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Faculty of Sport, University „ Union - Nikola Tesla“, Belgrade**

SPORT MEDIJI I BIZNIS

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Recreational Sports and Lifestyle: Sport as a Way of Life

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT TRENDS OF THE WTA TOP 100 TENNIS PLAYERS

Dejan Žličar¹, Petar Barbaros², Tomislav Hublin³

Abstract: The aim of this paper was to compare patterns of entry into the professional women's tennis rankings through the age at which the first WTA point is earned, the time required to first break into the world's top 100, and the relationship of these indicators with career-high ranking. The analysis was conducted on samples from the year-end rankings for 2023 and 2024, including the top 100 players. Descriptive statistics were applied, along with Pearson's correlation between the age at first point and career-high ranking.

The results show that the average age at which the world's leading female players earn their first point is between 15 and 16 years. Some players earn points immediately after turning 14, as soon as regulations allow, while others earn their first points after age 17. The average time from earning the first point to entering the top 100 is between 5.1 and 5.5 years.

Keywords: tennis, female players career development, ranking, WTA points

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Introduction

According to the ITF's 2024 Global Tennis Report, just under 106 million people play tennis at some level across 199 countries, representing a substantial increase from 84.4 million in 2019 (ITF, 2024). Success in professional tennis depends on a combination of physical capacities (strength, agility, endurance), technical skills, tactical thinking, and psychological resilience, with each component contributing meaningfully to overall performance (Kovacs, 2007). The structure of tennis consists of points that typically last between five and eleven seconds on average, varying by playing surface (O'Donoghue & Ingram, 2001; Smekal et al., 2001). Women's tennis is dominated by baseline play, with fewer forays to the net than in the men's game and performance is closely linked to consistency and the reduction of unforced errors (Cui et al., 2018). Female players tend to rely more on longer rallies and strategic shot placement, whereas male players more often finish points with powerful serves and aggressive strokes (O'Donoghue & Ingram, 2001). Elite women's tennis is characterised by longer exchanges, greater movement demands, and a higher premium on defensive skills compared with men's tennis (Crespo et al., 2024). Regarding the key determinants of success in women's tennis, some authors emphasise speed, agility, explosiveness, and upper-body strength as critical motor abilities (Reid & Schneiker, 2008), while others highlight precision and tactical variety as primary factors (Nikolakakis, 2022).

In some of the studies that examined trends based on the rankings Reid et al. (2009) found that 99% of junior top-20 women later earned a professional ranking, indicating strong predictive validity and clay-court development was linked to higher pro rankings. In men, Reid et al. (2007) reported a similar pattern: 91% of junior top-20 players achieved a professional ranking, with mixed clay-hard development outperforming hard-only backgrounds. Modeling women's careers, Kovalchik et al. (2017) showed that higher-peaking players entered the rankings earlier (top-10 first ranked at 15.5 years, 1.2 years younger than peak No. 51–100) and stayed in the top 100 longer (to 29.0 vs. 24.4 years). Reid et al. (2014) identified distinct male ranking trajectories across tiers, with top-10 paths diverging by year two on tour and top-100 players separating from non-top-100 by year four. Gallo-Salazar et al. (2015) observed rising mean ages in the top 100 (men: 24.6 to 27.6; women: 23.5 to 24.8), earlier top-100 entry and peak for women, but slightly longer top-100 tenure for men. Reid and Morris (2013) showed men typically needed 4.5 years from first ATP ranking to reach the top 100 (mean age 21.5), reflecting overlapping junior–pro competition during transition.

Aims

Professional women's tennis has long attracted attention due to the dynamic nature of players' careers and the diversity of factors that contribute to success. Analyzing the top 100 WTA players offers valuable insight into key demographic and career dimensions of the professional game. This study examines players' mean age, the distribution of ages across ranking tiers, and the time required to progress from earning a first WTA point to entering the Top 100. Particular emphasis is placed on the relationship between junior ranking and success at the senior level to identify patterns associated with elite careers. The aim is to discern trends and determinants that shape professional success in women's tennis and to provide guidance for future research and sport development. On this basis, the study sets three objectives – to analyze the demographic characteristics of the top 100 WTA players, including mean age and age distribution and to determine demographic differences across segments of the WTA ranking list; to define the onset of senior careers among elite female players and trends in the acquisition of initial points toward the WTA ranking; and to estimate the time to Top-100 entry from a player's first appearance on the professional ranking list, by analyzing the intervals required to attain a Top-100 position.

Methods

This retrospective observational study analyzed two cross-sectional cohorts comprising the Top-100 players on the WTA year-end singles rankings for 2023 and 2024. Primary analyses were conducted within each cohort; a pooled, de-duplicated summary (retaining the earliest observation for players appearing in both years) was used descriptively. Data were obtained from publicly available sources, including the official WTA rankings pages (year-end singles lists and historical weekly positions) and ITF player profiles (dates of birth; earliest ranking-point information), with tournament records consulted as needed to verify first ranking point and first Top-100 entry dates. Players ranked 1–100 on each official year-end list were eligible; no a priori exclusions were applied. When a specific datum could not be located after reasonable verification, the player remained in the dataset and was coded as missing for that variable.

For each player we recorded date of birth; date of first WTA point (the earliest date yielding entry to the professional ranking); date of first Top-100 entry (the ranking release at which a player first appeared at No. 100 or better); year-end ranking position (1–100) for the cohort year; and career-high ranking (CHR) with its date. Analyses included descriptive statistics (mean, median, SD, IQR, minimum/maximum) for

continuous variables and counts/percentages for categorical or binned variables. Associations between age at first WTA point and CHR were quantified with Pearson's correlation. Latency to Top-100 served as the principal progression metric and is reported in both days and years.

Results and discussion

The average age of the top 100 players on the 2023 year-end WTA ranking is 26.69 years. The average age of the top 10 is 26.01 years, and for the top 50 it is 27.12 years. The list includes six players under 20 years old; 25 aged 20–25, 49 aged 25–30, and 20 aged 30 or older. The mean age of the top 100 players on the 2024 year-end WTA ranking is 26.81 years. The top 10 average 25.90 years, while the top 50 average 26.12 years. Notably, there is only one player under 20 years of age on the list. When comparing age parameters for the top women players in 2023 and 2024, several notable differences emerge. In 2023, there were six players under 20 years of age, whereas in 2024 only one remained. Of the 2023 cohort, Gauff, Nosková, Krueger, and Shnaider turned 20, Fruhvirtová fell outside the Top 100, and only Mirra Andrejeva remained on the list. No new sub-20 player entered the Top 100 in 2024. It is also notable that the number of players aged 20–25 years increased substantially (from 25 in 2023 to 37 in 2024), while those aged 25–30 years decreased (from 49 in 2023 to 41 in 2024). These figures suggest that in 2024 the typical first entry into the Top 100 occurred between 20 and 25 years, while departures from the Top 100 were most common among players aged 25–30 years.

Examining mean age within ranking strata indicates that, although the Top 10 and Top 50 have become slightly younger, within-bin averages have edged upward—implying that age profiles within each group are shifting toward the upper end of their respective ranges, even as more younger players (20–25 years) break into the Top 50. Other age metrics show no major differences between the two years. Finally, the overall mean age increased slightly from 26.69 years (2023) to 26.81 years (2024).

According to the 2023 year-end ranking, the mean age at which players earned their first WTA point was 15.6 years (Table 1). The youngest age at first point was 14.01 years, while the latest was 20.29 years.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for age at first WTA point among the Top 100 players (2023)

Metric	Value
Sample size	100
Mean	15.60
Median	15.48
Minimum	14.01
Maximum	20.29
Standard deviation	1.10

The ten earliest entrants to the ranking list averaged ≈ 14.20 years at first point, with a very narrow spread of 0.44 years (14.01–14.45), i.e., roughly five and a half months. Relative to the full-sample mean (15.60 years), these players reached their first point about 1.4–1.5 years earlier, indicating an accelerated transition through the junior system and an early exposure to professional competition. No player in this subgroup was younger than 14 years, consistent with Age Eligibility regulations restricting professional participation before the 14th birthday. The pattern is not cohort-bound: first points for these players are recorded continuously from 2004 to 2019. The geographic distribution is also instructive. The most represented tennis nations—those with strong development pathways and dense calendars of international events—predominate: the United States ($n=3$), Czech Republic ($n=2$), and Romania ($n=2$), with one player each from Switzerland, Spain, and Ukraine. This distribution suggests environments in which talented juniors obtain early opportunities—via qualifying draws and wild cards—on ITF events around the age of 14.

The mean age of the ten latest entrants to the ranking list is 17.79 years. The range is wide, 16.99 to 20.29 years, spanning 3.30 years. Compared with the full-sample mean (15.6 years), these players earned their first point on average 2.2 years later, suggesting different developmental pathways: a longer stay in juniors, a more gradual transition to ITF events, continued education, and at times contextual factors such as injuries or limited access to domestic ITF tournaments. These data indicate multiple routes to elite tennis. At one end are players who begin earning WTA points very early; at the other are those who remain longer in junior competition. A later first point does not preclude elite outcomes. For athletes and coaches, this implies that combinations of education, targeted selection of ITF tournaments, and a progressive increase in competitive load over a career can still culminate in top-level performance.

To examine the association between age at first WTA point and career-high ranking (CHR; lower values indicate better performance), we calculated Pearson's correlation coefficient. The correlation was $r = 0.203$, indicating a weak positive association. Older age at first point is linked to a worse (numerically higher) CHR. Thus, earlier entry onto the ranking list is slightly associated with a higher peak ranking, but the effect is small and numerous exceptions exist. For example, Elena Rybakina earned her first point at a relatively later age yet went on to win a Grand Slam and attain a prominent WTA ranking. Early point acquisition may signal potential and accelerated development, but it is not determinative of an elite peak. Among the players who finished 2023 inside the Top 100, 34 had, at some point in their careers, reached the Top 10.

Examining the ages at which elite players earn their first WTA point (Table 2) shows that 66 players do so by age 16, and 91 by age 17. This provides a concrete benchmark for career planning in female youth tennis: in practical terms, players aiming for elite pathways should typically begin competing in ITF or WTA events by age 17.

Table 2. Number of players by age at first WTA point (2023 Top-100 cohort)

Age range (years)	Players	Cumulative
14 to 15	37	37
15 to 16	29	66
16 to 17	25	91
17 to 18	7	98
18 to 19	1	99
19 to 20	0	99
20 +	1	100
Total	100	100

One of the primary milestones for any professional tennis player is entry into the world's Top 100. This threshold grants direct acceptance into the strongest events, namely the Grand Slams (main draws of 128) and most Masters 1000 tournaments (typically 96-player main draws). Access to these main draws is crucial for financial stability, facilitating uninterrupted career development, and for earning more ranking points with fewer matches. For these reasons, among others, this study examines the time required for elite female players to progress from earning their first WTA point to first entering the Top 100 (Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for time from first WTA point to first Top-100 entry (2023 Top-100 cohort)

Metric	Value
Sample size	100
Mean (days)	2,078.5 (5.69 years)
Median (days)	1,883 (5.16 years)
Standard deviation (days)	1,045
Minimum (days)	511 (1.40 years; Cori Gauff)
Maximum (days)	4,739 (12.97 years; Viktoriya Tomova)

On average, players required 2,078.5 days (5.69 years) to reach the Top 100 after their first point. The fastest ascent was Cori Gauff in 511 days (1.40 years), while the longest was Viktoriya Tomova at 4,739 days (12.97 years). The median (1,883 days; 5.16 years) lies notably below the mean, indicating a right-skewed distribution: most players break into the Top 100 around 4–5 years after their first point, while a smaller subset with substantially longer pathways pulls the mean upward.

Descriptive indicators for the time from first WTA point to first Top-100 entry based on the 2024 year-end ranking show similar patterns to 2023. The mean interval is 2,010.2 days (5.51 years). The fastest ascent was Caroline Wozniacki in 511 days (1.40 years), while the longest was Nuria Párrizas Díaz at 5,194 days (14.23 years). The median lies well below the mean, indicating a right-skewed distribution: most players reach the Top 100 within 4–5 years of earning their first point, while a smaller subset with substantially longer pathways pulls the mean upward, as in 2023 (Table 4).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for time from first WTA point to first Top-100 entry (2024 Top-100 cohort)

Metric	Value
Sample size	100
Mean (days)	2,010.2 (5.51 years)
Median (days)	1,871 (5.12 years)
Standard deviation (days)	1,017
Minimum (days)	506 (1.39 years)
Maximum (days)	5,194 (14.23 years)

Comparing the 2023 and 2024 year-end lists indicates no substantive differences; the patterns are highly similar. Most elite players require relatively little time to progress from their first WTA point to a first Top-100 entry, with the minimum observed interval just over 1.5 years in exceptionally rapid cases. The most common timeframe is 4–5 years, which can be regarded as the optimal window for achieving this milestone. Notably, late-maturation cases also recur—instances in which players do not enter the Top 100 until more than 12 years after earning their first point.

Conclusion

This study provides a practical picture of when, and how quickly, successful female players enter the professional points system and how long it typically takes to reach the Top 100 for the first time. Entry onto the ranking list most often occurs in the mid-teen years, while the pathway to the Top 100 varies widely, from very rapid ascents to trajectories that culminate later in a player's career. Across two consecutive seasons, the findings are stable. The mean age at first WTA point clusters around 15.6–15.8 years, with a very tight band among the youngest decile (14.2 years), reinforcing that ages 14–17 constitute the standard window for initial transition to senior competition. At the same time, a slower pathway also exists, with some players earning their first point later.

Regarding the speed of progression, the median interval from first point to first Top-100 entry is about 1,871 days (5.1 years), and the mean is about 2,010 days (5.5 years). The range is wide: some players break into the Top 100 within two years, whereas others build their careers over 10+ years. These benchmarks can guide coaches and athletes in calibrating expectations relative to individual maturation rates. The association between age at first point and career-high ranking is present but weak: an earlier first point modestly signals potential and a faster transition, yet it does not determine ultimate success. In practice, health, continuity of competition, thoughtful tournament scheduling, surface adaptation, and a stable support team are likely decisive for peak outcomes.

Practical implications are twofold. First, create conditions for talented players to access appropriately tiered ITF—and, where suitable, WTA—events around ages 14–16. Second, maintain patience for later-maturing athletes by emphasizing high-quality training, injury prevention, academic balance, and progressive competitive loading.

While the results offer a consistent and practically useful picture of pathways to elite outcomes, several limitations warrant note. First, the analysis is restricted to players

who successfully navigated selection pressures and reached elite status (Top 100), introducing survivorship/selection bias; results may not generalize to players with lower peak rankings or those who exited the pathway earlier. Second, the study spans two adjacent year-end lists, with substantial player overlap, which likely attenuates between-year differences and limits sensitivity to short-term change.

Future work should broaden the sampling frame to include athletes outside the Top 100, enabling comparisons across the full performance spectrum; extend the temporal horizon by incorporating additional year-end lists; and consider covariates such as injury history, competition load, surface exposure, and federation resources to better explain heterogeneity in developmental trajectories.

Conflict of interests:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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WHAT HAS NIKE DONE WITH THE BATON OF STEREOTYPES IN THE MEDIA

Paula Čatipović¹

Abstract: The paper analyzes ways in which women are portrayed in the sports advertisement "Nike: What will they say about you?" and how that relates to stereotypes and representation of women in a broader sociological context. This is achieved by considering social trends through the prism of commodification and contemporary consumerism. For this purpose, the qualitative method of narrative analysis was used. Thus, the paper explores advertising segments in detail through linguistic, visual, and symbolic categories, which are then interpreted within the social discourse and gender and religious stereotypes. Women portrayed in said commercial are shown in different sports, situations, and conditions that require a lot of sacrifice, while the female appearance, in this case, is not the subject of attention. This discourse is therefore, in the context in which it is analyzed, an example of a refreshingly positive media advertising practice.

Keywords: media representation, sports, narrative analysis, advertising

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Introduction

“Stereotyping involves the representation and evaluation of others in ways that ratify and endorse unequal social relations” (Pickering, 2015: 1). The relay race of stereotypes, whose bearers are all those who allow themselves to be drawn into this obscure race, can thus be very dangerous, thanks to those who pass on the “baton.” In addition to individuals, various institutions, and many social and interest groups, the actors who often engage in this action are precisely the media, and public opinion influencers are known to rely on social trends and stereotypes through commercials (Jung, 1973). By taking into consideration fundamental questions, concepts, and context tied to advertisements in contemporary society, this paper analyzes the rejection of gender and religious stereotypes in the “Nike: What will they say about you?” commercial from 2017. Gender stereotypes are defined, by Casad and Wexler (2017: 755), as overgeneralized beliefs about the characteristics that are based exclusively on gender, without considering the actual differences between gender groups. On the topic of religious stereotypes, Warren (2018) points out that Islamophobia is now a widely reported social phenomenon, as Runnymede (a leading British think tank for racial equality) defines it as anti-Muslim racism. What does this mean? It is about religious-based hostility and discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, which is a prominent political issue (Warren, 2018). While considering these definitions, the paper also theorizes the concepts of advertising and its narrative elements as a prerequisite for purposeful polemics on the questions of capitalism, commodification, and consumerism. Because of this, and for the purpose of analyzing gender and religious stereotypes in the advertisement “Nike: What will they say about you?”, narrative analysis was chosen as the most suitable research method. It is a qualitative method that enables the researcher to investigate the cause-and-effect relationship of events in a story (Ospina and Dodge, 2005).

Theoretical framework

Capitalism, commodification, and consumerism

According to Barnard (1995), the word “advertisement” comes from the Latin *adverto* and *advertere*. The author suggests that the root of the word is related to “turn” or “turning to something”, thus incorporating the idea of directing attention into the very essence of the word (Barnard, 1995: 27). Stolac and Vlastelić (2014: 15)

define advertising as "a complex semiotic sign that promotes the value of a product; media content whose purpose is to inform potential buyers about products or services; information; selling a dream; ubiquitous business." The persuasive effects of advertising are very well known and highlighted to the public (Jung, 1973; Cook, 2001; Baudrillard, 2005; Hromadžić, 2014), as they are inherently tied to the social circumstances we live in, and, as Walsh (2013) explains it, commodification is inevitable under capitalism, as it is part of its logic. One example of deconstructing this phenomenon is given by Bilić in *Sociology of Media* (2020), when, under the auspices of capitalism, he explains the increasing influence of electronic media owned by powerful companies that reduce the space for rational debate (2020: 39). Speaking of the prerequisites for the creation of modern society and the rise of capitalism as the dominant mode of economic organization, he explains "the creation of a fragmented cultural field in which different actors struggle for public visibility and authority (Bilić, 2020: 69)." Jung (1973) argues that, if a man who wants to influence public opinion misuses symbols for this purpose, while they may affect the masses if true, whether they will have an emotional effect on the unconscious of these masses cannot be calculated in advance, because it is essentially irrational. Attempts to influence public opinion by means of newspapers, radio, television, and advertising are based on two factors. On the one hand, they rely on techniques that reveal trends in collective attitudes, and on the other, they express the prejudices, projections, and unconscious complexes of the author (*ibid.*). Walsh (2013) goes on to explain commodification as a process of transformation of goods into products that become marketable and widely available. Afterwards, he sets a question of how far the market can, or should, go and interfere in other aspects of life. Therefore, in the context of this paper, the concept of commodifying female presence in advertising is imposed. Hromadžić (2014) speaks of women's appearance as a subject of increasing social attention, while Urla and Swedlund (2002: 24, cit. according to Hromadžić, 2014: 85) explain the logic behind female bodies becoming advertising goods on the capitalist market, as it is desirable for mass communication to be widely understandable (Vrebić and Kesegić, 2014: 51) and attention-catching. Clearly, the issue of ubiquitous consumerism arises here, the importance of which can be emphasized by framing it in the signifier of "consumerism as a way of life" versus "consumption as an act" (Žakman-Ban and Špehar Fiškuš, 2016). There is also the theory of cultivation and the thesis that media producers homogenize meanings (Ng, Chow, and Yang, 2021), which is especially highlighted in the commercial environment of media systems, as Bilić (2020: 58) points out information as being key in the production processes of the new technological paradigm. The media are thus in a direct relationship with cultural change in information societies and symbolic flows, and "the Internet is becoming an increasingly important part of the networked commu-

nication structure" (*ibid.*). That is precisely why an Internet commercial served as the unit of analysis in this paper, even though its capitalist patterns will have proven to be politically much more resistant to commodifying femininity, rather focusing on sports products and emancipation. But before moving on to the analysis itself, it is necessary to break down the elements of the narrative that will be studied in the rest of the paper. Also, the principle on which narration is deconstructed needs to be understood, as all narratives have some basic elements in common, which is to be further explained in the following section.

