

FAN EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

In recent decades, the Internet has become an essential component of modern life, transforming the way we communicate, learn, and go about our daily activities. In a dynamic and ever-changing world, access to online information and services has given us unlimited opportunities to improve our quality of life. The Internet is no longer just a tool for finding information; it represents a complex and varied platform for entertainment, relaxation, and education.

In the past, the public image of athletes was largely controlled by traditional media. Today, thanks to social platforms, athletes can communicate directly with their fans, showcase moments of triumph, and address controversies and rumours, all on their terms. This freedom allows them to cultivate a personal brand and establish themselves as models and influencers.

The online environment has greatly expanded the fan base of athletes. Instead of being limited to local fans or attendees of specific events, athletes can now interact with fans from all over the world. A notable example is Cristiano Ronaldo, who has over 612 million followers on Instagram. With each sponsored post, Ronaldo earns around \$2.3 million, demonstrating the economic power of such a large online presence.

In the paper "Fan experience management in the online environment" we discuss how technology and the Internet have changed sports and the way of interacting with sports fans, then we present what digital presence of fans means, and we conclude with a small study in which we present people's opinion regarding the online environment and how it has revolutionized sports.

Keywords: fans, sport, digital age, social media, communication, integration.

JEL classification: M30, M31, M37.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the sports industry has seen a significant digital transformation, marking important advances in the way sports teams and events are managed, but also in the sports betting sector. The use of digital technologies not only optimized existing processes but also created new opportunities to engage fans and increase revenue.

The sport has evolved a lot in recent decades, the growth being quantified in the amounts paid by television and digital media to broadcast the events [1]. It is nothing artificial: if there were no interest, there would be no money.

During the period when the matches were broadcast free only on television, the involvement of the fans in the life of the team was limited to the day of the match, through the presence at the stadium. A first stage in which they could express a certain influence was recorded in the 80s, with the appearance of the "Pay per view" system. Sports fans only pay for what they want to see, so a first selection is made between the teams that know how to win supporters and those that don't do much.

In sports, digitization has been implemented to measure the physical performance of athletes (heart rate, speed, muscle tone), to create live statistics related to team play (possession, distance run, wrong passes, rebounds, etc.), to transform raw data into complex information, for smart stadiums, etc.

But the energy that moves the sports world is generated by the fans [2]. For them, the digital evolution translates into the diversification of devices and platforms through which the sports watcher has access to content with and about teams and athletes.

Today, thanks to advances in technology and widespread access to the Internet, fans have unlimited options to engage with their favourite teams and athletes. Online platforms allow fans to connect with each other and share their passion for sports like never before.

2. Literature review

2.1 Digitization of sports management

One of the biggest advantages of the online environment is quick and easy access to information. Anyone, anywhere in the world, can get up-to-date data on almost any topic, from science and technology to culture and health. In the past, access to information was limited, but the Internet has radically changed this paradigm. Today, information is available to anyone with a networked device [12].

Online news platforms and blogs dedicated to specific areas allow us to keep up to date with events around the world in real time. However, access to information also requires discernment. The online environment, despite its benefits, is full of less than credible sources, so it is essential to develop our skills to discern between real facts and misinformation. Trusted websites and recognized publications, as well as academic forums and educational resources offered by leading universities, provide us with a solid framework to document ourselves correctly and efficiently.

For those who prefer a more active lifestyle, the Internet also offers access to resources related to sports and fitness. Online workout platforms, whether it's mobile apps or YouTube videos, have become a great way to keep fit without having to go to a gym. Also, live sessions of yoga, meditation or other wellness activities are available for free or for a fee on various platforms, allowing anyone to better manage their stress and improve their mental and physical health.

Modern sports team management involves a strategic approach that integrates digital solutions to monitor player performance and optimize training [4]. Data analysis systems collect real-time information about athletes' physical condition, their in-game efficiency, and potential injury risks [10]. This data is then analysed to adjust training programs and customize recovery regimens, ensuring each athlete is in optimal shape at the right time.

