

SOCIAL MEDIA IN HANDBALL: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

SOCIAL MEDIA EN EL BALONMANO: UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA

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Short title:

Social Media in handball

How to cite this article:

Berraquero, D., Baena-González, R., Chavarría-Ortiz, C., & Gallardo, A. M. (2024). Social Media in handball: a systematic review. *Cultura, Ciencia y Deporte*, 19(60), 2107. <https://doi.org/10.12800/ccd.v19i60.2107>

Received: 05 September 2023 / Accepted: 22 December 2023

Abstract

Sport seems to be the main cultural activity when it comes to generating interest in the population, as a business that moves billions of euros, due to the emotions and passions generated in the fans. According to different authors, the emergence of digital marketing techniques, social networks, and online communication, positions them as the main tools to reach fans (customers), who are now digital natives. The aims of this work were: (a) to explore and better understand the scientific studies on the application of these techniques in handball; and (b) to compare the positive effects of digital marketing and online communication in handball. This systematic review conforms to the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses. The databases consulted were the Web of Science and Scopus. The results provided 40 articles, although only six met all the inclusion criteria. These records show the link between online communication and handball. The study shows that when digital marketing and online communication techniques are applied, the results are more beneficial both in economic and sporting terms, despite the notable limitation of publications in this regard.

Keywords: Digital marketing, sports marketing, sports, social networks, online communication.

Resumen

El deporte se antoja como la principal actividad cultural a la hora de generar interés en la población, constituyendo un negocio que mueve miles de millones de euros, resultado de emociones y pasiones generadas en los aficionados. Según diferentes autores, la aparición de técnicas de marketing digital, redes sociales y comunicación online las posiciona como las principales herramientas para llegar a los fans (clientes), ahora, nativos digitales. El objetivo de este trabajo ha sido: (a) explorar y conocer los estudios científicos sobre la aplicación de estas técnicas en el balonmano; y (b) comparar los efectos positivos del marketing digital y comunicación online en el balonmano. Esta revisión sistemática se ajusta a las directrices de los Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses. Las bases de datos consultadas han sido Web of Science y Scopus. Los resultados mostraron 40 artículos, aunque solo seis cumplían todos los criterios de inclusión. Estos registros muestran el vínculo de la comunicación online en el balonmano. El estudio muestra que cuando se aplican las técnicas de marketing digital y comunicación online los resultados son más beneficiosos tanto en lo económico como en lo deportivo, a pesar de la notable limitación de publicaciones al respecto.

Palabras clave: Marketing digital, marketing deportivo, deporte, redes sociales, comunicación online.



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Introduction

Sport has become a vehicle or tool for the promotion of products, ideas and even values thanks to the increase in its popularity in recent years (Rojas, 2014). On a daily basis, sport occupies a large part of the programming in television, radio or other media. But this goes much further, as it has become one of the pillars of society. In other words, it is the common thread of contemporary culture, a faithful chronicler, which narrates, westernizing and impregnating with values, the entire society that is subject to its influence (Olivera, 2005). Brands relate to great athletes, to become a showcase for millions of people through a communion between the brand and the athlete, obtaining mutual benefits, and creating brand value (Monfort, 2021). For all these reasons, marketing has had an immense impact on the sports field, as it is an excellent tool to encourage revenue and enhance the resources we have. The adaptation of marketing to contemporary sports allows connecting the passion and sentimental connection of sports practice with the spectator (Orozco, 2018). This is based on the fact that the emotional brain has a greater impact than the rational brain in decision-making, which, from a commercial perspective, provides advantages to those who offer products or services due to the favorable psychological predisposition of the consumer (Braidot, 2013).

Within the field of marketing, digital marketing and social media have emerged, with a wide variety of digital communication channels. The most popular are blogs, micro-blogs, social networks, and web spaces for sharing, analysis sites, and forums, among others (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012).

These media allow brands to be in continuous contact with consumers and have triggered the need to monetize the social business. In the sports world, the main objective is to try to enhance the effectiveness of brand-consumer relationships in order to raise the perception of the total quality of the services offered by the brand, raise customer satisfaction levels, and, thus, consolidate customer loyalty to the brand with the goal of maintaining high levels of repeat purchases. Ultimately, the desire and objective is to build consistent, lasting, and relevant relationships. This is usually defined as acquisition and loyalty (Nogales, 2006).

The emergence of new communication technologies has forever changed both the way of communicating and the way in which brands create commercial strategies (Luque-Ortíz, 2020).

This is where social networks become the main means by which sports managers can understand, in a much more accurate and precise way, the behavior of fans, followers, and consumers, and their relationship with brand consumption (Vargas et al., 2022).