Narration

Solar (1997) lists five basic stages of action in storytelling. In this sense, the exposition is described as an introduction, followed by a dynamic-based plot, or often some sort of contradiction. The climax is the moment when the tension is at its peak and must be resolved. The turning point/peripetia occurs when the plot moves in a certain direction and eventually ends with a denouement as a resolution (1997: 238-239). The author explains both sequencing and gradation in storytelling, arguing that sequencing is primarily related to the stringing of motives, that is, sequencing events in a chronological order (1997: 192), while gradation is explained as a small, almost imperceptible, change that can still add details (1997: 196). Characters are also a very important component of the narrative, which can be related to advertising tendencies in terms of target groups, who are then offered the possibility of identification with the characters. "Characters offer us the possibility of identification, but also of refusing to identify with them, they evoke feelings of sympathies and antipathies, love and hatred, fun and boredom" (Grdešić, 2015: 61). Regarding media storytelling itself, Osmančević and Car (2017: 8) emphasize that communication today is almost impossible to imagine without the mass media. "They help shape up our personality, our attitudes and values, even when they indoctrinate, misinform, or mislead us" (Osmančević and Car, 2017: 8). Media narratives thus guide decision-making processes through framing (Entman, 1991), and for narrative analysis as a method to be successful, it is crucial to distinguish the elements that will be observed within media storytelling. Accordingly, the categories that stood out in the advertisement "Nike: What will they say about you?" from 2017 include women's inhibitions, success, independence, and emancipation, as well as women's physical qualifications through the presentation of the role of sports, which are now to be explained in more detail. The reason why "Nike: What will they say about you?" commercial, in particular, was chosen for analysis is because it addresses several important aspects in just a bit more than one minute. It deals with the subject of women's freedom, athleticism, individuality, religion, and stereotypes. Also, the YouTube platform, where it is published, seemed most suitable for commercial

analysis because of the platform's interactive element and the popularity of the media. Therefore, said commercial was picked out for narrative analysis as an example of positive media portrayal.

Inhibition of women as a media narrative

Muslim women are often portrayed as oppressed women who require some sort of salvation, and the media seem to be an indispensable component in this narrative construction of *weak* women (Alsultany, 2012). Tuchman (2000) notes that lots of media portray women in general in traditional roles, as homemakers or mothers, or doing some "pink-collar" jobs. He argues that there is a lack of focus on depictions of strong female characters, encouraging education or training. Instead, women are defined in terms of their relationships with men, needing guidance. Newer research (Santonnicolo, Trombetta, Paradiso, and Rollè, 2023) seems to agree that stereotyping, objectifying, and sexualizing representations are still very common across several contexts and appear to strengthen beliefs in gender stereotypes and endorsement of gender role norms, fostering sexism, harassment, and violence in men and stifling career ambitions in women. Bali, Omer, Abdulridha, and Ahmad (2021) claim that their research had shown how most Arab women were afraid to post their picture on social media when given this task, and only about one-third (490/1312, 37.3%) ended up doing it. On the other hand, internet platforms can be seen as a way of accumulating power and empowerment in general. "The events of the Arab Spring empowered men and women activists to express their dissatisfaction with the social reality through internet and social media" (Hamid, Basid, and Aulia, 2021: 101).

Success, independence, and emancipation of women as a media narrative

Powell (2018) points out that, although women are still somewhat underrepresented in the media, new media are encouraging women from different contexts to get involved, without implying traditional ideas of power. There are examples of positive portrayals of women in commercials, as Gajger and Car (2020) show in their narrative analysis of advertisements for perfumes that showcased women as decisive, assertive, independent, and wrapped in the idea of emancipation. Nevertheless, it was significantly easier to track papers emphasizing the negative media portrayal of women than positive, which is one of the main reasons this paper tries to contribute to filling that gap. Although Hamid, Basid, and Aulia (2021: 100) claim that Arab women and patriarchal culture are almost inseparable, they also explain that the emancipation and reactualization of the identity of Arab women is being written about in the media and point to potential positive developments. Posetti (2006) emphasized the media's debate on hijab as an extremism symbol, a sign of

Muslim women's backwardness. Therefore, its symbolism can be used to portray them as victims of their religion, or they could be shown wearing them proudly and showcasing their religion, depending on the media framing.

Qualifications of women and the role of sports as a media narrative

Milner and Braddock (2017) link the treatment of women in sports with issues of gender perception and discrimination but emphasize an increasing number of women who now compete in "traditionally male sports", such as football or mixed martial arts. Sherry, Osborne, and Nicholson (2016) state that women's sport is still not sufficiently represented in the media. They explain that by "a low level of media interest, narrative focus, prominence of positioning or scheduling, linguistic choice, and visual representation of women's sport" (2016: 299). Midgley, DeBues-Stafford, Lockwood, and Thai (2021) discuss the importance of sports' role models for women, emphasizing that women are less likely than men to name same-sex examples of successful sportspeople. Nevertheless, women were shown to be more motivated by their gender, and the authors claim that same-sex role models provide them with evidence that success is possible, and it depicts a positive future against negatively represented stereotypes. Semi-structured interviews with participants from Istanbul showed that stereotypical portrayals and emphasizing physical appearance over athletic skills resulted in internalization of stereotypes and affected the participant's self-esteem, contributing to performance anxiety and creating mental health challenges (Şahin, Soylu, Toktas, and Köse, 2024). This highlights the crucial role the media can play in constructing the way narratives are framed and its consequences.

Methodological framework

Aim and research questions

The aim of this paper is to analyze the ways in which women are represented in the "Nike: What will they say about you?" commercial, how this is related to social stereotypes, and how it serves the general representation of women in society. The research questions of the paper pose to examine how women are portrayed in the advertisement, what the relationship between their depiction and social, gender, and religious stereotypes is, what symbols appear in the commercial, and in what context. The method of research used to achieve this is narrative analysis.

Narrative analysis

Polkinghorne (1995) argues that narrative analysis uses stories while dealing with human experience and activities. In this sense, the environment in which the narra-

tive takes place, the characters that are being created, the events and actions of the narrative, are all integrated and crucial for thorough exploration (*ibid.*). Equally important is the characterization of narrative and its various themes, because they can be, among everything else, political in nature (Chandler, 1997). The tone and mood of the message create a relationship between the text and the reader, which is a crucial component for this paper, as it decides on the way the media audience is being addressed (*ibid.*). Put simply, the narrative method is based on the idea that people make sense of the world through stories and their meanings (Ospina and Dodge, 2005: 145), which makes a narrative the core of media text. Therefore, it was selected as the research method for this paper.

Sample

This research paper focuses on only one commercial and its narrative analysis, which may seem unusual, but the reason for such a small sample is a very thorough analysis that deconstructs positive media portrayal of women to its detail, which seems to be a very rare subject, as it was a lot easier to track papers that give examples of negative media portrayal. The analysis itself was carried out by following steps described in the previous chapters; it investigates the story behind the subject, the environment where the narrative takes place, the characters, events and actions. The theme of the narrative is thoroughly analyzed by investigating the tone of the commercial, and the mood of the message that is sent to the reader, while deconstructing the relationship between the text and the scenery. As Solar (1997) lists five stages of action in storytelling, the analysis follows them and analyzes the changes in them and what follows them. The advertisement that was chosen for the analysis, "Nike: What will they say about you?" is available on YouTube (28/01/2025) on channel "Nike Women" under hashtags #JustDoIt #Believeinmore (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-UO9vMS7AI&ab_channel=NikeWomen). The commercial is one minute and ten seconds long, and it was released on March 6, 2017. It had 2,088,035 views at the time of this analysis, while the channel was followed by roughly 221,000 accounts. The description of the commercial reads: "What will they say about you? Maybe they'll say you showed them what was possible. #Believeinmore #JustDoIt." The advertisement was created by the Wieden + Kennedy agency for the Nike brand.

Analysis and results

The commercial starts with a scene of a young woman wearing a hijab, as well as Nike sportswear. She goes for a run and soon notices an older-looking woman, who is also wearing a hijab, surprisingly staring at her. There is a text that reads: "What will they say about you?" and another woman is shown, riding a skateboard and also wearing a hijab. This woman, like the one in the previous scene, looks back and sees a frowning, gray-haired man looking at her. The subtitles continue the previous sentence reading: "That you shouldn't be out here?" Another woman is shown, swinging her boxing gloves towards her female opponent in a ring. The text reads: "That it's unladylike?" as she knocks her opponent down. Next, we see her fall into what seems to be the bottom of a pool. The text follows: "That you're not built for this?" and as her eyes open: "Or maybe...They'll say you're strong", and this is when the pace and tension of the commercial start growing. This is a twist, dynamic moment, captured by a scene of a horse in the desert, rising in the air, as the public is being brought back to the scene in the ring. This time the woman gathers her strength and begins punching her opponent back. The pace gradually grows even more as the viewer is shown women who are playing football. A woman is being chased by two of her opponents, and as she is successfully fighting them back, the text reads: "That you can't be stopped." After them running, the horse from the desert is shown running, and immediately after that, a woman doing parkour. In the moment when she is in between two buildings, in the air, the text appears: "That you'll always find a way." As she lands on the ground, her Nike sneakers are very clearly shown, close-up. The shot moves on from her hands and knees to the hands and knees of another woman exercising, and there seems to be a child next to her, doing the same. The boxer woman from the ring is shown again, punching and avoiding hits, but this time she is on television, as the match is being watched by men who are cheering. She delivers a powerful blow to her opponent, and the commercial switches the viewers to a silhouette of a woman dancing on ice, in a dark, empty gym. As she is seen practicing, the text reads: "That you make it look easy." The next scene is of urban character, with four women leaning on their motorbikes, looking straight at the camera. The scenes and music are very dynamic, as the viewer is being switched between the ice dancer and the women on motorbikes, followed by words: "That you make it look... good." The woman who was exercising with the child is shown again, as she falls on the floor to rest, the pace of the commercial starts to get slower, and the viewer is presented with a fencing scene. The winner gestures with her blade towards her opponent and symbolically removes her mask as a sign of victory while the audience is cheering. In the next shot, she is victoriously standing on a mountain that resembles the desert from

the beginning of the commercial. This is followed by a scene of a little girl standing in front of a skating rink that is glowing under the lights, while everything else is in darkness, except for the camera flashes coming from the audience. While she is looking at them confusedly, a light illuminates her face as she steps on the ice and the text reads: "Or maybe... they'll say you're... the next... big... thing." The screen goes black with white letters: "Believe in more" and the Nike logo appears.

Even though there are various examples of authors describing the representation of women as somewhat narrow-minded (Tuchman, 2000; Alsultany, 2012; Sherry, Osborne, and Nicholson, 2016; Santoniccolo, Trombetta, Paradiso, and Rollè, 2023), the commercial analyzed in this paper doesn't seem to be of such characteristics. It depicts women wearing hijabs, not wearing hijabs, doing all kinds of sports while dressed for doing sports, simply fighting to get better in their disciplines, while ultimately sending the message that there will always be supporters and non-supporters, but that that shouldn't stop them from doing "their own thing." At the beginning of the commercial they are shown to be judged by some people passing by (judging by the looks on their faces and the titles), but the ad starts to culminate (see Solar, 1997) the moment the boxer falls into the water. After a symbolic depiction of a strong running horse, the boxer gathers her strength again and is soon shown on television, while men are cheering for her, even though boxing is traditionally perceived as a rough, unfeminine discipline. The twist (see Solar, 1997) is not only visual but also linguistic, which is evident in the change of text, as it was initially asking questions about what other people will think, if they are being unladylike, or if they even have what it takes, which falls under the category of inhibition of women as a media narrative. But, as the twist happens, the viewer realizes the narrative is using these rhetorical questions to encourage women to pursue their desires, as they are shown to be strong, successful, and, in the end, completely independent of what other people think. Ultimately, narration in the advertisement starts from the middle and then, through elements of sequence and gradation (see Solar, 1997), becomes simultaneous (Genette, 1980, and Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, cited in Grdešić, 2015).

Hamid, Basid, and Aulia (2021) claim that Arab women and patriarchal culture are inseparable but also emphasize the power of new media and its potentially good influence on their independence. Somewhat similarly, the analyzed advertisement conveys that there will always be judgment, but when women embrace their power, as in the commercial, they overcome all obstacles, both in the sports and social sense, which seems to be the ultimate metaphor and something Nike is looking to support. On the symbolism of hijab, Posetti (2006) emphasized the media's debate on hijab as an extremism symbol, which can portray women as victims of their

religion. On the other hand, this commercial seems to be portraying them as wearing it proudly while doing their sports activities, which explains how much of the narrative depends on the way media framing is done (see Entman, 1991). Hamid, Basid, and Aulia (2021) talk about the renewal of the myth of feminism in the context of old customs and stereotypes being challenged. Speaking of this advertisement, women are not shown in customary roles or, for example, seductive, compromising positions that would have nothing to do with real sports, which seems to be a good way to avoid prejudicial social perceptions (see Walsh, 2013; Hromadžić, 2014; Gajger and Car, 2020). Rather than that, women are portrayed as achieved athletes who clearly got there by training and hard work, on their own. The commercial also considers the importance of future generations of women and thus symbolically ends with a depiction of a little girl wearing ice skates, gathering the courage to perform while the audience is cheering for her, which can be interpreted as a kind of path to acceptance that has been paved by women before her.

Sherry, Osborne, and Nicholson (2016) argue that women's sports are still underrepresented in the media, and Midgley, DeBues-Stafford, Lockwood, and Thai (2021) have found that women are less likely to cite examples of successful female athletes than men are likely to name male athletes. However, the authors argue that women are more motivated by their own gender because other women provide them with evidence that success is possible. Considering that, the "Nike: What will they say about you?" commercial seems to seek to inspire and encourage women's sports, as they are placed in contexts of various disciplines, such as running, skateboarding, boxing, football, parkour, ice skating, and fencing. In this way, both "traditionally masculine" and "traditionally feminine" sports (see Milner and Braddock, 2017) are merged into a neutral category where women are successful and motivated simply because they exercise and put in the effort. Therefore, the focus is on sports and Nike equipment, rather than anything else. This is not to say that Nike doesn't use marketing tricks to present their equipment, or that engaging more women in sports doesn't favor the brand, only that they found a somewhat positive way to do it, without diving into social polarizations and creating more prejudice.

Conclusion

This paper provides a combination of gender and religious stereotype analysis while placing the advertisement "Nike: What will they say about you?" into the contemporary media cultural context. While considering capitalist trends that manifest themselves through elements of commodification and consumerism, the paper uses

narrative analysis to find out about the representation of women in said commercial. Since narrative analysis deals with human experiences through stories, it was chosen as the most suitable method for this qualitative research of media text. The paper focuses on only one commercial, as it aims to make a very thorough analysis of its narrative elements, but there are limits to this in terms of generalizability and potential researcher bias. The field could benefit from future research comparing positive media practice in systematized categories and drawing conclusions from that. This research has found that said commercial seems to be resisting the traditional (and somewhat contemporary) stereotypes by showcasing women who are strong, persistent, and resilient, regardless of religion or gender. This is done by portraying them in challenging disciplines and conditions that require a lot of sacrifice. Female appearance isn't the subject of attention, as the emphasis is on sports and women's emancipation. This doesn't suggest that Nike didn't use certain trends or consumeristic tricks to put focus on their equipment, only that they found a more positive way to do it, proving that it is possible to sell a product and still send a meaningful message to your buyers. Therefore, the symbols in the advertisement also served the purpose of empowering representations of women, denying sexual and religious prejudice, thereby challenging traditional societal divisions and roles. The discourse of this commercial can serve as an example of positive media representation, and writing about such examples might have a positive overall effect, which is the aim and importance of this paper. Moreover, Nike's approach to tackling stereotypes in advertising could have significant practical implications, such as influencing consumer behavior, supporting emancipation and women's athleticism, maybe even setting new industry standards and providing guidance for marketers and brands. In conclusion, Nike, in this case, did not pass on the social baton of stereotypes, and such examples invite for representation in public discourse.

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THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIGITAL MARKETING OF THE SPORT MEGA EVENTS IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract: Owing to the technological innovations that are dominating the global market of today, and seen through the prism of digital transformation megatrends, sports mega-events have rapidly (beginning of the 21st century) developed and integrated a formidable digital infrastructure that is becoming the foundation of their organizational operation, as well as the primary communication channel that can be described as accurately defined and strategically placed digital bridge towards the sporting auditorium. In such a precisely defined digital concept, marketing represents a dominant business function. The largest companies and official partners of sports recognize the digital reality of sports mega-events as an ideal and truly one-of-a-kind global marketing platform that enables them to dominate the global market. Companies will establish this market position by integrating all the elements of the sports industry, however this time in a digital setting. This is precisely why keeping the perspective of digital marketing of the sports mega-event is crucial for better understanding the future of world sport, which is fiercely moving towards the digital environment and virtual options. This article aims to define the marketing potential of applying digitalization to the sports mega-events.

Keywords: digitalization, sport mega-event, marketing, globalization

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Introduction

Digital globalization has revolutionized the world of sports, providing diverse marketing opportunities through the integration of digital capacities (Breidbach et al., 2018; Legner et al., 2017) while sports mega-events are increasingly shaped by digital content, concepts, and technologies (Pegoraro et al., 2017). Fans can access statistics and gather information about sporting events through social media on their mobile devices, making stadiums digital fortresses that compete with traditional television broadcasts (Breidbach et al., 2018; Legner et al., 2017).

Sport, like many other traditional industries, has gone through various stages of the globalization process during its development. Today, acknowledging the current moment of transition from globalization as a process to globalization as a conceptual model, it exerts a strong and, in many aspects, revolutionary impact on the institutional components of global sport (Trkulja & Brkić, 2025). Moreover, the transition of the market from physically defined categories (marketplace) to a functional virtual dimension (marketspace) has greatly contributed to the transformation of sport towards digital options (Trkulja, 2022). In fact, thanks to the technologies available in today's global market, the sports industry has developed and integrated a serious digital infrastructure, which increasingly becomes the backbone of its organizational transformation. Conceptually, it is also viewed as the primary communication channel to all public segments, serving as a strategically designed digital bridge (Trkulja & Brkić, 2025).

However, the impact of digital globalization on the marketing of sports mega-events and sports management has received less attention from the scientific community compared to other areas of management. Research primarily focuses on social media, digital platforms, and event branding (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2018; Yoshida et al., 2018; Geurin & Burch, 2017; Ratković & Grubić, 2009; Trkulja, 2008), the changing role of the sports audience and the use of social media by event organizers to enhance audience satisfaction (Wakefield & Bennet, 2018; Yoshida, 2017; Dolan et al., 2016; Watanabe et al., 2015).

While social media and digital platforms play a significant role, the foundational elements of marketing should not be ignored. Market research, segmentation, and sponsorship remain crucial aspects of sports marketing (Trkulja, 2022; Manić, Trandafilović & Ratković, 2018; Ratković, Krasulja & Garača, 2013; Medić & Ratković, 2010). The literature also explores the phenomenon of eSports and its relationship to sports (Trkulja et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Funk et al., 2018; Heere, 2018).

This paper discusses the aforementioned features within the boundaries of its formal and technical framework. The contribution is in defining the key overlapping points of marketing, sports mega-events and digital innovations, as well as highlighting new opportunities that are the result of combining the potential from the aforementioned areas.

Based on the above, the objective of this paper is to define the marketing perspectives of digitization at sports mega-events. The basic hypothesis is that digitization represents the primary marketing potential at sports mega events in the 21st century.

Digital value matrix of sport event marketing

The concept of a value matrix on one side has two perspectives, temporal and monetary, and on the other, digital interaction with the sports audience and the use of a large amount of available data (Big Data). In a value matrix defined in this way, it is necessary to explain the recognized perspectives in more detail, thus: 1. The time perspective is defined by the time allocated for attending a sports mega-event or following it through one of the preferred communication channels or devices; 2. The monetary perspective is recognized through the real financial involvement of the sports audience, which is realized at the sports mega-event or outside of it within the content that can be linked to it (e.g. following the sports mega-event from a leisure place) ; 3. Digital interaction with the sports audience is formalized through a spectrum of digital communication channels, which today is dominated by social media and mobile applications. They create the expected structure of channels, both in terms of the way of communication, as well as its digitally specific content and volume; 4. The large amount of available data (Big Data) creates a previously unimaginable structure of optional analyses related to the sports mega-event and its participants. This type of content, which is most often shown through two dimensions, those in real-time, but also through historical comparison, provides a new, and for the sports audience, a very interesting digital cross-section of sports achievements, which above all are linearly comparable, both in the time in which they were achieved, as well as from the perspective of the athletes who made them. Also, the large amount of available data on all segments of the public, which the organizers of sports mega-events have, can create new profit centres that did not exist until recently, and are the result of their digital monetization.

In a business sense, for global sports, understanding the digital value matrix is of particular importance. On one side, this matrix has a temporal and monetary perspective, and on the other, digital interaction with the sports audience and the utilization of large amounts of available data (e.g., Big Data) (Trkulja & Brkić, 2025).

