

Module 3. Information to infotainment to entertainment. The content evolution

Social media in sports

In the past few years, there has been an incredible development within the social networks in sport. This applies not only to Germany, but also globally to sports. Sport touches people's everyday lives, it writes and delivers stories, it bundles emotions and the passion of millions.

It all began with the Facebook platform, which was and will remain elementary for recognizing the potential. The use of all other applications was the result of this (extremely) positive development. The reason for this and the (many) possibilities for sport will be discussed extensively in this chapter.

The international clubs and leagues realized relatively quickly what new opportunities were being presented to them on a silver platter by the rapidly growing online community. Sports organizations had the opportunity to directly provide the target group of fans and interested parties with information; the fans, in turn, could consume the latest news directly from their favourite club and easily get in direct contact with them. Because many of the social platforms had and have today their home in United States, were the sports organizations of the major American professional leagues in basketball (NBA), ice hockey (NHL), American football (NFL) and baseball (MLB) that opened up the opportunities quickly and made use of. From 2010 onwards, this "wave" swept across Europe in all its might and has so far been experiencing an unbelievably great triumph, the end of which is not yet in sight.

The pioneering role in European football was played by two Spanish clubs, which already had an extremely large international following: Real Madrid CF and Spanish LaLiga FC Barcelona were the first clubs to experiment with Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in 2007, not yet on a large scale, however, as the number of users in Europe was still manageable. In 2009, both clubs used the knowledge they had gathered, used the experience they had gained over two years in an increasingly targeted manner and quickly focused on internationalization. They recognized that the charisma of their club existed not only in Spain itself, but far beyond its borders; the global soccer fans were immediately in focus.

In addition, it was the British Premier League with the majority of its teams that created their profiles at an early stage and were able to look forward to a large influx in the

respective communities worldwide. Particularly noteworthy was the strategic approach of the Premier League, which mainly used its appearance to make the clubs of the League even more known and thereby give British football as a whole in the social platforms a head start over all THE others football and sports leagues.

The picture and development in German football was very different. The clubs of the German Bundesliga were on their own for many years in this strong and exponentially growing division and could not rely on the support of their own League as in England. Thus, for a long time, it was up to the clubs themselves to present their own club and, with it, the league on the largest social platform, Facebook, to broaden content and to steadily increase the fan community. It was only in December 2016 that the German Bundesliga imitated its official Facebook page.

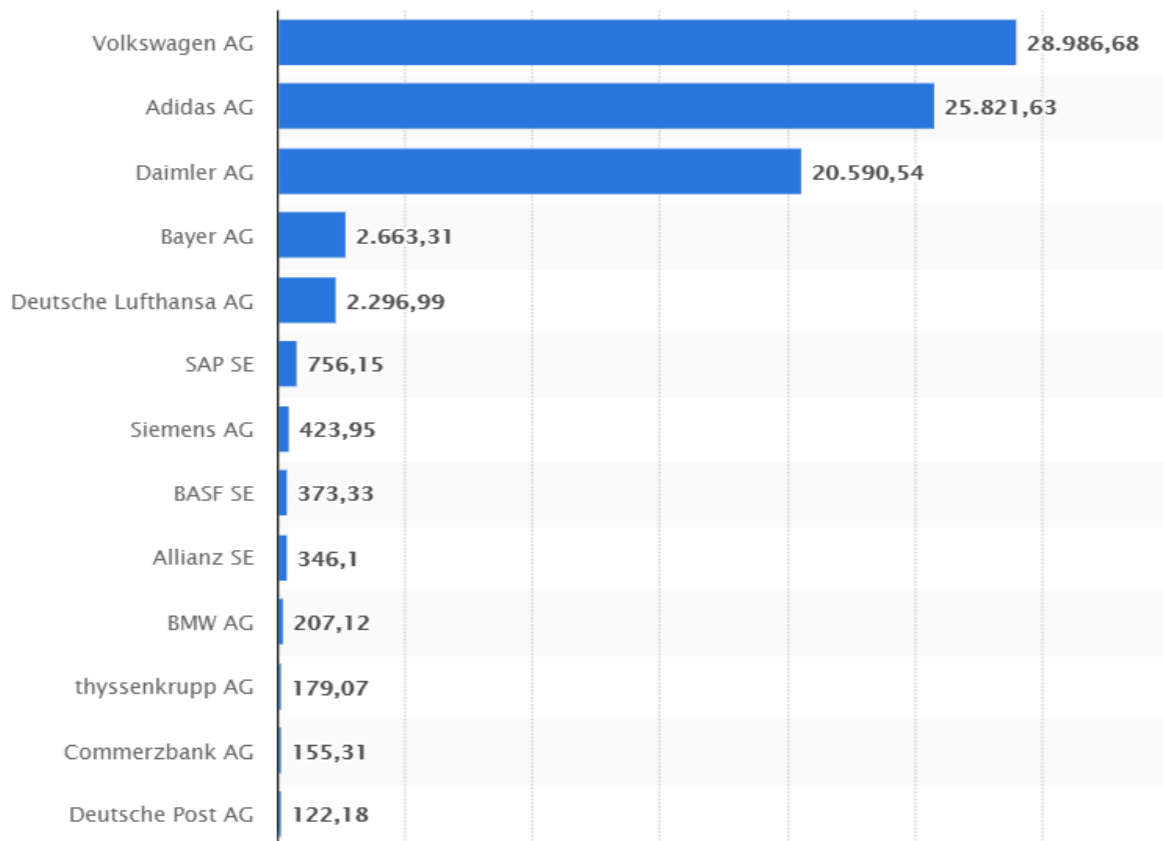
FC Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund, particularly, have taken on a pioneering role and have positioned their respective clubs in the markets and social platforms relevant to them and ensured widespread awareness. In retrospect, the two flagship clubs succeeded with flying colours. With reservations, you can still mention FC Schalke 04, Bayer 04 Leverkusen, VfL Wolfsburg and, for a few years now, RB Leipzig, who made the best possible use of the opportunities offered by their participation in international competitions (UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europa League).

