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The social media activity of top athletes during the global suspension of sports competitions — based on the example of Instagram

Aktywność czołowych sportowców w mediach społecznościowych podczas globalnego zawieszenia rozgrywek sportowych — na przykładzie Instagrama

Abstract

In March 2020, most sports competitions in the world were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Fan demand for information about top athletes could not be fully satisfied traditionally, that is why social media have grown in popularity. This article aims to identify the factors that affect the engagement of sports fans on social media and is based on the example of Instagram. The number of likes, comments as well as the number of likes and comments divided by the number of followers (appropriate engagement rates), were taken into account as engagement indicators. The results clearly show what types of posts generated the most engagement.

Keywords

Instagram, social media, communication, athletes, sport, engagement, likes, comments

Streszczenie

W marcu 2020 roku większość zawodów sportowych na świecie została zawieszona z powodu pandemii COVID-19. W tej sytuacji zapotrzebowanie kibiców na informacje o najlepszych sportowcach nie mogło być w pełni zaspokojone w sposób tradycyjny, czego wynikiem był wzrost popularności mediów społecznościowych. Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja czynników wpływających na zaangażowanie fanów sportu w mediach społecznościowych, bazując na przykładzie Instagrama. Jako wskaźniki uwzględniono liczbę polubień i komentarzy, a także liczbę polubień i komentarzy podzieloną przez liczbę followersów (właściwe wskaźniki zaangażowania). Wyniki przeprowadzonego badania pokazują jakie typy postów generowały największe zaangażowanie.

Słowa kluczowe

Instagram, media społecznościowe, komunikowanie, sportowcy, sport, zaangażowanie, polubienia, komentarze

JEL: M30

Introduction

During the global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, many socio-economic changes occurred. In this article, we focus on two areas. The first area is that of social media which have gained a great deal

of popularity, and the second is the sports industry which incurred significant losses as a result of the pandemic. The above-mentioned areas, due to their specificity, are closely intertwined, and the COVID-19 crisis proved that they can affect each other. Social

media belong to the group of entities whose market offer has become the subject of particular consumer interest as a result of the pandemic. As a result of COVID-19, 43% of social media users admitted that they spend more time on social media (Global Web Index, 2020). In the United States during the pandemic, people spent on average 82 minutes a day on social media — an increase of 6 minutes compared to forecasts (Williamson, 2020). The increased activity of social media users results from the specificity of the platforms which meet the current needs of consumers as they are used mainly for entertainment, information, and social needs (Global Web Index, 2020). During the COVID-19 outbreak, social media also reduced the feeling of loneliness for over 60% of generation Z and Y. Importantly, people's approaches to published content have also changed — as many as 42% of users stated that during the pandemic they did not feel pressure to show unrealistic pictures of their lives (Global Web Index, 2020).

In 2013–2020, Instagram recorded an increase in the number of users from 90 million to 1 billion, and during this period it was the fastest growing social media platform in the world, currently occupying third place in terms of the number of users (Iqbal, 2020; Omnicore, 2020; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Smart Insights, 2020). Every day, over 100 million photos or videos are published on Instagram, generating 4.2 billion likes (Droesch, 2019; Omnicore, 2020). This trend continued during the pandemic — the increase in user time on Instagram (14%), was higher than other social platforms such as Snapchat (12%) and Facebook (4%). This contributed to more than a nine-times greater increase in time spent on Instagram than had been predicted in 2019 (original growth forecast: 1.5%). Currently, Instagram users spend an average of 30 minutes per day, an increase of 4 minutes compared to 2019 (eMarketer, 2020). Instagram, compared to the other social media platforms (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) is characterized by the highest level of user engagement, which is up to a dozen times higher (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). The engagement level is reflected in the use of Instagram as the main social media platform in influencer marketing. In 2019 — Instagram was used in over 90% of influencer marketing campaigns, significantly more compared to Facebook (40%) and Twitter (45%).

It should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the sports world particularly hard. For the safety of athletes and fans, it was decided to postpone the largest sports events scheduled for 2020 (including the Olympic Games), and some league games were simply ended (e.g. football leagues in France, Netherlands, and Belgium). Until now, such decisions were made only as