Thanks to the digital value matrix defined in this way, the marketing of the sports event gets strategically important information that determines both the specific marketing approach and the many more marketing tools that will be used. In this context, in recent years, marketing has predominantly turned to the use of mega-trends of digital transformation to increase and improve access to the sports audience. As a result of this approach, the importance of the digital path, digital identity and digital experience of the sports audience was recognized, which defines a new strategic paradigm of marketing a sports mega-event in the era of digital globalization.

Key digital trends for sport development

Bearing in mind what has been said so far, it is completely clear that the organizers of sports mega-events today are competing with numerous challenges. Some of them are created as a consequence of the change in the way of creating value (economy of platforms), collecting data, storing and using it, as well as the specific use of the megatrends of digital transformations or the current challenges of data privacy protection (GDPR). This results in:

- 1. Creation of new digital business models in sport.
- 2. Establishing innovative sport-eco systems.
- 3. Change of behaviour of the sports audience, both in the sports venues and more so outside of them.
- 4. Different ways of adopting new technologies.
- 5. Higher interest of state institutions towards sports.

To illustrate the magnitude of the challenge that lies before the scientific audience in Table 1, we provide an overview of the top 3 digital trends that Deloitte and N3XT Sports company singled out as critical digital trends for the development of world sports in their report from 2025.

Table 1. Critical digital trends for the development of world sport from 2022 to 2025

Year	Key Digital Trends
2022	Accelerated adoption of AR/VR fan experiences; Digital collectibles (NFTs); Data-driven fan personalization
2023	Generative-AI in fan engagement and marketing; Advanced streaming integrations; E-commerce & digital ticketing
2024	Responsible AI for safer sports experiences; Multi-screen and interactive content; Dynamic segmentation and personalization
2025	Hyperscale social video platforms; Immersive virtual events; Real-time dynamic creative and contextual ads

Source: Deloitte and N3XT Sports 2025.

To illustrate the magnitude of the power of change, Table 2 gives a comparative overview of the audiences, that in 2024-2025 followed the finals of the most professional USA leagues (NBA, NFL, MLB, NHL), in the following media communication channels: Direct TV broadcast, Streaming and digital (including Facebook, TikTok and YouTube) and X.

Table 2. Viewership of 2024–2025 US Sport Finals (in millions of spectators)

League	Event	TV Broadcast (2025, avg viewers)	Streaming & Digital (Facebook/TikTok/ YouTube)	X (2025, peak engagement)
NBA	Finals	10.2	4.5 (combined est.)	1.2 (peak)
NFL	Super Bowl	115 (2025, est)	7.9 (TikTok est.)	6.2 (peak)
MLB	World Series	7.2	2.1 (Facebook est.)	0.5 (peak)
NHL	Stanley Cup Final	3.0	1.9 (YouTube est.)	0.3 (peak)

Source: NBA, Streaming media blog, 2025.

The data presented above confirms the complete dominance of digital over traditional communication channels in the segment of spectating sports mega-events in the US market. Also, some research has confirmed that there is a relatively high level of uniformity in the activities of the sports audience on social media regardless of the geography they come from (Li et al., 2017). This is particularly important for marketing, as it provides a highly uniformed approach to a geographically dislocated sports audience, confirming once again the unique phenomenon of globalization of world sports.

The main goal of accepting the concept of digital globalization in the marketing of sports mega-events comes down to achieving a set of benefits for the sports organization and event organizers that can be identified in the following segments (Microsoft, 2017):

1. Better understanding of sports fans to enable personalized and rich content within the shared experience, available anytime and anywhere.
2. Easier cooperation within the organization, knowledge sharing, increasing productivity and efficiency.
3. Optimization of training and preparation of athletes by their coaches and their teams, to enable a high quality of performance and results.
4. Better coordination of operations, collecting and data analysis about the sports audience, as well as business processes.
5. Providing an advanced spectating experience, and providing innovation services in the sports arena, and outside of it, thus increasing monetization using the new business models.

Xiao et al. (2018) give an overview of some of the most important effects determined by the digital spectrum in the global sports industry which includes an organizational component (elimination of manual work processes and enabling access to data in real-time, live TV broadcasts and the separation of TV and digital rights to cover sporting events provide new value for clubs, spectators, and sponsors, the emergence of completely new sports based on digital premises (eSports), using different megatrends of digital transformation in order to create new ways of interacting with different groups of the sports and the business public), technology component (new digital products, use of IoT and Big Data and digital platforms, etc.), symbolic component (creation of a large number of independent communication channels through which it is possible to create awareness and directly influence the image and brand within the global sports industry, increase the accessibility of sports events to a much wider public, reducing the difference between the physical and virtual experience of sports mega events, etc.) and educational component (the increase in the use of data analysis for the needs of training, preparation for the match and analysis after its completion significantly affects the change in the way coaches work, which requires the acquisition of new skills and a different understanding of available data as a result of the digital globalization of the sports industry, possibility of innovations in the training process and replacement of traditional training with a virtual form (digital training simulators).

Considering the structure of the presented implications of digital globalization on the sports industry, it can be concluded that due to these structural changes, the importance of marketing as a business function within world sports is growing. What's more, most of the exposed implications are directly or indirectly related to marketing, which, thanks to the implemented digital capacities, changes its location and realizes its business philosophy and importance in a changed virtual environment.

Marketing perspective of sports mega-events

Accepting and acknowledging what has been said so far, the power of digital change with the intention of setting the framework for the next research in a format that will not have such a high level of time and content flexibility, and wanting to map it to the observed digital tendencies that define the current moment of global marketing, the relationship that created in the bridge between digital globalization and the marketing of a sports mega-event, we believe that it should be viewed in the following perspectives/strategic levels: 1. The digital path and the digital experience of the users of the mega sports event, with which their importance would be posi-

oned (in this case, the sports audience on and off the sports arenas and the creation of digitally connected fans) through the appreciation of all the specifics of the Marketing 5.0 concept (the current stages of marketing defined by the interweaving of technological and human capacities, Kotler et al., 2021) and promoted the strategic importance of digital identity as a digital currency of the 21st century. In most cases, the digital path is seen as a dynamic and spatial diagram that recognizes the trajectory on which the user acquires a concrete digital experience. In this context, it actually represents the user's road map, which as a rule is segmented into special stages, and which as a final result gives a certain level, quality and structure of the digital experience that is of crucial importance for the success of the marketing of mega sports events. Considering the above, digital journey (Microsoft, 2017, 9) shows an example of a digital path connected to a geographic location and a sports arena. It is a digital journey of a sports fan in relation to a geographical location and a sports arena. The fan experience begins with receiving news about the team and its events, followed by updates on new players and coaches, as well as insights into team history and legendary figures. Fans also interact through socialization with teammates and other supporters, consume press conferences, and follow training sessions. Beyond the core sporting activities, the journey highlights players' interests, community service, and youth outreach initiatives. On game day, fans receive real-time updates from the team, purchase tickets online, and gain exclusive behind-the-scenes content. During the match, spectators often rely on a "second screen" to complement the live experience, while simultaneously discussing game events and analyzing outcomes. The journey continues post-match with merchandise purchases, interactive digital games, and personalized offers from teams, sponsors, and merchants. Finally, it extends beyond the stadium through travel and tourism opportunities, as well as connections with friends and fellow fans, underscoring the holistic and digitally interconnected fan experience.

Besides this digital journey, digital journey of a sports fan (Microsoft, 2017, 10) should also be considered as it is more narrowly focused on the activities of a sports fan around game attendance. It starts with following team news and games, receiving loyalty offers, and purchasing tickets. Fans are then informed about events and services in the city and are provided with personalized offers for local businesses. Practical aspects such as transportation options, navigation assistance, and game-day updates from the team are integrated into the digital experience. Upon arrival, fans access novelty food, merchandise, and stadium services, and use digital channels to socialize with other fans. After the game, they can learn about post-match events, share opinions about the outcome, and once again engage with personalized offers from nearby businesses and sponsors. The journey concludes with arranging

transportation home, meeting friends for post-game socialization, and maintaining ongoing digital connections with teams and fans.

The recognized duality of the digital path directly affects the level and structure of the digital experience, i.e. the satisfaction of the sports auditorium, and it represents one of the significant indicators of the success of the marketing of mega sports events. 2. Athletes as creators of digital content, which we believe is the only authentic and conceptually correct way of understanding the importance of social media in the marketing of sports mega-events. In the scientific literature, there is a consensus that the global popularity of mobile devices and social media has introduced a revolution in the way sports content is consumed, thus also in the concept of marketing sports mega-events (Pritchard & Stinson, 2014; Harris, 2013; Nore Al-Deen & Hendricks, 2012). The value created by the sports audience in the digital space (Facebook, Instagram and X) is estimated at €1.1 billion in 2021 at the same level as some of the world's most famous sports leagues, and within the 20 most powerful sports clubs on the planet, it amounts to €733 million. According to Nielsen Research, athletes who had more than five million followers on Instagram in 2020 generated US\$314 million worth of media exposure with their posts, 80% more than in 2019. Also, the number of sports fans who consume social media in search of information or content, increased by 83% in the period from September 2019 to January 2021. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms, and especially digital networks, have become an excellent communication channel for global brands that use athletes' accounts to enter new products on the market, raise their level of awareness, or communicate with the goal of enabling a final purchase. In this context, recognizing the interest of companies in this type of marketing, athletes increase the number of announcements that contain the emphasis of a specific brand. Thus, in the period of July 2019 - March 2021, the number of Instagram accounts of 15,000 athletes that contain information about the brand registered a growth of 58% (Nielsen Sports, 2021, p. 9). All this represents an excellent example of the power and magnitude of changes that digital globalization can generate in the short term for marketing and a real reason to initiate the harmonization of the existing marketing strategy and the defined approach to the global market, through adapting the concept of integrated marketing communications. On the other hand, the concept of digital globalization brings with it a revolutionary change as athletes become content creators in a virtual environment. This situation disrupts the existing business model of world sports and requires the acceptance of a new marketing reality that promotes the institution of digital identity. Such a shift on the digital axis also creates the launch of the contextual identity of sports fans as members of a much wider sports audience. 3. Sports arenas (stadiums) as modern digital plat-

forms, today represent a unique conceptually and technically defined unit that is determined by the integration of the drivers of digital globalization, and the global nature of sports and the expectations of the sports audience. They have been transformed into interactive and, in a technical sense, powerful digital platforms that provide sports fans with a wide range of previously unimaginable services, which fundamentally changes the relationship between athletes - sports audiences on the field of play and outside the field of play, on the one hand, and also the realistic perception of the place as an element of the marketing mix which, in such a changed situation, becomes an element of promotion. All this defines the transformation of the sports arena into a digital platform that moves in the direction of virtual reality and ultimate connectivity (Giorgio & Campbell, 2016). It is clear that the transformation of sports arenas is actually the acceptance of the concept of the digital path and the digital experience of sports fans as the only authentic indicator of success in the sports market in a digital environment (Gareth, 2017; Smith, 2015). In that change certainly lies a crucial part of the business and marketing benefits that sports arenas get from accepting the concept of digital globalization.

In addition to the above-mentioned perspectives, it is necessary to refer to a set of specific digital components of contemporary global sports that change the perception of sports mega-events on a global level. Here special focus should be directed to recognising trends that create new innovative approaches to the marketing of sports mega-events, such as:

1. The phenomenon of the concept of Big Data, identified in the amount of data that is created as a result of the interaction between participants in the sports market. This ensures that marketing representatives of sports mega-events, thanks to the application of analytical methods that are carried out on a previously unimaginable amount and variety of data, get strategically important information necessary for creating an adequate marketing mix and especially elements of integrated marketing communications. In fact, the very structure of a sporting mega-event provides a much wider channel of communication and a correspondingly greater amount of highly heterogeneous information. The sports mega-event itself obviously represents an excellent communication platform that generates a large amount of data that, after analysis, has a high level of value for companies.
2. The influence of digital generations: Z (born between 1997 and 2009) and Alpha (born between 2010 and 2025) on the structure of integrated marketing communications.

3. The Sports Auditorium 4.0 model promotes the global sports community (Hwang & Lim, 2015) and is conceptually a product of the quality and multi-layered experience of sports fans that is created when consuming a sports product or service in a digital environment, which today has a complete global perspective. Its main specificity, and thus a significant difference on the market, compared to previous models that were based on the direct advantages of electronic media, lies in the incredible possibilities of digital platforms. The crucial difference brought by this model is recognized in the possibility of direct contact with athletes, which did not exist before.
4. Following sports mega-events with a "Second Screen" approach, which is the result of the availability of mobile digital platforms and devices in various multi-channel marketing options, has led to the shift of the traditional position of global sports to much more challenging virtual options. "Second screen" is a complementary concept to traditional television for the following reasons (Gantz & Lewis, 2014): a. Digital identity of the sports fan; b. Expanding the sports fan base; c. Information expertise; d. Social interaction; 5. Realizing ambitions.
5. eSport, as an authentic consequence of the impact of the concept of digital globalization on the sports industry and its positioning within the global sports system, as one of the factors of its future market success.

Conclusion

Based on the observations and assumptions presented, along with concrete facts from the integration of digital technologies in the marketing of sports mega-events, we can conclude that the digital transformation of the sports industry impacts sports mega-events through changes in the marketing mix, specifically in integrated marketing communications. Additionally, it affects the communication between organizers and sports fans, recognizes the sport as a digital phenomenon, creates a digital identity for all market participants, and acknowledges the structure and attributes of sports fans in the concept of Sport Auditorium 4.0. The user experience is defined based on digital capabilities and the strategic acceptance of digital transformations. However, these changes pose challenges for professionals and researchers, requiring a holistic and interdisciplinary approach. The value matrix of marketing sports mega-events in the digital environment provides a framework for trend analysis but cannot predict future marketing potentials due to uncertainty in technological innovations. This paper presents assumptions on the development perspective of marketing

sports mega-events in the digital environment of the 21st century. Recognizing the impact of digital globalization on mega sports event marketing, it is vital to find the intersection between digital options and world sports. This includes accepting the importance of the digital path, digital identity, and digital experience of the sports audience as a new marketing paradigm. It also entails recognizing the changing communication channel of world sports and creating a new balance between media and athletes in the digital era. The basic hypothesis of this paper, that digitization represents the primary marketing potential in 21st-century sports mega-events, has been confirmed.

Author Contributions

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FAN CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON FOOTBALL: INSIGHTS FROM CROATIAN SUPPORTERS

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Abstract: This paper examines the culture of sports fans, focussing on fans' habits, their influence on sport, the psychology and methods of cheering, fan types and their motivations. The main objectives of the paper are to show what drives fans, their loyalty and other factors that influence their engagement, especially with football clubs. The study compares fan groups across Europe and highlights the main differences. It also analyses the motivations of Croatian fans, including regular attendance and club loyalty. In order to collect data on fans' habits and attitudes, a quantitative survey was conducted, looking at sports preferences, frequency of attendance, spending, involvement in deviant behaviour and the importance of club success. The results show that most Croatian fans follow football, have supported their club for over 15 years and usually go to matches several times a year. The strongest motivations are love, a sense of belonging and the integration of the club as part of the fan's identity. Creative songs and banners as well as charity work are important features of this identity. Strengthening relationships between fans and clubs and expanding the regional focus form a strategic basis for sports clubs to increase the number of fans.

Keywords: fan culture, sports fans, emotional attachment, fan psychology, fan motivation

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Introduction

Sport is now a globally popular activity for all groups, influencing public opinion, consumer behaviour, lifestyle and health through modern technologies and media, leading to an increase in family spending on sport-related activities (Ratković, Kavran and Zolak, 2022). Sports are enjoyed both individually and in groups, while professional sports and competitions are often consumed in large groups, commonly referred to as fan groups (Funk, Alexandris & McDonald, 2022). The behaviour of fan groups varies greatly and differs significantly from country to country. The experiences and meaning of football and football matches differ not only between fan groups and ordinary fans, but also between Eastern and Western Europe. According to Dr Andrew Hodges, a social anthropologist from Manchester, fan groups can be divided into subcultures (where the focus is on uniqueness) and political movements (where the focus is on politics).

In order to understand these differences, this article analyses the attendance figures for handball, basketball and football matches and examines the question of how sports fans are described and what drives them to become fans. To better understand Croatian sports fans behaviours research has been conducted, focusing on football fans.

Sport fans – who are they and what motivates them?

Turković (2016: 13) defines fans as "people who gather in groups and cheer on their team at matches, with or without aids, to support the team in achieving positive results. It is a heterogeneous group that is part of the sports audience and forms an unstructured and unorganised social group."

Regarding motivation, Funk, Alexandris, and McDonald (2022) describe two types: intrinsic (participating for learning, achievement, fun, or new experiences) and extrinsic (participating for results, rewards, or from guilt/anxiety). Shilbury et al. (2009), on the other hand, identify five fan motives that motivate fans to attend sporting events: socialisation, performance, excitement, respect and entertainment. The authors emphasise that fans differ from normal spectators due to their deep psychological need for connection and a sense of belonging.

Fans can also be categorised according to their level of involvement: occasional, moderate or fanatical (Bang and O'Connor, 2022). Fanatics are the most emotionally involved as they empathise strongly with their team's victories and defeats, as Bang and O'Connor (2022) explained, and are seen as important supporters by the teams.

Whitbourne (2011) describes two patterns of sports fans' reactions to their team's performance. The first is "BIRGing" from Basking in Reflected Glory. When the team wins, fans feel great. Author further explains that different research shows that fans feel even better the next day. They say "we" won, identifying strongly with the club, and are more likely to wear team merchandise after a victory. The second pattern is "CORFing" from Cut Off Reflected Failure. When the team loses, fans distance themselves from the loss, saying "they" lost, not "we." CORFers avoid wearing team items after a defeat. This difference reveals true fans versus fair-weather fans, whose team identification rises and falls with results. True fans continue to show support, wearing team gear regardless of performance (Whiteborn, 2011). Additionally, sports fans are often superstitious, believing their actions—like wearing certain clothing or following rituals—can influence the outcome of games (Whiteborn, 2011).

According to a recent study by the European Club Association (2020) on football fan behavior, there are six fan types: Football Fanatics, Club Loyalists, Icon Imitators, FOMO (Fear of missing out) Followers, Main Eventers, and Tag Alongs. Study explains Football fanatics (11%) are primarily motivated by love for the game—they follow all of football with strong emotions, frequently attend matches for a sense of community, and believe clubs should help make the world better. Club loyalists (14%) are long-time fans deeply connected to their club, following high-level football for quality and community. Icon imitators (11%) are young fans who mainly support specific star players and enjoy big matches. FOMO followers (27%) watch football to stay part of conversations, preferring major teams but with less emotional involvement. Main eventers (19%) care more about the occasion than results, often older people or women who get involved around major tournaments. The last group, Tag alongs (19%), have low emotional ties and are mainly influenced by friends, family, or the national team.

In short, sports fans represent a diverse group whose motivations, commitment and emotional attachments vary widely — from deeply loyal fanatics to casual fans characterised by their personal identity, social relationships and reactions to their team's successes and failures.

The role of fan loyalty and attendance in sports club success

As already explained, the difference between fanatical fans and casual spectators is that fanatical fans almost always follow their team and attend matches much more frequently due to their strong loyalty. They support their team even when they per-

form poorly, and frequent defeats do not affect them. For this reason, sports clubs value their fans and strive to 'reward' them by winning, while strengthening relationships with fan groups through marketing activities (Rotko, 2023). Rotko (2023) also explains that fans who are committed to a club's brand support it in the long term and are more likely to buy products and attend events, significantly extending the longevity of a sports organisation. This also means that engaged fans attract more followers by sharing their experiences in their social community, which is very effective in increasing attendance at games (Rotko, 2023).

The LA Times (MacGregor, 2004) discusses the impact of fans on athletes, emphasising that the presence of a crowd can trigger a release of adrenaline in players, which can either enhance performance by returning to dominant responses, or hinder it due to increased anxiety and nervousness (ScoreVision, 2022).

Considering the influence that fans have on sport, it can be concluded that fans are a priority in the marketing strategies of sports clubs. Increasing revenue is the most common overall objective of fan engagement (Rotko, 2023), with a focus on ticket sales, sponsorship and merchandise.

Successful clubs with a strong winning tradition attract large attendances. According to Statista data, in the 2023 Premier League season, the highest average attendance was 73,504 spectators per match, with Manchester United ranking first. At the bottom, Luton Town had an average attendance of 10,830, largely influenced by infrastructure limitations, specifically the number of seats at their stadium. Considering all 20 Premier League clubs, the overall average attendance was 38,334 spectators per match (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/268576/clubs-of-the-english-premier-league-by-average-attendance/>).

