THE INFLUENCE OF SPORTS MARKETING ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AND BRAND PERCEPTION IN THE MODERN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the growing importance of sports marketing as a key factor in the development of modern sports organizations and its influence on consumer behavior and brand perception. The study examines socio-demographic differences in attitudes towards sports, digital promotion, sponsorship, and the role of social media in creating consumer engagement. Data were collected through an online survey of 107 respondents, using a Likert scale to measure attitudes. The results indicate that most respondents recognize marketing as essential for the success of sports organizations, especially through creative campaigns and digital channels. However, traditional sponsorship still plays a significant role in shaping audience trust and engagement. The findings highlight the need for integrating innovative digital marketing strategies to strengthen consumer relations and improve brand visibility in the sports industry.

Keywords: Sports marketing, consumer behavior; sponsorship; digital marketing; and brand perception

Introduction

In contemporary social contexts, sport and physical activity play an increasingly important role, not only as forms of leisure and recreation but also as integral components of modern lifestyles (Gammelsæter et al., 2025). The growing public interest in sport has led certain sports disciplines to occupy a central position within social dynamics and

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the media landscape. One of the key factors contributing to this development is the strong economic dimension of sport, as significant financial resources have been invested over recent decades in sports clubs, competitions, and professional athletes, while the market value of sports organizations and individuals has continuously increased. In such an environment, marketing assumes an increasingly prominent role in sport. Although its fundamental principles do not differ substantially from those applied in manufacturing and service industries, sports marketing possesses specific characteristics that distinguish it as a separate field of study. It encompasses a set of activities aimed at promoting sports products, services, events, and brands, as well as building and maintaining relationships with audiences, fans, and the wider public (Nilsen et al., 2024).

The subject of this paper is the analysis of sports marketing, its core characteristics, significance, and role in contemporary sport, with the aim of highlighting how marketing contributes to the development of sport and the enhancement of its social popularity.

The origins of sports marketing in North America date back to the mid-nineteenth century, when business entities recognized the potential of sport as a means of achieving commercial objectives. During the 1850s and 1860s, companies sought to capitalize on the growing public interest in sporting events in order to improve their business performance. One of the earliest examples is the rowing competition organized between Harvard and Yale universities in 1852, which, in addition to its sporting significance, generated notable economic effects for the local community through increased commercial activity, tourism demand, and revenues.

By the late nineteenth century, the commercialization of baseball had begun, with tobacco companies using images of sports teams and players for promotional purposes (Straume & Gammelsæter, 2025). This practice led to the creation of the first baseball cards, which played a significant role in enhancing brand recognition and consumer loyalty. Although the forms of distribution of these promotional materials have evolved over time, they laid the foundations for the modern market of sports memorabilia and collectible products (Koch et al., 2025).

The further development of sports marketing was strongly linked to technological progress. The introduction of radio broadcasting in the 1930s enabled mass audiences to follow sporting events, while television in the mid-twentieth century further increased the accessibility of sport to the general public. Sporting events became part of popular culture, and athletes evolved into public figures with substantial market potential (Akbar et al., 2025). During the 1960s, sport became increasingly associated with identity and image, which led to the development of sponsorships and long-term marketing partnerships between athletes and companies.

A particularly significant moment in the history of sports marketing was the signing of one of the first sponsorship agreements, when golfer Gene Sarazen began collaborating with Wilson Sports Goods in 1923. Later, in 1928, Coca-Cola became an official sponsor of the Olympic Games, further confirming the global importance of sport as a marketing platform. The development of television broadcasting and the growth in the value of media rights contributed to the emergence of the modern sports industry, whose market value today is measured in billions of dollars.

In contrast to North America, sports marketing in Europe began to develop more intensively only during the 1970s and 1980s, parallel to the processes of professionalization and commercialization of sports clubs. Major sporting events, such as the Olympic Games and international football competitions, became attractive platforms for brand promotion, while television broadcasts enabled access to mass audiences. During this period, organizations such as UEFA initiated cooperation with major sponsors, significantly expanding marketing activities in European sport.