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research on team sports in general, and handball in particular (Sánchez, 2011) on various topics: Information and Communication Technologies (Augustyn & Juva, 2014), online communication (Fernández-Souto et al., 2022; López et al., 2017) training (Feu et al., 2010) or sports security (Baena-González, 2021). For millions of people around the world, handball is more than a sport. Whether they live their passion in the stands, in front of their TV, on the court, or on the street, handball is part of their lives. This is why international brands choose to partner with the International Handball Federation (IHF); the sport is the vehicle that allows them to share their own passion with fans of this great game (International Handball Federation, 2023).

The sport of handball is growing every year, with a larger global audience of spectators and an increasing number of participants. The IHF is composed of 209 national federations, which are integrated into the following six regional confederations: Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and the Caribbean, Oceania, and South and Central America (IHF, 2023).

With a cumulative global television audience of over two million, 900,000 viewers, 88 million sponsor impressions, over 6,186 hours of airtime, and a worth of 222 million Euros, the need for the application of sports marketing in handball is evident (IHF, 2023) for achieving effects equal to soccer (Marini, 2016) and basketball (Herrera-Torres et al., 2017).

In addition, in the context of Spain, on the eve of celebrating the 40th anniversary in 2024 of the creation of the Association of Spanish Handball Clubs (ASOBAL), we are living in a historic moment with the ratification of the Plenitude ASOBAL League by the Consejo Superior de Deportes (CSD) as a Professional League (Ágreda, 2023).

For all of the above, and in order to achieve a holistic experience of handball as a product and business, the objectives of this systematic review were: (a) to explore and learn about the scientific studies on the application of these techniques on handball; (b) to compare the positive effects of the involvement of digital marketing and online communication on the field of handball.

Materials and Methods

Study design

For the present study, we used the systematic review, an essential and fundamental tool for evidence-based decision making, as we can synthesize the available scientific information, increase the validity of the conclusions of individual studies, and identify areas of uncertainty where research is needed (González et al., 2011). To perform this systematic review the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology criteria were followed, a guide designed to improve the poor reporting found in systematic reviews. It has been widely recommended and endorsed by more than 200 journals and organizations involved in systematic reviews. Currently, its use and adoption in several disciplines offers more complete reporting of work for these purposes (Ciapponi, 2021).

Selection of studies

The inclusion criteria were: (a) articles that explicitly indicated the use of digital marketing and online communication in handball, (b) articles written in Spanish and/or English, and (c) publications from the year 2000 onwards. The decision was made to not place further limitations as a consequence of the evident lack of literature in the research field.

The exclusion criteria were: (a) articles that did not show a relationship with the search criteria mentioned above. That is, the document should refer to a direct link between handball and social media.

Study strategies

A literature search was conducted independently between three reviewers. This search was carried out using different databases: Web of Science (WoS, hereafter) and Scopus. The search covered all publications published since January 1, 2000 to June 30, 2023.

WoS and Scopus were determined as the databases that offered a much more global and complete view of the research question. These tools included articles published in journals indexed in the Journal Citation Report (JCR) or similar.

In order to work with one of these research tools, the correct use of keywords is essential. For this purpose, on this occasion, a focus group was held with the researchers in this publication to determine the search strategy.

It was determined that the main term and starting point for the entire study would be the concept of handball, and that it would be paired with the following terms: social media, online networks, internet social networks, and online social media.

The data collection process was carried out by entering the "General Search" section, where the "all fields" field was selected. It should also be noted that the following were used truncators and Boolean operators such as AND-OR, to ensure that as many scientific studies as possible are obtained.

