

Kateřina Turkov

Sports Communication on Social Media and Audience Reactions



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Introduction

The relationship between sport and (social) media continues to evolve with each party offering its own contribution. As one of the most appealing forms of broadly understood mass culture, sports provide entertainment, characters, and fans, while the media offer the vehicle, narratives, and audience (Carvalho, 2021; O'Boyle & Free, 2020; Sekot, 2008a). Within the last decade, sports communication has changed dramatically from the perspectives of technology, organization, finance, and promotion (Novak, 2021; Pedersen et al., 2021). As Cornwell (2020, p. 14) stated: "We have been in the middle of communication evolution for some time now, but it never seems to end. We develop new preferences, new technologies, and new priorities regularly."

In a figurative sense, the thoughts above characterize the process of conceptualizing and writing this book. My relationship with the topic as well as my knowledge of sports (social media) communication, sports marketing and related theories have continued to evolve as I continue to learn. Sport has been an inherent part of my life since childhood and my interest in the subject led to my PhD studies.

The original research concept was aimed predominantly at the commercialization of the content posted by Czech professional athletes on their social media pages and involved a quantitative content analysis. When it comes to methodology and ideology, I primarily draw inspiration from US-based studies conducted by, e.g., Guerin and Clavio (2015), Hambrick and Mahoney (2011) and Pegoraro (2010). I planned to uncover how Czech athletes use their official social media pages for promotional and commercial purposes. The motivation for doing so was apparent. Firstly, similar work focusing specifically on the commercialization of sport on social media in the Czech Republic had not yet been done. Secondly, the previous researchers focused on a relatively short

time period (e.g., a few weeks or months); hence, I had planned to collect and code the data for a whole year to preclude distortion of the results due to seasonality, which has been mentioned as a limitation in previous studies (e.g., Hambrick, 2012; Peetz et al., 2004).

In the first year of my PhD studies (2016/2017), I thought I had prepared (almost) everything. I had systematically studied the relevant literature and worked on the definition of variables for my coding book. Then, analogous to foreign studies, I chose the relevant social media for the area, Facebook, as a reference platform. Consequently, I needed to prove how it works (and if it works) in reality. Thus the “problems” began. Firstly, I discovered that the narrow focus on the commercial content would not be beneficial. The general style of social media communication of each athlete significantly influences their promotional and commercial communication, so it would make no sense to focus only on the commercial content without any context. Secondly, I wanted to include the audience reactions, which play a significant role in social media communication. Then I decided to explore the communication style of selected Czech professional athletes and the fans’ reactions on the athletes’ official Facebook pages.

Two short-term pilot studies were conducted between 2017 and 2019. In August 2017, a one-month pilot study of a sample of selected athletes’ Facebook pages was conducted. The principles of the coding protocol used in this research were applied (with necessary modifications) in a paper researching the communication of female skiers on social media (Macková & Turková, 2019). Those short-term studies confirmed that the chosen methodology would be effective in achieving the aims of this project. In 2018, data collection began. I manually screenshotted and saved every post published from July 2018 to June 2019 on the official Facebook pages of selected athletes in monthly intervals (three months after the publication), including the audience reactions and comments. Before that, the sample of the athletes chosen for the research had been finalized according to the criteria discussed in the Methodology.¹

During the process of collecting materials and coding, I reconsidered my original intention to focus on Facebook communication only. Although the content analysis is aimed at the official Facebook pages of the selected athletes, I decided to also discuss other social media in my research to illustrate the complexity of the athletes’ social media communications, albeit on a smaller scale. I realized that it would be beneficial

1 See Chapter 2, Methodology (p. 47).

to gain the opinions and views of athletes and their managers on social media communication, so I expanded my research plan to include a qualitative component in the form of semi-structured interviews. The potential respondents were contacted after the data collection period. After the necessary corrections and updates, I am finally able to present the final form of my book, which is based on the findings in my dissertation (Turková, 2021).

This publication focuses on two integral parts of the contemporary world: sports and social media (Carvalho, 2021; Rowe, 2004; Wenner, 1998). The research is hoping to primarily uncover how social media is used by well-known Czech professional athletes from various Olympic disciplines and secondarily to consider the fans' reactions to the athlete's social media use. Special emphasis is given to the promotional and commercial aspects of the athletes' communications.

The publication addresses three research questions, inspired by the questions posed by Hambrick and Mahoney (2011):

- **RQ1:** How do Czech athletes use their official Facebook pages?
- **RQ2:** How do Czech athletes use their official Facebook pages for promotional and commercial purposes?
- **RQ3:** How do visitors of the athlete's official Facebook pages react to the content posted on those pages?

