



“You are a Champion and Will Always Be!” – Sports Fans, Influencers, and Media Consumption in 2021¹

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Abstract. The spread of digital media culture can be seen in action in almost every walk of life. The use of online media results in new solutions even in the most common practices, and the field of sports and related fan cultures are no exceptions to that. From the mid-2010s, the trend of sports events, athletes, and their fans becoming more and more connected to online space can be well observed. This transformation generates significant changes, which can often have far-reaching effects. One such phenomenon is that excellent athletes can appear in the role of online opinion leaders or influencers. In the following study, I present these processes based on the results of a recent study that examined changes in Hungarian fan habits in connection with the 2021 European Football Championship. The second half of the study then focuses on how changes in fan practices contribute to making athletes the most valuable players in the influencer market.

Keywords: sports fandom, sports content, sports influencers, patterns of consumption

1. Introduction

Sport has played a key role in Western culture since the beginning of modernity. In addition to the beneficial health effects of a sporty lifestyle, it also has a number of social and cultural functions that have played an important role in our lives for generations. Just to name a few: social practices related to sport play an important role in the process of socialization, help to practise group dynamics processes, teach rule-following behaviour, and help develop endurance and concentration. At the

¹ The researcher was supported by the János Bolyai Research fellowship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

same time, one of the most important socio-cultural functions of sport is identity formation, emotional attachment to sports and athletes, which can manifest itself in two ways: directly and indirectly – directly when someone is living an active, sporty lifestyle and, for example, as a footballer, wrestler, or rower he or she is an active participant in sports; indirectly when the individual is not involved in any real sports activities, but as a fan he or she is constantly following the current events of a given sport. Nowadays, within the framework of media culture and media society, we attach increasing importance to the latter phenomenon, as more and more social and cultural practices are moving into the media space. Many of these practices are connected to sports fandom.

In May 2021, Telenor Hungary launched a comprehensive research project aimed at mapping the sports-related fan habits of the Hungarian population, with a special focus on online fandom activities.² The research was carried out with the participation of Hungarian Internet users aged 18–65. A total of 840 people took part in the research, the peculiarity of the sample being that women were underrepresented compared to the real composition of Hungarian society. This may also be due to the fact that men are still more interested in sports-related topics than women. Accordingly, 45% of the respondents were women and 55% were men. A further feature of the sample is that those aged 54–65 were represented slightly higher than the average. Considering the type of region and settlement, the sample is representative, but in the case of education there is a more significant difference compared to reality, as those with low education are underrepresented in the online sample, while those with higher education appear in a higher number than their real proportion in the society. However, these factors do not significantly distort the results of the study, as a sufficient number of commercially important groups appear in the focus of the query. Data collection was carried out between 28 May and 2 June 2021.³ In the following, I will present the results of this study from the scientific perspectives of communication and media studies and cultural studies. In the second half of the study, I will focus on the changing role of sports influencers in the light of the study results.

2. Changing Fan Habits in the Online Space: Channels, Content, Social Media

The survey of sports fandom shows that sport is a particularly popular content among media consumers, with at least 73% of respondents watching at least one sport, while 49% are interested in more than one sport at a time. Smaller sporting

2 Data were collected by Ipsos Instant Research.

3 For the official press release, see: <https://www.telenor.hu/sajto/kozlemeny/itt-az-uj-rekord-elkeszult-az-orszag-leghosszabb-szurkoloi-salja>.

events of domestic or local relevance are of low interest. It is worth noting, however, that the vast majority of respondents (73%) are primarily interested in world events, while 44% are also interested in continental sporting events. This also illustrates one of the most important features of late-modern media culture in the context of sports: in contemporary popular media, the constraints of space and time are indifferent, content is accessible to all, and its popularity is influenced only by its attractiveness and quality (Kellner, 1995). However, it is not incidental that athletes appearing in the global media space, due to their enormous visibility, have a very strong community cohesion force that can forge fan communities across national borders and continents.

One of the distinctive features of sports-related content consumption is that we can find clear differences by gender. 80% of the male respondents follow at least one sporting event, while the same practice is common to only 66% of women. All sporting events (international, continental, domestic) are followed by significantly more men, while the biggest difference between men and women is in the interest in continental and Hungarian sporting events: these are followed by 20% more men. All in all, it can be stated that the world of sports invariably concerns men more; what women are interested in within this thematic category I will discuss in more detail later on.