The fact that posted contributions, emotional interactions, high-quality images and graphics does not automatically result in large increases and growth within a profile; it rather shows the diverse examples from the economy with which we now want to start.

Unit 3.1 Overview and development

As part of a study, in January 2017, Volkswagen AG topped the list with the highest number of Facebook fans in the social media area. With a total of 28,986,680 fans, they were ahead of the sporting goods manufacturer Adidas and Daimler AG. Other companies clearly lagged behind in these statistics. This can still be observed in some cases today, although no longer in the DAX companies, but in many, well-known companies.

Figure 1



Source: Statista, 2018, <https://bit.ly/37n3Zje>

Background

These companies named in the graphic hardly play a role in people's everyday lives. In other words: everyday topics dominate in the social networks. Sport is an everyday topic like the weather, news about celebrities, among others.

Clubs and associations are not only topic owners but also target group owners. This strength needs to be developed and used in a targeted manner and involve the fans in the communication, because in this way clubs and associations have the fans' emotional component more than with sporting goods manufacturers or automobile groups.

Social media users dedicate a large amount of their online time on a social platform to their individual interest, and this interest is very often their favourite sport or their favourite sports organisation of club.

That is why we talk about target group ownership: people remain on a platform for a specific reason or cause. Sport bonds emotions and passion, and attracts a global interest;

hence, target group ownership enables larger opportunities, not only for communication matters, but also for marketing, merchandising, ticketing or even sponsorship.

All topics a sports organisation shares on social platforms are relevant to the audience (target group and topic related ownership).

Overall, we observe a shift in user behaviour during the digital sports media evolution. While in the beginning of social media platforms, it literally was enough to post any update to receive an engagement, the online fan community nowadays has specific expectations on content and tonality.

The terms “social web” and social media are often used as a synonym and have a lot of overlap with “Web 2.0”. However, the term “social web” indicates that the development is heavily concentrated on the WWW, while social media makes a stronger media reference clear. The term “social” underlines the social character of today's Internet and thus includes all interactive channels. The focus is on social action, which consists of communication, participation and collaboration.

“Social media” offers a proportionately higher share of possibilities. On the one hand, social media includes a differentiation from traditional media; on the other hand, interest in this term has increased significantly in the past in contrast to the social web. In the future, from the author's point of view, the holistic approach with the term “digital media” will be the one that describes all online activities in a sustainable and long-term manner.

Definition of “social media”:

Personally created articles aimed at interactions that are published in the form of text, images, videos or audio via online media for a selected target group of a virtual community or for the general public, as well as the underlying and supporting services and tools of Web 2.0 (...). With the support of appropriate internet technologies, social media makes it possible to share and communicate in online communities. (Hettler, 2010, p. 14)

In relation to sport, the term social media can be used because the club can serve both its fans and the media with its appearances within social networks or mobile devices, just as the company can for its customers and the media.