In addition to improving sports performance, digitization also helps to manage resources more efficiently. Digital match scheduling, e-ticket management, and the use of CRM platforms for fan engagement are just a few examples of technology-optimized processes. These solutions not only reduce operational costs, but also provide an improved supporter [16]. The management and

maintaining ethical relations with the fans are also a part of the marketing mix [7]. The club's relationships with the fans need to be cultivated and periodically assessed [6].

The sports betting sector has benefited enormously from digitization. Online betting platforms offer users access to a wide range of sporting events globally, along with a multitude of bet types and real-time updated odds [15]. Furthermore, advanced data analysis tools allow bettors to access detailed statistics and performance history, helping you to be more informed before pressing the bet button.

Another innovative aspect in sports betting is the integration of gamification elements. Contests and challenges based on personal achievements encourage active participation and increase user loyalty. For example, platforms can offer rewards for winning betting streaks or for participating in special events, which maintains long-term interest and engagement.

What makes mixed reality so promising is its ability to create a learning and training environment that transcends traditional barriers. Athletes can train not only to compete against other athletes but also to compete against virtual entities that are created to test their limits in new and surprising ways. And as technology constantly evolves, virtual avatars will become increasingly sophisticated, learning and adapting to each athlete's playing style.

The biggest advantage of this technology is that it allows training in a controlled way without physical risks. Think of an athlete who needs to perfect his defensive reactions in football or boxing.

Instead of risking accidents during physical training, he can do so in a mixed reality environment, where the virtual opponent behaves like a real one, but without the risk of causing injury [13]. Thus, performance and safety go hand in hand, giving athletes more opportunities to improve.

And it's not just about individual sports. Mixed reality can change the way teams collaborate and coordinate [9]. Imagine a basketball team practicing against a virtual lineup designed to mimic the game of the best team in the league. Human players will learn to adjust their tactics, respond faster, and coordinate more effectively, all while improving their skills. As technology advances, in a few years, these "virtual" teams will even be able to steal the ball from your hand.

These applications of mixed reality in sports are just the beginning. As technology continues to evolve, we can expect an even deeper integration of virtual worlds into the everyday lives of athletes. In the future, it is possible that an athlete will no longer only train in the weight room or on the field but spend hours in a mixed reality, learning how to optimize their movements and react better to the challenges that come from digital opponents.

2.2 Digital presence of fans

Modern sports management strategies also include optimizing how fans interact with their favourite teams and sports. Mobile apps and social media are used to stream exclusive content such as player interviews, pre- and post-match analysis, and even live streaming of events. This not only keeps the fans interested but also allows them to be more than mere spectators, actively involved in the life of the team.

Augmented reality and virtual reality are also starting to be implemented to provide immersive experiences, such as viewing matches from the player's perspective or virtual tours of stadiums [11]. These technologies not only appeal to younger fans raised in the digital age but also add substantial value to the overall fan experience, opening up new avenues for monetization.

The adoption of digital technologies in sports management and the sports betting industry has revolutionized the way organizations run their operations and interact with fans. By innovating and adapting to new trends, businesses in this field not only improve their efficiency and profitability but also manage to create a more engaged and passionate community. In an ever-changing world, these innovative strategies ensure that sport remains not only relevant, but also in the face of technological advancement.

In the digital age we live in today, fan engagement is more important than ever. With so many distractions competing for people's attention online, teams and athletes must find ways to capture the attention of their fans. Without engaged fans, professional sports would not exist as we know it today.

It is the fans who support ticket sales, merchandise purchases, sponsorship opportunities and ultimately revenue generation for the teams.

Fans' opinions are important as they make up the customer base of the sports club. Without fans, the home game atmosphere might not represent a driving force for the players. Fans also share their experience through social media and other networks [5].

Moreover, engagement is necessary because it creates a community among fans, which enhances their emotional connection with their favourite sport or team. This connection causes them to stay involved for the long term instead of just being supporters who only show up when things are going well on the court or basketball court. Fan involvement is an essential aspect of modern-day sports fanaticism, which has been facilitated by technological advancements in recent decades.