Sport is one of the most popular and universal topics in the media. Considering this, it is not surprising that such content can be found on all channels, but there is considerable variability in consumer behaviour regarding channel choice. Recent domestic research confirms the international finding that major sporting events are still watched on television by the vast majority of fans, 70% of those surveyed. We also know from international research what the background is. On the one hand, television as a means conveys content that is consistently edited with a consistently high technical standard, providing high enjoyment value, especially for sporting events (Silverstone, 1998). On the other hand, watching sports events on television is often a community experience that can provide a social experience for family members and larger groups of friends. It is worth noting, however, that the popularity of television varies more significantly in different age groups. The popularity of television is the highest among the elderly, who mainly follow sports events through this channel and who also connect the experience of fandom and support with this device. In the case of the middle-aged, television is also a leading medium, but in their case information is supplemented by browsing and viewing online content. Watching sports broadcasts on television is significantly reduced only among the younger generations, but more than half of the young people surveyed still show this behaviour. We also see from the research that the second most popular channel is online media, while the use of radio and press is already negligible among the classic mass media. The generational fault lines that emerge in connection with channel choices are the clearest in the case of social

media and streaming interfaces: 49% of young people and 26% of older people follow sporting events through social media, while 42% of young people and 22% of older people watch sporting events through online streaming. Accordingly, the overall ranking of popularity is as follows: television (70%), websites (42%), social media (34%), online broadcasts (31%), radio (10%), and print media (10%).

Social media provides an opportunity not only to watch sporting events but also to follow well-known athletes, and this is primarily an activity typical of young people (Woods–Ludvigsen, 2021). Nearly half of those surveyed (48%) follow well-known athletes and sports-related sites on social media, mostly Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Regarding fan habits, we can also experience generational differences, although these cannot be considered specific in the case of sports topics, as these patterns follow general regularities. In this context, the study found that the 18–26 age group is the most active in following athletes, with 69% of those surveyed visiting the profile of an athlete on a regular basis. According to the study, the most important motivations are the interest in the given sport or person (53%) and the exemplary behaviour, personality, and activity of the athlete (40%). This result is also in line with international research, and the phenomenon can be explained by the star cult and, within it, the influencer phenomenon (Guld, 2016, 2018, 2019). In this context, we have seen the process since about 2012 that opinion leaders with an athletic background who are also active on online platforms are able to grab and retain the attention of huge masses.⁴ What is really interesting is that this can only be partly explained by the actual athletic performance of those characters, and especially for female consumers this has much more to do with the athletes’ personalities, appearances, lifestyles, private lives, or the brands and products they promote. In this sense, we consider *ordinariness* to be an essential key concept, i.e. consumers like to gain insight into the everyday lives of well-known people through these interfaces (Szijártó, 2016).

The research also ranked a number of other topics related to sport according to the extent to which they attract the attention of those interested. This shows that 31% of respondents follow social sites because of summaries or exclusive videos, and 28% feel close to celebrities by being able to encounter content shared directly by athletes on these sites. 23% of respondents find out about the schedule of sporting events on these surfaces, and 22% visit personal sites for fun or funny content. 19% of the respondents expect insider information, 18% want to improve their own sports performance, and 17% specifically want more information about an athlete’s privacy. From a marketing point of view, it is not incidental, but not particularly promising, that, according to their own statements, only 12% of users are interested in the products promoted by athletes, and only 6% stated that the appearance of celebrities also play a role when following a well-known athlete on

4 <https://www.digitalhungary.hu/interjuk/Az-online-videos-sztaroke-a-jovo-interju-Guld-adammal/4256/>.

social media sites. It can be assumed that compliance with the envisaged norms worked most strongly on this issue, resulting in bias in the results. After all, we know well from commercial practice that the personality of athletes is particularly attractive, especially when it is matched with appropriate commercial brands in a marketing campaign.⁵

In the use of social media, the research revealed a gender difference in whether respondents follow a page or person related to sports in online or social media, but this difference is not significant. At the same time, it is clear from the results that the proportion of women who follow sports-related sites on social media is slightly lower. The reason for this is to be found in the different interests of the sexes: while men are basically interested in the schedule, results, and insider information of sports events, women are primarily interested in the private lives of athletes, and they are looking for useful tips and advice for their own sports activities. Generally, it may come as a surprise that men are more interested in the appearance of athletes than women and that women see a higher proportion of role models in athletes than men.

