefits of direct engagement with brands and the ability to provide instant feedback as key advantages of the digital environment (Ferrell, Hartline & Hochstein, 2012). Additionally, precise audience targeting and measurable results make online marketing more appealing to younger consumers, contrasting with traditional marketing, which was often described as “outdated” and “less engaging.” This is reflected in Fig. 2., where attributes like “outdated” and “boring” have significant representation, indicating traditional marketing’s perceived limitations.

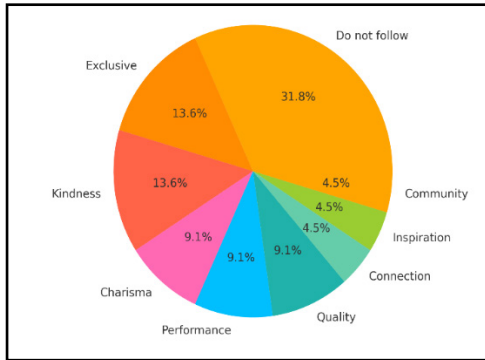


**Fig. 3.** Opinions about online marketing

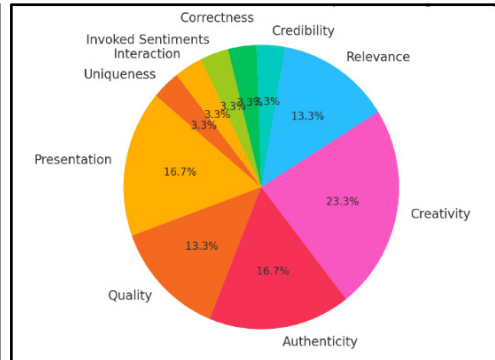


**Fig. 4.** Favourite social media platforms

Among social platforms, Instagram and TikTok were preferred by respondents due to their rapid, easily consumable content, characteristic of the “continuous feed” format. Respondents also emphasized the importance of community engagement and captivating visuals, considering these platforms ideal for sports marketing campaigns. The chart illustrating the percentage distribution of codes in online marketing opinions supports these findings, with a significant portion of respondents associating online marketing with “efficiency” (40.7%) and “accessibility” (18.5%), both crucial attributes in fast-paced platforms like Instagram and TikTok. In the distribution of social media platforms used, Instagram held the highest preference (34.8%), followed by Facebook and Twitter, which had relatively lower percentages, further reflecting the participants’ inclination towards platforms conducive to visually dynamic and engaging content.



**Fig. 5.** Results of following famous athletes and the appeal of their content



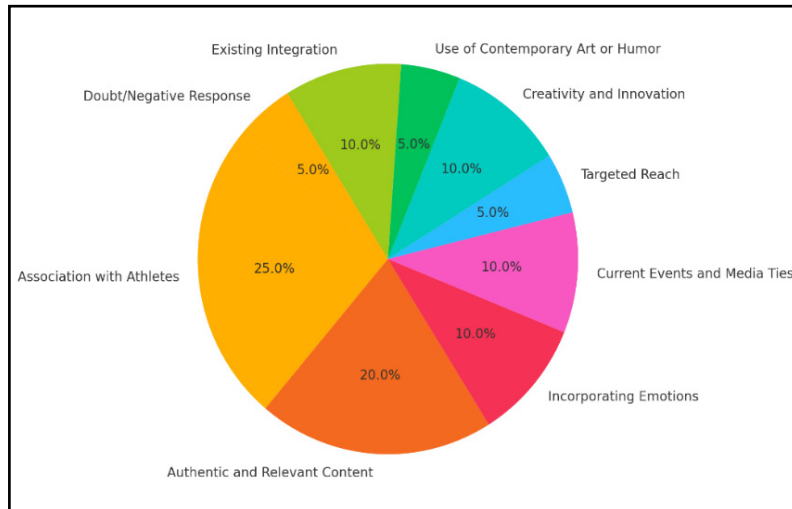
**Fig. 6.** Key Motivational Factors in Marketing Campaigns

According to Fig. 5., thirteen respondents indicated that they follow athletes and sports organizations online, while seven expressed no interest in doing so. The primary reasons for following athletes include “a unique behind-the-scenes perspective” (exclusivity), the charisma of the athletes, and, in some cases, purely for the quality of information presented by sports pages.

