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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<br>(2025, avg<br>viewers) | Streaming & Digital<br>(Facebook/TikTok/<br>YouTube) | X (2025, peak<br>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

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Conceptualization:** M.T. and M.R.; **Resources,** A.K.K and M.T.; **Methodology,** A.K.K. and M.T.; **Investigation,** M.R. and M.T.; **Data curation,** A.K.K.; **Formal Analysis,** M.R. and M.T.; **Writing – original draft,** M.T. and M.R.; **Writing – review & editing,** M.T and M.R. *All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.*

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