In the Balkan region, the development of sports marketing progressed more slowly and was shaped by political and economic changes during the 1990s. In the period of the former Yugoslavia, the commercial aspect of sport was limited; however, popular sports such as football and basketball gradually opened space for sponsorships and promotional activities. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, sports clubs began to implement more professional marketing strategies, while television rights became one of the key sources of revenue. Today, sports marketing in Europe and the Balkans increasingly follows global trends developed in North America, while retaining certain local specificities arising from regional contexts and cultural patterns (Choi et al., 2025).

The subject of this study is the analysis of the influence of sports marketing, with particular emphasis on the role of social media, on consumer behavior and the perception of sports brands in the contemporary digital environment. The research focuses on examining respondents' attitudes toward the importance of sport in everyday life, the development of social cohesion, the informational and promotional role of social media, as well as the level of digital audience engagement in the context of sport. The primary objective of the research is to determine the extent to which sports marketing—especially digital channels and social media—affects consumer be-havior, their level of engagement, and the perception of sports brands. The secondary objectives of the study are to analyze the importance of sport in respondents' everyday lives, examine attitudes toward the contribution of sport to the development of social cohesion, determine the level of sports content consumption on social media, assess respondents' trust in sports-related information on digital platforms, analyze the impact of online promotions and interactions on interest in sports events, and examine the gap between the perceived importance of social media and their practical application in sport. Based on the theo-

retical framework and the subject of the research, the following hypotheses were formulated: **H1:** The majority of respondents perceive sport as having a significant role in their everyday lives. **H2:** Respondents perceive sport as an important factor in the development of social cohesion. **H3:** Social media represent a significant channel for information dissemination and promotion in sport. **H4:** There is a positive perception of the role of social media in sports development, but their practical use (e.g., registration for sports events) remains at a low level. **H5:** The majority of respondents assume a passive role in the digital sports environment, primarily as content consumers rather than active participants in online interactions.

Literature Review

The sports industry continues to grow, and sport has become one of the most significant social activities, driven primarily by economic motives and profit-generating opportunities, followed by its positive impact on individual and public health (Ratković & Dašić, 2018). Branding is no longer limited to physical products, services, or companies, but increasingly encompasses individuals, particularly those who are already publicly recognized due to the nature of their professional activities (Dašić et al., 2021).

Philip Kotler defines marketing as a discipline that integrates scientific and creative aspects in the process of identifying, creating, and delivering value to target markets with the aim of achieving profitability. Through marketing, unmet consumer needs and desires are identified, enabling organizations to develop appropriate value propositions (Bindal & Nulkar, 2022).

The contemporary marketing environment is characterized by high dynamism and complexity, with changes further accelerated by the development of digital technologies and the emergence of the Web 2.0 concept. The Web 2.0 concept, extensively elaborated by Hennig-Thurau and colleagues, is based on user-generated content and a significantly higher level of interaction between the internet and its users. Over the past two decades, the internet has become a key communication tool, enabling global connectivity and information exchange in a manner far more efficient than traditional forms of communication.

Boone and Kurtz introduced the concept of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) as a strategic framework that enables organizations to achieve consistent and coordinated communication with potential consumers in target markets. IMC provides a foundation for aligning different elements of the promotional mix, thereby facilitating greater control over communication activities and the development of consumer-oriented messages while simultaneously achieving organizational objectives. Integrated marketing communications also contribute to the creation of effective targeted

campaigns, allowing brands to deliver the right message to the right audience at the right time.