Before beginning the first phase of the research—the quantitative content analysis—nine hypotheses based on previous foreign academic research were formulated:

- **H1:** The intensity of athletes' communication activity on their official Facebook pages is greater during their sport's usual season (cf. Geurin & Clavio, 2015).²
- **H2:** Popular athletes (i.e., sports celebrities) use their official Facebook pages more intensively than less popular athletes (cf. Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011).³
- **H3:** The Facebook pages of athletes who participate in mainstream sports contain a greater number of posts than those of athletes who participate in niche sports (cf. Geurin & Clavio, 2015).⁴

2 In this case, intensity means the number of posts published on the official Facebook page of a specific athlete during a particular period (more posts = more intensive Facebook use, fewer posts = less intensive Facebook use).

3 See Athletes' Popularity (p. 42).

4 See Dimension of the Sport (p. 44).

- **H4:** The intensity of promotional activity on athletes' official Facebook pages is greater during the usual season of their sport (cf. Geurin & Clavio, 2015).
- **H5:** Popular athletes (i.e., sports celebrities) post more promotional content because they have the ability to gain more sponsors and earn more money than less popular athletes (cf. Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011).⁵
- **H6:** Male athletes mainly focus on endorsing sports-related products, whereas female athletes promote a wider range of brands (cf. Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012).⁶
- **H7:** The official Facebook pages of athletes participating in extreme sports tend to have a more promotional character than the pages of other athletes.⁷
- **H8:** The audience (fans and followers) reacts more intensively to posts published on the official Facebook pages of popular athletes (i.e., sports celebrities) than less popular athletes (cf. Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Witkemper et al., 2012).
- **H9:** Negative reactions on the official Facebook pages of sportsmen are most often aimed at poor sports performance and results, whereas sportswomen are criticized more for their appearance or for personal reasons (cf. Lumsden & Morgan, 2012; Toffoletti, 2017).

The structure of this book respects the standard rules for academic publications. After a brief introduction, it begins with a theoretical part where key concepts are defined. The impact of sport in contemporary society, the relationship of sports and media communication, and the marketing aspects of sports communication are discussed. This part also describes a trend in sports marketing toward establishment of tight, continuous relationships between athletes—and the brands and companies they promote—and their fans. Separate subchapters are dedicated to athletes' motives for using social media and the disadvantages of adopting that form of communication. Factors that may influence athletes' communication are introduced as well.

The methodological part that follows defines the methodological paradigm that was used. Each step of the research and the methods that were adopted—quantitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews—are presented in the context of media studies. After that, the

5 See Athletes' Popularity (p. 42).

6 See Athletes' Gender (p. 43).

7 See The Adrenaline Factor (p. 45).

hypotheses and research questions are restated. Afterwards the concept and structure of the conducted research are explained.

The results of the research follow. Each athlete is introduced, alongside his or her sporting history, use of social media, and the manner of that use. In the sub-chapter Communication on Social Media, the official Facebook communication of each athlete over the course of one year is presented separately in a structured way. The data from the quantitative content analysis is enriched by information gathered from semi-structured interviews with each athlete (or a representative) and his or her statements that have been reported in the traditional media. Graphs and illustrations help to comprehensibly present the collected data.

The achieved results are summarized and compared to one another in the Comparison chapter, taking into account concepts developed in the literature review.⁸ The first part of that chapter compares the factors identified in previous studies that can influence athletes' communication on social media, including Facebook. The second part is dedicated to the promotional activity of the selected athletes and problems with disclosing commercial collaboration and advertising on their official Facebook pages. The third part describes athletes' individual attitudes towards the use of social media for communicating with their supporters and fans, and for other purposes.

The Discussion and the Conclusion provide answers to the key research questions and indicate whether the hypotheses formed on the basis of previously published studies were verified. The last part of the thesis reveals the differences in the social media usage of Czech and foreign athletes. In accordance with the objective of this book, in addition to describing and explaining how well-known Czech professional athletes use social media, the reactions of their audiences (fans and followers) are also presented and examined.

Based on expert analysis and reflection, the book provides a comprehensive overview of well-known Czech professional athletes who have been active on social media during their active careers. The findings can be useful not only as a basis for further research but also for educational purposes. Moreover, the publication can inspire the athletes' managers or individual athletes concerning their social media (self)presentation.

8 See Chapter 1, Theoretical Part (p. 15).

1. Theoretical Part

The theoretical part of the publication is divided into three main sub-chapters covering the core approaches towards the topic. The first provides the context and highlights the importance of sports communication as well as documents the development of the relationship of sport and media as well as sports fandom are documented. The last part of the first subchapter is explicitly dedicated to the ongoing commercialization of sports communication.

The second theoretical section looks at sport communication from the marketing perspective. The basic concepts and related theories such as sports public relations and relationship marketing are defined, and the shift of sports marketing to social media is discussed. Special emphasis is given to the examination of the disclosure requirements for commercial collaboration and advertising in Czech legislation.