a result of wars or very serious political crises. It can therefore be concluded that professional sport is one of the areas most affected by COVID-19. This situation has also prompted discussions about whether professional athletes earn too much, and in many cases, there has been a temporary reduction in players' salaries (Stock, 2020). According to the European Club Association (ECA, 2020), financial losses of European football clubs related to COVID-19 can be estimated at 3.6 billion EURO (1.5 billion in the 2019/2020 season and 2.1 billion in the 2020/2021 season). All clubs' revenue streams have been reduced, but the COVID-19 situation had the greatest impact on matchday direct revenue, as stadiums were closed to fans or could be only partially filled. During the suspension of competitions, athletes, like most of the population, had to stay at home and train individually. Social media — including Instagram, became one of the main means of communication with their fans. Therefore, a decision was made to check what the athletes communicated in their posts and what was associated with the greatest engagement of their followers. The purpose of the study was to identify the factors that contributed to fan engagement on Instagram during the global suspension of sports competitions. The study consisted of analyzing posts on Instagram from March 12 to April 12, 2020. March 12 was deliberately chosen as the day that most of the world's sporting activities were suspended due to COVID-19 (ESPN, 2020). The analysis included 85 posts that were divided according to the indicated categories, i.e. context, content, and format.

Social media engagement measurement

One of the main challenges for social media users is to create relevant content, the effectiveness of which depends on user engagement (Lehmann et al., 2012; Jaakonmäki, Müller, and vom Brocke, 2017; Aldous, An and Jansen, 2019). As indicated by R. Jaakonmäki et al. (2017), involvement on social media depends on three variables, i.e. creator, context, and content. Creator, i.e. the author of published content, is one of the basic engagement factors. The creator's features include among others: gender, age, profession, popularity outside of social media which connects with the number of followers. Context means when the post was published, for example, a specific time and day of the week. The last element is the content, which refers to the form of publication. R. Jaakonmäki et al. (2017) indicated the presence of three types of content: text, visual and audio. In our study, we

propose a modification of the structure of variables determining involvement on social media by distinguishing: 1) creator — athletes with the most followers on Instagram; 2) context — whether the post is or is not related to COVID-19; 3) content — four groups: a) the athlete himself, b) his family/friends, c) text, d) other; and 4) format — video or photo.

The key element is the determination of the follower's engagement rate. According to K. Aldous et al. (2019), four levels of user engagement on social media can be identified, i.e.: level 1: private — measured by the number of views; level 2: showing preferences — measured by the number of likes; level 3: expressing opinions and feelings — measured by the number of comments and shares; level 4: content distributor — distribution of content to other platforms. In this research, basic Instagram popularity indicators were used: likes, comments and followers. However, it should be noted that looking only at likes and comments may lead to wrong conclusions. The key indicator here is the number of followers, which is a benchmark for the number of interactions with the post. As noted by R. Jaakonmäki et al. (2017), the number of followers influences the number of interactions. This is also indicated by E. Ferrara et al. (2014) who proved that on Instagram, increases in the number of likes generate new likes. That is why a higher number of followers may contribute to a greater number of likes and comments, although it will not be proof of the greater engagement of followers. On the other hand, research shows that as the number of followers on social media increases, the engagement rate decreases — in the case of Instagram, among accounts with less than 1,000 followers, the engagement rate is 7.2%, among accounts exceeding 100,000 followers it is 1.1%, and among those exceeding a million it is 0.7% (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2020). Therefore, this study also included the number of likes and comments divided by the number of followers, which was defined as the appropriate engagement rate.

Social media in sport

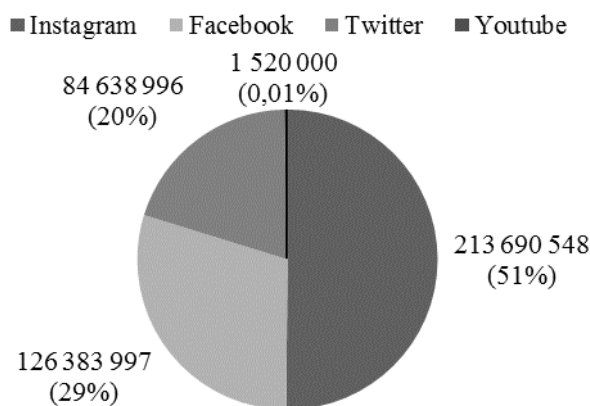
Many athletes are now investing their resources into social media. Their goal is to arouse interest around themselves — attract and maintain relationships with as many fans as possible. An interesting trend is that athletes on social media are more likely to post on personal than professional topics (Frederick et al., 2014; Pegoraro, 2016). Thanks to this type of post, fans have the opportunity to obtain information about

the everyday lives of their favorites. This is the kind of information that, before the emergence of social media, was available only to a very small group of people. In sports, behind-the-scenes and exclusive content is more popular with fans on social media (Osokin, 2019). Osokin (2019) points out that when it comes to social media in sports, posts in video and photo formats are more engaging. The use of the video format is one of the most important trends on social media. As noted by A. Kar and A. Chak (2016), as many as 70% of social media users share video materials, and 97% say that they would be willing to do so. Similar conclusions were reached by Benevenuto et al. (2009) who stated that the video format is one of the main elements of everyday functioning on social media, which also allows for the creation of new forms of online interaction. It should also be noted that according to some sources (Smart Insights, 2020), videos generate more interactions on social media. This is true on Facebook, while on Instagram, photos gain more interactions than videos (Smart Insights, 2020).