The research also shows that a significant proportion of users in social media dealing with sports are inactive (48%), i.e. they are passive consumers of content. Only 10% of respondents comment or like shares, and only 5% upload such posts on their own profiles. However, in another large group, 30% of respondents say they do not follow sports-related pages at all, while a further 6% do follow such pages but never actually read the content that is shared there. A higher rate of activity is seen only in a smaller group of young people, with 16% of the 18–26 year olds liking or commenting on sports-related posts compared to only 8% of the 54–65 year olds. These results are characteristic of several aspects and are in line with international trends. On the one hand, these proportions approach the “1-9-90” rule, which is typical of social media in general.⁶ According to this theory, 1% of users produce original content, 9% amplify, edit, or supplement it, and 90% are only passive followers of events. This ratio does not seem to make a drastic difference in the case of otherwise particularly popular sports-related content either. It is also a typical international trend that these are younger people, members of Generation Z and Generation Y, who are highly active on social platforms, which is closely related to the fact that identification with youth cultures and subcultural identities, as well as parallel fan activity, usually reach their peak in these age groups.

As can be seen from the above discussion, sports-related social media activities appear more passively. As a result, none of the activities listed in the research and described below is specific to Hungarian sports supporters. Generally, following

5 See, for example: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kurtbadenhausen/2019/08/03/social-medias-most-valuable-athletes-ronaldo-mcgregor-and-lebron-score/?sh=5715bbaa2f98>.

6 <https://blog.elatable.com/2006/02/creators-synthesizers-and-consumers.html>.

athletes and making bets is typical of only 2 out of 10 respondents, while young people are much more likely to be involved in these activities than any older age group. Only 16% of the respondents participate in sweepstakes, 10% join online fan groups, and only 9% make online friendships because of a common interest in sports. Even fewer of them log in to social networking sites while watching a match (7%), share a related photo (7%), or exchange their profile picture during a specific event (3%). From a marketing standpoint, it is important that only 7% of the respondents buy sports memorabilia or branded products, among which the t-shirt is the most popular, followed by various utility items such as a hat, a badge, or a sweater.

The research also sheds light on the fact that on-the-go content consumption on mobile devices is not a rarity at all but, according to self-reports, is the most common for static content related to sporting events, such as reading online news or viewing photo reports. Only 17% of the respondents consume video content on the go, but this may also be related to the limits of the mobile Internet package they use. Young people are more likely to watch more sports-related content on the go, and this practice is much more common for men (22%) than for women (11%). Generally, it is not surprising that the on-the-go practise is most prevalent among the young members of Generation Z and Y, which is why they are often referred to as the “mobile (phone) generation”. Several previous research has shown that the characteristics of these generations can be captured most sensitively through the significance of movement (Glózer et al., 2014). In the context of media usage, this movement can also be interpreted as a change of location in physical space and a transition between different media surfaces. Physical relocation can be interpreted mainly in relation to the home, the school, or workplace and the road connecting them, where specific media usage and practices are adapted to each location and to the road itself. Micro-moments are good examples for these practices. Micro-moments of media usage are created on the move, and these short-time slots can be used to consume even larger amounts of content in a very short time – nowadays on TikTok, as a very typical example. This is mainly made possible by the use of high-speed network connections, which are now available in more and more places. The movement in the virtual space of media can be explained primarily by the phenomenon of multitasking, the essence of which is that users move from one media interface to another without any problem and are often present in several places at the same time. It is clear from the study that all these characteristics also apply to young people when consuming sports-related content.

Finally, in connection with the results of the research, it is worth examining the content consumption habits of Generation Z more thoroughly in an international context. The special attention may be justified by the fact that digitally indigenous Generation Z youngsters are considered a “trendsetter generation”, which means that future trends can be deduced from their consumption patterns.⁷ This statement

7 http://www.epa.hu/03000/03056/00075/pdf/EPA03056_mediakutato_2020_1_079-092.pdf.

is based on the observation that media use practices among this age group have a wide-ranging impact on consumer trends and typically appear among older users with a lag of one or two years and then become ordinary. Recent research has found, for example, that sports content has a declining appeal among young Americans and is preceded by other forms of entertainment, such as movies and series, or other segments of pop culture such as musicians and celebrities.⁸ The declining popularity of sports is also shown by the fact that only 53% of the Generation Z youngsters are sports fans, while 63% of adults and 69% of Generation Y people say so. Generations Z youngsters in the USA are only half as likely to watch live sports events as members of Generation Y, but e-sports are already more popular in their circles than MLB, NASCAR, or the NHL. Although Hungarian research has not yet produced exactly these results, in the future we can also expect that consumption trends in Hungary will move into this direction among young people.