La Liga recorded lower attendances, led by Barcelona (with 56,304 spectators). At the bottom of the table was Mallorca with an average of 20,295 spectators, giving a league average of 29,429 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/382833/clubs-of-la-liga-by-average-attendance/>). In Italy, Inter recorded the highest average attendance in the 2021/22 season with 33,183 fans, while in the Bundesliga, Borussia Dortmund led the way with an average of 81,228 spectators per match, making it the most-attended football club in Europe (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/282985/clubs-of-german-football-bundesliga-by-average-attendance/>).

Enthusiastic and loyal fans not only drive strong attendance and sustained support through emotional and social bonds but also significantly influence sports teams' performance and club marketing strategies, making them indispensable to the long-term success and growth of sports organizations.

Fan culture across Europe

Fan cultures in Europe vary widely, reflecting diverse histories and social contexts. English football fans boast a rich heritage with deeply ingrained traditions and high match attendances, despite rising violence and hooliganism challenges (Michie & Oughton, 2005; Dóczi & Tóth, 2009), including notable increases in arrests and pyrotechnic offenses in recent years leading to a mandatory one-year stadium ban for offenders introduced in 2022 (<https://www.skysports.com/football/news/11095/12703086/significant-rise-in-crime-at-football-matches-arrests-due-to-fan-disorder-in-england-and-wales-up-by-59-per-cent>). Football in England has had a profound impact on society and people's lives. In no other country are there so many fans who are devoted to their teams or whose lives revolve around their team's schedule (Dóczi & Tóth, 2009).

Spanish fans have unique customs, such as pre-match gatherings in cafes and distinctive merchandise practices, with political affiliations often intertwined with club support (<https://fromboothferrytogermany.com/2019/05/24/football-culture-spain/>). With FC Barcelona and Real Madrid becoming iconic rivals, and their "El Clásico" rivalry turning into a major cultural event (<https://www.hashtagspain.com/soccer-in-spains-culture-2972/>).

When people talk about Italian fans, they usually refer to Ultras. Known for choreographed performances, loud chants, banners and club colours, the Ultras also created "tifos", visual representations that expressed team spirit. While Ultras enrich fan culture with their loyalty and great choreography, there are still problems such as racism and violence (<https://seriea.co.uk/the-history-of-ultras-in-italy/>).

Central and Eastern European fan culture shifted after the fall of communism, moving from a politicised, state-influenced fandom to more autonomous forms of expression (<https://idrottsforum.org/call-for-papers-central-and-eastern-europe-football-fans-identities-what-happened-over-30-years-webinar-may-14-2021-call-ends-march-15-2021/>), although political and violent themes still persist, particularly in Poland and Hungary (Benedikter and Wojtaszyn, 2017; Mortimer, 2021). Izzo et al. (2014) note that football clubs in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Moldova began to seek sponsorship to generate revenue, but spectator numbers remained low and infrastructure was underdeveloped compared to Western Europe. Despite these challenges, the popularity and progress of football in Eastern Europe is evident.

Balkan supporters, especially in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, are known for their passionate yet sometimes violent fandom (<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/01/24/brothers-in-arms-the-balkan-hooligan-bonds-fuelling-violence/#>), with organized groups engaging

in intense rivalries that occasionally disrupt leagues (<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2015/feb/25/greece-football-suspended-crowd-violence-syriza>).

Serbia’s major fan groups include Grobari (Partizan) and Delije (Crvena Zvezda, Belgrade). Delije, officially founded in 1989 from a merger of fan groups, are considered among Europe’s most powerful fan association (<https://www.telegraf.rs/sport/navijaci/3022014-slala-su-se-pisma-o-ujedinjenju-svim-bitnijim-navijacima-zvezde-ili-je-to-uradio-arkan-dve-verzije-o-ujedinjenju-delija-pre-30-godina-video>).

Due to geographical and historical ties, Croatian and Serbian fan groups are often compared with each other. Political and social influences were often the trigger for their confrontations. However, violent clashes between these groups have decreased in recent times (https://www.dnevno.hr/sport/nogomet/mafija-ulazi-medu-navijace-ali-ne-i-u-hrvatskoj-tucnjava-sa-srbima-i-danas-se-pamti-nisu-bili-spremni-na-uzas-2195691/#google_vignette).

Fan groups in Croatia

Talking about football in Croatia, Pesarović and Mustapić (2013) explain that Croatia has successfully gained a foothold in the football world mainly due to the results of its national team, but that the reality of the Croatian national league is far from the standards of the rich European leagues.

Table 1 shows the average number of spectators in the Croatian Football League over the last 10 seasons. With the exception of the 2020/21 season, when attendances were very low due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Croatian Football League has seen a gradual increase in interest and attendance.

Table 1. Average attendance in the Croatian football league

Season	Average attendance	Club with highest average attendance
2014./15.	5,371	HNK Hajduk Split- 21,232
2015./16.	2,451	HNK Hajduk Split- 9,246
2016./17.	2,780	HNK Hajduk Split- 9,377
2017./18.	2,948	HNK Hajduk Split- 11,999
2018./19.	2,732	HNK Hajduk Split- 11,978
2019./20.	3,152	HNK Hajduk Split- 11,837
2020./21.	1,472	HNK Hajduk Split- 3,929
2021./22.	2,841	HNK Hajduk Split- 12,668
2022./23.	4,084	HNK Hajduk Split- 15,345
2023./24.	5,371	HNK Hajduk Split- 21,232

Source: Authors compilation based on the data from Transfermarkt.com

While Hajduk from Split is consistently at the top in terms of spectator numbers, other clubs have lower attendances. Dinamo Zagreb, for example, had an average attendance of 3,926 in the 2021/22 season, which rose to 9,013 in the 2023/24 season due to close results and a very effective marketing campaign, especially in the spring. The Croatian club Rijeka also attracted an average of 3,799 spectators at home and away matches in the 2021-22 season, which increased to 6,406 by the 2023-24 season. The last of the four major Croatian clubs, Osijek, built a new stadium and recorded an average attendance of 7,418 in the 2023/24 season, compared to just 2,764 in the 2021/22 season (<https://www.transfermarkt.com/1-hnl/besucherzahlen/wettbewerb/KR1>).

This data shows a positive growth trend for the Croatian football league, with most of the growth concentrated on these four clubs, while the rest of the league is increasingly lagging behind.

Junaci (2024) discusses the return of fans to stadiums, highlighting that Dinamo has once again filled the seats, with increasing demand for tickets, especially for the home games. However, to fully understand Dinamo and its supporters, it is important to recognize the Bad Blue Boys (BBB)—the club's iconic fan group.

The BBB are known for their passionate support, loud chants, and strong presence both at home and away matches. The group is synonymous with Dinamo's identity in Zagreb, contributing to the club's vibrant supporter culture and making a direct impact on the matchday atmosphere (<https://www.vecernji.hr/sport/povratak-navijaca-na-stadione-dinamovci-su-u-jednom-segmentu-najbolji-u-hrvatskoj-1767694>).

Dinamo has always had a large fan base, but the first organised group emerged in 1986 when some of the club's most loyal supporters founded the Bad Blue Boys (BBB), which was modelled on foreign fan groups. The fans organised trips around what was then Yugoslavia, visiting cities such as Ljubljana, Niš and Belgrade with symbols of Dinamo, Zagreb and Croatia. There were often fights at these meetings, but the fan base grew (<https://www.badblueboys.hr/povijest/>).

In 1991, the club was renamed HAŠK Građanski, later Croatia Zagreb. Many fans rejected this and demanded the return of the Dinamo name. In the 1990s, there were riots, incidents and conflicts with the police, but when the Dinamo name returned on Valentine's Day 2000, fan support grew back. The BBB attracted attention across Europe for their passionate support at both home and away games, but were also involved in hooliganism, earning a reputation as one of the most dangerous fan groups in Europe (<https://iks-portal.info/dogadanja/otrgnuto-od-zaborava/item/25597-17-03-1986-godibne-osnovana-navijacka-skupina-zagrebackog-dinama-bad-blue-boysi.html>).

Although the BBB is one of the most influential fan groups in Europe with many positive stories — especially in terms of charity and community support, its main shortcoming is frequent violence. (<https://www.tportal.hr/sport/clanak/duga-povijest-ludila-bezobzirnih-bbb-a-20100504>). The most recent incident occurred in 2023, when BBB fans and fans of Panathinaikos Athens clashed with fans of AEK Athens, resulting in the death of Greek fan. Over 100 Dinamo fans were arrested. UEFA penalised Dinamo for the incident and the club has not had any fan support at European away matches since then (<https://sportske.jutarnji.hr/sn/nogomet/hnl/klubovi/dinamo/novi-sok-nakon-poraza-u-ateni-uefa-kaznila-dinamo-15366526>).

Torcida was founded in 1950 and is the oldest Croatian fan group known for its fervent support of Hajduk Split during the political oppression of the Yugoslav period, which led to the banning of the Torcida name. (<https://www.torcida.hr/povijesna-cinjenica/nakon-utakmice-protiv-partizana/>). Despite the ban, the fans continued to support their club. In the 1960s, incidents became more frequent. In the 1970s, Torcida adopted southern-style cheering with many flags and banners and northern-style scarf-wearing and violence (<https://www.torcida.hr/povijesna-cinjenica/nastavak-djelovanja-u-ilegali/>).

Torcida name was re-installed in 1981, gathering fans at the new Poljud stadium in Split. The 1980s saw political graffiti reflecting ethnic tensions and growing national consciousness, alongside rising hooliganism and drug problems (<https://www.torcida.hr/povijesna-cinjenica/osamdesete/>). In the 1990s the group faced crises of drugs and leadership issues (<https://www.torcida.hr/povijesna-cinjenica/velika-kriza-torcide/>). In the early 2000s, a younger generation took over, but violence continued. However, in 2004, Torcida took over managing the club Hajduk (<https://www.torcida.hr/povijesna-cinjenica/torcida-ponovno-postaje-navijacka-skupina/>).

Croatian football is deeply characterised by its passionate fan culture, exemplified by iconic fan groups the Bad Blue Boys of Dinamo Zagreb and the Torcida of Hajduk Split. Their history reflects both deep loyalty and challenges such as violence, but despite the ongoing complexity, they continue to play a central role in maintaining and revitalising the sport.

Research into the habits and characteristics of fans in the Croatia

In order to gain a better understanding of football fans in Croatia, a research study was conducted to define their key characteristics and uncover the motivations behind their support for clubs and attendance at sporting events. The research focussed on two main relationships: the relationship between fans' financial reso-

urces and their ability to attend sporting events, and the relationship between a club's success and fans' motivation to attend stadiums, arenas and other sporting venues. The aim of the study was to investigate the reasons why fans follow certain clubs, to investigate the prevalence of deviant behaviour among fans at sporting events and to identify the club characteristics that are most attractive to Croatian fans and which they follow.

A survey-based research was conducted to achieve the above objectives. To collect the data, a questionnaire with 13 closed questions was distributed online, with the invitation to participate in the survey placed in the Dinamo fans Facebook group and other fan-based social networking groups on Instagram. This sampling strategy helped to target a specific part of the population, resulting in convenient with convenient sample but relevant sample for the topic and scope of the research. The data was collected in late 2023 and early 2024, with a total of 364 participants.

The characteristics of the sample show that significantly more male respondents took part, with men outnumbering women by 46.8 %. The largest age group was participants aged 21–30, who made up 30.2 % of the total sample. Respondents aged 31–40 made up 20.9%, followed by 41–50 year olds at 19.2%. Participants under the age of 20 made up 14.6 %, while 15.1 % were over the age of 50. In terms of educational level, the majority of respondents (55.8 %) had completed secondary school. This was followed by respondents who had completed a Master's degree (14.6 %) and students (12.9 %). In addition, 9.1 % of the participants had a bachelor's degree, 3.3 % had completed a postgraduate degree and 4.4 % (16 people) had only completed primary school.

The research participants are primarily interested in football. 93.4% or 340 of them stated that football is their favourite sport. This is no surprise, as the sample was selected from football fans. However, other sports are mentioned in smaller proportions: handball with 1.6% and other sports mentioned are basketball, futsal, swimming, tennis and ice hockey.

The survey results show that majority of respondents (76%) have supported their club for more than 15 years. The next largest group are those who have been fans for 10–15 years (12.1%), followed by fans who have been loyal to the club for 5-10 years (8.8%). The smallest group are the new fans, of whom only 3% have supported their club for less than five years. This question was designed to determine the degree of attachment and loyalty to a particular club. The results clearly show that most respondents have remained loyal to their club over the long term and have a deep connection with it.

Building on these findings about long-term loyalty, the study analysed the most important reasons why Croatian fans support their clubs. The majority of respondents — 50.3% — stated that they follow their club primarily because of a strong geographical connection between the club and the region in which they live. Family influence is the second most common reason, with 11.6% stating that they cheer for a club because other family members do the same. Watching games on TV motivates 10.5% of participants to support their club, while 8.7% cited various other reasons for their loyalty. Of those who stated their personal motivations, love of the club was the most commonly cited (8.5%), followed by factors such as defiance, belonging to a fan subculture, lifestyle choice, the opportunity to participate in fan-related incidents and other individual motivations. These findings highlight the deeply rooted social, emotional and cultural drivers that characterise football enthusiasm in Croatia and reinforce the strong bonds between fans and their clubs.

The study also analysed how often fans attend their club's matches to find out how often fans spend their time (and financial resources) inside and outside football stadiums. The survey data shows that the majority of respondents (29.8% or 108 individuals) attend their club's matches more than five times a year. A further 23.1% attend matches once or twice a year, while 12.4% go to matches once or twice a month. Some of the respondents (9.9%) stated that they regularly attend all home and away matches, and 8.3% attend several matches per month. The remaining respondents only rarely attend matches. These results show that a significant proportion of Croatian football fans regularly attend matches.

The study analysed how much money Croatian football fans spend on attending their club's away matches. The results show that the largest group (24%) spends between €20 and €50 on away games, 20.1% spend more than €100 per away game, 19.8% spend between €50 and €100 and 18.6% spend up to €20 on these trips. For the remaining participants, the most common reasons for not attending away games are work abroad, other personal commitments or — for a minority — spending more than €300 per game due to long-distance travelling. These results highlight the diverse financial commitment of Croatian football fans when it comes to supporting their clubs away from home.

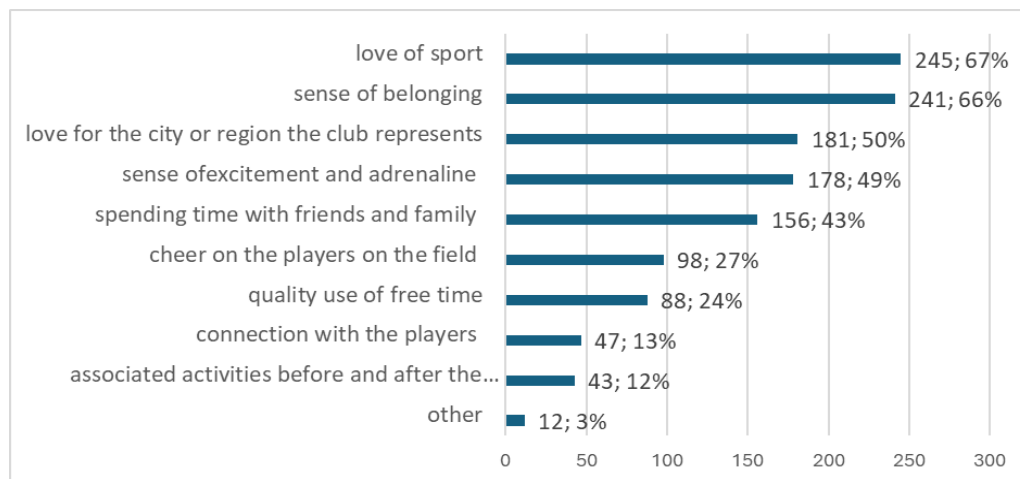
The study also examined the level of interest and involvement of Croatian football fans in club management and fan organisations. The results show that the majority of respondents (56.9%) are not involved in the governance or management of their club. At the same time, 39.2% of respondents said they were members of a supporters' organisation, reflecting a strong involvement at fan community level. Only a small minority 3.9% (14 people) are directly involved as a member of their club's

board. The results suggest that while active participation in club governance is rare, a significant proportion of fans are involved in organised fan groups, underlining the importance of fan associations in Croatian football culture.

The next survey question aimed to explore the connection between fans and their clubs by identifying the reasons why respondents began supporting their particular team. Participants could select from multiple motivating factors.

The most common motivator was a love of sport, cited by 67.3% of respondents. This was closely followed by a sense of belonging, where the club is seen as an integral part of one's identity (66.2%). 49.7% of respondents stated that they support their club out of love for the city or region that the club represents. Other notable reasons include the sense of excitement and adrenaline during matches (48.9%) and the social aspect of spending time with friends and family (42.9%). The motivation to cheer on the players on the field was mentioned by 26.9%, while 24.2% felt that they could make good use of their free time. In addition, the connection with the players was an important motivation for 47 respondents, and 43 supported their club because of the associated activities and events that take place before and after the sports matches. Details are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Motivations behind Croatian football fans supporting their clubs



Source: Research results

The next question related to participation in the lighting of torches and similar activities in stadiums or arenas. The aim was to determine the frequency of deviant behaviour before, during or after matches — a widespread problem, especially in Croatian football leagues.

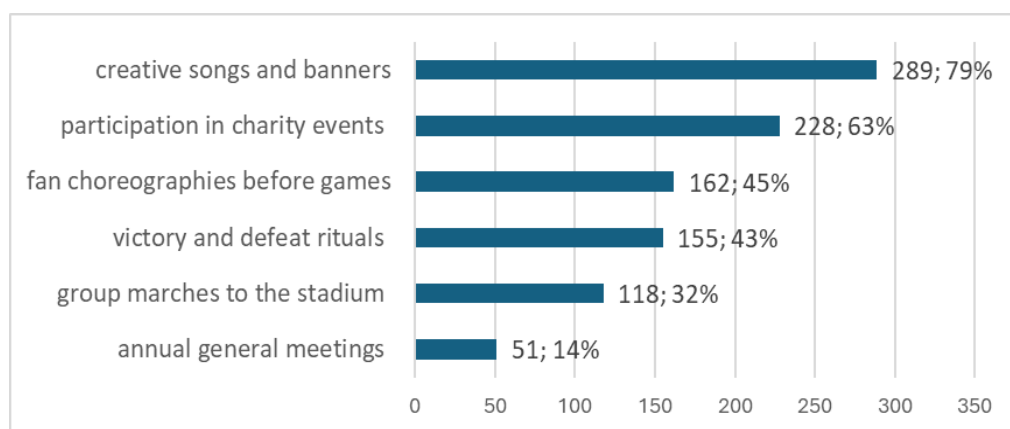
According to the results, the majority of respondents (66.9%) stated that they had never participated in deviant behaviour in stadiums or arenas. 24.2% of respondents admitted to having participated in such behaviour and 8.8% did not want to answer the question. This data suggests that while deviant behaviour does occur among some fans, most Croatian football fans refrain from such behaviour at sporting events.

The next question focussed on how important the success of their club is to the respondents. Only 3 respondents stated that the success of their club was not or only slightly important to them. A neutral attitude was expressed by 17 respondents (4.7%). For 59 respondents (16.3%), success was important, while the vast majority or 277 respondents (76.3%) stated that the success of their club was extremely important.

Finally, respondents were able to select multiple traditions and customs that define their fan groups. The most frequently mentioned characteristics are creative songs and banners, chosen by 80.1% of respondents, followed by participation in charity events with 63.2%. Choreographed fan shows (tifos) received 44.9% of the votes, while victory and defeat rituals were mentioned by 42.9%. In addition, group marches to the stadium were mentioned by 118 respondents and annual general meetings by 51 respondents, as shown in Figure 2.

These results emphasise the diverse cultural practises of Croatian football fans, which reinforce a strong sense of community and shared identity within their fan groups.

Figure 2. Traditions and customs characterizing Croatian football fans



Source: Research results

The study examined Croatian football supporters' demographics, behaviors, motivations, and traditions. The sample consisted predominantly of males, mostly aged 21–30.

It is evident that a large majority of fans support their clubs for over 15 years, demonstrating strong long-term loyalty. The primary motivation for following a club is geographic connection (50.3%), followed by family influence and love for the sport. Fans frequently attend matches, with nearly 30% going to more than five games per year and typically spending between €20 and €50 on away matches. While most fans (66.9%) do not engage in deviant behaviors like pyrotechnics, a notable minority (24.2%) do. Success of the club is extremely important to 76.3% of fans, reflecting the high value placed on sporting achievement. Fan groups strongly identify with cultural traditions, notably creative songs and banners (80.1%), but also in charity involvement (63.2%) and choreographed displays (44.9%), reinforcing community bonds.

Overall, Croatian football fans show deep emotional attachment, active engagement, and rich cultural practices that sustain vibrant fan communities despite challenges.