The popularity of top athletes and Instagram is best illustrated by the example of one of the most famous soccer players in the world — Cristiano Ronaldo. The chart below presents the number of followers of Cristiano Ronaldo's profile on various social media — a total of 430,634,034 people follow him, and more than half of them are Instagram users.

When discussing the topic of social media in the world of sport, it is also worth describing sports fans. It is believed that a fan's relationship with his or her favorite team or player is deeper than a typical consumer relationship — fans are often emotionally attached to the object of their sympathy (Dionísio et al., 2008; McCarthy et al.,

Chart 1. The number of Cristiano Ronaldo's followers on various social media (April 18, 2020)



Source: own elaboration.

2014). For many fans, a favorite sports club is a part of their identity (Tapp & Clowes, 2002). Sport gives fans the opportunity to identify themselves because through the sport, they can communicate who they are and what is most important to them. In addition, fans are now (more than ever) able to express their sympathy and loyalty to the team via social media (Pronschinske, Groza & Walker, 2012). It should be noted, however, that the loyalty and behavior of fans are complex and the conventional belief that fans are faithful to only one team throughout their lives is not always true (Tapp & Clowes, 2002). In sports marketing, fans are treated as a diverse group whose representatives can be found in every socio-economic class (Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

Methodology

The analyzed group consists of ten athletes with the highest number of people following their Instagram profiles. They are mainly soccer players — which highlights the global popularity of this sport. The top ten also included a representative of the NBA — LeBron James, and a cricket player from India — Virat Kohli. When analyzing the athletes in terms of their workplace, most of them play in European leagues (7 — including 3 in Real Madrid), and they come from 8 different countries (most from Brazil — 3). Two players included in the study are retired athletes — former soccer stars: David Beckham and Ronaldo de Assis Moreira. It is also worth adding that in modern times, professional sport is a real business, and the most popular athletes on Instagram are also among the

top earners. For example, in the period from June 2018 to June 2019, Lionel Messi earned \$ 127 million, Cristiano Ronaldo \$ 109 million, Neymar \$ 105 million, and LeBron James \$ 89 million (Badenhausen, 2019).

The study consisted of analyzing posts on Instagram from March 12 to April 12, 2020. March 12 was deliberately chosen as the day that most of the world's sporting activities were suspended due to COVID-19 (ESPN, 2020). The analysis included 85 posts that were divided according to the previously indicated categories, i.e. context, content, and format. The average number of posts per creator was 8.5. The greatest number of posts were published by Neymar (full name: Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior). In turn, Ronaldinho (full name: Ronaldo de Assis Moreira) 7th in terms of the number of followers, did not publish any post during this period. In total, all posts in the analyzed period received 213,789,277 likes (average: 2,515,168) and 1,471,760 comments (average: 21,967). Neymar's account had the option to restrict comments, so due to the possibility of disrupting the final results, he was excluded from the analysis of comments. Altogether, all analyzed creators had 864,600,084 followers (an average of 86,460,008). Cristiano Ronaldo had the highest number of followers (213,690,548), while Gareth Bale had the fewest (43,031,978). All ten of the most popular athletes on Instagram along with information about their activity on Instagram are presented in Table 1.

In the analyzed group, we can find confirmation of the research conducted by E. Ferrara et al. (2014). This is reflected in the fact that the post with the most likes belongs to Cristiano Ronaldo (12,179,725 likes), and the post with the least likes

Table 1. Activity of the analyzed athletes on Instagram from March 12 to April 12, 2020

Athlete	Followers*	Posts	Total likes	Total comments	Avg. likes per post	Avg. comments per post
Cristiano Ronaldo	213,690,548	12	95,642,465	909,900	7,970,205	75,825
Leo Messi	148,195,915	7	27,288,753	230,900	3,898,393	32,986
Neymar	137,692,832	18	37,372,842	700	2,076,269	39
LeBron James	63,154,751	12	14,023,017	97,612	1,168,585	8,134
David Beckham	62,559,795	11	9,731,760	50,604	884,705	4,600
Virat Kohli	54,606,766	9	19,252,799	114,337	2,139,200	12,704
Ronaldinho	51,953,307	0	0	0	0	0
James Rodriguez	45,355,629	4	4,905,112	31,079	1,226,278	7,770
Marcelo	44,358,563	5	2,461,776	8,334	492,355	1,667
Gareth Bale	43,031,978	7	3,110,753	28,994	444,393	4,142

*Data from 18/04/2020

Source: own elaboration.