Data collection and synthesis

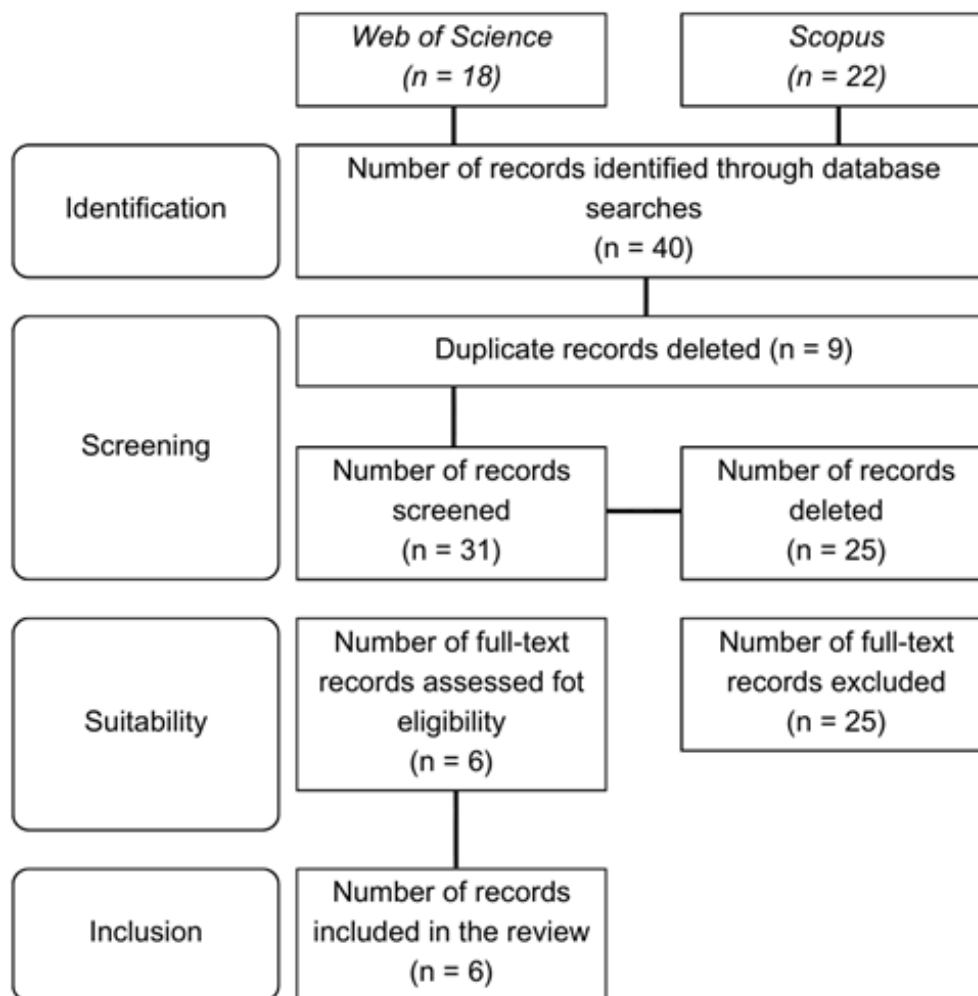
The publications found were analyzed and reviewed completely independently by the three reviewers following the instructions determined and established by the PRISMA standards and methodology.

Results

Once the search was performed in the databases mentioned above, the potentially interesting and valid results for the objective of the study were selected for subsequent reading and analysis. Results and proposals that did not meet the inclusion criteria or duplicates were discarded.

In accordance with the criteria determined by the PRISMA statement for conducting this type of systematic review, a total of 40 records were obtained in the two databases used (18 in WoS and 22 in Scopus). However, after inserting and applying additional filters to each of the articles according to the items included in the PRISMA methodology checklist, as well as the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned above, a total of six articles were selected to be considered in this review. Figure 1 shows the diagram of the phases of the process. The deleted records and results have been suppressed for reasons of compatibility with the object of the study. All those deleted results did not show any relationship between the main study question: handball and social media.

Figure 1
Flow chart of the studies obtained



Discussion

The present article aims to show the state of social media and digital marketing in handball. A Marketing disciplines that has generated positive impacts in the field of sports, and other, sports such as soccer (Marini, 2016) and basketball (Herrera-Torres et al., 2017).

The search shows data related to various thematic areas within the subject and object of study. There are two studies on the impact of the use of social networks and digital communication on sports clubs; one article on the effects on athletes to their exposure to social networks; one article refers to the impact of social networks on the dissemination, promotion, and visibility of sports events; one article highlights the effects of the use of ICTs by handball coaches on training and communication; and one article on the professionalization of communication management in a sports organization.

It should be noted that, that no studies showed the direct impact of online communication has on the engagement of consumers, fans, or customers of a club or brand. Similarly, no studies were found that measured the economic profitability caused by the good use of social networks and other mass media channels in the field of handball.

However, in other sports such as soccer, many research studies show the positive economic impact of social networks in this new digital paradigm (Marini, 2016). Similarly, research on basketball demonstrate that social networks have become an ideal platform to publicize and increase the visibility of different brands, and of course, to interact and analyze the actions of their fans and followers of these (Herrera-Torres et al., 2017).

In the records and results obtained, it can be observed that some studies that measured the use of social networks and online communication between coaches and athletes, the professionalization of communication management in sporting events, the use of online and digital communication as a visibility tool, or the use of social networks Facebook and Twitter

(now "X"), and their different approaches in sports clubs. However, documents specific to handball and online and digital communication are scarce and limited.