The third subchapter of the theoretical part focuses on the athletes and teams and their motivations for (not) using social media. Finally, this section is dedicated to the factors affecting athletes' communication and fans' perception of those communications that were considered in the research.

1.1 Contextualization and Development of Sports Communication

1.1.1 The Impact of Sport in the Modern World

Sport can be defined as an institutionalized physical activity motivated by a desire to increasing fitness, personal realization, result, or perfor-

mance (Seippel, 2006; Sekot, 2008b). It represents an integral part of life in the modern world and cannot be separated from contemporary social and cultural structures (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Jarvie, 2013; Rowe, 2004). Sport is a leisure activity as well as a competitive opportunity (Real, 1998; Sekot, 2017; Slepíčková, 2014). Sekot (2017) and Jarvie (2013) have highlighted the meaning of sport as a part of mass culture. “Social change and sports development are related each to the other and, as with industrial societies, the system of sports is following the idea of ‘modernization’,” (Digel, 2013, p. 9).

Sport attracts public interest and influences values that matter not only in sports (Sekot, 2008b). Sport shows people achieving their physical and psychical limits (Jackson, 2013), glorifies winners as heroes (Rahman & Rockwood, 2011; Whannel, 2002), and promotes the ideals of health and fair play (Rowe, 1996). As part of pop culture, sport has a socio-emotional function as well as socialization, integration, political and social mobility functions (Holt, 1981; Stevenson & Nixon, 1972; O’Boyle & Free, 2020). Moreover, Digel (1995) talks about the “sportification” of society. He suggests that society adopts sport’s values and habits in its terminology, fashions, and behaviors (Rowe, 2004). Sportification takes place also in science, e.g., in the form of science competitions such as the Science Slam and the Grand Prix in Science (Carlson, 2019).

From the sociological point of view, sport is a structured, goal-oriented, competitive, ludic, and cultural activity (Delaney & Madigan, 2015; Giulianotti, 2015). In recent times, the ludic, playful aspect has receded in importance as sport is rationalized and professionalized (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). The focus on performance emphasized at the top level of sports, and transferred in terms of so-called professionalism, nowadays dominates the whole of society (Sekot, 2008b).

The benefits of sport in the modern world appear in many ways. On an ideological level, sport connects people from various countries and social groups (Dunning, 1999; Jarvie, 2013). Eco (1987) viewed sport as a “deep area of collective sensibility” (Eco, 1987, p. 160). And as Watkins (2018, p. 2) adds: “Sports still help bring people together, and as globalization increases and more people leave their homes and country in search of opportunity, sports are still an important component of keeping us connected.”

Sport has often had an integrative impact on the political sphere (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Kunz, 2018). Furthermore, sports events have substituted for war in many instances (Dunning, 1999; Levermore,

2008).⁹ Jarvie (2013) argues that sport has had an impact on the protection of human rights. There is pressure for equal opportunities for all genders, despite the traditional hegemony that masculinity still maintains in certain areas of sport (cf. Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Tejkalová & Křišťoufek, 2019; Seippel, 2006). Sekot (2011, p. 175, transl. KT) observes: “Today, however, we can see that sport in many cases contributes to the emancipation process, particularly in developing countries.” Sport can be a distraction or a healer; hence it diverts attention from tragedies, as evidenced on September 11, 2011 (Mirabito & Hardin, 2021) or during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (Krieger et al., 2021).

Levermore (2008) has stated that sport can be an efficient tool in the process of improving physical and mental health. Sport also contributes to economic growth (Rowe, 2004; Sekot, 2017). Bill Clinton, the former U.S. President, has suggested that “football does more for poverty in poor nations than almost any other intervention” (Jarvie, 2013, p. 17). An important sports event can improve the economic situation within the host country. Some of the benefits result from sporting event tourism. This type of tourism can be motivated by the desire to watch or attend a sports event, the chance to meet sports celebrities, and the opportunity to visit the place of a famous sporting event (Roche et al., 2013). At the individual level, successful sports careers help athletes from developing countries or first-world slums to escape from a “poverty lockdown” (Jarvie, 2013).

On the other hand, the influence of sport is not always positive (Anderson & White, 2017; O’Boyle & Free, 2020). Sport also has negative effects, e.g., health problems, violence, criminality, social and economic disparities, corruption, and the breaking of ethical and other rules. Sport can be a powerful tool for enforcing dictatorship, fascism, Nazism, or extreme nationalism. Still, sport can also help with solving those problems (cf. Gems. 2021; Jarvie, 2013; O’Boyle & Free, 2020; Sekot, 2008b).