The evolution of sports broadcasting has created exciting opportunities for fan engagement in the digital age [14]. From the early days of sports on television and radio to social media campaigns and virtual reality, fans now have more ways than ever to connect with their favourite teams and athletes. While some forms of involvement can be controversial, such as sports betting, there are numerous other options available. It is important that fans, sports organizations, and the media address these new forms of fan [3]-[8]. By doing so, they can create a more immersive experience for viewers and build stronger connections between fans and teams. Additionally, these new technologies can provide valuable insights into fan behavior that can influence marketing strategies and improve overall engagement.

3. Research methodology

Considering the nature of the research problems, this study was based on a survey, considering that through it or we could gain new perspectives and knowledge that is currently not so well grounded in the branding literature. Due to insufficient in-depth examinations in this area, our paper must be a starting point and a prelude for future investigations that can build on existing studies. As research methods in this paper, we used the bibliographic study, we do not focus on the analysis of specialized literature, and the statistical-mathematical method in data processing.

This study was conducted between December 20 and January 23 on a sample of 87 people. The questionnaire included various questions that first aimed to create a profile of the people surveyed and then tracked various aspects of the fans' online experience.

We present in the following paragraphs the description of the socio-demographic structure of the subjects of the research.

Regarding the sex of our respondents, we observe that 32% are female and 68% of them are male. The second question was the analysis of the age of respondents, so between 20 and 30 years of age represented the equivalent of 43% of respondents, 32% of respondents were aged 30-40 years, the equivalent of 20% were aged ranging from 40 to 50 years, and 9 respondents equivalent to 5% are over 50 years of age.

The distribution of respondents in correspondence with their studies highlighted that 30% of respondents have secondary education, 48% have higher education, and 22% of respondents have post-graduate studies.

The vast majority of respondents, approximately 74%, live in the urban environment, in Craiova, and the rest in the rural environment, in neighbouring areas near the city, and in terms of the work environment, over 90% of people work in the private environment, and the rest they have various jobs in the public environment.

4. Findings and discussions

The first question sought to elicit the respondents' opinion on how the online environment has improved sports and interaction with fans. First of all, we can talk about quick and easy access to information, today, information is available to anyone who owns a device connected to the network. The Internet has not only contributed as a source of insightful information to the sports world, but transformed it into an entertainment platform.

In an era where the pace of life is increasingly fast, the ability to access online entertainment content and contribute to relaxation and recreation is very important.

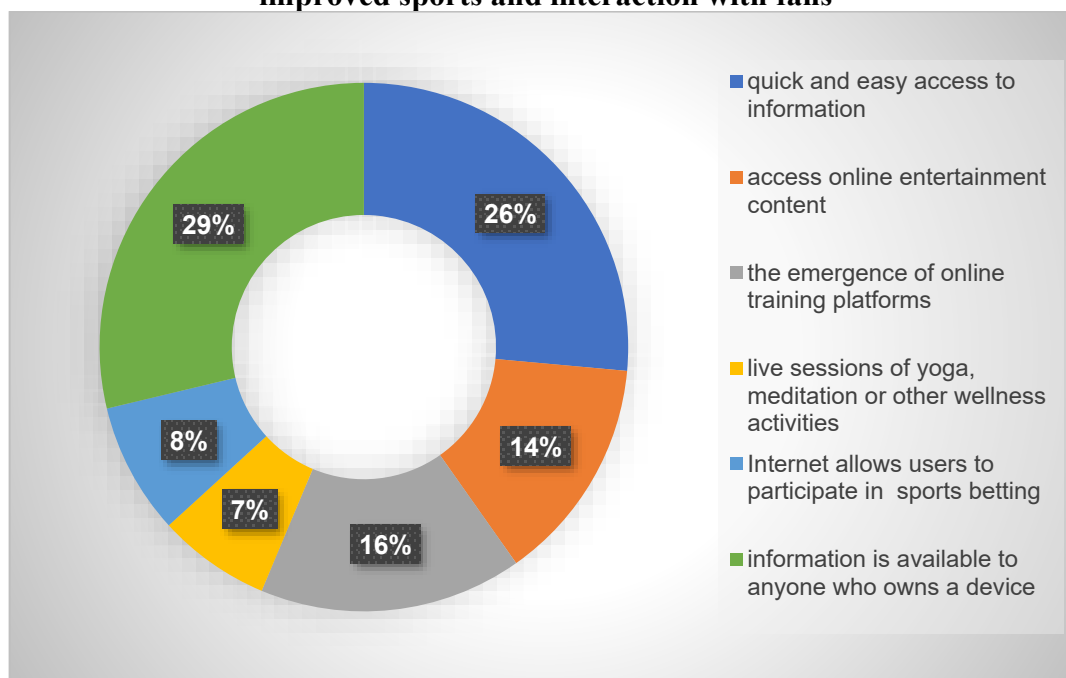
Also, the emergence of online training platforms, be it mobile apps or YouTube videos, have become a great way to keep fit without having to go to a gym. Respondents also brought up live sessions of yoga, meditation or other wellness activities are available for free or for a fee on various platforms, allowing anyone to better manage their stress and improve their mental and physical health.