Conclusion

It is extremely important to distinguish between general sports spectators and enthusiasts and the more dedicated fans and supporters. Due to their strong loyalty, immense motivation and deep sense of connection and belonging to their chosen club, fans are the consumers who regularly attend sporting events regardless of the cost of tickets or related stadium services. A better understanding of fans can be instrumental in driving sports marketing and popularising a wide range of sports in the European market, where football currently dominates as the most popular sport. In particular, clubs such as Manchester United and Borussia Dortmund have high attendances and generate significant revenues from ticket sales, memberships, food, drink and other in-stadium services, as well as substantial revenues from TV rights outside the stadium.

Croatian football has not yet reached this level, but is making steady progress, as evidenced by rising spectator numbers and growing interest in the league.

Fan culture, especially football fan culture, is rich and diverse throughout Europe and can look back on a long history. Cultural practises are different — for example, the traditions of English fans before, during and after matches are very different

from those of Italian Ultras— - which emphasises an important positive aspect of European sporting culture. Across Europe, fans live football and organise their daily lives around match schedules, investing money to attend away games, travelling around Europe and the world, learning about new cultures and customs — all mainly to support their club or national team. In addition, fans often take part in charitable activities.

Fans have a significant influence on sports policy and legislation, as well as other areas related to sport. Alongside the positive aspects, however, there are also negative consequences. High adrenaline levels, disappointment and anger can lead to some fans in and around stadiums being prone to riots, fights, harassment of innocent people and serious damage to property. Unfortunately, some countries have seen an increase in violence in and around stadiums, England and Wales, for example. While Turkey and Greece have longstanding problems. In Croatia, annual incidents tend to involve pyrotechnics and verbal abuse of opponents or referees, which is still an improvement on the 1990s and 2000s when brawls between fans and injuries to police and bystanders were more frequent.

Building on previous research, this paper presents a study aimed at better understanding the habits and characteristics of Croatian fans. The aim was to uncover their motivations for supporting certain clubs, investigate the prevalence of deviant behaviour at sporting events and identify the club characteristics most attractive to Croatian fans.

The results of the study show that a large majority of fans (76%) have supported their club for more than 15 years, indicating strong long-term loyalty. The most important motivation for support is geographical connection (50.3%), followed by family influence and love of the sport. Fans attend matches frequently, with almost 30% attending more than five matches per year and typically spending between €20 and €50 on away matches. While most fans (66.9%) avoid deviant acts such as the use of pyrotechnics, a minority (24.2%) admit to carrying out such acts. The success of the club is very important to 76.3% of fans, which shows how highly sporting success is rated. Fan groups are strongly associated with cultural traditions, particularly creative songs and banners (80.1%), charity events (63.2%) and choreographed performances (44.9%) that strengthen the community. These findings are consistent with previous research by Funk, Alexandris and McDonald (2022) and Shilbury et al. (2009).

In conclusion, fans and fan groups are an important factor in the operation of clubs, leagues and sport in general, exerting an influence that can have both extremely positive and extremely negative consequences. The aim of sports marketing profe-

ssionals, security personnel and all stakeholders in sport should be to nurture and promote the positive aspects of the fan base whilst firmly discouraging, punishing and minimising the negative behaviours. This will help to build and develop a positive reputation for Croatian clubs, capitalise on the benefits of passionate support and turn fan engagement into successful business outcomes.

Conflict of interests:

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Author Contributions:

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PARTICIPATION OF THE CROATIAN SOCCER REPRESENTATION IN LARGE COMPETITIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCCER IN CROATIA

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Abstract: This paper contributes to the understanding of the economic impact of the Croatian national football team's participation in the World and European Championships on the overall development of Croatian football. The successes of the Croatian national football team are an incentive for children and young people who, delighted by their successes, start training football, that is, they enter the football "world". Also, the successes of the Croatian national football team, reflected in the economic aspect, have an economic impact on society, the federation, clubs and individual football players. Namely, the greater the success, the greater the financial reward, both for the athletes and for the sports association, which repeatedly affects the development of Croatian football. Through the topic of the research, the goal was to analyze and present whether there is and to what extent the economic impact of the participation of the Croatian national football team in major competitions on the development of football in Croatia. Scientific methods of induction and deduction, method of description and compilation were used. The empirical results of the research or the set variables point to facts where it is noticeable how big, significant and economically visible the success of the Croatian football team in major competitions has on the income of the Croatian Football Association, and thus immediately on the development of football in Croatia.

Keywords: football, Croatian national football team, impact, development

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Introduction

Football has a long history. Football in its present form originated in England in the mid-19th century, however, alternative versions of the game existed much earlier and are part of social, sporting and football history. Different forms of ball games, which included kicking, were recorded all over the world, including in China, Japan, Australia, Ancient Greece, Rome, England, etc. Football and major sports competitions are two global social phenomena that gather a large number of people. The rapid and dynamic development of the mentioned phenomena throughout history is the reason for their wider study. The rapid development and wide spectrum of football's scope, as well as the active life of a person, created the prerequisites for the connection of these two terms. The best football players in the world, the best football teams-representations of the world gather at major sports football competitions. For research, the World and European football championships fall under major sports competitions. The aforementioned sports events attract a large number of fans and tourists in one place during the time of the event. The organization of such manifestations enables the host country to receive great global media attention and various other economic and social positive effects. Today, football and large sports events are the subject of research due to their economic and social potential. Large sports events are, as a type of sports tourism, one of the main branches of sports tourism based on their mass attendance, large economic consumption and potential. The success of holding large sports events for organizers and participants is evaluated according to various variables in a very complex way, and the final decision on profitability is often of a subjective nature. The participation and success of football players and teams or national teams in major sports competitions gives athletes, football players, sports federations, clubs and countries a lot of media attention, popularizes football, affects the construction of the infrastructure necessary for the said sport, etc., but also an economic benefit that is significant and important. Since the topic of this research is "the economic impact of the participation of the Croatian national football team in major competitions", the paper analyzed and presented the same using the example of the Croatian national football team.

Social effects of sport events

For a number of people today, football as a sport and social phenomenon is the most important secondary thing in the world. For many, it is not secondary, but the primary thing in the world. At the time of major sporting events and the success of the Croatian national football team, there are even more people who become sensitized to football. For them, football and the football matches of the Croatian national football team

represent the most important thing at that moment. Considering the number of people gathered by the World and European Football Championships and the economic effects, the mentioned socio-economic phenomenon is considered one of the phenomena of the modern economy. Due to the extremely rapid development that began in the second half of the 20th century, sports events are an activity that has enormous influence and power in all social and economic aspects of everyday life. Organizations of sports events are closely related to sports, but also to tourism as a relatively young scientific discipline, which constantly achieves large economic consumption and stimulates the economy to a large extent. This makes it the third largest economic sector in the world, behind the chemical industry and the fuel industry. There are different criteria according to which manifestations, or events, are classified, and the basic classification of events (manifestations) is planned and unplanned. When we talk about planned events, we mean events that are the subject of the study of "event management" and they require setting up, management, organizers and executors and a certain time. The social effects of large, international sports events can be defined as the way in which sports events affect changing collective and individual values, patterns of behavior, community structure, way and quality of life. Three main aspects of the social effects of sports events can be identified through: sport and participation in sports - the degree to which sports events stimulate the sports sector and especially stimulate participation in sports, attitudes and beliefs - the degree to which sports events influence people's beliefs, attitudes, norms and values, social cohesion - it is a constant process of developing common community values, common challenges and equal opportunities, which are based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity. Although there are a number of positive impacts of sporting events, it is also important to point out that there are also a number of negative impacts. The positive social effects of sports events can be cited as an increase in mass participation in sports and physical activities, an increase in health awareness, an increase in (national) pride, the stimulation of a sense of satisfaction and connection, an increase in social cohesion, inclusion and social capital, the construction of social identity, various psychological benefits such as feelings of euphoria, transcendental effects. The negative effects of sports events can be cited as excessive crowds, security risks, traffic jams, social exclusion, vandalism, noise, etc. Aspects such as degradation, employment of foreigners rather than domestic and local population, and non-compliance with cultural norms (such as not shoulder coverings in the Middle East), are just some examples of the negative impacts of sports tourism. Sporting events can also result in negative impacts on host cities, these can include: displacement of local communities, crowds, hooliganism, crime and disruptions to the normal life of local residents. Of course, sports events are not organized to produce negative effects, but on the contrary, to produce as many positive effects as possible, both social, economic and all other.

Sports events and correlation with sports tourism

Sports events are an important driver of the economy, thus of time and tourism, and are prominent in the development and marketing plans of most destinations. The roles and impacts of planned events in tourism are well documented and are of increasing importance for the destination's competitiveness. Events (or planned events) are a spatio-temporal phenomenon and each one is unique due to the interactions between events, visitors and the management system (organization and implementation of events). Sports events are increasingly used to build the brand of the host destination. Events can play different roles in relation to a destination: as co-branding partners, as an extension of the destination or as a feature of the destination. Since each role presents different opportunities, risks and requirements, events must be strategically incorporated into a destination's marketing plan. The strategic inclusion of sporting events in destination branding requires that each event be compared to others in the destination's portfolio of events, as well as to the destination's other sporting activities and attractions (Aguar-Noury; Garcia-del-Barrio, 2022). It is important to point out that the contribution of sports events to the brand of the destination will be complete when their importance is not exclusively related to sports, but also with all the accompanying benefits of sports events. Getz gives a simple definition of sports events "sports events are, in the simplest terms, current matches or meetings during which sports activities take place" (Getz,). Getz also classified events into four categories: mega (large) events, periodic significant events, regional events, and local events. Major events are those such as the Olympic Games and the World and European Football Championships, and usually involve large investments, complex decision-making from many different parties and large potential impacts.

Football as a social phenomenon

Every day, large numbers of people sit in stadiums or in front of screens, whistling and shouting as they watch 22 players chasing the ball on a grass-covered field. Football, as it is known today, has become a global phenomenon. The history and origin and global spread of football has already been previously presented in the literature. So, modern football originated in England in 1863, and the rules of the game designed by the Football Association created the foundations for the way the sport is played today. The factors that turned football into a world pastime, i.e. the king of sports, are the following: simple rules of the game - when you watch the game for the first time, you don't need to try hard to understand it, a sense of social cohesion - whether you watch the game in the stadium or at home, in front of the television set, it's always fun to watch and comment on the game with friends, big stars and big amounts of money. Fortunately, money can't buy titles, and it's the players who always have to prove their

abilities. As long as the game lasts, and there are eleven players against eleven players on the pitch, anything is possible. Football has spread all over the world, cities, towns and even small villages have their own football clubs. Whether it's the spirit of the game, the emotions of the players, brilliant technique or stunningly beautiful goals, everyone will find something to enjoy in football. Considering all these factors that contribute to its immense popularity, it is safe to say that.

European and world championships

Although the first European Championship was held in 1960, the idea for it was born much earlier. It dates back to 1927, when the manager of the French Football Association, Henri Delaunay, first proposed holding a pan-European football tournament. The European Championship, formally the UEFA European Championship, also referred to as the "Football Euro", is a quadrennial tournament held between member countries of the Union of European Football Associations. The European Championship is the second most prestigious after the World Cup among international football tournaments. The World Cup, formally the FIFA "Football World Cup", is a tournament held every four years that crowns the world champion of football. It is probably the most popular sporting event in the world, which attracts billions of television viewers, and has enormous economic significance. The first competition for the cup was organized in 1930 by FIFA. 32 national teams participate in the tournament, and before the tournament, elimination international qualifying tournaments are held, the 32 winners of which play in the final tournament. It has already been mentioned that European and world championships are international "mega" sporting events, for which countries must compete in order to secure hosting.

Subject goal of the work and research questions in research methodology

The subject of the research is the economic significance and impact of the participation of the Croatian national football team in major competitions on the development of football in Croatia. From the subject of the research comes the goal of analyzing and presenting, is there any economic impact of the participation of the Croatian national football team in major competitions on the development of football in Croatia? In order to fulfill the goal of the research, the authors asked research questions that were answered in the paper. The questions covered the following areas: what are the most important sports and football events, what does the sports infrastructure in football include, the sustainability of sports facilities in the Republic of Croatia, motives for the participation of states in the organization of large football events, what are the successes and effects of the participation of the

Croatian national football team in large competitions? Scientific methods of induction and deduction, description and compilation were used during the research.

In the research, secondary theoretical research was carried out using secondary sources of data, namely books and professional articles related to the topic of the work, as well as various publications on the Internet. In order to achieve the goal of the work and collect useful information that improved knowledge about the research problem, which is the economic impact of the participation of the Croatian national football team in major competitions. Research to achieve the goal of the work and were collected through qualitative research using the method of research interviews with experts in the field of football, sports events and economic effects. Conducted qualitative research, using the research interview method. Based on the analysis of individual facts, using the inductive method, the research reached a conclusion about the general court, that is, using the deductive method, general and individual conclusions were drawn from the general courts. In the research, the method of description was used in the research to describe facts, processes and subjects without scientific interpretation and explanation. When taking over other people's observations, attitudes, conclusions and knowledge, the compilation method was used.

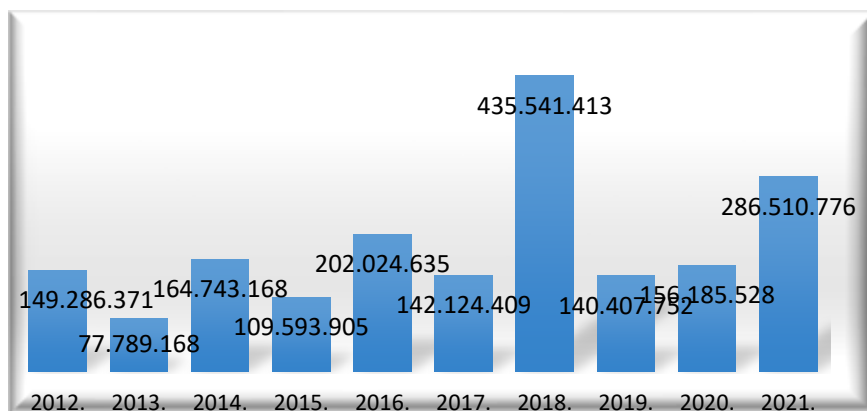
Research results

Thanks to winning second place at the World Cup in Russia 2018, the national team's success brought Croatia and its economy at least HRK 3.2 billion, which was the first concrete estimate of how much this great result affected the increase in GDP. The Croatian Football Association continued to invest significant funds in infrastructure in 2020, allocating more than 2,000,000 euros so that Croatian clubs would have the best possible conditions for work and the creation of new playing values. In the past year, HNS financed the installation of artificial grass on six playgrounds with its own funds in the amount of 1,100,000 euros. The project was realized in cooperation with cities/municipalities and/or clubs that were in charge of preparatory work, while HNS financed the purchase and installation of artificial grass. Investments in infrastructure continued with the installation of artificial grass on three more playgrounds as part of a project funded in the amount of 2,000,000 euros from UEFA's HatTrick program, after HNS's project was approved by the umbrella organization of European football. The project continues in 2021 with the installation of artificial grass on five more fields. In 2020, the Croatian Football Association allocated more than 1,000,000 euros in financial aid to Croatian clubs for the construction

of their infrastructure, and the same trend will continue in 2021. After the installation of hybrid turf in six Croatian stadiums (Rijeka, Koprivnica, Zaprešić, Kranjčevićeva, Maksimir, Pula) significantly improved the quality of Croatian first league football, which is reflected in the more pronounced minutes of the so-called "clean game", the higher number of goals scored and the lower number of player injuries, HNS will continue with the installation of hybrid lawns in the stadiums of the Croatian first league teams in 2021. Kustić states that "investments in infrastructure are a fundamental part of our approach to the development of Croatian football.

After the construction of hybrid lawns for the first league players, we continued our investments in infrastructure in the form of financing the construction of fields with artificial grass, and our investments will continue in the coming years. Without the high-quality work of the football base in Croatia, we would not have such a successful national team, and the Croatian Football Association is persistent in helping the base in all the ways available to us".

Graph 1. Total revenues of the Croatian Football Association in the period from 2012 to 2021 (in HRK).



Source: created by the author according to data from the Register of Non-Profit Organizations, available at: <https://banovac.mfin.hr/rnoprt/Index> (05/02/2022)

Previously, in the aforementioned graph, the successes of the Croatian national football team at major world competitions were presented. The economic impact of the success of the Croatian national football team is reflected in increased income in the years when the aforementioned successes were achieved, as can be seen from the graph. In 2012, the revenues of the Croatian Football Association increased, and

that year Croatia participated in the finals of the UEFA European Championship in Poland and Ukraine. Revenues also increased in 2014, when Croatia participated in the finals of the FIFA World Cup in Brazil. In 2016, Croatia took part in the finals of the UEFA European Championship in France 2016 and reached the round of 16, which can be seen in the increased income of HNS. In 2018, the Croatian national team achieved the greatest success in history by winning the silver medal at the FIFA World Cup in Russia, which can also be seen in the significant increase in HNS income in 2018. At the European Championship held in 2021, Croatia participated in the final and also achieved a significant economic benefit.

Empirical research carried out using the in-depth interview method found that the success of the national team significantly affects society's identification with football, the development of training infrastructure, the increase in income from international club transfers (8,862,243.34 Euros), the increased number of international player transfers, the increased number of issued professional licenses, increased number of trips to international tournaments, increased number of issued official licenses for participation in competitions, etc. The research also found that success: did not affect the construction of football stadiums, financial stability of all clubs from the first three ranks of the competition, increase in gross compensation for coaches and sports workers in the lower ranks of the competition. In the club licensing procedure for the 2020/2021 competitive season. for the first time, an obligation was introduced that women's clubs that wanted to participate in the UEFA Champions League had to obtain a license for that competition. Therefore, at the beginning of the Central Licensing Procedure for 2020/2021. held a workshop to which all clubs I. and II. HNLŽ. A workshop was also held for all clubs I. and II. HNL, and for clubs III. HNL and I. HNLŽ who submitted applications for licenses for 2020/2021 (Table no. 1).

Table 1. Number of licenses issued by HNS for official competitions in 17 licensing systems.

Number of licenses issued to clubs	Competition rank
136	Licenses for UEFA competitions
235	Licenses for 1 HNL
296	Licenses for 2 HNL

Conclusion

All sports events, of greater or lesser importance, are an excellent opportunity for the development of cities, regions or countries to the extent that they stimulate local socio-economic development by contributing to the creation of jobs and the construction and improvement of infrastructure (roads, lighting, hotels, restaurants, shops, etc.), that is, not only tourists but also the local population benefit. Participation and achieved results in major sporting events represent great opportunities for the economic development of football in a particular country, but also great challenges with a possible negative outcome. The successes of athletes and sports teams at major sports competitions such as the World and football championships, in addition to being confirmation of their dedicated work and training for athletes and teams, i.e. national teams, also bring with them economic benefits, social influences, etc. Successes of the Croatian national football team have been followed since the very beginning, and the greatest successes of the Croatian national football team, since Croatia became an independent state, are 3rd place at the FIFA World Cup in France in 1998 and 2nd place at the FIFA World Cup in Russia in 2018. The paper presents the income of the Croatian Football Association in the period from 2012 to 2021, where it is noticeable how significant the success of the Croatian national football team in major competitions has on the financial income of the Croatian Football Association, and thus immediately on the immediate development of football in Croatia. Which was presented through: the construction of sports fields, economic benefits for sports clubs, increasing the involvement of the number of experts in football, developing social interest in football, increasing the number of systematically organized competitions, increasing the number of young people in football, etc. To fully exploit the potential of the national team's sports results, it is necessary a long-term plan for economic and infrastructural sustainability, as well as proper development and building of the Croatian football brand. In conclusion, focusing on the facts, our empirical analysis of the national team's sporting successes, it follows that the national team's successes are the main force, the flywheel of the development and well-being of Croatian football as a whole, both in terms of social, sporting and economic significance, and entail great potential.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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LANGUAGE OF VICTORY AND TOGETHERNESS: A CASE STUDY OF HANDBALL CLUB MRK ČAKOVEC'S SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

Tina Smolković ¹

Abstract: Social media have become an indispensable part of marketing strategies in sports. In cases of smaller organizations and localized popularity of a certain sport, they have come to provide a rather useful and cost-effective tool for reaching desirable audiences, boosting visibility and fostering engagement.

The paper focuses on the social media presence of the sports club MRK Čakovec, currently a member of the highest level of handball competition in Croatia. The club uses social media and newsletter campaigns for communicating relevant information, results, updates, and to reach out to the fans.

A qualitative case study methodology was employed, i.e. content analysis was used to examine the club's social media posts as well as fan engagement data, thus providing practical insight into the effects of social media management in sports.