Society and sport are changing. Boyle and Haynes (2009) and Sekot (2008b) emphasized the rise of the commercialization of sport. It is obvious that professional sport has increased in public interest while it has sought the attention of the media and commercial sponsors. (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Sekot, 2008b). The mass media pay enormous amounts of money for broadcasting rights and private companies are promoted by sports teams

9 An example of sports-related initiatives which contribute to the possible appeasement is the summer soccer tour of FC Barcelona called “The Peace Tour”. The purpose of this initiative is to build the conditions for peaceful dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis through one of the most popular sports in the world – soccer (Kunz, 2018).

and athletes (O’Boyle & Free, 2020; Sekot, 2008b). Boyle and Haynes (2009) noted that television, sport, and sponsorship create a sort of “sporting triangle” where interconnected entities influence each other.

Digel (2013) highlighted the importance of social networks in the present era and deemed sport to be one of the essential social networks. Social media has enabled sports-related information to disseminate widely in society and has influenced journalists’ routines (Bossio, 2017; Boyle & Haynes, 2002; Hutchins, 2011). The medialization of sport has led to the rise of a new, coherent social group—sports consumers and sports fans (Digel, 2013; Slepíčková, 2014). Sports fans from various cultural, economic, language and political backgrounds can each have a similar kind of experience in real time (Rowe, 2004). With their shared experiences, fans of a particular sport or athlete often become a large and extremely loyal group (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wenner, 1989b). Sport can even be viewed as a substitute for religion, where the media have the power to lift an athlete to a “godlike” level.¹⁰ The adoration of sports celebrities takes the place of religious rituals (Beck & Bosshart, 2003; Higgs, 1995; Sekot, 2008b).

Jackson (2013) notes that sport is an important form of promotional communication within society. The aforementioned commodification and commercialization of sport only increased in the 20th century (Orlowski et al., 2017). Since the beginning of the new millennium, some contend that sport is being “corrupted” by the (over) commercialization of sport across the world (Nicholson et al., 2015; Simmon, 2004).¹¹ As sponsors took priority over fans, sports communication began to lose its authenticity (L’Etang, 2013). Besides the “classic,” mainstream sports, special events such as the Olympic Games have long had promotional potential (Barney et al., 2002; Fullerton & Mertz, 2008; Rahman & Lockwood, 2011). Beck and Bosshart (2003, p. 22) stated that “the history of the modern Olympic Games has become a history of Olympic commercialism.” The rise of commercialization has occurred not only in landscape of professional sports, but also in amateur sports, such as college leagues (cf. Kunz, 2018; Schneider, 2010; Staurowsky, 2004).

Despite all the above, sport is still largely considered a marginal, even unnecessary, part of the social spectrum. That opinion applies to perfor-

10 One example of this was the glorification of the Czech ice hockey goalkeeper Dominik Hašek after the Czech ice hockey team unexpectedly triumphed at the Nagano Olympic games in 1998 (Děkanovský, 2008).

11 Whitson et al. (2004) pointed out that the tendency to commercialize sport wholesale began to appear in America around 1980s. Europe followed later on.

mances by elite athletes, sports teams, and sports organizations as well (O’Boyle & Free, 2020; Slepíčková, 2014). Based on the findings in the literature, as well as her own research, the author disagrees.

Major sporting events such as the Olympic Games attract large audiences and many sponsors, and receive pervasive, worldwide media coverage (Billings, 2008; Delaney & Madigan, 2015; O’Boyle & Free, 2020). “To ignore sport is to overlook a phenomenon that extends into a multitude of social arenas, including the arts, mass media, the economy, the community, and international diplomacy,” (Delaney & Madigan, 2015, p. 3).

1.1.2 Sport, Communication, and Media

Media and sport are mutually linked. They have a complementary relationship, influence each other and are often referred to as the “sports/media complex” (Jhally, 1989), “mediasport” (Wenner, 1998), or “media/sport production complex” (Rowe, 2013). The increasing popularity of sports depends on the development of communication technologies, and the growth of sports communication is influenced by technological advances (Carvalho, 2021; Cornwell, 2020; McDaniel & Sullivan, 1998). New technologies have always found their way into the sports field (Bernstein & Blain, 2002; Hancherick, 2011).

As Pedersen et al. (2021, p. 84) put it: “Sport communication is a process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavor share symbols as they create meaning through interaction.” The dominant media for sports communication has changed over time (Nicholson et al., 2015). The first medium that regularly covered sports was the written press. The sports pages both reported and promoted the results of sporting events and were enormously popular among readers (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). Beck and Bosshart (2003) suggest that reports published periodically by sports clubs and associations followed the traditional style of sports press coverage. The position of the written press is unique in the present era; the broadcast media have to pay sports organizations for the rights to cover games. All forms of media now have a reciprocal relationship with athletes and sports entities (Pedersen et al., 2021; Wenner, 1989a).

