



# Evolving fields: Communication, marketing, and sponsorship in sport

***Campos en evolución: Comunicación, marketing y patrocinio en el deporte***

## INTRODUCTION

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This special edition of *Obra Digital* brings together a selection of academic contributions exploring the dynamic intersections of sports marketing, communication, and sponsorship. In a context where technological innovation and digital transformation continue to reshape the sports industry, these papers offer valuable insights into emerging strategies, media practices, and sponsorship models that define the

contemporary landscape. Collectively, the issue highlights how sport, as a social and cultural phenomenon, becomes a powerful force for communication, branding, and audience engagement in the digital age.

The issue opens with a contribution by Júlia Alabart-Algueró, Óscar Gutiérrez-Aragón, Joan

Cuenca-Fontbona and Joan-Francesc Fond- evila-Gascón, which examines the habits and motivations of students in equestrian training programmes when engaging with online equestrian content. Through qualitative analysis based on focus groups, the study reveals that leisure, learning, and information-seeking are key motivators for following equestrian influencers. The findings also indicate that these influencers play an important role in providing entertainment, enhancing the visibility of equestrian sport, and serving as valuable sources of information for students.

The second article, by Juan Manuel Corbacho-Valencia, Javier Abuín-Penas and Jesús Pérez-Seoane, explores how 14 global Olympic sponsors employed digital communication during one of the most significant sporting events worldwide. Based on an examination of 226 social media posts from both Facebook and Instagram, the study identifies emotional storytelling, athlete collaborations, and institutional promotion as dominant strategies in brand messaging. The findings underline how brands capitalise on shared emotion and collective experience to reinforce audience connection and brand affinity. Overall, the article provides valuable insights into how global sponsors adapt their communication strategies to enhance engagement and brand positioning during large-scale sporting events.

Continuing with the theme of communication strategies among sponsors of sporting events, John Fortunato focuses on the particular case of golf. By analysing televised commercials during PGA and LIV tournaments, the article investigates how equipment brands

communicate functional congruence with athletes who use their products in competition. It further reflects on the disruption introduced by the LIV Golf Tour, offering insights into sponsorship dynamics in a changing sporting ecosystem. In doing so, the article deepens the understanding of functional congruence as a communication strategy within the evolving landscape of professional golf sponsorship.

The discussion on visibility and representation is expanded in the work of Ainhoa Montero-Baraza, Penélope Martín-Martín and Gema Lobillo-Mora. This study delves into gender stereotypes and sponsorship inequalities in a discipline that traditionally lacks visibility. Through quantitative and qualitative approaches, the authors demonstrate how men's rhythmic gymnastics remains marginalised in media coverage and commercial support, thus exposing persistent gender biases in sports communication and marketing. By highlighting these disparities, the article provides insights into how sponsorship practices and media representation perpetuate gender inequities, offering possibilities for more inclusive strategies in sports marketing.

Shifting towards digital broadcasting, Lucía Moya-Díaz and Sonia Blanco provide a comparative examination of two milestone events: *Netflix's The Slam* and HBO Max's 2024 Roland Garros final. The research contrasts Netflix's spectacular and dramatised approach with HBO Max's more traditional yet technically refined production style. Together, these findings illustrate the diverse ways in which OTT platforms are redefining the aesthetics and strategies of live sports coverage. The article contributes to

understanding how streaming platforms shape audience perception and engagement through contrasting narrative and production strategies in live sports broadcasting.

Complementing this perspective, José Luis Rojas-Torrijos and Juan Ignacio Martín-Neira investigate how scientific and technological narratives are incorporated into sports reporting. Analysing coverage from *Folha*, *El País*, *The Athletic*, and *L'Équipe*, the study reveals a growing journalistic interest in topics such as mental health, biomechanics, and environmental impact. It highlights the relevance of expert sources and multimedia storytelling in diversifying the thematic scope of sports journalism. The findings show that science-focused coverage not only broadens the range of topics and voices in sports reporting, but also enhances the presentation of information through visual elements, infographics, and explanatory content, providing greater context, depth, and societal relevance.

Our next article, prepared by Nadia Balaguer-Calderón and Guillermo Sanahuja-Peris and, examines a new form of sports-entertainment hybrid aimed at Generation Z audiences, focusing on the Kings and Queens League. Combining content analysis and audience surveys, this research underscores the influential role of streamers as key mediators between brands and fans. The findings demonstrate how these events blur the boundaries between traditional sport, digital entertainment, and participatory culture. By highlighting these dynamics, the article provides insights into how brands can effectively engage younger audiences through novel sports-entertainment formats.

Continuing with the exploration of digital sports environments, Sarphan Uzunoğlu analyses sponsorship integration and audience response within the Turkish programme *Londra Merkez*. Drawing on qualitative and computational methods, the study identifies tensions between authenticity and commercialisation, offering theoretical and practical insights into effective brand communication in online sports media. The analysis of viewer comments and sponsorship practices over multiple seasons provides a nuanced understanding of how digital audiences perceive and interact with branded content. It highlights strategies for balancing promotional objectives with audience trust, contributing to best practices in digital sports marketing.

The issue concludes with the work of Montse Vázquez-Gestal, María Isabel Fernández-Souto, and Iván Puentes-Rivera, which turns attention to organisational communication within elite football. Through interviews with communication professionals from Spanish and Portuguese first-division clubs, the research reveals well-established communication structures that strengthen fan relations, emotional connection, and national brand identity. The study highlights communication as a strategic and structural component of modern sports management. The article further illustrates how effective communication practices contribute to long-term fan engagement and the reinforcement of a club's national and cultural identity, offering insights relevant for both practitioners and scholars in sports management.

Together, the contributions in this special issue demonstrate the richness and diversity of contemporary research on sports communication, marketing, and sponsorship. From equestrian influencers to Olympic sponsors, from digital platforms to institutional communication, each study contributes to a deeper understanding of how sport continues to evolve as a communicative, economic, and cultural force. Overall, this issue highlights the value of interdisciplinary inquiry and critical reflection in examining the transformations that are redefining the global sports media landscape.