(105,064) to Gareth Bale. The same is true for the number of comments — the highest score in this area was achieved by Cristiano Ronaldo (172,000) and the lowest by Gareth Bale (381). This rule is also confirmed by average results. Cristiano Ronaldo achieved the highest average of likes (7,970,205) and comments (75,825). On the other hand, Gareth Bale had the lowest average of likes (444,393), and Marcelo (full name: Marcelo Vieira da Silva Júnior) had the lowest average of comments (1,666).

As previously indicated, one of the goals of the research was to measure the appropriate engagement rate. In all analyzed posts, the engagement rate of likes — 2.199%, was definitely higher than the engagement rate of comments — 0.018%. This confirms the concept of four levels of engagement (Aldous et al., 2019) and the statement of E. Ferrara et al. (2014) that the Instagram ecosystem is not friendly for commenting and discussion. Assuming that as the levels increase, it becomes more difficult to engage followers, it can be concluded that followers were less likely to get involved in the third level (comments) compared to the second level (likes). Data on appropriate engagement rates among the analyzed athletes is presented in Table 2.

It is also worth noting that the engagement rates varied in different athletes and differed from the previously presented number of likes and comments. In this case, when it comes to likes, Virat Kohli's followers were engaged the most (3.917%), and Gareth Bale the least (1.033%). On the other hand, in terms of engagement rates measured by comments, Gareth Bale obtained the highest score (0.067%), while Marcelo's score was the lowest (0.004%).

Results

Most of the analyzed posts (57) were thematically related to COVID-19. Posts in the context of COVID-19 generated an average of 2,888,158 likes and 26,150 comments. Taking into account the appropriate engagement rate, in the case of likes it was 2.333%, and in comments 0.017%. On the other hand, posts not related to COVID-19 generated an average of 1,755,867 likes and 8,633 comments. This is a 1.926% engagement rate of likes and 0.008% of comments. The Student's t-test for independent samples showed that the context variable significantly differentiated the number of likes $t(79) = -2.335$; $p = 0.022$, Cohen's $d = 0.525$ and the number of comments $t(63) = -3.267$; $p = 0.002$, Cohen's $d = 0.823$. In summary, it can be concluded that the context of COVID-19, compared to other topics, engaged followers to a greater extent.

As part of the analysis, the posts were divided into 4 groups according to the type of content presented, i.e.: 1) the athlete himself, 2) his family/friends, 3) text and 4) other. Additionally, the posts were divided into three further categories, i.e.: 1) general (4 analyzed content groups regardless of the COVID-19 context), 2) 4 groups in the context of COVID-19 and 3) 4 groups without the COVID-19 context. Posts with the content "family/friends" gained the most likes and comments among all analyzed groups, especially when there was a COVID-19 context. In the case of the engagement rate of likes and comments, it was the highest in the case of "text" in posts without a COVID-19 context. But there was only one post of this kind, so no far-reaching conclusions can be drawn. Detailed results are presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Engagement rates of followers among the analyzed athletes

Athlete	Engagement rates of likes	Engagement rates of comments
Cristiano Ronaldo	3.730%	0.035%
Leo Messi	2.631%	0.022%
Neymar	1.508%	0.000%
LeBron James	1.850%	0.013%
David Beckham	1.414%	0.007%
Virat Kohli	3.917%	0.023%
Ronaldo de Assis Moreira	0.000%	0.000%
James Rodriguez	2.704%	0.017%
Marcelo Vieira Jr	1.110%	0.004%
Gareth Bale	1.033%	0.067%
Average	2.199%	0.018%

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3. Popularity of Instagram posts depending on their content, broken down by COVID-19 context

Context	Content	Posts	Avg.likes	Avg.comments	Engagement rates of likes	Engagement rates of comments
All posts	Athlete himself	37	2,501,573	22,898	2.088%	0.013%
	Family/friends	32	3,044,391	24,524	2.701%	0.017%
	Text	8	2,025,835	24,660	1.738%	0.016%
	Other	8	950,488	5,485	1.166%	0.006%
COVID-19	Athlete himself	19	3,012,843	29,043	2.208%	0.018%
	Family/friends	25	3,467,512	28,426	2.910%	0.019%
	Text	7	2,051,164	26,387	1.568%	0.015%
	Other	6	1,055,833	5,680	1.219%	0.005%
NoCOVID-19	Athlete himself	18	1,961,898	10,608	1.961%	0.007%
	Family/friends	7	1,533,240	5,793	1.956%	0.007%
	Text	1	1,848,531	14,300	2.927%	0.023%
	Other	2	634,455	4,998	1.008%	0.008%

Source: own elaboration.