In this context, social media represent a significant tool for strengthening consumer engagement and enhancing an organization's online reputation, as emphasized by Hennig-Thurau and colleagues. The increasing use of social media by consumers creates additional opportunities for boosting sales and expanding audience interest. Malthouse and colleagues emphasize that success on social media does not depend solely on a brand's presence on digital platforms, but also on the development of processes that enable the creation of relevant and engaging content. Through interac-tion on social networks, blogs, and online communities, organizations can gain valu-able insights into consumer perceptions, maintain brand awareness in the public mind, and stimulate engagement in both digital and traditional environments, thereby strengthening long-term consumer loyalty (Al-Shammari et al., 2025).

Social networks function as digital networking platforms that enable users to connect with family members, friends, and professional contacts, as well as to develop direct interpersonal relationships. The growth in their use has significantly transformed the way marketing activities are conducted by enabling new, interactive forms of communication between consumers and brands. Through social media, users can actively participate in content exchange and engage in two-way communication with sports and other brands, which contributes to higher levels of engagement.

Consumer interactions on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have encouraged brands to become more innovative and faster in creating and distributing content. As a result, strong online brand communities have emerged, within which intensive interactions take place among consumers themselves. Social media advertising enables brands to efficiently disseminate information related to their products and services in a manner that is easily accessible and understandable to users, making this form of promotion increasingly prevalent in contemporary marketing practice (Apostu et al., 2025).

In the sports domain, loyal audiences and shared fan interests contribute to the creation of numerous online and offline communities. Fans and consumers of sports brands represent a key target group in sports marketing, originating from diverse social, economic, and educational backgrounds and possessing varied personal characteristics. Research indicates that fans experience sport in a highly personal manner, demonstrating varying levels of identification, passion, and emotional involvement during and after sporting events.

The development of social media has further intensified emotional expression and strengthened fan affiliation by enabling consumers to communicate directly with sports clubs, teams, and athletes, as well as to gain deeper insights into their activities

and personalities. At the same time, social media provide sports organizations with opportunities to actively build and maintain relationships with fans. Although these platforms allow users to publicly express opinions and attitudes—which may occasionally have negative effects on brand image—continuous monitoring and management of online interactions can help sports managers identify opportunities to strengthen consumer relationships and enhance long-term loyalty (Gordi Baghcheh Mishe et al., 2025).

Research suggests that social media can be effectively used as a key marketing tool for managing consumer relationships, primarily through active engagement, which can also contribute to increased audience interest in sporting events. Consumer engagement via digital platforms strengthens the bond between brands and audiences, indirectly influencing viewership growth and fan loyalty. Additionally, some studies indicate that sponsor image can positively influence sports involvement and purchase intention, whereas mere sponsorship awareness does not always produce the same effect and may even reduce the desired impact.

Practical examples from the sports industry confirm the importance of social media in building sports league brands. The growth of the Pro Kabaddi League fan base in 2016, according to reports, was driven not only by television campaigns but also by intensive use of social media for audience communication (Koronios et al., 2016). Marketing teams employed various digital activities, including live event streaming, real-time result updates, and the sharing of information about athletes and sponsorships, thereby creating active online fan communities.

A similar approach is applied by other professional sports leagues, such as the NBA, which use social media to increase game attendance and strengthen their base of loyal fans, particularly in developed markets. Investments in social media communication have become strategically important for sports organizations, as they enable higher levels of interaction and audience engagement in the digital environment. Analysis of data obtained through online metrics helps marketers better understand consumer behavior and design campaigns that can lead to increased attendance at sporting events and revenue growth.

Furthermore, the application of advanced technologies such as live streaming, interactive posts, augmented reality, and chatbots can further enhance the fan experience. The inclusion of athletes in digital campaigns also contributes to greater visibility of sports brands on social media. Social networks are increasingly viewed as powerful factors influencing individual attitudes and behavioral intentions. Digital communication, particularly via platforms such as Twitter, has proven to be an effective means of improving relationships between sports organizations and their audiences.