The Internet has opened up a wide range of activities that can be done from anywhere, be it shopping, financial services or socializing. At the same time, the Internet allows users to participate in recreational activities such as music streaming or even sports betting. These activities represent only a small part of the possibilities we have online, and the Internet facilitates access to them in a safe and comfortable manner.

The digital environment has thus transformed into a multifunctional platform, capable of meeting the varied needs of users, from education and work to entertainment and recreation.

In conclusion, the online environment is an inexhaustible and versatile resource that helps us to be better informed, relax, enjoy entertainment and have a more balanced lifestyle. From access to information and education, to recreational and personalized activities, the Internet has become a central pillar in everyday life. When used correctly, the online environment can contribute significantly to our overall well-being, becoming an essential tool for a better life.

Figure 1 – Distribution off the respondents' opinion on how the online environment has improved sports and interaction with fans



Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

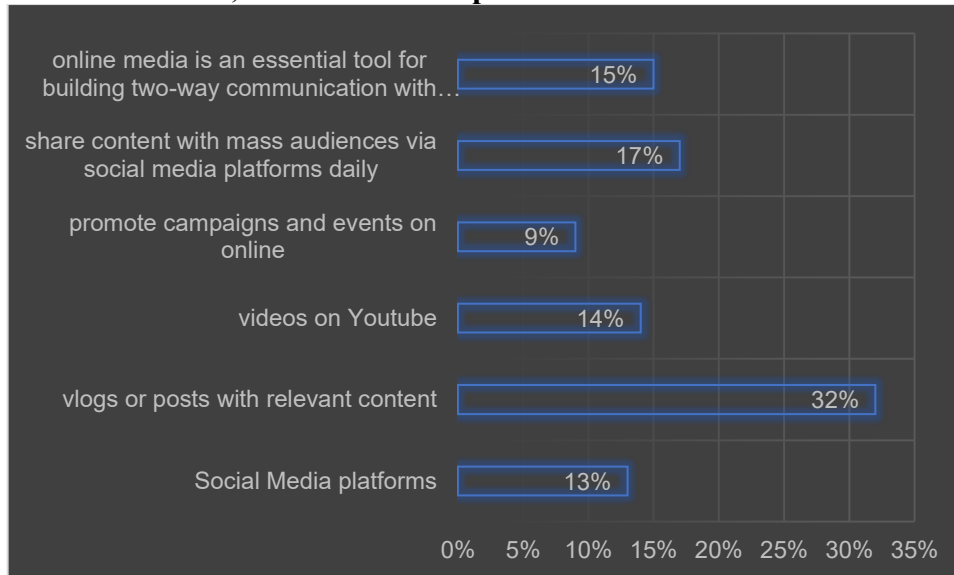
Next, we wanted to know the opinion of the respondents about the change in the role of sportsmen and athletes, who with the help of the online environment have gone from some people to be admired to influencers, who have built an audience thanks to the posts they make and with whom the audience resonates.

People answered that they are interested in achieving a balance between body, mind and soul. Thus, athletes through Social Media platforms, and the huge growth of influencers in the world of sports, who share their experience through vlogs or posts with relevant content, people have found inspiration and motivation to change their lifestyle, to regular sports, to be the best version of themselves.