Social media in sports can be seen as a very special field: Why?

Sport very often depicts social developments with a special and higher intensity. As mentioned above, social action in social media consists of communication, participation

and collaboration. This applies to companies as well as to sports clubs or sports associations.

It can be said that the intensity of companies –as a rule– is not comparable to that of sports clubs, even if this statement does not apply to individual companies. Anyone who gets involved on an association social media profile is usually emotionally connected to it as a fan, and not as a consumer who develops brand preferences but is in principle more open to other brands. This is usually not the case with the fan, we speak of a so-called captive consumer.

In today's world, it seems sports consumers have infinite choices and unlimited digital demands to spend with sports. The sporting sphere rotates around multiple media channels, mediums to engage and virtual stadia to interact, before, during and after an event, making the challenge for digital marketers to create an impact even greater.

Take a look at what happens in just one day on social media:

- 1.2M people join social media platforms
- 6.6B Internet searches
- 25M hours of Netflix streaming
- 269B Emails sent (Schultz, 2019)

We are creating and consuming an enormous amount of content, from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed. With more and more people gaining access to the Internet and new devices emerging, the amount of content we create and consume will accelerate further.

Therefore, we are relying on our mobile devices more than ever, to navigate the sea of information and content that we are exposed to every day. And this it is no wonder. Mobile is the dominant device in our lives.

According to Apple's global iPhone data, we are unlocking our mobile devices more than 80 times a day. The mobile has become a personal remote to our favourite information, with users consuming content 41% faster in comparison to desktop.



Unit 3.2 What relevance are the social media gaining in sport?

The social media have taken their place in many areas of sports communication and in recent years have developed an unmistakable influence in terms of information, entertainment and content distribution. Clubs, associations, organisations, athletes and PR professionals in particular have been in the online paradise for some time and understand how to make the best possible use of the variety of marketing and brand communication.

Much has already been written about the important role of social media in sport: both for the areas mentioned above (clubs, associations, athletes, etc.) and for journalism, which has been sustainably shaped on several levels. Many things have been changed or simplified for the better: by means of the various social media platforms, such as Facebook, the micro-blogging service Twitter or visual channels such as Instagram, fans and journalists can communicate directly with other people and in real time without much delay. That raises the journalistic work to a new level and enhances the “live experience”. Of course, this is not just a one-way communication, but the flow of information also goes in the opposite direction.

In December 2020, a video posted on Instagram by former Austrian ski racer Marcel Hirscher spread at an incredible speed. For the first time since his retirement, the eight-time overall World Cup winner appeared in a specially designed racing suit during a race training with the giant slalom team of the Austrian Ski Association. This brought about millions of clicks within a very short time, as national and international media had taken over in a second, and for many, the question was whether this could have been the starting signal for a comeback of the century. There was a lot of speculation afterwards, but no further comment from the double Olympic winner (as usual in his career). Apart from the fact that he was the fastest athlete in the times despite a long break, it was ultimately a well-planned marketing gag to promote the launch of a new clothing line, "The Mountainstudio", in which Hirscher had participated. That was definitely successful: the strong brand Marcel Hirscher in combination with his sport was the driver and the ideal platform for the starting shot: a prime example of the possibilities that social networks offer if you can use them carefully for yourself. With such media-effective campaigns, the needs of partners and sponsors can then also be satisfied to a high degree.