Empirical findings also confirm that fans' purchase intentions largely depend on their attitudes toward sponsors and their level of sponsorship awareness, while social media communication significantly influences fan engagement within online communities. Contemporary organizations and brands have adapted their communication strategies to achieve more interactive and innovative engagement with consumers. Consequently, social media occupy a distinct position in marketing and promotion, differentiating themselves from traditional communication channels. Their advantages include relatively low costs, opportunities for creative expression, integration of multiple communication channels, timely content distribution, and continuous collection of consumer feedback.

Understanding the motivation of sports fans represents an important component of successful sports marketing, as it enables more precise design of marketing activities aimed at increasing viewership and audience interest. Research highlights that fans' motivational characteristics are crucial for understanding their behavior. In this context, theoretical approaches emphasize the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with intrinsically motivated individuals demonstrating higher levels of involvement, focus, and engagement. A high degree of involvement in activities is often associated with more favorable consumer behavior, further confirming the significance of emotional and motivational dimensions in the sports environment.

Today, all these countries are independent states with different demographic, socio-economic, and macro-structural characteristics (Jotanovic et al., 2017).

Research Results

The survey began with a question regarding the respondents' gender, and the results are also presented graphically in order to provide a clearer overview of the sample structure. A total of 107 respondents participated in the study, of whom 51% were female and 49% male. This distribution indicates a relatively balanced gender structure of the sample, with a slight predominance of female respondents.

By comparison, Eurobarometer data from 2019 show that within the European Union, 47% of men regularly engaged in physical activity, compared to 42% of women, indicating the existence of gender differences in overall interest in sport. In certain EU countries, such as Bulgaria, Spain, Greece, and Slovakia, this difference reached up to ten percentage points in favor of men. Although specific statistical data on the gender structure of students in the field of sports marketing are not widely available, the results of this study may suggest a gradual reduction in gender disparities, particularly within the academic and marketing context of sport. In this regard, increased media

visibility and more intensive sponsorship of women's sport may further contribute to greater female interest in the field of sports marketing.

With respect to age structure, the results indicate that the largest proportion of respondents belongs to the youngest age category, up to 24 years (74.5%), which is expected given that the research primarily involved a student population. Respondents aged 25–34 account for 8.5% of the sample, while 10.6% are aged between 35 and 44. The age group 45–54 is represented by 6.4%, whereas respondents older than 55 did not participate in the survey. These findings are consistent with the results of a study conducted among employees in the European Union sports sector, according to which young people aged 15–29 account for 37.4% of the workforce in this sector, which is more than double their share in total employment. These data confirm that the sports sector, including areas such as sports marketing, strongly attracts younger populations, which may be associated with the dynamic nature of the sector, digitalization, and the growing role of social media.

An analysis of respondents' monthly income shows that the largest share of the sample (42.6%) has no personal income, which is expected given the predominance of students. Monthly income of up to RSD 65,000 is reported by 17% of respondents, while 21.3% earn between RSD 65,001 and RSD 120,000. Income exceeding RSD 120,001 is reported by 8.5% of respondents, whereas 10.6% did not declare their income level. This structure indicates heterogeneity in the economic status of respondents and enables the examination of attitudes and behaviors within the context of different levels of purchasing power.

The final sociodemographic question referred to marital status. The majority of respondents are unmarried (76.6%), while 19.1% are married. Divorced respondents account for 4.3% of the sample, whereas there were no widowed participants. One respondent (2.1%) chose not to disclose marital status. This marital status structure further confirms that the sample largely consists of a younger population, which is consistent with the age distribution results. Overall, the sociodemographic profile of respondents indicates the predominance of a younger, economically still partially dependent population, with relatively balanced gender representation. Such a sample structure provides an adequate basis for analyzing attitudes and behaviors in the field of sports marketing, particularly in the context of contemporary trends related to digitalization, media exposure, and youth engagement in the sports industry.