Most often, athletes share through various channels their experiences and offer advice on types of training or valuable information regarding diet, thus helping those around them to achieve their own goals.

Our respondents consider that they value the transparency of sports models the most, thus leading to the general conclusion that influencers and brands must be 100% sincere, honest and client-oriented in order to win the trust of the public. It is very important that they are genuine and do not convey a wrong message and without a logical and real foundation.

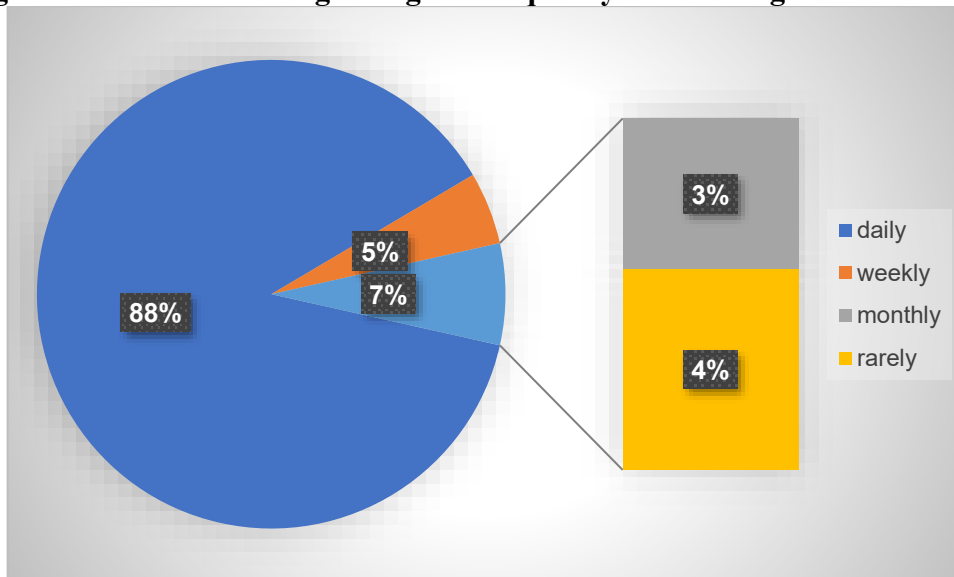
Figure 2 – Distribution off the respondents' opinion in changing the role of sportsmen and athletes, who with the help of the online environment



Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

Next, we wanted to see the frequency of all kinds off online networks. As expected, today social media has an extremely important influence on people, which is also seen in the graph below, 88% of respondents accessing online networks several times a day, becoming one of the habits of day by day, and this is due to the fact that the online environment is today an important part of people's lives, unable to imagine what it would be like to do even the simplest things without having a device connected to the Internet.