Keywords: digital marketing in sports, fan engagement, language in social media communication

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Introduction

Sport has a far-reaching positive side that goes beyond health and physical fitness, especially when it comes to social interaction. It can give the opportunity for sports enthusiasts and fans regardless of their age to socially connect and get a sense of belonging by coming around a shared passion. A sports club can also be a representative of a legacy, local heritage, and, by extension, a source of pride for the local community. In order to reach potential fans, create and expand a loyal fan base, sports clubs use various marketing strategies. While major clubs in widely popular sports tend to have at their disposal substantial financial resources for marketing, smaller organizations often struggle in that respect. However, social media has given a voice to them, i.e. a convenient and cost-effective platform for a club to be heard and become visible in their sport. Therefore, digital marketing has become crucial for brand promotion and fan engagement.

An example of such a sport organization is MRK Čakovec, a male handball club from Međimurje, Croatia. The club was founded in 2013, continuing on the long-standing tradition of handball in the region dating back almost a century. In more recent history, two decades ago the nominal predecessor of the club participated in the top level of the Croatian handball league and even the European EHF Cup. MRK Čakovec, therefore, was established as the legitimate successor with the aim to restore its position not only in the world of sport but also in the local community (Maruševac, 2023). Currently, the club is competing in the Croatian Premier League among the best Croatian handball clubs, and, consequently, it can be said that male handball has been revitalised in the region and has restored its popularity in the local community.

The case study presented here takes into account the strategic use of content, particularly language, on social media sites to promote the club brand as well as the sport, communicate news and updates, engage with fans and encourage them to actively participate in events and club activities.

Theoretical framework

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2016) define digital marketing as '[a]chieving marketing objectives through applying digital technologies and media'. It has permeated all walks of life, including sports, and changed the way sports is promoted and fans reached. Yu (2024) refers to digital marketing in sports as 'the most important bridge between

clubs and fans today'. Digital marketing is not limited to social media platforms exclusively, but the focus of the paper lies primarily on them.

Social media is defined as a 'computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through virtual networks and communities', used by more than 5 billion users worldwide (Paljug, 2025). In terms of social networks, 59.3% of the population in the European Union, 62.8% in Croatia, use them (Eurostat, 2024). In Europe, Facebook (78.01%) followed by Instagram (8.54%) are leading social media platforms by their share in the social media market (Statista, 2025).

Social media provides a cost-effective and convenient tool for connecting the brand with target audiences (Krajnović et al., 2019). Paljug (2025) also notes that perceived advantages of social media include connectivity, building community and affordable advertising. Similarly to sports, which has the power to connect people across generations as well as communities, so are social media used as means to form relationships and foster communication. Combining the two has broadened the range of possibilities for sports organizations, athletes as well as the audience, and has enabled the globalization of sports (Galen, 2021). Romero-Jara et al. (2023) as well as Alferova (2024) also stress the importance of social media for sports organisations in terms of fan engagement, identifying them as fundamental tools for communication.

McCulloh (2019) has analyzed the language as well as symbols used in the digital world, and how it has influenced our communication. Apart from the symbols and signs that are crucial for developing a brand identity the target audience recognises and responds to (Gandla & Vemali, 2023), language plays a major role as well. It can influence the behaviour of the target audience, evoke emotion and build connection and loyalty (Sambuno, 2023). Therefore, organizations need to consider the right language for effective social media content as well as bear in mind specific elements of a post, e.g. captions, emojis, calls-to-action, mentions, hashtags, images and videos (Hootsuite, 2025). The language strategies applied in the business sphere in general can be used as a means to reach out and address audiences in sports as well. In other words, sports organisations can communicate messages fans can relate to and connect with by using social media (Ramotion, 2024).

Methodology

The study explores the role of language in digital marketing of a handball sports club - MRK Čakovec. A case study approach has been selected to grasp the ways in which language affects fan engagement on social media platforms. Most recent examples of content used on the club's Facebook and Instagram in the season 2024/2025 have

been analyzed. Primarily qualitative method has been used for this purpose. In order to provide the context of the club's activities, a portion of the data has been quantitatively presented as well.

MRK Čakovec and its social media presence

The handball club MRK Čakovec is run by a number of volunteers united by the shared enthusiasm for handball, both as one of the most successful national sports in Croatia and for its enduring presence and popularity regionally (MRK Čakovec, 2025). The mission and vision of the club are expressed as follows:

'The vision is to be the leading men's handball organization in the region, offering its members, partners, and supporters the opportunity to fulfill their needs for proper development and enjoyment of sporting competition at the highest levels. The aim is to create a solid club based on development, teamwork, and a high level of responsibility. The mission, based on collaboration and the development of the potential of all our members and partners, is to popularize and work on giving mass appeal to the game of handball, to ensure proper and professional development of the sport in the town of Čakovec and the Međimurje County, and to provide lasting satisfaction to both members and supporters of the club' (MRK Čakovec, 2025, translated by Smolković,T.).

It can be discerned that the club strives to maintain stability and teamwork, regain and preserve the popularity of sport regionally, and to ensure fulfilling sporting moments for everyone involved. Apart from the head team competing in the top level of handball league in Croatia, there is also the reserve team, 10 generations of youth teams, as well as the veteran team. Therefore, the club assembles active members of various age groups as well as their families. Its target audience are also handball enthusiasts in general, most of whom are residents in the region. A rise in the level of performance of the head team in the last couple of seasons has also resulted in the increasing number of fans who actively support the team, particularly during the home matches. The rise in numbers is evidenced in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. The number of visitors present at the home matches of MRK Čakovec from 2022 to 2025

Season and league MRK Čakovec competed in:	Average number of visitors at a home match:
Season 2022/23 1. League North	198
Season 2023/24 1. League North	473
Season 2024/25 Premier League	956

Source: Official match reports by Croatian Handball Association (HRS)

As a means of informing the fans about upcoming events, relevant information and the teams, various social media are used. Newsletters campaigns are sent to subscribers generally to announce an upcoming match, amounting to two emails per month on average. The club also has a YouTube account featuring videos about the head team. The main platforms the club uses to reach out to the fans and the wider community are Facebook and Instagram. Posts are published on a daily basis, often more than one, generally reflecting the activities of all the teams active within the club, even though the head team dominates the number of published content. (Note: Content published on Facebook does not differ to a great extent to the one posted on Instagram, so the selected examples are taken from the Facebook page.) Table 2 lists types of content posted in March 2025:

Table 2. Types of content published by MRK Čakovec on Facebook during Premier League season in March 2025

Social media content published on Facebook (March 2025) by type:	Number of posts
Game-related content	
- match updates/score graphics	4
- post match summaries with standout moments	5
- upcoming match countdowns or reminders	18
- highlight reels from matches	2
- statements before matches	4
- behind the scenes	1

Player features	
- career highlights	2
Fan engagement	
- giveaways	2
- (invitation to the match - overlapping with match reminders)	(4)
Value content	
- achievements (awards)	1
- club in the news	2
- curiosities	1
Community & outreach	
- youth team updates	14
- sponsor shoutouts	3
Trend based	
- reactions to trending sport moments (national handball team)	1
Total:	60

Source: Facebook page of MRK Čakovec

Language use on the social media – MRK Čakovec

The club's social media posts reflect the club's brand - professionalism while keeping in touch with the target audience. After all, it is precisely the wording of the messages that contributes to caring and developing the community spirit. The posts are generally written in a semi-formal style, especially when conveying updates and useful information. The informal and conversational styles are adopted as well, especially when addressing the fans directly. While the tone of the messages is generally professional, there are also instances of humorous and emotional tones. One of the most frequent examples is a match announcement, as shown in the image below.

Photo 1. A typical match day announcement posted on Facebook on February 16 2025 and its translation

 Muški Rukometni Klub Čakovec 16 Feb · 🌐 🔥 [GAME DAY - LIGA ZA PRVAKA - 1. KOLO] Danas nas čeka prva utakmica u Ligi za prvaka Paket24 Premijer lige! 🏆 Gostujemo kod RK Poreč, momčadi s velikim iskustvom u premijerligaškom natjecanju. Iako naši rukometaši odlaze u Poreč oslabljeni, spremni su dati sve od sebe i pokazati borbeni duh! 🏐🛡️ 🏆 RK Poreč vs MRK Čakovec 📅 Nedjelja, 16.2.2025. 🕒 17:00 sati 📍 SC Veli Jože, Poreč 📺 Prijenos uživo na Sportskoj televiziji Ulaskom u Ligu za prvaka ostvaren je naš ovosezonski cilj, a svaka utakmica u ovom natjecanju prilika je za rast i stjecanje vrijednog iskustva. Pratite nas uživo u Poreču ili putem Sportske televizije te budite uz naše dečke! 💪 MRKI KAŽE: AJMO ČAKOVEEEEEEC! 🐻 ZA ČAKOVEC - SVI! 🤝 #premijerka #ligazaprvaka #crohandball #hrs #paket24 #mrkčakovec #začakovescvi #mrki #mrkčk #volimčakovec #letećimedvjedi	Muški rukometni klub Čakovec [GAME DAY – CHAMPIONSHIP LEAGUE – ROUND 1] Our first match in the Championship League in the Paket24 Premier League awaits us today! We're playing an away match against RK Poreč, a team with great experience in the Premier League competition. Although our players are heading to Poreč with a weakened squad, they are ready to give their all and show their fighting spirit! RK Poreč vs. MRK Čakovec Sunday, 16.2.2025 17:00 SC Veli Jože, Poreč Live broadcast on Sportska televizija channel Upon entering the Championship League, we have achieved our goal for the season, and every match in this competition is an opportunity for growth and gaining valuable experience. Follow us live in Poreč or on Sportska televizija and support our boys! MRKI SAYS: LET'S GO ČAKOVEEEEEEC! FOR ČAKOVEC – ALL! #premijerka #ligazaprvaka #crohandball #hrs #paket24 #mrkčakovec #začakovescvi #mrki #mrkčk #volimčakovec #letećimedvjedi
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Source: Facebook page of MRK Čakovec (translated by Smolković, T.)

While the post serves its purpose to inform the followers about an upcoming event, the length of the post confirms that social media is used as the primary source of communication towards the public. It not only contains the most relevant information in the form of time and venue of the match, but also provides a broader context. The caption is clear and concise, while the emojis are used to pinpoint specific information or emphasise a part of the text. The post also contains hashtags

referring to the club and the handball in Croatia. The post ends in a 'statement' by Mrki, the club's bear mascot, and a call-to-action to follow the match.

Posts featuring Mrki the mascot usually have a conversational style especially in giveaway posts which begin with '*MRKi pita - koga vodiš na utakmicu [...]?*' (Cro. 'MRKi is asking - who is coming with you to the match?') (Facebook - MRK Čakovec, April 2 2025). A humorous tone is also given in the match announcement posts ending with '*MRKi kaže - vidim ose na tribinama*' (Facebook, MRK Čakovec March 24 2025), which translates as 'MRKi says - I see wasps in the stands', but is also an intentional misspelling of '*vidimo se*' (Cro. see you).

When announcing matches, motivation in language can be clearly discerned. For example, Photo 1. above not only shows a direct invitation to the fans ('follow us live [...] and support our boys'), but also uses the cheer '*Za Čakovec - svi!*' (Cro. 'All for Čakovec'), which is used by the head team during the matches. In order to further engage the audience, direct calls-to-action for fan participation are used as well as the sense of urgency, as shown in Table 3.:

Table 3. Examples of calls-to-action for fan participation

Calls-to-action for fan participation	Translation	Date of the post
<i>Vrijeme je za Ligu za prvaka - svi na Nexe!</i>	Time for the Championship League – (inviting) everyone to (watch the match against) Nexe!	February 25 2025
<i>Nemojte propustiti!</i>	Don't miss (the match)!	February 27 2025
<i>Budite uz našu momčad u Ligi za prvaka!</i>	Support our team in the Championship League!	February 28 2025
<i>Ponosni do neba na našu ekipu i navijače! Idemo dalje samo jako!</i>	(We are) greatly proud of our team and fans! Let's keep pushing forward all out!	March 2 2025
<i>Vaša podrška bit će važnija nego ikad, stoga se vidimo na tribinama za destak dana!</i>	Your support will make a difference more than ever, so see you in the stands in about ten days!	March 10 2025
<i>Vaša podrška čini razliku!</i>	Your support makes all the difference!	March 21 2025
<i>Podržite nas kad nam je najpotrebnije!</i>	Support us when it counts the most!	March 29 2025

Source: Facebook page of MRK Čakovec (translated by Smolković, T.)

The sense of togetherness and the idea that the team's success relies on fan support permeates the messages on social media. The club takes great pride in victory, even more so when it was accomplished in a great atmosphere in the sports hall, which corresponds to the club's mission and vision. See Table 4. for examples of language used to promote unity and community spirit:

Table 4. Examples of the language used to promote the sense of togetherness

Language of togetherness:	Translation	Date of the post
<i>Hvala svima koji su bili dio [rukometne] večeri - Čakovec živi rukomet!</i>	Thanking everyone who was part of the [handball] evening – Čakovec lives and breathes handball!	March 4 2025
<i>Dođite i budite dio naše zajedničke rukometne priče!</i>	Join us and become a part of our handball story!	March 18 2025
<i>Ponosni na naše igrače i navijače! Fenomenalna atmosfera i glasna podrška s tribina nosila je naše dečke tijekom cijele utakmice!</i>	Proud of our players and fans! The incredible atmosphere and loud support from the stands carried our boys throughout the entire match!	March 23 2025

Source: Facebook page of MRK Čakovec (translated by Smolković, T.)

Apart from the language used to promote the brand and club activities, encourage fan engagement and foment community spirit around sports, visual elements accompany textual posts in most cases. As seen in Photo 1., special signs and emoticons are used to communicate the general idea and to pinpoint the specific parts of the message. Graphics that are posted along with the text mostly contain a photo of a player, the most relevant information (e.g. full time score, clubs and league logos). They are done against a dark blue background with a touch of red, which corresponds to the club's visual branding.

Analysis of audience engagement

As previously mentioned, MRK Čakovec has been gradually building its fan base, which also overlaps with the success of the head team. When it comes to social media, the club has more than 3.300 followers on Facebook, and more than 1.400 followers on Instagram. For the purposes of the paper, likes and comments are taken into account as examples of audience engagement.

Posts that generate the most comments are giveaways, since they tend to encourage fans to name the person who will be accompanying them to the match and, in doing so, they might win a piece of official club merchandise. Such posts tend to generate a couple of hundred comments on average (161 comments on Facebook and 101 comments on Instagram - giveaway post on April 2 2025; 279 comments on Facebook and 26 comments on Instagram - giveaway post on March 26 2025; 146 comments on Facebook and 159 comments on Instagram - giveaway post on March 19 2025; 189 comments on Facebook and 74 comments on Instagram - giveaway post on February 26 2025).

When it comes to fan engagement in the form of likes, various types of content have brought about reactions from the audience, as shown in Table 5.:

Table 5. Example of posts with the greatest number of likes in season 2024/2025

Type of content	Brief post description	Nr. of likes on Facebook/Instagram	Date of post
Game-related	A video clip with a text about controversial moments in a home match	89/602	March 5 2025
Player features	A photo showing a head team player with two youth players with a text about taking part in the junior national team	80/406	March 14 2025
Game-related & fan engagement	A photo gallery with match highlights and a text expressing pride in players and fans	168/355	March 2 2025
Game-related	A behind-the-scenes photo celebrating victory, as expressed in a single-word text	245/332	April 4 2025

Source: Facebook page of MRK Čakovec

The greatest amount of likes stems from game-related content. The posts are generally published on the same day as the events occur, so fan engagement can also be connected with emotion and connection experienced on the spot in the sports hall. This, again, aligns with the club’s mission and vision - to restore popularity for the sport in the region and give the community a reason to come together to enjoy exciting sporting moments.

Conclusion

The case study on the social media presence of handball club MRK Čakovec has highlighted the important role of relevant and compelling content as a part of the digital marketing in sports. The use of emotionally resonant and community-oriented language enhances fan engagement. The club's tone, marked by pride in achievements and inclusivity, reflects its brand values, fostering a strong connection with its supporters.

Despite having a limited marketing budget and staff, MRK Čakovec still manages to get its message across, not only towards the fan base, but sporting public in the region and wider as well. By using sport-focused and community-oriented messaging, the club encourages active participation both online and in-person during sporting events.

This case study contributes to the broader field of digital marketing, and more specifically, sports marketing, by offering practical insights into the effective content creation and use of language for engagement. It also highlights the growing importance of digital communication as not just a tool for promotion, but as a means of community-building.

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FROM RECREATION TO ELITE SPORT: CYCLING AS A LIFESTYLE AND ITS IMPACT ON HEALTH, WELL-BEING, AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to examine cycling as a lifestyle, from leisure to competitive levels, with a focus on the effects it has on people's physical and mental health as well as their social connections within communities. The objective is to investigate the health advantages of regular cycling, such as the prevention of chronic illnesses, the increase of cardiorespiratory endurance, and the strengthening of the musculoskeletal system, by means of a review of pertinent research and the literature currently in publication. Both psychological effects—like stress reduction, improved subjective well-being, and boosted self-confidence—and social aspects—like how cycling contributes to the development of sports culture, community, and social capital—are given special consideration. Examples of cycling competitions, such as the Tour de France, are also analyzed as global sporting events that influence the popularization of cycling and its integration into different spheres of social life. The paper seeks to demonstrate how cycling, in all its forms, represents a powerful instrument for promoting an active and healthy lifestyle.

Keywords: cycling, lifestyle, health, well-being, social connectedness

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Introduction

One of the earliest and most well-liked types of physical exercise and mobility is cycling, which has developed throughout time from a straightforward mode of transportation into a complicated phenomena with important social, cultural, and health ramifications. People of various ages, genders, and physical abilities may participate in it because to its accessibility, affordability, and wide range of applications. Cycling is now more than just a sport or leisure activity; it's a way of life that incorporates exercise into everyday routines, shapes individual and societal identity, and promotes sustainability and health consciousness.

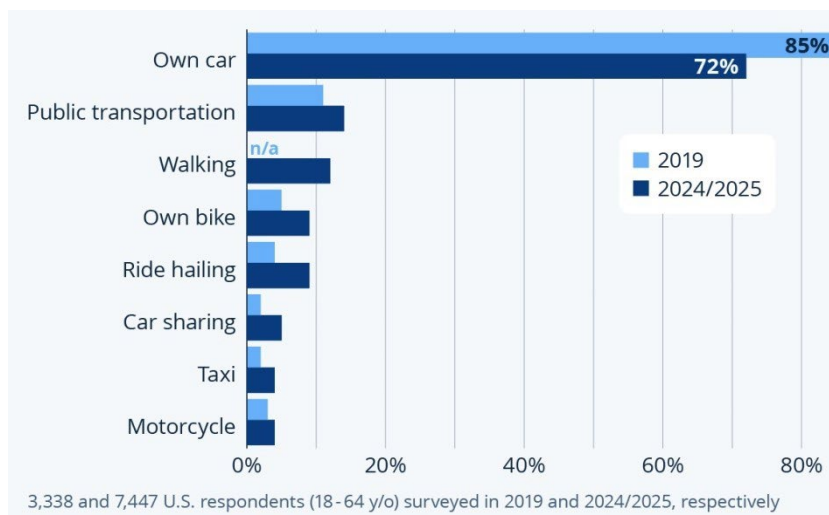
Regular cycling provides physical benefits, including strengthening the cardiovascular system and reducing the risk of chronic diseases (Schwarz et al., 2024). Psychological benefits include stress reduction and improved mental health, as confirmed by the causal link between commuting by bicycle and lower prescription rates for antidepressants and anxiolytics (Berrie et al., 2024). Cycling also provides both health and climate benefits, such as prevented deaths and reduced CO₂ emissions (Schwarz et al., 2024). Active commuting (cycling or walking) is associated with a significantly lower risk of mental and physical illnesses, as well as reduced mortality (Friel, Walsh, & Whyte, 2024).

The social dimension of cycling includes the potential for building and strengthening social ties (Ilievska Kostadinović & Kostadinović, 2025). Group rides, cycling clubs, and local initiatives encourage cooperation, exchange of experiences, and a sense of community belonging (Heeremans et al., 2022). Mass sporting events and prestigious cycling races, such as the Tour de France, represent not only the pinnacle of sporting achievement but also cultural manifestations that inspire millions of people worldwide. These events promote values of perseverance, teamwork, and fair play, while simultaneously raising awareness of the importance of physical activity in everyday life (Dašić, 2024).