Table 1. Structure in Relation to the Importance of Sport in Everyday Life

Sport plays an important role in my everyday life	
I completely disagree	7%
I disagree	13%
I have no opinion	15%
I agree	42%
I completely agree	23%

Source: autors;

The majority of respondents perceive sport as having an important role in their everyday lives, as 65% of them either agree or strongly agree with this statement. A smaller proportion of respondents (20%) express disagreement, indicating that sport does not represent a significant part of their daily routine. At the same time, 15% of respondents do not hold a clearly defined opinion, which may suggest the existence of a potential target group that could be further motivated through appropriate sports-related and marketing activities.

Table 2. Structure in Relation to the Development of Social Cohesion

I believe that sport contributes to the development of social cohesion	
I completely disagree	4%
I disagree	4%
I have no opinion	7%
I agree	51%
I completely agree	34%

Source: autori;

The research results indicate that the majority of respondents actively follow sports-related content on social media platforms, as 66% either agree or strongly agree with this statement. This finding points to a high level of digital engagement among the audience and confirms the importance of social media as a key channel of sports marketing. At the same time, 25.5% of respondents do not regularly follow sports content via these platforms, while 8.5% have not formed a clear opinion, suggesting potential for additional engagement through targeted digital activities.

The results further show that trust in sports-related information on digital platforms is moderate. Specifically, 48.9% of respondents agree that they trust such content, while

36.2% remain undecided and 14.9% express distrust. This indicates that although digital channels exert influence, their effectiveness largely depends on the credibility of information sources. Online promotions increase interest in sports events for 46.8% of respondents, whereas 27.7% are neutral and 25.6% do not perceive such an effect, highlighting the need for improved design and more precise targeting of digital campaigns.

Secondary data suggest that social media have a particularly strong influence on younger age groups, as a significant proportion of young people follow athletes and actively consume sports content through digital platforms. Previous studies also indicate that intensive use of social media can influence fan consumer behavior, especially by increasing impulsive purchasing and engagement. However, the findings of the present primary research show that the influence of comments and reactions on social media on opinions about sports events is not pronounced among most respondents. As many as 46.8% disagree with the statement that comments affect their opinions, 27.7% are undecided, and only 25.6% report being influenced. These results suggest that although social media play an important role in promotion and communication, their direct impact on attitude formation toward sports events depends on individual audience characteristics and levels of trust in online content.

The results also demonstrate that most respondents do not actively participate in online sports-related discussions. A total of 68% of respondents (34% "strongly disagree" and 34% "disagree") state that they do not engage in such activities, indicating a low level of interactive audience engagement. An additional 21.3% have no clear opinion, while only 10.7% report participating in online sports discussions. These findings are consistent with earlier research suggesting that most sports fans adopt a passive role on social media, primarily consuming content rather than actively commenting or participating in discussions (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011). The results imply that sports organizations should develop more interactive and inclusive digital strategies to encourage active participation and stronger fan engagement.

Overall, the survey results indicate that respondents largely remain passive within the digital sports environment. Most do not actively engage in online discussions, and the influence of social media comments and reactions on opinion formation about sports events is assessed as moderate. Although social media offer numerous opportunities for interaction and information sharing, they are still insufficiently utilized as channels for active participation and attitude formation in sport.

With regard to registering for sports events via social media or applications, the results reveal a low level of adoption of these tools. As many as 68.1% of respondents disagree with this statement, 17% are undecided, while only 10.6% agree and 6.4% strongly agree that they use digital platforms for event registration. This indicates substantial

room for improving both the functionality and promotion of digital channels in the organization and marketing of sports events.

The findings reveal a clear discrepancy between the perceived importance of social media and their actual practical use in the sports context. Although most respondents do not use social media and applications to register for sports events, perceptions of their role in sports development are highly positive. A total of 78.8% of respondents (51.1% agree and 27.7% strongly agree) believe that social media significantly contribute to the development of sport.

