

Kateřina Turkov

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# **Sports Communication on Social Media and Audience Reactions**



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# Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 See Athletes' Popularity (p. 42).

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

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

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

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

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5 See Athletes' Popularity (p. 42).

6 See Athletes' Gender (p. 43).

7 See The Adrenaline Factor (p. 45).

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 1, Theoretical Part (p. 15).

# **1. Theoretical Part**

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

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

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

## **1.1 Contextualization and Development of Sports Communication**

### **1.1.1 The Impact of Sport in the Modern World**

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1.1.2 Sport, Communication, and Media**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1.1.3 The Development of Sports Fandom**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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