In the so-called “Golden Age of Sport” in the 1920s, radio broadcasts of sporting events became popular and complemented the established print media in reporting on sports (Hancherick, 2011; Nicholson et al.,

2015). The radio allowed fans to enjoy the drama of sport events in real time. Besides broadcasting games live, the radio interview became a popular genre. The audience now had a chance to hear the immediate emotions in the athlete's voice and intonation (Beck & Bosshart, 2003; Carvalho, 2021).

The range of sports media communication channels remained unchanged until the late 1950s, when the network "television boom" began (Carvalho, 2021; Pedersen et al., 2021). The advent of television broadcasting brought the audience an impressive combination of visual information and sound, which gave viewers the feeling of being "on the field" with their favorite athletes (Beck & Bosshart, 2003; Rowe, 2004). The popularity of radio broadcasts decreased (Hancherick, 2011). "The phenomenon of mass consumerism of televised sport has created a much different feel for sport than in the past," (Rinehart, 1994, p. 25). Due to televised images of young, fit, and attractive athletes, the popularity of sports increased. "The 'ménage à trois'—i.e. sports, media, and advertising—produced a highly marketable service: showbusiness," (Beck & Bosshart, 2003, p. 10). Pedersen et al. (2021) pointed out the expansion of televised sports in the 1970s and 1980s, which was a direct result of cable television and specialized sports channels.

Television dominated sports media communication until the 1990s, when the Internet entered people's everyday lives (cf. Hardin, 2014; Rowe, 2013). The two main advantages of the World Wide Web for the public are immediacy and content control (Hancherick, 2011; Hipke & Hachtmann, 2014; McDaniel & Sullivan, 1998). Those qualities make the Internet extremely beneficial to sports fans, athletes, and sports organizations. The turbulent rise of the Internet is continuing. Alongside the classic websites, discussion forums and blogs have been set up. The public is especially eager to follow the sports news on the Internet during mega-events like the Olympic games (Beck & Bosshart, 2003; Brown et al., 2020; Burch et al., 2012; Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014).¹²

Another form of Internet communication takes place on social media. In the broad sense, social media consists of various Web 2.0 forms: "blogs, forums, message boards, online sites to share video and pictures, wikis, user-generated sites, and podcasts" (Pegoraro, 2010, p. 502). Fuchs (2017) noted that social media support communication, collaboration,

12 The 2012 London Summer Olympic Games were called the "Twitter Olympics" because social media users published a record number of tweets during this event. The number was even higher during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games (Hambrick & Pegoraro, 2014).

content sharing, and building virtual communities. In the present era, they have a greater impact and userbase. Facebook, Twitter,¹³ Instagram, and YouTube are examples of such modern social media (Watkins, 2018).

Nowadays, sports communication is undergoing a process of metamorphosis (Cornwell, 2013; Cornwell, 2020). The nature of new technologies dismantles physical barriers and helps mediate and enrich sports fans' experiences (Gantz; 2011; McDaniel & Sullivan, 1998; Pegoraro, 2010). Social networks allow social interaction that is lacking during the consumption of traditional media (Cornwell, 2013). "Social media have enabled new kinds of connection between new kinds of users" (Meikle, 2016, p. x). These channels combine both public and personal communication; the public media and personal communication now converge (Meikle, 2016). Almost every sports entity has at least one public social media account (McKelvey & Masteralexis, 2011).

This shift in media usage has influenced the work of sports journalists. They have access to many sources of information and their task is to verify them and create the cross-platform media content as quickly as possible (Bossio, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2021). The daily routines of mediasport consumers have also changed (Rowe, 2004; Smith & Stewart, 2015). People rely more and more on mobile phones and other technologies that allow them to extend the time they spend on social media (Meikle, 2016; Lietsala & Sirkkunen, 2008; Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). Viewing live video feeds and following real-time information have become commonplace (Clavio et al., 2013). Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012, p. 86) say that Facebook is "the easiest tool for establishing a branding strategy" in the sports world, whereas Twitter is "the most effective at fostering the direct fan – sport relationship because of its immediacy, intimacy, and interactivity." Facebook enables sports entities to build a community and share new information. Cross-posting between Facebook and Instagram is also possible (Smith & Stewart, 2015).

1.1.3 The Development of Sports Fandom

Sports and sporting events have attracted public attention since ancient times (Sekot, 2008b). The current form of sports fandom (a word derived from the word kingdom, in the sense of as a space where people with

¹³ The author uses the term Twitter in the whole book, not X, because it was rebranded after the data were collected and analyzed (Hardy et al., 2024).

common interests spend time and develop empathy and camaraderie with each other) began to emerge in the late 19th century. The values and conditions of sports fandom evolved over time (Tarver, 2017). In the sports fandom, fans are not just spectators (cf. Allison & Knoester, 2021; Wann et al., 2001; Wenner, 1998); they both “care about” and “practice in relation” to a sport or team (Tarver, 2017, p. 21). Lopez and Lopez (2017) argue that sports fans often participate in an “oppositional fandom,” which means that their position is defined by their opposition to another group of fans supporting another sport, team, or athlete. Related attributes, such as rivalry and a desire to defeat others, are also ascribed to sports fans by Mastromartino et al. (2018). Watkins (2018) noted that in order to understand sports fandom, it is necessary to reflect both—fans’ and athletes’—perspectives.