Figure 3 – Distribution regarding the frequency of accessing online networks

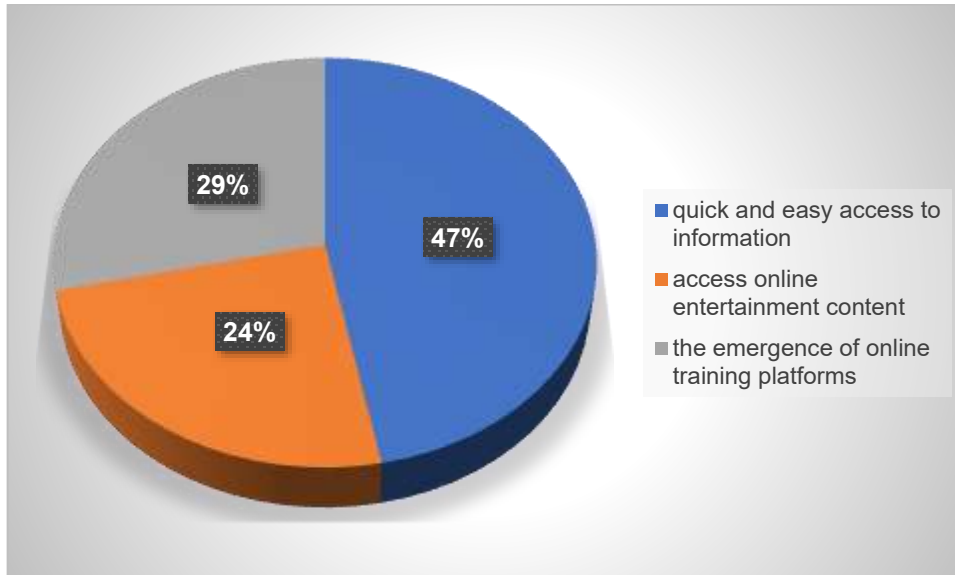


Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

The following questions began to follow the activity of the sports clubs or athletes on online networks, and more specifically, the opinion of the respondents on how this activity contributes to the development of the brand.

Thus, the vast majority consider that the social media pages, the club always posts the latest information, and regarding the other two variants that are on equal places, some consider that the information posted by the club can only be found on social media, and at the pole opposite are respondents who consider that no relevant information is provided.

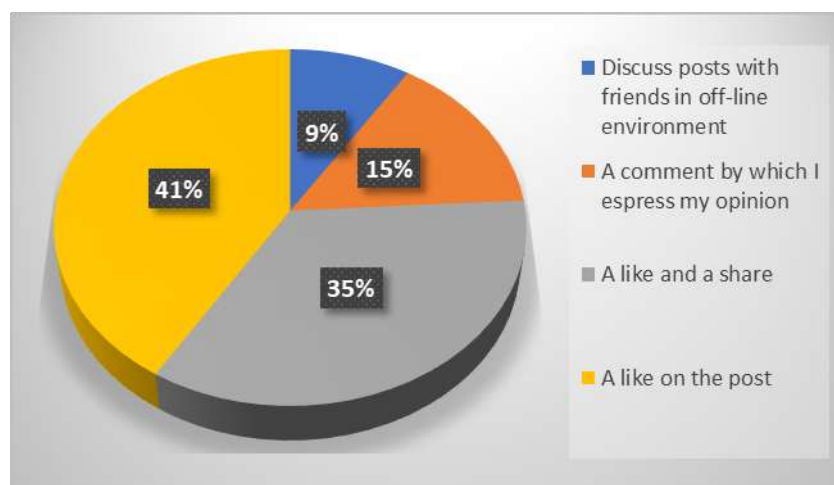
Figure 4 – Distribution regarding the information provided by the sports clubs on the online media



Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

In this question we wanted to see the reactions of the fans after seeing different posts off the clubs or the athletes, so after reading the postings, 41% they gave a liking to each post, followed by 35% respondents who besides like, give a share of the announcement, 15% add comments on what is being posted, and just 9% may chat with friends in off-line environment.

Figure 5 – Distribution of responses according to club posts



Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the online environment, which has penetrated all fields, not only in sports, represents an inexhaustible and versatile resource, which helps us to be better informed, to relax, to enjoy entertainment, and to have a better lifestyle balanced. From access to information and education to recreational and personalized activities, the Internet has become a central pillar in everyday life. However, its use requires responsibility and discernment because, without it, we can fall prey to misinformation or excess. When used correctly, the online environment can contribute significantly to our overall well-being, becoming an essential tool for a better life.

Digital platforms have not only enabled access to international sports broadcasts, they have also changed the way fans interact with their favourite sports. Sports news sites, blogs, mobile apps, social media, and streaming platforms have transformed the sports fan experience.

In the digital age, the use of new technologies has led to changes in the behavior, wants, and needs of sports fans. Thus, sports entities had to change the way they relate to them, using innovative business models to transform them from potential customers to consumers and even partners.

The change in optics happened especially at the level of formulating and transmitting the message. Communication is no longer one-way, from the club/federation/athlete/sports goods manufacturer to the target audience. Today, the most effective marketing efforts are double-edged. One of the important features is that supply adapts to demand based on feedback received in real time.

In conclusion, it is obvious that sports, like many other areas of life, is not immune to digital influence. From the way we watch and interact with our favourite matches and competitions to the way we express our support and passion for the teams and athletes we love, technology and digital innovation have brought sports into a new era.

Acknowledgment

All authors contributed equally to this research.

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