Figure 2: Marcel Hirscher of Austria poses for a portrait in Muhr, Austria



Source: Red Bull, 2020, <https://win.gs/3fykYUo>

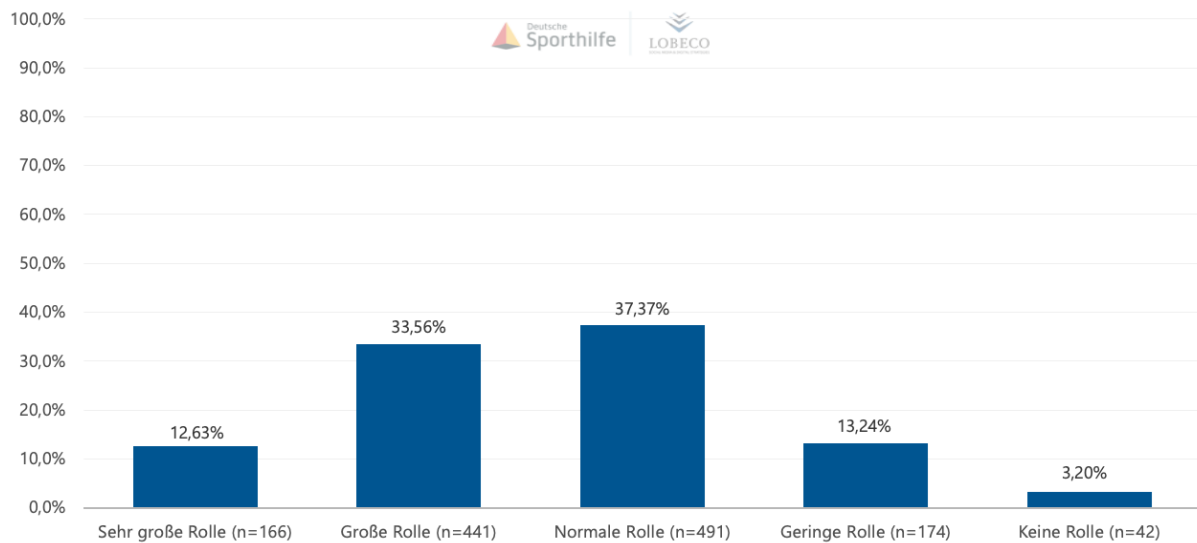
Journalists follow the target group relevant to them –regardless of whether they are clubs or athletes– and read published content on social media in order to find out about the latest news in order to finally publish themselves and offer their subscribers and users added value to prepare. But this enormous development did not stop in marketing either. With target group-specific communication, sponsors reach exactly those people that believe their products or services are relevant (in addition to product placement, self-portrayal has a decisive place in the communication mix).

According to this, social media influences the relationship between athletes and journalists. Recipients and fans are less and less dependent on journalists and their reports due to the extensive use that athletes make of social media. The direct contact with their idols and the so-called first-hand information reduce the fans' dependence on the general media and their published information, which is why the use of social media with regard to comprehensive sports communication is increasing more and more.

In spring 2020, Deutsche Sporthilfe, together with the social media agency LOBECO, carried out an online survey among 1,300 athletes from 50 types of sport sponsored by Sporthilfe. Almost half of the athletes surveyed stated that social media played a very large role in their everyday life as top athletes (46 percent). Social networks are only less

important for every six respondents (16 percent). There is a polarization in use: either the platforms are used daily or hardly at all.

Figure 3



Source: Statista, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3rWtZeN>

The importance of social media for sport

The choice of digital platforms is huge. The most popular with us are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat and WhatsApp. These networks have ushered in a new era, and will continue to do so at a rapid pace. The days when athletes or officials had to wait for a reporter to hold a pad or a microphone under their noses in order to be able to speak publicly are long gone. Nowadays everyone can create their own platform to be heard, to enjoy attention, to convey messages, to polarize. You can express opinions and justify decisions.

When it comes to transfer activities in sport, too, social media key figures are becoming increasingly important and have an enormous impact; an example of this was the transfer of Cristiano Ronaldo from Real Madrid to Juventus Turin in 2018. Shortly before one of the most exciting changes in history, the traditional Italian club took the advice of a German company. RESULT Sport, in the person of Mario Leo, who has supported in an advisory capacity for years, gave the Italians seven hours of predictions regarding the digital development of their social media channels and presented strong arguments or extrapolated how quickly the money that was spent would flow back into the club fund. Juventus wanted to approach the sponsors with the numbers, without which a transfer of this magnitude would not have been possible.

With his move to the Juventus Turin Club, which had to deal with all communication without the assistance of the star in communication, Cristiano Ronaldo triggered a true



social media tsunami: the number of followers on all Juventus platforms increased within a few weeks over 10 million. On Facebook alone, Juve posts now have a total reach of 437 million; on Twitter, they triggered 280 million impressions; and on Instagram, the “old lady” reaps 65 million likes and 630,000 comments: numbers that had never been achieved before. The transfer of the century had paid for itself within 15 months. Gigantic! And all that, with the great help of social media.

This transfer shows the incredible influence of social networks in sport. In practice, it is not always in a “Ronaldo dimension”, but there are enough examples even on a smaller scale. So, it often happens that internationally known players who are followed by a large community are obliged to boost marketing in these countries for the club or for sponsors and to expand the fan base. You often see this process with Asian players –mostly Japanese or Chinese– who are brought to Europe. For these reasons, social media is often also called “transfer opener”.