Dixon (2016) stated that many authors who examine sports fandom distinguish between traditional and new types of fans. So-called “traditional” or “genuine” fans are defined as sports consumers who are intensely devoted to and interested in a sport or a sports-related event, whereas the “new” forms of fandom are strongly influenced by commercialism and commodification, with fans perceiving sports as a kind of entertainment (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Crawford, 2004; Dixon, 2016). These “new” fans are more attracted by success than by traditional sport or team values (Dixon, 2016). The traditional form of fandom was also more determined by the fans’ geographic location, something which is less important in the era of the Internet and social media (Tarver, 2017; Watkins, 2018).

Sports fans consciously identify with their favorite teams and athletes, who often become their role models and even their idols (Tarver, 2017; Hayes et al., 2019; Pegoraro, 2010). Social media give athletes opportunities to reveal pieces of their personal lives, unique stories, and their happy moments in an authentic way. They help fans to experience and understand the feelings and thoughts of their idols in depth (Billings, 2011; Pedersen et al., 2021). The new media enable more personalized experiences that are the key components of contemporary sports fandom (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Dixon, 2016).

“The number of sports fans using social media continues to grow,” (Bowman & Cranmer, 2014, p. 214). It is predicted that the motivation for consumers to engage with sports content on social media will rise with the continuous development of social media, as has already happened in the case of eSport video game competitions. Sports fans are attracted by the ability to share their opinions and interact on social

media with athletes and with each other before, during, and after an event (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018; Brown et al., 2018). The use of a second device while watching sports events on television is called second screen watching, which mainly takes place through mobile devices. Sports entities have adapted to the fans' behavior, for example, by creating specialized hashtags or social media competitions conducted during the events (Pedersen et al., 2021).

Despite some differences, all types of sports fandoms involve a degree of repetitive practice (Tarver, 2017, p. 11). The community experience, previously determined by a similar geographical location, now exists in the new, virtual form of fandom as well. Sports fans share their opinions and feelings in groups or community chats on social media. Fans can communicate in real time with their counterparts regardless of their location and time zone (cf. Haugh & Watkins, 2016).

The results of the studies of the phenomenon that have been conducted suggest that there are gender differences in fans' behavior, in both the offline and online environments. In general, men are more likely to identify themselves as more avid sports fans than women and non-binary individuals (Allison & Knoester, 2021). Male fans tend to react sharply, aggressively, and more negatively to setbacks than women, while female fans commonly support their favorite teams or athletes even if they lose (cf. Babac & Podobnik, 2016; Wenner, 1998).

The aforementioned facts specifically reflect the case of adult fans. Children's sports fandom is usually influenced by their parents' preferences and behavior, in which the father typically plays a dominant role. Sport can be the connecting element in a family such as when the family members visit or watch a sports event together and support the same team or individual athlete (Tamir, 2020). Contrarily, the conflict in fandom between family members, most often between father and son, can even jeopardize family relationships (Tamir, 2019).

To sum up, fandom and the fans themselves are the key elements that give importance and power to the sport. Sports fandom does not disappear in the course of people's lives, even if the form and level can change (Tamir, 2020). The relationship between sport and sports teams or individual athletes can contribute to building relationships between the teams' or athletes' fans and the sponsors or partners (Watkins, 2018).

1.1.4 Sports Communication Goes Commercial

It is clear that the commercialization of sport via social media, along with sports communication as a whole, is a topic of current interest. Although the phenomenon of commercialization has been recognized for many years (cf. Bourdieu, 1996; Cornwell, 2020; Watkins, 2018), it is now a crucial, fundamental part of mediasport practice and an active area of academic research. Real (1998) mentioned that the technologies that enable the commercialization of modern sport leads to conflict: the traditional ideals of sport are overshadowed by the culture of consumerism. Real (1998) talked about this in relation to TV productions, but in recent times it is also occurring in the new media, social media included (McDaniel & Sullivan, 1998; Hutchins, 2014). Nowadays, social media are no longer used only to establish and maintain personal contacts but also for offering and selling products and services using new techniques (Watkins, 2018). Kotler et al. (2017) compare social media content to advertising messages.

The monetization of sport has also increased since the beginning of the new millennium (Cornwell, 2013; Cornwell, 2020), although sports advertisements had already appeared by the end of the 19th century in the press (Peterson, 2021). Cornwell (2020) pointed out that gate revenues are decreasing as revenue from media and marketing rights is increasing. Additionally, athletes themselves can build a huge social media community of followers that attract sponsors and commercial partners (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012; Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012).

