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

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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 (Marušević, 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 (Krajinović 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

| | |
|---|--|
|  <p>Muški Rukometni Klub Čakovec 16 Feb • 6</p> <p>[GAME DAY - LIGA ZA PRVAKA - 1. KOLO]</p> <p>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 rukometari odlaze u Poreč oslabljeni, spremni su dati sve od sebe i pokazati borbeni duh! ✊</p> <p>RK Poreč vs MRK Čakovec Nedjelja, 16.2.2025. 17:00 sati SC Veli Jože, Poreč Prijenos uživo na Sportskoj televiziji</p> <p>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! 💪</p> <p>MRKI KAŽE: AJMO ČAKOVEEEEEE! 🐻</p> <p>ZA ČAKOVEC - SVI! 🤝 #premijerka #ligazapravka #crohandball #hrs #paket24 #mrkčakovec #začakovecsvi #mrki #mrkčk #volimčakovec #letećimedvjedi</p> | <p>Muški rukometni klub Čakovec</p> <p>[GAME DAY – CHAMPIONSHIP LEAGUE – ROUND 1]</p> <p>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!</p> <p>RK Poreč vs. MRK Čakovec Sunday, 16.2.2025 17:00 SC Veli Jože, Poreč Live broadcast on Sportska televizija channel</p> <p>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!</p> <p>MRKI SAYS: LET'S GO ČAKOVEEEEEE!</p> <p>FOR ČAKOVEC – ALL! #premijerka #ligazapravka #crohandball #hrs #paket24 #mrkčakovec #začakovecsvi #mrki #mrkčk #volimčakovec #letećimedvjedi</p> |
|---|--|

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 [...]?*' (Croat. '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*' (Croat. 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!*' (Croat. '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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