From the athlete's point of view

The good thing is that social networks are a living system. This means that the athlete very quickly receives direct feedback on his online activities, regardless of whether it is a positively motivating or a critical comment about the sporting activity or private events. In any case, the feedback from users tells you that actions and behaviour as an athlete or as a private person are followed with interest and sympathy.

Athletes can communicate directly to the interested public (fans and media) through their channels. It is important that you remain credible and authentic in everything you do, regardless of whether it is to do with a positive or negative topic. Professional athletes also use social media for PR and advertising purposes, which can create a clichéd, image-oriented profile that does not correspond to the real athlete’s personality traits and does not do justice to the athlete. This sometimes reduces them to individual aspects. Therefore, one should bear in mind the motto “everything I do (communicate) has to pay into my individual personal brand” if one has already defined one's personal guard rails for the appearance in the social networks - this makes the future path and the content easier-.

Even if there are not always only the positive sides in the online area, a lot of athletes like to share content; on the one hand, they address their specific audience in a targeted manner; and on the other hand, large reach and access numbers can be achieved, which then allows them to build a network with existing and new sponsors.

In the meantime, many athletes have understood what added value the social networks can offer them and what they have to do to achieve a great output. The problem in practice is that many do not have the time or know-how to design their appearance professionally

–they prefer to concentrate on their sporting existence in order to pursue their profession with full focus.

Social media shaping sports consumption

How fans consume sports is rapidly changing. Rising global Internet connectivity rates, the increasing cost of sports broadcasting rights and the ever-growing role of social media platforms as hotbeds of fan engagement all highlight over-the-top (OTT) live-streaming as the future of sports consumption. League stakeholders are leveraging the power of digital platforms to identify and reach the “future” fan.

Social media live-streaming: reaching new fans and deepening experience with existing ones.

The intersect of professional sports and social media is long-established. Platforms that facilitate interactivity and sharing user-generated content globally have created what has been called “the second screen” or “the second screen experience”. People are able to share real-time opinions irrespective of physical location.

Stakeholders in professional sports are confident that not only does live-stream games on social media represent a new broadcast avenue, but also an opportunity to enrich the experience and convert casual fans into core fans. Reducing the reliance on pure proximity to the action could prove especially valuable in new markets.

Facebook

In terms of pushing sports content out to global audiences and simultaneously driving advertising revenues through live and on-demand sports video content, Facebook is in a dominant position. With the platform localised in 140+ languages and focusing on penetrating areas with low internet accessibility, the potential for driving engagement in professional sports is impressive.

Twitter

As for Twitter, this is what Alan Rowan has to tell us:

Twitter is instrumental in driving engagement and conversation in professional sports. It has been long established as a go-to ‘second screen’ for fans.

In 2017 Twitter was vocal about the platform’s advance into the streaming space, live-streaming sports, sports-related programming, concerts, news and other events. Several content tiers serve to keep users engaged on the platform.

Snackable content: Twitter's NFL partnership is centred on dedicated programming, with live previews and highlights or 'snackable content' and a weekend show containing comprehensive pre-game updates.

Full match offer: A weekly regular season WNBA game will be live-streamed on Twitter (20 total per season) during the 2017, 2018 and 2019 seasons. Twitter delivered live action of women's basketball and the traditional 'second screen' fan conversation within one user interface. (Rowan, 2019, para. 7-10)

Instagram

For Rowen, Instagram has more of an athlete focus than Facebook and Twitter do:

Back in 2016 Instagram announced that at the time, of the 500 million people using Instagram every month, 165 million were sports fans – meaning they follow at least one sports-related account. Owned by Facebook, Instagram has the highest user bases in the US, Brazil and Indonesia.

Compared to Facebook and Twitter, Instagram has more of an athlete focus. The Golden State Warriors breached the top 10 in terms of overall Instagram followers across all teams tracked – making the team a contender with the behemoths of European football.

Instagram has solidified its place as a hub for 'athlete influencers'. The platform has been leveraged to drive social discourse, perhaps most notably witnessed during the Colin Kaepernick led protests that polarised stakeholder opinion. Athletes' personal social media accounts are consistently proving to be platforms from which fan engagement can be extended beyond the field of play to political and social arenas. (Rowan, 2019, para. 12-14)

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