These trends are not appearing only in mainstream sports. In the last two decades, commercialization has come to influence sports disciplines that have traditionally been labeled as alternative, “adrenaline,” or extreme, like BMX, rock climbing, windsurfing, and wake-, skate-, and snowboarding (Edwards & Corte, 2010; Wheaton, 2004). Wheaton (2004) commented that alternative sports athletes nowadays are less critical of sponsorship and professionalism than they had been. Athletes promote marketable brands, and they are quite willing to “sell out” in exchange for financial compensation (Orlowski et al., 2017). Crompton (2014) warned athletes against the risk to their reputation that arises from the promotion of controversial products, e.g., tobacco, alcohol, and gambling. The connection of professional athletes with fast-food companies is also becoming unfashionable and may even be judged unethical (Crompton, 2014).

As Walsh et al. (2013) have mentioned, social media such as Facebook or Twitter allow their users immediate interaction with content. Those platforms are crucial channels for sports communication and building athletes' personal brands (cf. Fuchs, 2017). Arai et al. (2014, p. 98) have defined "the athletes' brand" as the "public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face, or other brand elements in the market."

Celebrity athletes' pages and profiles are among the most followed and most "liked" accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram worldwide, as well as in the Czech context (Socialbakers, 2020; Trackanalytics, 2020). According to Socialbakers' statistics in the period relevant to the conducted research (March 27, 2020), soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo had the largest worldwide audience in the celebrity category on Facebook, and another soccer player, Lionel Messi, took fourth place. The Czech top celebrity on Facebook is the soccer player Petr Čech; ice hockey player Jaromír Jágr (6th) and bodybuilder Tomáš Klíč (8th) are both in the "Top 10." Ronaldo is the fifth most followed celebrity on Twitter worldwide. Amongst the Czech audience, the first five places in the Twitter celebrity category are occupied by athletes (soccer player Petr Čech, tennis player Petra Kvitová, tennis player Tomáš Berdych, soccer player Tomáš Ujfaluši, and ice hockey player Jaromír Jágr) (Socialbakers, 2020).

1.2 Sports Communication from the Marketing Point of View

1.2.1 Sports Public Relations

Sport has gradually become one of the world's major businesses, while preserving its character as entertainment (L'Etang, 2013). Increasing attention is being paid to the area of sports public relations (PR). PR involves a systemic management function as well as communication (Stoldt et al., 2012). More specifically: "Sports public relations is related to both marketing and advertising in that its goal is to generate awareness of an organization's product," (Pedersen et al., 2021, p. 34). The motto once proposed for the Olympics by Baron Pierre de Coubertin—"Citius, Altius, Fortius" (faster, higher, stronger)—is slowly clearing the way for a new, more updated motto: "Faster, higher, stronger, bigger (business), and especially – more PR," (Tamir et al., 2015). Generally, no sports entity can afford not to do PR nowadays (Beech & Chadwick, 2007).

Sports PR operates in what L'Etang describes as two closely interconnected areas: the "sportscape" and the "mediascape" (L'Etang, 2013). The sportscape can be defined as the environment or conditions in which sporting events take place (L'Etang, 2013; Wakefield et al., 1996). In sports, the "mediascape" refers to the presence of sports, teams, and athletes in the media, as well as in other publicly available content such as promotional and advertising materials (Gamache, 2010; L'Etang, 2013).

In the modern world, advertising is not enough by itself; PR skills are required as well (Göksel & Serarslan, 2015; L'Etang, 2013; Tamir et al., 2015). Public relations are practiced by multiple actors and institutions in the sports field (Beech & Chadwick, 2007; Tamir et al., 2015). They include: "countries, local authorities and municipalities, political parties, politicians, owners and investors, clubs and teams, athletes, sports agents, mass media, sports advancement organizations, sponsors, advertisers, coaches, referees, sports officials, athletes unions, fan organizations, gambling companies, health product manufacturers, service providers, electronics companies (including computer and content manufacturers), stores, the police and emergency services, merchandise manufacturers, sports memorabilia collectors, artists (primarily singers), universities and colleges, and various one-time interest groups." (Tamir et al., 2015, p. 99). Sports PR professionals focus on traditional media, website management, social media content, organization of special events, fundraising, planning of promotions, and marketing sports (Isaacson, 2010; Nicholson et al., 2015; Tamir et al., 2015). The experts in sports PR are no longer just statisticians and information providers; they also create the public image of the sports entities through their presentation directly to the audience (Pedersen et al., 2021).