Cycling also plays an important role in sustainable mobility. As an environmentally friendly mode of transportation, it reduces harmful gas emissions, improves air quality, and lowers noise levels in urban environments. The development of cycling infrastructure—bike lanes, parking facilities, and safety systems—contributes to greater traffic safety and encourages more people to incorporate this mode of movement into their daily activities. In many cities around the world, cycling is integrated into urban planning strategies as a key element of sustainable development and public health improvement. June 3 has been recognized as World Bicycle Day by the United Nations, a celebration that highlights the advantages of

bicycles as a healthy, affordable, and environmentally friendly means of transport. On this day, people are encouraged to leave their cars and commute by bike. However, in the United States, this remains relatively rare despite its health and traffic benefits. According to Statista Consumer Insights, 72% of Americans commute by car, 14% by public transport, and only 9% by bicycle. Although alternatives to cars have been on the rise since 2019, automobiles still dominate (Figure 1). The low use of bicycles is largely due to the long distances Americans typically travel and the lack of bike-friendly urban planning. Only two U.S. cities are ranked among the world's top 50 for cycling in terms of infrastructure, safety, and riding conditions.

Figure1. Cars Still Dominate the American Commute



Source: Richter, F. (2025). Statista

The multifaceted influence of cycling—from individual health benefits, through psychological well-being and social integration, to ecological advantages and cultural affirmation—makes it a unique activity that transcends the boundaries of sport.

Literature Review

Cycling is becoming more and more acknowledged in the scientific literature of today as an essential component of a healthy lifestyle, with a multifaceted effect on social connectedness, psychological well-being, and physical health. With substantial potential to avoid chronic illnesses and encourage healthy lifestyle choices, the fundamental premise is that frequent riding, whether for leisure or competition, enhances the quality of life for both individuals and communities.

In a narrative review, Logan et al. (2023) analyzed the benefits, risks, barriers, and facilitators of cycling. The authors emphasized that the most significant health benefits include improved cardiorespiratory endurance, reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, and overall enhancement of physical fitness. At the same time, psychological gains such as stress reduction and improved mood were observed, as well as social effects through strengthened community ties and mutual support.

Similarly, Berrie et al. (2024) investigated the effect of daily bicycle commutes on the risk of mental illnesses using an instrumental variable approach. According to their findings, those who frequently ride their bikes to work had a significantly lower chance of experiencing mental health problems, supporting the idea that riding a bicycle has important psychological benefits in addition to its physical ones.

Additional support for these findings is provided by Friel et al. (2024), who, using data from the Scottish Longitudinal Study, determined that walking and cycling as means of daily commuting significantly contribute to the improvement of public health. The authors highlight that such activities should not only be viewed as forms of mobility but also as a daily “dose” of physical activity necessary for the prevention of chronic diseases and the promotion of overall well-being.

In their study, Prince et al. (2025) examined how the improvement of bicycle infrastructure affected the frequency of leisure cycling. According to their findings, expanding bike lanes and enhancing safe riding conditions directly inspire more individuals to include cycling in their free time, which in turn promotes improved health and stronger social relationships.

Lastly, the degree to which recreational cycling might impact modifications in everyday mobility practices was investigated by Sabogal-Cardona et al. (2025). According to the findings, engaging in leisure cycling activities, such as amateur races, may result in cycling being a permanent mode of transportation, which would have long-term beneficial consequences on environmental sustainability and human health. Based on a summary of these findings, it can be said that the scientific community is strongly in agreement about the many advantages of cycling. It becomes clear that it is an activity that can greatly improve mental health, social integration, and individual and group health when supported by social promotion and appropriate infrastructure. As such, it deserves a prominent position in public health plans and sustainable urban development.

Methodology

This research takes the form of a review-analytical study based on the analysis and synthesis of relevant scientific literature, as well as the application of comparative and descriptive-statistical methods. The primary objective is to present cycling as a lifestyle and to assess its impact on physical health, psychological well-being, and social connectedness through the integration of findings from existing empirical and theoretical studies.

The analytical method was employed to systematically examine the content of scientific sources and to identify key concepts and findings related to the health, psychological, and social effects of cycling. Descriptive statistics were used to present quantitative data drawn from relevant studies, with the aim of providing a clearer picture of the prevalence of cycling, the estimation of health benefits, and the assessment of social impacts, without conducting primary field research. This methodological framework enables a comprehensive and well-founded review of existing scientific knowledge, accompanied by a critical reflection and comparison of findings across different research contexts.

Research hypotheses

H1: Cycling as a lifestyle has a significant positive impact on physical health, reducing the risk of chronic diseases and improving overall physical fitness.

H2: Regular engagement in cycling contributes to increased psychological well-being and strengthened social connectedness, regardless of whether it is practiced for recreational or competitive purposes.

Discussion

Implications for Health, Social Connectedness, and the Development of Sports Culture

Cycling is promoted as a vital tool for enhancing sustainable urban mobility, lowering pollution, and enhancing public health. Systematic infrastructure investment alters mobility culture and promotes stronger social connectivity, as evidenced by European city experiences. The primary barriers to cycling's broader adoption are cultural and political rather than technological. Discourses that place more emphasis on user responsibility than on establishing safe riding circumstances have drawn the most

criticism. To sum up, cycling is a resource that is both accessible and ecologically sustainable, and it has the potential to create a society that is more physically active, healthier, and more equitable (Walker, 2017).

One of the main topics of current social and scientific discussions is the effects of sport on social cohesion, health, and the formation of sports culture. It has been demonstrated that regular sports involvement improves psychological well-being, boosts immunity, and helps avoid chronic illnesses, all of which have a good impact on physical and mental health. Sport has a significant impact on fostering social relationships and fostering chances for collaboration, connection, and community growth at levels beyond the individual (Zubić & Milenković, 2024). At the same time, sport fosters values such as discipline, fair play, and tolerance, thereby contributing to the broader cultural and educational context. In this sense, the development of a sports culture is not only a matter of recreation but also an important component of social progress that connects health, social inclusion, and cultural practices into a comprehensive whole (Dašić, 2023c).

Sport engagement is continuously linked to major health and psychosocial consequences, according to research (Jovanović et al., 2023; Čekić, 2024). Regular participation in sports enhances mental health, lessens the symptoms of anxiety and depression, and fortifies social bonds through group activities and mutual support, according to a systematic study by Eather, Wade, Pankowiak, and Eime (2023). This implies that sports are a valuable social resource in addition to being a way to get exercise. One of the most thorough attempts to investigate, in a more global setting, how learning to ride a bicycle affects lifestyle and subsequent patterns of physical activity is the research of Estevan et al. (2025). Conducted as a pooled data analysis across eight countries, the research employed a person-centered approach that allowed the identification of different participant profiles. Key findings highlight that learning to ride a bicycle in childhood is not merely a technical skill but a significant factor in shaping identity and lifelong habits. Participants who mastered this skill earlier demonstrated greater tendencies toward regular cycling, both recreational and utilitarian. In addition, the study emphasized psychological benefits such as self-confidence, autonomy, and social integration, as cycling often serves as an activity that connects individuals within their communities.

Furthermore, a comparative study by Shao (2025) in China and Malaysia confirms that engagement in outdoor sports is a powerful motivational factor driving both health and social interaction. Participants in such activities showed higher levels of social inclusion as well as more positive attitudes toward the shared use of public

spaces. This suggests that sport can be viewed as an instrument for strengthening public health and social capital.

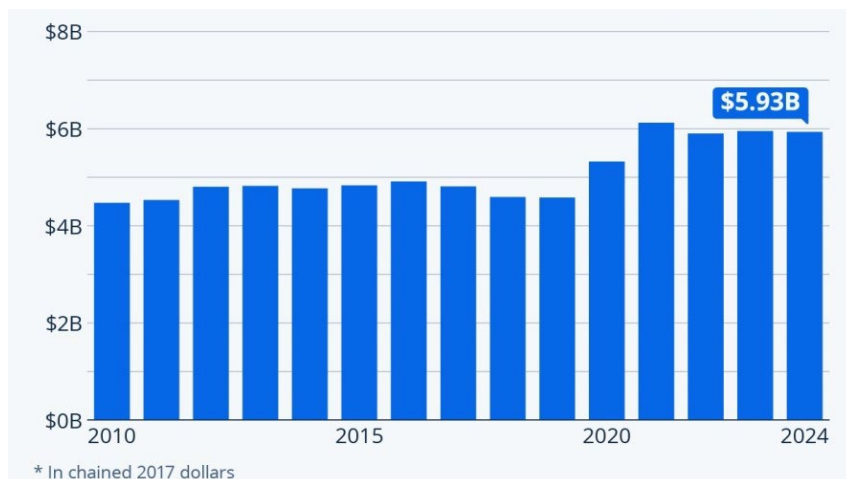
Of particular significance is the study by Osborne (2025), which analyzed a program led by the Māori in New Zealand. The e-bike initiative not only promoted physical activity but also affirmed cultural values and collective identity. This example demonstrates how sport and recreation can be integrated into broader cultural strategies that support social connectedness and the preservation of tradition.

From a theoretical perspective, Merlo (2025) develops the concept of “connectedness” as a pillar of health, emphasizing that social integration is just as important as physical and mental factors of well-being. His findings indicate that sport and physical activities represent a crucial mechanism for building and maintaining these social bonds, thereby directly influencing the quality of life of individuals and communities.

Garrard et al. (2021) conclude by highlighting that cycling in urban settings is a significant cultural phenomena that creates urban identity and encourages sustainable transportation, in addition to being a way to improve public health by lowering pollutants and chronic illnesses. Their results support the notion that cycling is a cultural and health-related activity that integrates ecological, social, and personal advantages. In conclusion, all five studies emphasize the many advantages of physical activity and sport, including enhanced psychological and physical health, social bond strengthening, cultural identity affirmation, and the growth of sports culture (Dašić, Kostadinović, & Kostadinović, 2024). These results provide compelling evidence in favor of the idea that policies pertaining to sustainable development, education, and public health must all include sport. (Dašić, 2023a; Dašić, 2023b).

In the United States, a society strongly oriented toward automobiles, the bicycle plays a relatively minor role compared to much of Europe, where people are far more likely to use bicycles for everyday commuting. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, when gyms were closed and public transport partially suspended, millions of Americans rediscovered the bicycle as a safe, socially distanced form of physical activity and transport. This “bike boom” caught retailers unprepared, as new bicycles became scarce, further exacerbated by global supply chain constraints caused by the pandemic. According to inflation-adjusted data from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Americans spent \$6.1 billion on bicycles and related equipment in 2021, nearly 30 percent more than the average of \$4.7 billion spent between 2015 and 2019. The pandemic demonstrated that the “bike boom” was not merely a short-lived trend: spending on bicycles and related products remained at a higher level thereafter, averaging \$5.9 billion between 2022 and 2024 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Cycling Shifted to a Higher Gear During Covid



Source: Richter, F. (2025) Cycling Shifted to a Higher Gear During Covid. Statista.

The Role of Infrastructure, Social Initiatives, and Sporting Events in Promoting Cycling as a Lifestyle

In contemporary metropolitan settings, cycling is becoming more and more valued as a lifestyle choice, not just as a leisure activity but also as a way to improve social cohesion, lower pollution, and preserve health. The presence of suitable infrastructure, such as bike lanes, parking lots, and safe traffic solutions, which permit the safe and convenient use of bicycles in daily life, is crucial to its development. Beyond the state of the infrastructure, social initiatives—such as campaigns to educate the public, programs encouraging healthy lifestyles, and neighborhood events—are crucial in getting people to see bicycles as an environmentally friendly form of transportation and exercise. (Ratković et al., 2023). Additionally, sporting events, such as cycling races and mass recreational rides, act as powerful motivational factors, as they not only affirm cycling as a sport but also encourage wider public participation. Through the synergy of infrastructure, initiatives, and events, the foundation is created for recognizing cycling as an integral part of a healthy and sustainable lifestyle culture.

The examined literature repeatedly shows that the best way to promote cycling as a lifestyle is to combine social activities and events with infrastructure measures. According to a scoping review of European research, perceptions of traffic risk serve as deterrents to active mobility, but network connection, segregated bike lanes, and the presence of green spaces are linked to greater levels of active mobility. The co-

benefits for the environment and health (obesity, cardiovascular and respiratory outcomes, fitness) are also highlighted, and it is observed that the best outcomes happen when "hard" infrastructure is combined with marketing and education initiatives (Michel, Banwell, & Senn, 2024).

A thorough review and meta-analysis of research tracking the implementation of "urban trails," or protected bike and pedestrian routes, helps to better elucidate the causal consequences of infrastructure investment. Results indicate that those who live close to recently constructed trails tend to be more physically active, but to a very small extent. However, it was challenging to reliably synchronize data on the influence on daily active travel and trail utilization since different research used different assessment techniques. Although the findings highlight the need for more accurate and consistent methodological approaches in future research, they also clearly show that safe and continuous infrastructure has the potential to promote increased engagement in active mobility (Fast et al., 2025).

A longitudinal natural experiment in Montreal that looked at the connection between self-reported cycling activity and infrastructure modifications offers an empirical perspective at the metropolitan network level. According to the study, inhabitants are more likely to use a bicycle at all if there are high-comfort cycling facilities nearby, while they are more likely to spend more time riding a bicycle recreationally if there are medium-comfort pathways nearby. According to these findings, the degree of safety and comfort provided by a path's design, as well as its spatial accessibility, affects not only whether or not inhabitants choose to bike, but also how frequently they do so (Prince et al., 2025).

However, network planning in constrained urban areas necessitates the use of instruments that balance the redistribution of traffic lanes between bicycles and automobiles. The suggested framework, which is based on linear programming, shows benefits over heuristic methods by introducing a Pareto-optimal consideration of trade-offs between automobile and bicycle traffic throughput and producing scenarios for decision-makers (Wiedemann, Nöbel, Ballo, Martin, & Raubal, 2024). This makes it possible to focus infrastructure spending where it will have the most influence on mobility patterns, equality, and coverage.

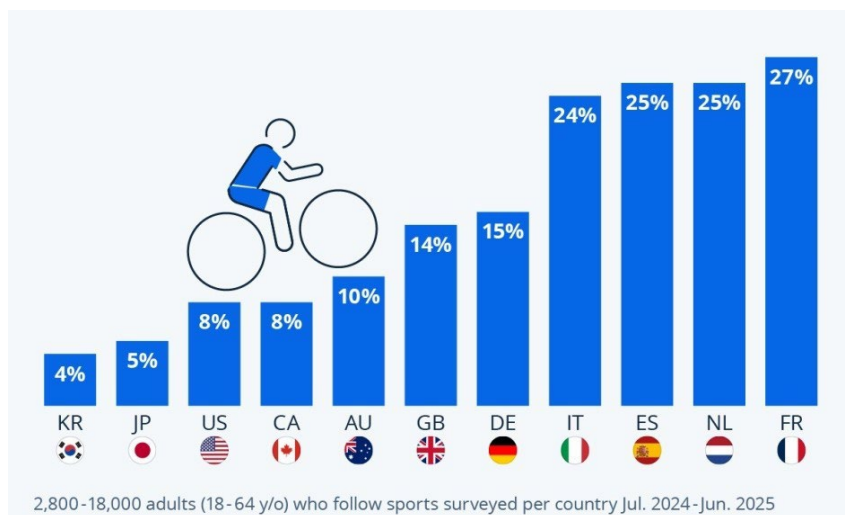
Lastly, social programs and athletic events serve as cultural change agents, normalizing cycling and enhancing emotional and motivational rewards for engagement (Toskić & Marković, 2024). An examination of a significant cycle tourism event reveals that social interaction, "contemplation," lifestyle-related motivations (Dašić & Jeličić, 2016; Dašić et al., 2021), and satisfaction prior to, during, and following the event all significantly predict repeated participation. This gives organizers and cities

the ability to develop a more sustainable participant base (Rejón-Guardia, Rialp-Criado, & García-Sastre, 2030). Events can act as a "soft launch" of habits that eventually make their way into daily life if these insights are matched with infrastructure, such as connecting large recreational rides with recently constructed high-comfort corridors.

The most dependable way for cycling to become a consistent part of urban lifestyles is through comfortable and continuous infrastructure (segregated lanes, network density, and spatial accessibility), as well as clever space planning and well-thought-out social initiatives and events. These factors have quantifiable advantages for sustainability, social cohesion, and health.

Data from Statista Consumer Insights show that interest in cycling is highest in Europe, where approximately one in four sports fans in France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Italy follow competitions such as the Tour de France, Giro d'Italia, or Vuelta, the three "Grand Tours." In the United States, that share is significantly lower—only 8 percent of sports fans, far from the era of the now-disgraced Lance Armstrong and the U.S. Postal Service team (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Where Cycling Faces an Uphill Battle for Fans



Source: Richter, F. (2025) Where Cycling Faces an Uphill Battle for Fans. Statista

When comparing the use of bicycles for daily transportation, significant regional variations are found, influenced by a mix of socioeconomic, cultural, and infrastructure variables. For many years, Scandinavian nations have served as models for incorporating cycling into transportation networks; Denmark is a prime example,

accounting for around 15% of all travel. Long-term national policies aimed at creating protected lanes, promoting active mobility, and connecting bike routes with public transit are the cause of these outcomes, which are not accidental (Christiansen, Anderson, 2025).

The situation in Asia demonstrates a specific developmental trajectory. While in China cycling once dominated as the primary mode of transport, urban motorization has significantly reduced its share. Nevertheless, in cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, cycling still accounts for a considerable portion of daily travel, with about one-quarter of trips in Shanghai. This is supported by the development of new public bike-sharing systems, as well as policies targeting the reduction of pollution and traffic congestion (Sudmant et al., 2020). Japan, on the other hand, maintains a stable share of approximately 12% of trips made by bicycle, illustrating that in societies with high urban density, cycling can still serve as a functional, efficient, and culturally accepted mode of transportation (Belliard et al., 2025).

In contrast, in African cities cycling is largely marginalized, with participation in major urban centers such as Nairobi barely reaching 1%. Contributing factors include unsafe infrastructure, the low social prestige associated with cycling, and the dominance of motorized transport. However, examples from medium-sized Tanzanian cities such as Morogoro, where the cycling share is about 20%, demonstrate that with adequate spatial organization and social acceptance, it is possible to achieve more significant bicycle use. These differences underscore that cycling is both a transport and a cultural phenomenon, whose expansion depends on infrastructural investment, social support, and urban planning (Walk21 Foundation, 2022; Mwaura, 2023).

Conclusion

When analyzed from the perspectives of elite sport and leisure, cycling becomes a complex phenomena that incorporates the social, psychological, ecological, and physical facets of modern life. Regular cycling greatly enhances cardiorespiratory health, lowers the risk of chronic illnesses, and increases general physical fitness, according to a consistent study and synthesis of pertinent data. Furthermore, psychological benefits like lowered stress, improved subjective well-being, and boosted self-esteem are important elements that set cycling apart as a useful tool for raising quality of life.

Cycling's social component, which is demonstrated via clubs, athletic events, and group rides, highlights the activity's contribution to social capital development and

community building. For instance, mountain biking is a complicated social practice that affects the environment, the economy, and culture in addition to being a sport. Participants in this sport build communities centered around the ideals of freedom, adventure, and being near nature, creating new identities and lifestyles (Cherrington, 2023). Large-scale athletic events like the Tour de France inspire and have a powerful media impact, which encourages younger generations to take up cycling as a long-term lifestyle habit. Combined with infrastructure development and support from local initiatives, cycling transcends the framework of purely physical activity to become an important element of cultural and urban development.

Although this study is based on secondary data, the findings provide a relevant framework for formulating public health policies and strategic plans in the areas of sustainable mobility and physical activity promotion. Further research, particularly those employing primary empirical data and longitudinal methods, could contribute to a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of cycling on health and social cohesion.

Taken as a whole, cycling stands out as a universally accessible and socially beneficial activity, whose potential far exceeds the boundaries of sport, positioning it as one of the key instruments for building a healthier, more active, and more connected society.

Study Limitations

Although this study offers a concise theoretical and analytical synthesis of existing knowledge on cycling as a lifestyle, several methodological limitations should be noted. The reliance on secondary sources limits the ability to test hypotheses directly, as findings depend on the quality and scope of prior research. Furthermore, the reviewed studies differ in sample characteristics, geographic contexts, and conceptual definitions, which complicates comparison and generalization. Finally, despite recognizing the influence of major sporting events like the Tour de France on promoting cycling, few studies systematically examine their long-term effects. Nevertheless, this paper provides a valuable foundation for future empirical research employing primary data and longitudinal designs.

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization: D. D., Investigation: D. D.; B. B., Theoretical framework: D. D., Data curation: D. D., Resources: B. B.; M.S. Writing – original draft: D. D., B. B., Writing – review & editing: D.D.,

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript

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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE PROMOTION OF RECREATIONAL SPORTS

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Abstract: Social media represents a key tool in modern communication, enabling broad accessibility to information and the creation of communities with shared interests. In the context of promoting recreational sports, these platforms play a significant role in encouraging physical activity, promoting a healthy lifestyle, and attracting participants. This paper focuses on analyzing how social media is used to promote recreational sports, with an emphasis on best practices and strategies. It specifically examines the role of visual content, interactivity, and creative marketing approaches that enable direct engagement with the audience. Through the exploration of various practical examples, the paper highlights the importance of social media as platforms that facilitate access to recreational sports and foster greater inclusivity in sports activities. The aim of this paper is to underline the significance of digital technologies in sports development and to provide recommendations for their more effective utilization.