The first record found in the systematic review shows a study, published in 2014 on how coaches commonly use ICT systems both in their personal lives and in their training. However, the results indicated that coaches do not often use ICT in their direct coaching, but that, especially at higher levels, videos are often used on the computer (Augustyn & Juva, 2014). The use of ICT and social networks is increasing every year, and their application to sports marketing, specifically in handball, can increase the following of this sport at a general level (Luque-Ortiz, 2020).

The second study analyzes the case of a handball sporting event and how it was managed and worked on using online communication (López et al., 2017). Social Networks (SN) have become the primary means for communication departments to improve the loyalty of their fans, as they represent an important opportunity to strengthen the relationship with their different audiences (Fernández-Souto et al., 2022). This makes it possible to analyze and classify the type of fans, the relationship with them, or their interaction with clubs or federations, which is essential to improve the satisfaction of handball consumers, as well as to attract new potential fans.

Within the entire online framework, the corporate website is the showcase of the event or of the organizing brand, so it must be constantly updated, and it is also the main axis of any communication strategy, with the possibility of providing immediate information to followers and, therefore, consumers.

Thirdly, a work by Fernández-Souto and Vázquez-Gestal (2017), highlighted the impact of online sports communication as an element and tool for visibility. With this study being very valuable due to its up-to-date nature. Nowadays, the communicative and relational processes of any company, institution, or entity have changed, largely due to the emergence of the internet medium. The Internet and 2.0 communication tools have made sporting events much more accessible (Montserrat-Gauchi et al., 2020).

In fourth place, the research study measured an aspect far removed from our scientific interests, i.e., the use and impact of social networks when working with athletes. This study that analyzed the ethical implications for sport psychology consultants. Society and the internet demand a continuous connection with sport (Margarit et al., 2018), and as of today, fans demand athletes to interact in social networks and digital media. The visibility of handball professionals would help generate a greater interest among consumers. For this, the work of psychologists and experts is essential for counseling professional athletes.

Once again, a study by Fernández-Souto et al. (2019), highlighted the direct relationship between the professionalization of club communication management and the category in which the club competes. The higher the level of competition of the brand or club, the greater the professionalization and vice versa. The professionalization of the jobs a handball sports club is one of the great handicaps encountered by this discipline is encountering to continue growing in terms of business and as a company. One of the examples is how basketball and handball were in similar places as sports during the Olympic Games; however, the difference in economic growth between these two sports disciplines is abysmal. The turning point experienced by handball in Spain with the professionalization of the ASOBAL League opens a new situational context. This milestone allows "working with greater autonomy, ensuring the growth of the Liga Plenitude ASOBAL, attracting more fans and enjoying the talent of the players who play in our clubs" (Ágreda, 2023).

Sport management is defined as a set of actions aimed at planning, organizing, directing, executing, and controlling resources at the club or brand level. This makes the presence and intervention of a professional or professionals necessary and evident. Therefore, the professionalization of the people involved in sport management, as well as in our case, the communication and marketing of sport, becomes indispensable in the system (Nogueras et al., 2002).

For all these reasons, sport is facing a highly demanding situation in terms of the knowledge necessary for the development of its work, increasing the need for recognition, social prestige, economic and sporting repercussion, and this can only be achieved with competence and credibility supported by adequate professional training (Nogueras et al., 2002).

Finally, in the systematic review, we found a German case that describes an up-to-date framework, a research analysis how professional sports clubs in Germany use Facebook and Twitter. The study covers the entire 2015-16 season and was illustrated by selectively choosing two weeks for data analysis. Four basketball, ice hockey, soccer and handball clubs were collected as a sample. For this reason, it is an interesting work for the present study, as there a lack of scientific research in the field of handball and online communication. The cited research showed all the Facebook posts and Twitter tweets published by the 16 clubs for two weeks, with a total of 3,412 contributions (Facebook 717, Twitter 2,695), were included in the analysis. The codebook contained 57 variables, and this article presented the results on the identified themes found in the content posted on the two social media platforms. In both platforms, the clubs examined mainly issued statements about themselves and their sports-related activities. Twitter was predominantly used as a live medium during matches,

while Facebook allowed for a significantly higher reach. However, no sport-related differences were found between the two social media platforms (Kautz et al., 2020).

It is worth noting that more research demonstrated the positive effects of the use of proper social media management. For example, fans and followers use these tools to find out the latest news about their favorite clubs, comment on live matches, or buy products. On their part, professional athletes, organizations, federations, and clubs have embraced these digital platforms to boost their personal brand, and to achieve a greater economic return, together with the possibility of using them as a direct vehicle for interaction and communication. Proof of this is the number of profiles on Twitter and Instagram that exceed millions of followers (López-Carril et al., 2019).