Whereas sports public relations include the various activities mentioned above, sports PR teams often employ specialists in specific areas. For example, social media PR representatives in sports organizations have to plan corporate communication, determine the language used in social media channels, and evaluate and measure social media activity on their official social media accounts, pages, and profiles (Tamir et al., 2015; Watkins & Lewis, 2014). They must also monitor the fulfillment of sponsorship agreements (e.g., the number of posts athletes make that mention their sponsors). Maintaining relations with sponsors and their partners has recently become crucial for athletes (Göksel & Serarslan, 2015; Tamir et al., 2015). Accordingly, a clear community relations structure is necessary for most professional sports teams and organizations. The community relations managers usually prepare and monitor the PR

activities plan, which the PR directors should approve of (Pedersen et al., 2021).

Sports organizations and individual athletes build their public images with their sporting results and their media outputs (Brown & Isaacson, 2017). “Besides attending games in person, sports fans use a wide variety of media including print, broadcast, the Internet, and mobile phones to keep up with their favorite teams and individual players” (Phua, 2010, p. 190). Even when an athlete cannot find space in the mass media or has lost trust in journalists, he or she can publish statements on social media platforms. They can control the content and form of the information they provide (cf. Bossio, 2017; L’Etang, 2013; Stoldt et al., 2012). Additionally, social media enables sports entities to receive direct feedback from their audiences concerning their image or the products and services they promote (Göksel & Serarslan, 2015).

Sports entities must keep ethical values in mind (Simmon, 2004). Even though the money “matters” and allows sports organizations and athletes to survive and even prosper, audiences and fans should not be manipulated or cheated by promotional materials (Bjelica et al., 2016). Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) have warned against over-commercialization in the way sports social media pages are used for promotional and commercial purposes. Commercialization places more emphasis on the secondary “off the field” monetary aspects of sport than on its “on the field” aspects (Wagg et al., 2009). Another issue is “abusing” sport with politics. For example, some political leaders attend sports events primarily to be seen by journalists and bolster their image in the public eye (Șerbănică & Constantinescu, 2016). Jackson (2013) has argued that it is essential for researchers to continue exploring PR, promotional, and commercial sports communication, and related trends.

1.2.2 Sports Marketing and the Shift to Social Media

As mentioned above, sport nowadays is closely connected not only to society and the media, but also to the marketing industry (Devlin, 2017; Jackson et al., 2005; Jhally, 1989). “Sport utilizes advertising to promote its product while simultaneously offering an extension for other commodities to market themselves,” (Devlin, 2017, p. 312). The contemporary sports industry derives income from commercial sources, such as advertising (Cornwell, 2020; Ferrand & McCarthy, 2008; Jackson, 2013). Fullerton and Mertz (2008) defined four strategies used in

sports marketing to make money: traditional sponsoring, venue naming rights, endorsements, and licensing agreements. Obviously, it is not only sports-related products that can be and are promoted through sport. Strategies for attracting the attention of sports fans to non-sports-related products or services have long been successful (Fullerton & Mertz, 2008; Lagae, 2005; Mullin et al., 2007).

Promotions and advertising can be done directly “in the field” through traditional media (press, radio, television, stadium billboards), and now, online and in social media (Devlin, 2017). The role of the traditional media in marketing is to deliver promotional messages along with reporting of sporting events, while social media marketing builds two-way relationships with the audience (Drury, 2008). Besides the traditional techniques, social media offer “increased interaction, communication, and collaboration between organizations and individuals,” (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015, p. 63). Posts on social media vary in format from texts, photos, and MP3s to video (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Participation on the interactive platforms is mostly free of charge, which allows every sports entity, including individual athletes and NGOs, to communicate and promote themselves and their partners and sponsors with minimal cost (Johns, 2015; Pegoraro, 2010).

Sports marketing today relies on sophisticated, intensive, and fast communication. As a result, more person-driven forms of marketing have been incorporated into sports marketing and, especially in conjunction with social media, work well. One of them is celebrity marketing; hence well-known athletes “endorse products to transfer the positive image of the celebrity to the sponsor’s brand and ultimately to heighten purchase intention, which is expected to translate into action,” (Fink et al., 2020, p. 149). Thus, the connection between the celebrity athlete and the particular brand is beneficial for both partners: the athlete can gain more fans and be in the public eye due to the sponsor, and the company can profit from the athlete’s image and promotional activity (Fink et al., 2020; Mikuláš, 2020).

In case of long-term and successful collaboration between the athlete and company, the athlete can become the brand ambassador and help the brand attain higher profits (Kitchen, 2008; Novak, 2021). Brand ambassadors are hired by companies for various purposes, such as introducing new products and services of the brand, promoting the brand itself, attracting a new target group, or improving the image of the brand (Novak, 2021).

Vážení čtenáři, právě jste dočetli ukázkou z knihy ***Sports Communication on Social Media and Audience Reactions***.

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