These results are consistent with existing research emphasizing that social media enhance communication between sports organizations and audiences, increase the visibility of sports activities, and encourage broader participation in sport, particularly within "sport for all" initiatives. In addition, the findings highlight the strong informational role of social media, as 80.8% of respondents reported discovering athletes and teams they had not previously known through these platforms. Only 10.6% disagreed with this statement, while 8.5% had no clear opinion.

Taken as a whole, the results indicate that social media represent an important instrument for the promotion and development of sport; however, their potential in terms of direct audience participation and conversion into concrete activities—such as event registration—has not yet been fully exploited. Social media demonstrate a strong informational and promotional function in contemporary sport, but further strategic efforts are needed to transform passive consumption into active engagement.

Discussion of Results

The research results indicate that, for the majority of respondents, sport represents a significant segment of everyday life, confirming its social and cultural relevance. The high level of agreement with the statement that sport contributes to the development of social cohesion suggests that sport goes beyond the framework of physical activity and constitutes an important social phenomenon that connects individuals and communities.

The analysis of results related to social media shows that most respondents actively follow sports-related content through digital platforms, which is consistent with findings from previous studies highlighting the growing importance of digital sports marketing. However, trust in sports-related information on social media is assessed as moderate, emphasizing the importance of source credibility and transparency in communication.

These findings confirm the results reported by Hambrick and Mahoney (2011), according to which the majority of sports fans assume the role of passive observers in the digital environment. At the same time, the results indicate a significant untapped potential for the development of more interactive and personalized digital strategies in sports marketing.

Conclusions

Based on the conducted research, it can be concluded that sports marketing, particularly through social media, plays an important role in contemporary sport, primarily as a channel for information dissemination, promotion, and relationship building with audiences. Respondents largely recognize the importance of sport in both personal and social contexts, as well as the contribution of social media to sports development.

However, the results indicate that the level of active digital audience engagement is relatively low, pointing to the existence of a gap between the potential of digital platforms and their actual use. This suggests that sports organizations and marketing stakeholders need to invest additional efforts in developing strategies that encourage interaction, trust, and the conversion of audiences from passive observers into active participants.

The main limitations of this study relate to the sample size and the predominance of a younger, student population, the use of only one data collection method (online survey), the subjective nature of self-reported attitudes, and the geographical and cultural limitations of the sample. Future research could include a larger and more diverse sample of respondents, apply a mixed methodological approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods, analyze differences across various sports and leagues, examine the role of influencers and athletes in digital sports marketing, and focus on mechanisms that stimulate active digital audience participation.

The evaluation of research hypotheses confirms the study's key findings. The majority of respondents perceive sport as having an important role in their everyday lives, as 65% agree or strongly agree with this statement, while only 20% express disagreement. These results clearly confirm a predominantly positive perception of the importance of sport, thereby confirming Hypothesis H1. Furthermore, respondents perceive sport as an important factor in the development of social cohesion, with 85% agreeing or strongly agreeing that sport contributes to social cohesion, which confirms Hypothesis H2. Social media are also confirmed as a significant channel for information and promotion in sport. The results show that 66% of respondents actively follow sports-related content on social media, while 80.8% report discovering athletes and teams they had not previously known through these platforms. These findings indicate a

pronounced informational and promotional role of social media, confirming Hypothesis H3. At the same time, the results reveal a positive perception of the role of social media in sports development, alongside a low level of practical usage. Although 78.8% of respondents believe that social media significantly contribute to the development of sport, as many as 68.1% do not use social media or applications to register for sports events. This clear discrepancy between perception and practice confirms Hypothesis H4. Finally, the findings indicate that the majority of respondents assume a passive role in the digital sports environment. A total of 68% do not actively participate in online sports discussions, while the influence of comments and reactions on social media on the formation of opinions about sports events is assessed as moderate. These results demonstrate the dominance of passive content consumption, thereby confirming Hypothesis H5.

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