On the other hand, for most respondents, credibility was the foremost attribute for an athlete engaging in a marketing campaign. This aligns with previous responses, where some participants indicated they follow athletes like Messi and Ronaldo. The success of marketing campaigns involving such athletes can be attributed to their expertise and integrity, establishing them as among the world’s most successful and credible sports figures. Other important attributes mentioned include charisma (attractiveness), relevance, and the professionalism of the campaign. If a product lacks relevance to the follower, the choice of athlete will have little impact. Additionally, if product information is not presented accurately and concisely, the audience’s interest may shift to alternative options.

The responses indicate a strong preference for integrating emotional, authentic, and relevant elements in sports marketing, particularly by leveraging well-known athletes and innovative content. Many participants believe that using famous athletes, whom both adults and children admire, strengthens credibility and connection with the audience. Respondents value campaigns that are authentic, emotionally engaging, and resonate with sports values. Storytelling that connects emotionally with fans is seen as particularly effective. The use of current events, creative collaborations with athletes, and innovative content like humor or contemporary art were highlighted as appealing strategies that enhance engagement.





**Fig. 7.** Important elements to enhance sports marketing campaigns

## DISCUSSIONS

This research highlighted the importance of online marketing in the sports context, emphasizing consumer preferences for dynamic and interactive formats, such as videos and stories, specifically to social media platforms. The results show that while traditional marketing remains valuable for certain audience segments, digital marketing offers superior accessibility and measurability, being preferred by younger audiences (Desai, 2019). Sports marketing campaigns, carried out by athletes and sports organizations, had a strong impact on respondents' perceptions. They were more likely to trust a product or brand promoted by a famous athlete, recognizing the essential role of credibility and emotional association in the success of a sports marketing campaign. However, respondents indicated a preference for authentic campaigns that convey real values, not just commercial messages. Factors that attract consumers to a marketing campaign most include originality, relevance to everyday life, and message authenticity.

Respondents emphasized that they feel more drawn to campaigns that use familiar language and present products in a realistic and accessible context. The most prominent theme -endorsed by about a third of respondents- is the association with famous athletes. Respondents emphasize the influence athletes have on consumers, particularly due to their status as admired figures. Research supports

that endorsements by admired public figures, especially athletes, create a halo effect, making associated products more desirable. This strategy is effective because it not only enhances visibility but also aligns sports fans' emotional connection to their idols. Approximately one-quarter of respondents value authentic and relevant content in sports marketing. Authenticity is increasingly recognized as a significant component in modern marketing, particularly among younger audiences, who tend to be skeptical of overt commercialization. This view aligns with findings that audiences prefer content that resonates with real-world experiences and highlights genuine interactions within the sports community (Thompson et al., 2022). These responses suggest that brands could benefit from adopting storytelling strategies that emphasize relatable content, creating narratives that foster a sense of shared experience and genuine connection with sports values.

A segment of responses highlights the emotional connection as a crucial element, suggesting that stories that "touch the hearts" of fans can strengthen brand loyalty. Emotional appeal is a powerful marketing tool, as emotions play a significant role in decision-making (Bagozzi et al., 2019). This approach in sports marketing could involve creating narratives around triumph, struggle, or passion for the game, which can resonate deeply with fans. Such a strategy not only aligns with the values of sports but also builds a stronger brand affiliation by tapping into the audience's emotional investments.

The responses reflect a strong inclination toward strategies that incorporate authenticity, athlete associations, and emotional connections within sports marketing. The preference for authenticity and emotional appeal aligns with current research, which advocates for relatable and genuine content to build trust and loyalty. These findings underscore the importance of aligning marketing strategies with the intrinsic values of sports such as teamwork, resilience, and community.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, we can conclude that sports marketing is a dynamic and complex field that requires constant adaptation, with success depending on a deep understanding of the target audience alongside the expertise and techniques of marketers. Essential to this field is the ability to create original, engaging content and involve compelling figures who convey both credibility and evoke strong emotions in the target audience.

Challenges include managing public perceptions of athletes and teams, navigating the rapid evolution of new technologies, social media platforms, and rapidly shifting trends. Additionally, forming strategic partnerships with sponsors

and crafting impactful campaigns to maximize visibility are crucial. In conclusion, online marketing has transformed the way sports are promoted and consumed, delivering significant benefits for both sports organizations and fans. As digital technologies continue to evolve, the role of online marketing will expand, presenting new opportunities for innovation and success in the field.

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