3. “You Are a Champion and Always Will Be!”⁹ – Athletes as Influencers in 2021

Two things can be deduced from the above study. On the one hand, it is clear that the spread of online media culture is generating fundamental changes in the consumption of sports-related content, both in terms of channels and consumption patterns. On the other hand, the research also shows that there is a change in the role of athletes in the lives of fans and supporters. Telenor’s study has shown – and there is no significant change in this respect from previous decades – that the identity of athletes is an important point of reference in our culture. Athletes are role models who play their part in conveying complex value systems that are related to, among other things, success, performance, excellence, or even male and female roles. At the same time, online culture is generating a significant change in the relationship that develops between athletes and fans. In the classical media environment, this was a one-way relationship where, within the frameworks of mass media, athletes were able to appear on a limited number of channels and only sporadically, typically in connection with their sports performance. In contemporary settings, in the world of online media culture, it can already be a two-way, interactive process that gives the impression that there can be a direct connection between fans or supporters and athletes. Basically, this transformation results in athletes being able to appear more and more often in the position of the

⁸ <https://morningconsult.com/2020/09/28/gen-z-poll-sports-fandom/>.

⁹ Fan comment under Katinka Hosszú’s Facebook post during the Tokyo Olympics, 28 July 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=365168798311117&set=a.200476304780368>.

online opinion leader or influencer. In the second part of the study, we review the latest trends in this process based on international literature.

To understand the phenomenon, it is necessary to see what factors make athletes more attractive in the influencer market. In the present text, I will argue that there are three main factors that play an important role in the fact that athletes have an outstanding appeal to the public and at the same time represent a significant commercial value. One of the most obvious explanations for this phenomenon is the way fame is born in the case of athletes. If we examine the typologies of well-known people, we find that famous athletes belong to the elite group of stars in almost all approaches. In Monaco's taxonomic system, successful athletes fall into the category of "heroes" or "stars" – where both groups are characterized by serious effort, hard work, high performance, and in many cases unparalleled talent. At the same time, the category of stars is also characterized by the fact that the famous person also has significant visibility through public appearances (Monaco, 1978). In Rojek's system, athletes fall into the category of "achieved celebrity", which refers to real achievements that occur in spheres independent of the world of media such as science, economics, or even sports (Rojek, 2011). If we want to define the character of successful athletes specifically according to typologies developed for influencers, then in their case the category of slow, constructive career applies. This is explained by the fact that it often takes decades of work to build up an athlete's career. And while well-known athletes can gather millions of followers on a platform in a very short period, the work and performance essential to do so require a serious investment of energy and time.

The second factor is the powerful identity-forming function of sport and athletes, which can take many forms. Of these, I will only discuss two types of identity relevant to the topic. The first of them is group identity, which refers to a psychological attachment that a sports fan feels to their favourite sports team (Kim et al., 2009; Wan, 2006 – qtd. in Lee 2021). Attachment to fan groups in sports does not differ from the basic group dynamics processes described by sociology. In the members of a fan group, an emotional attachment develops not only towards the sport and the athletes but also towards each other. Group members prefer to sympathize with each other more than with individuals outside the group; furthermore, those in the group tend to consider themselves and their group different from other individuals and groups (Hogg–Abrams, 1988). Research on the topic has also shown that, depending on the strength of group identity, fans' cognitive and behavioural responses show significant differences. The most dedicated fans experience particularly intense emotional reactions, whether it is the joy they feel over winning a match or the depression after losing a game. In the case of hard-core fans, there are quite specific cognitive mechanisms that explain success with internal factors (e.g. athletes' outstanding talent, unparalleled abilities, etc.), while failure is explained by external circumstances. Research on

the topic has also revealed that supporters with high emotional commitment and strong group identities also have well-distinguished consumption patterns in terms of media usage: through multiple channels, with greater consistency and more focused attention to content closely related to sports (Yim–Byon, 2018). Intensive group identity can also explain the tendency for fans to be more loyal to brands associated with athletes, i.e. less likely to switch to new brands instead of the usual ones (Lin, 2017 – qtd. in Lee, 2021).

Another aspect of the identity-forming power of athletes is related to national identity. In this context, it is a general rule that athletes, especially in international competitions, never represent only themselves or their team but an entire nation. Because there are relatively few events in the public that would receive as much attention as international sporting events, the athletes featured in them also have serious symbolic potential. This factor can further deepen the commitment to successful athletes and add a strong emotional charge to the relationship between supporters and athletes. The process is most evident in classic media events related to sports such as the Olympic broadcasts, where outstanding performance becomes the glory of an entire country (Dayan–Katz, 1992). One of the most characteristic examples of this phenomenon in Hungary is the long career of Katinka Hosszú, who has had an unparalleled successful career as an athlete, having represented Hungary in international competitions many times, so it is no coincidence that she has become one of the most popular athletes in the country. In the light of this, it is no surprise that the athlete has become one of the most valuable and sought-after influencers in the online media of the recent years, with more than 400,000 followers on Instagram alone.¹⁰