Due to the specificity of Instagram, the dominant format on this platform are photos. In this study, 52 posts were photos and 33 were videos. Overall (including both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 related posts), the photos gained 56% more likes and a 50% higher appropriate engagement rate of likes. In turn, in the case of comments, the average values were similar. Analysis with the Student's t-test for independent samples showed that the variable format significantly differentiates the engagement rate of likes, $t(83) = 2.595$; $p = 0.011$, Cohen's $d = 0.570$. It can therefore be concluded that the photo format increased the engagement rate of likes, but did not affect comments. Detailed data is presented in Table 4.

In the case of posts in the context of COVID-19, the photo format gained more likes — by 56%, and a higher appropriate engagement rate of

likes — by 48%. In the case of comments, the values were similar. Analysis with the Student's t-test for independent samples showed that the variable format in the case of posts in the context of COVID-19 statistically significantly differentiates the engagement rate of likes, $t(55) = 2.013$; $p = 0.049$, Cohen's $d = 0.543$. In turn, in the case of posts unrelated to COVID-19, photos generated more likes (97%), comments (33%) and a higher appropriate engagement rate of likes (61%). Only the engagement rate of comments was lower in the case of photos by over 20%. Analysis using the Student's t-test for independent samples showed that the variable format in posts not related to COVID-19 statistically significantly differentiates the number of likes, $t(26) = 2.434$; $p = 0.022$, Cohen's $d = 0.955$.

Table 4. Popularity of Instagram posts depending on their format, broken down by COVID-19 context

Context	Format	Posts	Avg.likes	Avg.comments	Engagement rates of likes	Engagement rates of comments
All posts	Video	33	1,870,274	21,205	1.682%	0.015%
	Photo	52	2,924,427	22,513	2.527%	0.013%
COVID-19	Video	23	2,213,559	25,847	1.811%	0.018%
	Photo	34	3,344,504	26,361	2.686%	0.016%
NoCOVID-19	Video	10	1,080,720	7,279	1.383%	0.009%
	Photo	18	2,130,949	9,685	2.228%	0.007%

Source: own elaboration.

Discussion

The research aimed to identify the factors that influence the engagement of sports fans on social media based on the example of Instagram. Based on the results it can be concluded that the COVID-19 context differentiated the average number of likes, comments, and an appropriate engagement rate of likes and comments. If an athlete published a COVID-19 related post, that post was more popular than his posts without this theme. Here it is necessary to emphasize the importance of authenticity, understood as the true content of posts. It turns out that unrealistic content can be successfully replaced by that which is authentic.

This is the insight into influencer marketing in sports. Summing up, it can be said that in this difficult period for everyone, sports fans expected their favorite athletes to comment on the COVID-19 situation on an ongoing basis. It seems that fans were particularly interested in how athletes spend their time during the lockdown period, whether they train at home, and their opinions on various phenomena related to the pandemic. On the other hand, if the post was unrelated to the ongoing crisis, it did not arouse such interest from fans. The other results may also be useful for influencer marketing in sports, namely: posts in the photo format (not video), and those depicting family/friends were more popular.

Some previous studies have indicated that video posts are very popular on social media. However, our study showed that in the case of Instagram, photos are more popular among users. Perhaps this is because photos can be seen quickly and a video requires a certain amount of time from the users, which may discourage them from interacting. In

turn, another significant result is that the posts that presented the athlete's family and friends were the most popular. It is very interesting because sportsmen often post their own photos on social media, and it turns out that to increase the popularity of the post it is worth inviting friends or family to the photo.

Conclusion

The results presented in this paper may not only have practical applications but may also form the basis for further research about factors determining the popularity of posts on social media. These results showed that it is possible to generate fans interest on social media during the lockdown by using the right tools and customizing content. The study found that posts related to COVID-19 were crucial during the period of limited opportunities to obtain information about athletes. Content related to the athlete's family presented in photo format also generated more interest. However, it should be added that the presented results are characterized by some limitations. First of all, it is not known if the same dependencies also occur in other groups, i.e. other than athletes. The analysis also did not show whether such a regularity occurs on other social media, because it should be remembered that each social media platform has its own characteristics. Another factor is that the study focused only on the top ten athletes on Instagram. Therefore, subsequent research in this area should take the above-mentioned into account and verify whether such dependencies also occur on other social media and among less popular athletes.

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