As in the case of soccer (Miranda, 2021), social networks are a great indicator of the engagement of the followers of the brand or sports club thanks to the objective feedback of their desires provided by the statistics of the different social network platforms.

The positive effects of social networks are even observed even in other areas of sport such as physical activities and health, providing increased profit for brands. The powerful relationship of sport with many areas such as fashion, fitness, or nutrition, and the great recognition of athletes and high-level sportsmen and sportswomen by society in general, has led brands such as Movistar or banks to sponsor Olympic athletes (Valverde et al., 2023).

After the review performed, as well as the search, selection, and careful reading of the articles that were identified according to the established criteria, it is easy to observe that, there is little scientific evidence on this highly topical subject, despite important impact on the world of sport.

Table 1
Descriptive summary table of the resulting works ordered by publication date

Author/Authors	Features of the article	Journal	Variables	Purpose of the research
Augustyn, T. & Juva, V.	Published in 2014. Type of document: Article in journal	Journal of Human Sport and Exercise 9 (special issue)	Information technologies (video, SN, databases, websites...) and handball coach education and training.	The use of information technology in non-formal education of handball coaches.
López, C., Arévalo, L., & Fernández, J.	Published in 2017. Type of document: Article/ Book chapter	Advances in Intelligent Systems and Computing	Use and impact of online communication and sporting events	Online Communication Management in Sporting Events. Case: EUC Handball 2013)
Fernández-Souto, A. B. & Vázquez-Gestal, M.	Published in 2017. Type of document: Article/ Case study	Advances in Intelligent Systems and Computing	Online communication and visibility of the city through the sports club.	The sport as an element of appreciation for the cities. The case of Pontevedra and its treatment in the digital media.
Margarit, E.-M., Tonita, F., & Angelescu, N.	Published in Bucharest in 2018. Document type: Conference	14th International Scientific Conference eLearning and Software for Education	The use of social media and the club/entity relationship	Employing social media in Working with Athletes: A Case Study Discussing Ethical Implications for Applied Sport Psychology Consultants.
Fernández-Souto, A. B., Puentes, I., & Vázquez-Gestal, M.	Published in 2019. Article in journal	Retos: Nuevas tendencias en educación física, deporte y recreación. N ^o 36.	Professionalization in the management of communication and the sports club's status	Communication management in regular sports competitions: Futsal, volleyball, basketball and handball in Spain.
Kautz, F., Schaffrath, M., & Gang, A. C.	Published in 2020. Document type: Article/ Case study	International Journal of Sport Communication	The impact of Facebook and Twitter on sports clubs	Identifying the Different Approaches in Use of Social Media Outlets: A Case Study of German Professional Sport Teams.

Conclusions

After the analysis, the need to continue researching and working on this line of research is evident. Digital marketing and online communication, including social networks, websites, apps, email marketing, among others, is a booming field internationally. Today, it has become an essential tool to connect and generate engagement with brand consumers. However, despite being very useful and current, there are not enough studies on the subject with scientific evidence and guarantees, both internationally and nationally, linked to handball, published in journals present in scientific databases. In addition, the most important limitations of the study were the limited number of articles and the disparity of variables related and measured in this field and line of research, which grant recognition and a positive impact generated by the use of digital marketing and online communication in handball. In short, this work describes the importance and impact of online communication, social networks, and the world of social media in the field of handball, especially, in Spain.

Future lines of research

The absence of content and scientific evidence on digital communication and handball implies the need to work on fan interactions and the use of social networks in handball. In addition, this systematic review also shows another aspect that needs to be considered the professionalization of sports managers. For future research and lines of work, this field of study is interesting for showing to show scientific evidence and academic literature on the impact of professionalization in handball clubs.

Ethics Committee Statement

Not applicable because the research study does not involve the participation of human subjects, either directly or through the use of their biological material or medical records.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research did not receive funding.

Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization D.B. & R.B.; Methodology D.B; Software D.B; Validation D.B., R.B. & C.C.; Formal Analysis D.B. & A.M.; Investigation D.B. & R.B.; Resources C.C.; Data Curation A.M.; Writing – Original Draft D.B.; Writing – Review & Editing D.B.; Visualization R.B.; Supervision C.C. & A.M.; Project Administration D.B. & R.B.; Funding Acquisition D.B., C.C. & A.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available in <https://www.recursocientificos.fecyt.es/inicio> (Web of Science y Scopus).

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