Keywords: social media, recreational sports, promotion, physical activity, marketing strategies, visual content

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Introduction

In modern society, recreational sports play a key role in maintaining health, social cohesion, and improving the quality of life. They represent a means of physical activity, relaxation, and community building, encouraging positive habits and mental well-being in individuals. With the fast-paced lifestyle and increased urbanization, the need for participation in recreational sports is becoming increasingly important, not only from a health perspective but also as part of the social dynamics and the culture of an active lifestyle. Alongside the growing significance of recreational sports, social media has emerged as a key factor in their promotion. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube provide greater access to information, inspiration, and motivation for sports activities. Through various digital strategies, sports organizations, influencers, and individual enthusiasts are able to attract more people toward an active lifestyle. Social media not only increases the visibility of recreational sports but also enables the creation of interactive communities that encourage engagement and participation across different age groups. The aim of this paper is to underline the significance of digital technologies in sports development and to provide recommendations for their more effective utilization.

Social media as a tool for sport promotion

In the modern digital society, social media has become one of the most powerful tools for promoting various activities, including sports. Social media allows for real-time updates, enabling journalists and sports organizations to share news as soon as it happens (Farrington et al. 2017). They facilitate quick and effective communication, global accessibility, and opportunities for interactive audience engagement. Social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) allow sports organizations, recreational clubs, and individual enthusiasts to reach a wider audience, encouraging people towards an active lifestyle. Social media has evolved from simple communication platforms into complex ecosystems that offer audiovisual content, interactive formats, and targeted promotion.

Since the emergence of Facebook in 2004, the digital landscape has significantly changed, with the rise of visually-oriented networks like Instagram and TikTok, which have become especially influential in the sports industry. The popularity of these platforms has grown due to algorithms that promote relevant content, allowing sports enthusiasts, clubs, and brands to increase their visibility at minimal cost. One of the key factors behind the success of social media in sports promotion is their

ability to create communities. Through groups, hashtags, and interactive campaigns, people with shared interests can easily connect, share experiences, and motivate each other. Recreational sports clubs, fitness instructors, and sports enthusiasts use these platforms to organize events, challenges, and live training sessions, resulting in increased engagement and participant dedication. Social media has a significant impact on consumer decisions, especially when it comes to sports and healthy lifestyles. Users are inspired by success stories, challenges, and trends they see online, which directly influences their motivation to engage in sports activities. Additionally, brands use social media for sponsored posts, influencer marketing, and interactive campaigns, which greatly influence the choice of sports equipment, exercise programs, and recreational methods. Athletes and teams use social media to build their personal brand and engage with fans. (Kunkel et al. 2017) Social media enables real-time communication and interaction with fans, enhancing fan engagement. (Pegoraro, A. 2010)

Social media not only facilitates the promotion of recreational sports but also creates a dynamic environment where users actively participate, share, and motivate each other. This highlights their crucial role in increasing physical activity and promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Visual content and interactivity in sports promotion

Visual content plays a crucial role in capturing attention and engaging users. Especially in the sports industry, where dynamics, emotions, and energy are best conveyed through images and videos, visual communication has become an indispensable element in promoting recreational sports. Social media enables quick and effective sharing of such content, encouraging participation, motivation, and the creation of sports communities. Visual content has significantly greater reach and influence on audience behavior compared to text-based posts. Research shows that posts with images receive more interactions, while videos have an even higher engagement rate. In the context of sports promotion, training videos, motivational clips, competitions, and personal sports challenges are particularly effective for inspiring and encouraging participation.

Leong et al. (2017) In their research, the authors analyze how social media influences purchase intentions and brand loyalty. They emphasize that visual content on social media plays a significant role in consumer decision-making, with images and videos playing a key role in attracting attention and creating positive attitudes toward brands. The authors also highlight that successful social media marketing

strategies are based on creativity in presenting visual material and its ability to stimulate emotional reactions from consumers. Visually attractive content evokes emotions, creates a connection with viewers, and motivates people to take action, whether it's joining a sports club, starting a new workout, or participating in a sports event. Influencers, particularly those active in the sports industry, have a significant impact on users' perceptions and behaviors. Their posts, training sessions, reviews of sports equipment, and personal stories serve as inspiration for followers, who often imitate their habits and lifestyle. Additionally, user-generated content (UGC) plays a critical role in building authenticity and trust. When people share their sports experiences, achievements, and personal stories through videos, images, and comments, they become part of the digital sports community and encourage others to join. Campaigns that use hashtags, challenges, and interactive posts further increase engagement, allowing for organic spread of the sports message. Live streaming is one of the most powerful tools for sports promotion, as it enables real-time interaction with the audience. Viral campaigns, hashtags, and influencer partnerships amplify these messages, reaching different audiences and encouraging public participation (Freeman et al. 2015, Jackson et al. 2021).

Broadcasts of competitions, training sessions, or sports events create a sense of presence and immediacy, which increases the connection between sports enthusiasts. Moreover, sports challenges that spread through TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook are a great way to engage a large number of people. Campaigns like the "30-Day Fitness Challenge" or "Run 5 km and challenge a friend" gain massive popularity and motivate many to participate in recreational sports activities. Interactive formats such as polls, quizzes, and Q&A sessions enable deeper engagement and direct communication with the audience. Sports brands, coaches, and organizations use these tools to gather feedback, create personalized experiences, and build long-term loyalty with followers. Visual content and interactivity play a fundamental role in digital sports promotion. The power of images and videos, the influence of influencers, user-generated content, and interactive formats significantly contribute to greater involvement of people in recreational sports. With the proper use of these tools, sports organizations and enthusiasts can increase their audience, inspire an active lifestyle, and foster a sports culture in the digital world.

Creative marketing strategies in sport promotion

In the digital era, sports promotion requires innovative and creative approaches to attract and retain the audience's attention. Social media enables various marketing

strategies that combine authentic user experiences, targeted paid ads, and collaborations with brands and sports organizations. Through effective use of these strategies, recreational sports can become more accessible, attractive, and dynamic to a broader audience.

One of the most powerful ways to attract new participants to recreational sports is through authentic personal stories. User experiences, shared through videos, images, or written testimonies, create an emotional connection with the audience and inspire others to engage in sports activities. Creative marketing strategies leverage storytelling to create emotional connections with fans. (Filo et al. 2015) Marketing campaigns that focus on real stories—such as transformations through sports, personal achievements, or shared sports experiences—have higher engagement and trust from the audience. People are more motivated to start a specific activity when they see real examples of successful athletes or recreational enthusiasts who have achieved positive results. Sports promotion on social media is based on a combination of organic reach and paid advertising. Organic reach involves creating quality content that naturally attracts followers through sharing, interactions, and hashtags. Paid ads enable faster targeting and a wider audience reach.

- **Organic Reach** – This includes posting authentic, valuable, and interesting content that attracts followers through shares, interactions, and hashtags. Video demonstrations of exercises, behind-the-scenes training content, health tips, and motivational messages often receive high interaction.
- **Paid Ads** – Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube offer precise targeting based on demographics, interests, and behaviors. This allows sports organizations to reach specific groups of people, such as fitness enthusiasts, recreational athletes, or families looking for sports activities for their children.

With a well-balanced strategy between organic and paid promotion, sports brands and organizations can increase their visibility and build long-term connections with their audience.

Collaboration with sports brands and organizations is a key element of successful sports promotion. Large sports companies, fitness centers, and sports clubs invest in marketing campaigns that include influencers, sponsored competitions, and interactive challenges.

- **Sponsorships and Partnerships** – Brands often support sports events and initiatives, providing financial support or sports equipment in exchange for

visibility and marketing. This is a common practice for races, marathons, fitness campaigns, and online sports challenges.

- **Collaborations with Influencers** – Engaging well-known athletes, fitness influencers, and trainers helps spread the sports message to a wider audience. Influencers create content that feels authentic and inspiring, which increases the influence of the brand or organization.
- **Promotion through Sports Competitions and Challenges** – Organizing online or offline sports events, such as fitness marathons, yoga challenges, or sports camps, is an excellent way to activate the community. Social media serves as the main platform for promoting and coordinating such activities.

Creative marketing strategies in sports promotion combine authentic stories, effective use of paid ads and organic reach, as well as collaborations with brands and organizations. By integrating these elements, sports enthusiasts, clubs, and companies can build a strong digital brand, inspire people to engage in sports activities, and create long-term audience engagement.

Accessibility and inclusivity in recreational sports through social media

Social media plays a key role in expanding access to recreational sports, enabling greater inclusivity and participation across different social groups. Through digital platforms, sports activities become more accessible to people of all ages, physical abilities, and economic backgrounds, encouraging a healthy and active lifestyle. Social media enables sports organizations to communicate directly with a wider and more diverse audience, improving accessibility (Achen et al. 2016). Traditionally, participation in sports required physical presence, financial resources, and access to proper sports facilities. However, social media overcomes these limitations by enabling:

- **Online training and tutorials** – Free videos and interactive sessions on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok make sports activities accessible to everyone, regardless of geographic location or financial means. Interactive content not only keeps the audience engaged but also allows participants to focus on long-term fitness goals, which was highlighted during quarantine periods and also showcases the potential of social media to support long-term fitness goals (Santos et al. 2023, Bjursten et al. 2017).

- **Digital sports communities** – Groups and forums on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Reddit create supportive environments where people can share experiences, receive advice, and motivate each other.
- **Virtual competitions and challenges** – Social media allows the organization of online sports events, such as virtual races, fitness challenges, or yoga sessions, that involve people regardless of their location. A new dance challenge on TikTok or a fitness challenge on Instagram can quickly gather millions of participants, turning exercise into a fun and social activity. This viral nature helps normalize physical activity and integrate it into daily life, especially among younger generations (Han et al. 2020, Alhabash et al. 2019).

Through these mechanisms, social media facilitates access to sports and reduces the need for expensive memberships, travel, and specialized equipment. Social media enables greater inclusivity in sports by tailoring content for various target groups:

- **Children and youth** – Through interactive videos, challenges, and educational games, platforms like TikTok and YouTube motivate young people to engage in sports activities instead of spending time in passive online interactions.
- **Adults and older adults** – More and more fitness trainers and health organizations are creating content for this population, such as low-intensity exercises, yoga, and mobility programs.
- **People with special needs** – Social media allows for adapted training and programs for people with various physical and cognitive abilities. Online instructors create inclusive videos with modified exercises, and digital communities offer support and experience exchange.
- **Economically disadvantaged groups** – Free online programs and virtual sports initiatives give those with limited financial resources the opportunity to be part of the sports world.

Through these mechanisms, social media contributes to reducing social disparities and enabling equal access to recreational sports. While social media opens new opportunities for sports inclusion, there are also certain challenges and barriers:

- **Digital inequality** – Not everyone has access to quality internet connectivity, smart devices, or digital literacy, which can limit participation opportunities.

- **Physical limitations** – Although there are online programs for people with disabilities, there is still a lack of sufficient adapted content and specialized instructors.
- **Lack of motivation and discipline** – Unlike physical sports clubs, online platforms do not have the same mechanisms for monitoring and motivation, which may lead to dropouts.
- **Fake information and inappropriate methods** – Some online content is not created by professionals, which may result in incorrect techniques, injuries, or misinformation about health and training.

Proper regulation, improved accessibility, and support from sports organizations can help overcome these barriers and make social media an even more powerful tool for inclusion in sports. Social media significantly contributes to improving accessibility and inclusivity in recreational sports. They allow people from various age and social groups to engage in sports activities without geographical or financial limitations. However, challenges remain that must be overcome for digital sports to become even more accessible and inclusive. By improving digital literacy, creating quality online content, and enhancing adapted sports programs, social media can become an even more effective tool for sports integration and motivation.

Examples of successful promotion campaigns

Social media plays a key role in the successful promotion of recreational sports, offering wide visibility, interaction with the audience, and encouraging active participation. This case study will analyze successful campaigns and strategies, compare different platforms, and extract key lessons from successful projects. Social media is an effective tool for promoting recreational sports, and many brands and organizations leverage these platforms to engage and inspire participants. Examples like #ThisGirlCan, Strava Challenges, and Nike Training Club show how social media can boost the popularity of physical activity and raise awareness of the importance of recreational sports.

Many other campaigns have had similar success in their influence, such as Adidas's "Run for the Oceans" campaign. #ThisGirlCan by Sport England aims to inspire women to engage in sports without fear of judgment. Through emotional videos, authentic stories, and strong community support, the campaign achieved millions of interactions and motivated thousands of women to become physically active. This campaign created a positive atmosphere and a sense of acceptance and motivation

for women who want to start or continue physical activity. Adidas used Instagram, Facebook, and Strava to promote their "Run for the Oceans" campaign, where runners were invited to participate and help protect the oceans from pollution. Every kilometer run was converted into a donation for ocean cleanup. The campaign was successful not only due to its environmental goal but also because it used social media to reach a wide audience.

Similarly, Red Bull's "Wings for Life World Run" was a global event that used a virtual race to raise funds for spinal cord injury research. Through YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, Red Bull encouraged participant activity by engaging them with attractive videos, challenges, and hashtags, resulting in hundreds of thousands of participants from all over the world. REI, with their #OptOutside campaign, focused on stepping away from the consumer race and promoting physical activity through nature, rather than the traditional "Black Friday," which focuses on shopping. This engagement encouraged people to join communal outdoor activities using hashtags on Instagram and Twitter, which led to the campaign's popularity. Decathlon's Virtual Sports Challenges motivated users to participate in fun sports challenges via TikTok and Instagram. These challenges, as part of the marketing strategy, increased brand visibility and generated high engagement. Influencers and users sharing their results helped amplify the campaign's popularity.

Nike Training Club (NTC) uses Instagram and YouTube to promote its free training programs, offering access to professional training and advisory sessions. Campaigns involving professional athletes and fitness influencers successfully encourage users to join the programs and strive to improve their health and fitness.

GoPro used its Million Dollar Challenge campaign to encourage the adventure sports community to film and share videos. By sharing user-generated content, GoPro inspired people to engage in active sports adventures and showcase their skills. The campaign included not only fun videos but also rewards for the most creative shots, strengthening participation motivation. By showcasing this content on their social media channels, GoPro not only demonstrated the possibilities of its product but also built trust and credibility with potential customers. These examples demonstrate the importance of creative marketing strategies, such as virtual races, challenges, humanitarian initiatives, and the involvement of influencers. Social media enables recreational sports to be visible and accessible to a wider audience, and successful campaigns use this opportunity to inspire physical activity and a healthy lifestyle in diverse communities. (Dolan et al., 2019; Moran et al., 2020; Shah-zbazinezhad et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Social media plays a crucial role in promoting recreational sports, enabling direct communication with target audiences, increasing engagement, and motivating participation in physical activities. The campaigns and strategies used on digital platforms largely focus on visual content, interactivity, and community-building, which makes sports activities more accessible and inclusive. Researching successful examples and strategies shows that the proper use of social media can significantly increase interest in recreational sports and bring positive changes in how people engage in physical activity. Based on the results, the following recommendations can be made to optimize the use of social media in promoting recreational sports:

1. **Developing Personalized and Emotional Content:** Social media should be used to create content that connects with participants' personal experiences. Using authentic stories, motivational messages, and visual content that express the emotions of athletes can inspire new participants to join the activities.
2. **Engaging with Influencers and Brand Ambassadors:** Creating partnerships with fitness influencers and sports ambassadors can help expand accessibility and reach new audiences. Messages from influential figures can have a stronger effect on motivating users.
3. **Encouraging User-Generated Content:** Investing in campaigns that encourage users to share their videos, photos, or experiences from participating in recreational sports can foster a sense of community and inclusiveness. This not only increases engagement but also strengthens the credibility of the campaigns.
4. **Using Interactive Formats:** Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube offer various interactive features such as polls, challenges, live broadcasts, and direct communication. These opportunities should be actively used to create a stronger connection with the audience and encourage active participation.
5. **Supporting Inclusivity and Accessibility:** Social media should be used to create campaigns that include diverse groups of people, including different age groups, genders, and social classes. Campaigns like #ThisGirlCan are excellent examples of how social media can promote equality and inclusivity in sports.

6. **Strategies for Local Targeting and Global Reach:** Sports organizations should develop strategies focused on local communities while also utilizing global platforms to attract international participants. This will allow them to build recognition and expand their activities into new markets.

With these recommendations, sports organizations, brands, and fitness communities can maximize the potential of social media, increasing their influence and encouraging greater participation in recreational sports, while also creating greater inclusivity in physical activity.

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Časopis *SPORT MEDIJI I BIZNIS* objavljuje radove na engleskom jeziku. Redakcija zadržava puno pravo da svaki rad lektorski i korektorski uredi u skladu sa važećim standardima engleskog jezika, **podnešen na portalu časopisa www.smb.edu.rs**

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ŠABLON: NASLOV RADA (CENTRIRAN, CALIBRI SIZE 12, BOLD, SVA SLOVA VELIKA, MAKSIMALNO DVA REDA)¹⁷

Ivana Marković¹⁸, Petar Petrović¹⁹, Mirko Mirković²⁰

Summary

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Key words: *navesti, maksimalno, pet, ključnih, reči.*

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Introduction

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Molimo Vas da poštujuete osnovna načela strukturiranja naučnih radova, odnosno trudite se koliko je to moguće da Vaš rad ima sledeće segmente: Uvod, Cilja rada i korišćena metodologija, Rezultati rada sa diskusijom, Zaključak, Literatura.

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Tabele moraju biti formirane u tekstu rada, a ne preuzete u formi slika iz drugih materijala. Tabele unositi u sam tekst rada i numerisati ih prema redosledu njihovog pojavljivanja. Nazivi tabela moraju biti dati neposredno iznad tabele na koju se odnose. Koristite dole prikazani stil tokom njihovog formatiranja. Naslov tabela pisati sa razmakom 6 pt – iznad/before i 3pt – ispod/after, u fontu Calibri, font size 11, ravnanje Justified. Tekst unutar tabela pisati fontom Calibri, font size 9. Tekst u zaglavlju tabela boldirati. Izvor i potencijalne napomene pisati sa razmakom 3 pt ispod tabela (before). Izvore i napomene pisati u fontu Calibri, font size 10, ravnanje Justified. Naredni pasus početi na razmaku od 6pt od izvora tabele ili napomene (after). Tokom pisanja rada u originalnom tekstu treba markirati poziv na određenu tabelu (Table 5.). Trudite se da se sve tabele u radu veličinom uklapaju u zadati format strane (Table properties – preferred width – max 97% - alignment: center). Sav tekst u poljima tabele treba unositi u formi (paragraph – spacing: before/after 0pt, line spacing: single). U slučaju da se tabela lomi na narednu stranicu, molimo Vas da prelomljeni deo tabele na narednoj stranici bude praćen zaglavljem tabele.

Table 5. Nike's distribution costs from production to retail stores

Indicators	Period			Total
	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	
Distance crossed (km)	12.926	11.295	13.208	37.429
Fuel consumption (litre)	3.231	2.823	3.302	9.356
Value of fuel consumption (\$).	242.378	211.790	247.653	701.821
Total time spend on touring (hour)	314	266	417	997
Value of total time spend on touring (\$).	47.048	39.890	62.570	149.508
Number of tours	98	77	102	277
Toll value (\$).	0	0	0	0
Number of pallets transported (piece)	1.179	976	1358	3.513
Total weight transported (kg)	602.600	429.225	711.116	1.742.941
Vehicle maintenance costs (\$).	203.858	164.970	224.806	593.634
Lease costs (\$).	480.938	454.214	565.784	1.500.936
Total sum (\$).	974.222	870.864	1.100.813	2.945.899

Source: Milić, 2012;

Note: Values within the table are calculated without Value Added Tax (VAT)

Grafike, dendrograme, dijagrame, šeme i slike treba unositi u sam tekst rada (ne koristiti opciju Float over text) i numerisati ih prema redosledu njihovog pojavljivanja. Njihovi nazivi se moraju pozicionirati neposredno iznad grafika, dendrograma, dijagrama, šeme ili slike na koju se odnose. Kod navođenja naslova, izvora i napomena koristiti isti stil koji je predhodno prikazan za formiranje tabela. Tokom pisanja rada u originalnom tekstu treba markirati pozive na određeni grafik, dendrogram, dijagram, šemu ili sliku (*Graph 2.*). Svi grafici, dendrogrami, dijagrami, šeme i slike u radu se svojom veličinom moraju uklapati u zadati format strane, te moraju biti centralno postavljeni. Fotografije nisu poželjne u predmetnom radu, a ukoliko se one ne mogu izbjeći molimo Vas da koristite optimalnu rezoluciju (preniska rezolucija dovodi do pikselacije i krzavih ivica, dok previsoka samo povećava veličinu fajla bez doprinosa čitljivosti rada).

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