The third factor is the looks, the attractive physical appearance of the athletes. Appearance has been one of the most important trademarks of celebrities since the early 20th century. Attractive appearance was already a sure entry into the world of stars at the beginning of the Hollywood golden age, and very often good looks was more important than actual acting talent. It is no coincidence that the outstandingly attractive, strong, healthy physique of athletes has been a valuable commodity in the industry of fame from the beginning (Dickerson, 2016). This is also evidenced by the classic and contemporary American film stars who have transformed from leading athletes into stars on the screen. The aforementioned group of stars include former football player Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger, diver Jason Statham, or even Ronald Reagan, who also made his way into the film industry after a successful athletic career before becoming President of the United States.¹¹ In this respect, the operation of the attention economy has not changed at all – good appearance achieved by sports is also key to success for influencers. For example, an industry survey conducted a few years

10 <https://www.influencerkereso.hu/toplista/instagram/kovetok>.

11 <https://www.mensjournal.com/entertainment/20-famous-actors-who-started-out-athletes/>.

ago found that 50% of marketers consider the appearance of a known person to be principal to secure success, 29% consider it very important, 17% think that appearance is important, and only 5% of the experts interviewed believe that appearance is incidental.¹² It follows from all this that attractive-looking athletes receive huge attention in the media and not only in the audience but also among representatives of the commercial sphere – and only because of their appearance (Seiler–Kucza, 2017).

Marketing activity is now an almost unavoidable factor in the influencer communication activity of athletes. Influencer marketing has been one of the most innovative segments of online marketing since the mid-2010s, and the solution is growing in popularity. Influencer marketing is a type of content marketing that is based on the idea that consumers prefer to buy products that are promoted by well-known people, stars, celebrities, or ordinary celebrities who are recognized, admired, or idolized. The success of influencer marketing is characterized by an exponential increase in the amount spent on the solution in recent years: in the United States, the advertising cost spent on the solution increased by 33.6% in 2021, for a total of \$ 3.6 billion.¹³ Out of that amount, a growing proportion is acquired by world-renowned athletes with outstanding popularity, global reach, and an international fan base. One of the best examples of this is Cristiano Ronaldo, who is the most popular celebrity on Instagram with more than 318 million followers¹⁴ and whose single post is worth \$ 1 million in the advertising market (Lee, 2021).

According to the literature, one of the most important attractions for athletes who also act as influencers is credibility (Lee, 2021). For athletes, credibility can be interpreted as a consequence of athletic performance, which can be related to the energy, effort, and endurance invested in achieving outstanding performances. It follows from the characteristics of sporting life that the performance and credibility of athletes are still relatively rarely questioned so that athletes are exceptionally stable and reliable characters in the public sphere. This is the factor that commerce and the advertising industry seek to make the most of through the operation of meaning transfer. This means that marketers always strive to extend the values (strength, endurance, performance, attractiveness, etc.) associated with a successful athlete to a particular brand or product as effectively as possible. This practice has also worked successfully in the world of mass media for many decades, and in recent years even more effective solutions have emerged for social applications. In the age of web 2.0 and social applications, the illusion of a personal relationship develops between a fan or supporter and a successful athlete. Through media

12 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/digital/movie-stars-matter-but-social-908042/#pagetop>.

13 <https://www.emarketer.com/content/us-influencer-spending-surpass-3-billion-2021>.

14 <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/top-most-instagram-followers/>.

usage and the related cultural practices presented earlier, this process results in a stronger attachment than what fans could ever experience before.

4. Summary

The work done here demonstrates that athletes and their associated fan groups or fan communities are not only culturally interesting but also have significant commercial and economic significance. It is clear from the results that the change of media culture, the spread of digital, social media, in addition to the change of simple user practices, also result in significant changes in the relationship between athletes and fan groups. Although the study of Hungarian supporters showed that a significant proportion of users are still strongly connected to television when it comes to consuming sports-related content, more and more people are consuming online content too, especially members of the younger generations. The study points out that online media puts the relationship between athletes and fans in a new context, with the increase in the amount of content available, the generalization of the experience of immediacy, and watching content on the go. The biggest change, though, may be that athletes can address the audience via their own channels, with their own messages. And this practice can create a more direct relationship between fans and athletes than ever before, and, taking advantage of this, more and more athletes who are active as influencers appear in the public sphere. The discussion revealed that several factors play a role in the popularity and attractiveness of athletes, such as the way fame is born, group and national identity, and an attractive appearance. Together, these result in athletes forming an outstandingly reliable, stable group within the world of well-known people, which also explains that cultural and market interest in them will remain constant in 2021 as well.

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