JOURNAL OF WOMEN'S SPORTS INNOVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

VOL.1-NO.1-2026

P ISSN: xxxx-xxx

E ISSN: xxxx-xxx

# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON WOMEN'S SPORTS FAN ENGAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Social media has become an important communication and marketing tool in women's sports, creating new opportunities for athletes, teams, leagues, and fans to interact beyond traditional sporting events. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and X enable sports organizations to share match highlights, athlete stories, behind-the-scenes content, live updates, and interactive campaigns that encourage audience participation. This study examines how social media influences fan awareness, emotional connection, online participation, loyalty, and support for women's sports. It also considers the role of content quality, athlete visibility, digital communities, and gender-related challenges in shaping fan engagement. Recent research indicates that social media engagement depends on the relevance of content, the relationship between fans and athletes, and opportunities for interaction (Cao & Matsuoka, 2025; Rai et al., 2025). However, online participation can also be affected by gender-based hostility, negative comments, and unequal visibility. The study adopts a qualitative approach based on a review of existing academic literature and reports concerning women's sports and digital engagement. The findings suggest that meaningful, inclusive, and interactive social media strategies can strengthen relationships between fans and women's sports organizations, support athlete recognition, and contribute to the long-term development of women's sports.*

## KEYWORDS

*Social Media, Women's Sports, Fan Engagement, Digital Communication, Sports Marketing, Fan Loyalty, Gender Equality*

## INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed the way sports organizations communicate with audiences, allowing fans to follow competitions, interact with athletes, discuss performances, and participate in sports communities in real time. Unlike traditional media, which often limits audiences to watching or reading sports coverage, digital platforms encourage two-way communication through comments, likes, shares, live discussions, and user-generated content. These features are particularly significant for women's sports, where social media can provide additional visibility for athletes and competitions that may receive limited attention through conventional broadcasting. Rai et al. (2025), in their systematic review of social media in sport, identify digital platforms as important spaces for shaping sports consumers' emotional engagement with teams, athletes, and organizations. Consequently, social media has become more than a promotional channel; it is an environment in which sports identities, relationships, and fan communities develop.The growing visibility of women's sports on digital platforms has created new opportunities for fans to discover athletes, follow teams, and engage with

competitions that may previously have received less media coverage. Short videos, match highlights, athlete interviews, training content, and personal stories can make women athletes more recognizable and help audiences establish emotional connections with them. The SportOnSocial International Federations 2025 report highlights the growing digital reach of women's sports, including substantial online interactions and increased streaming audiences in women's football (SportOnSocial, 2025). Such developments demonstrate the potential of digital communication to extend the reach of women's sporting events beyond stadiums and television broadcasts. However, increased visibility does not automatically guarantee sustained engagement, because audiences must also find the content relevant, accessible, authentic, and worth sharing.Fan engagement involves more than observing a sporting event or following an athlete's account. It includes cognitive involvement, emotional attachment, active participation, community identification, and behaviours such as sharing content, attending matches, purchasing merchandise, and supporting teams over time. Cao and Matsuoka (2025) identify several factors associated with social media engagement in sport, including the characteristics of posts, teams and athletes, fans' motivations, and identification with a team or community. In women's sports, these factors may influence how fans respond to athletic achievements, personal narratives, social campaigns, and interactive online activities. Content that encourages conversation and gives fans a sense of belonging may be more effective in developing long-term relationships than posts that simply communicate match results or promotional information.

Athletes themselves play a central role in shaping digital fan engagement because social media allows them to communicate directly with audiences and present aspects of their sporting and personal identities. Research by Bredikhina et al. (2025) examines factors associated with Instagram popularity among women football players and highlights the relevance of athlete accounts, team audience size, and branding arrangements. Direct communication, personal storytelling, and consistent interaction can help fans understand athletes beyond their on-field performances. Nevertheless, women athletes and fans may also encounter gender-based criticism, harassment, and dismissive attitudes in digital spaces. Doehler (2024) examines women football supporters' experiences on social media and demonstrates that gendered hostility can influence their digital participation and coping strategies. These challenges indicate that increasing engagement requires not only attractive content but also safe and respectful online environments.Sports organizations increasingly use social media to build communities, strengthen brand recognition, attract sponsors, and encourage continued participation in women's sports. Effective digital strategies can combine live coverage, interactive questions, fan-created content, athlete interviews, and community campaigns to encourage meaningful audience involvement. Research on social media in sport suggests that content characteristics and fan identification can influence engagement and subsequent consumer behaviours, including loyalty and behavioural intentions (Cao & Matsuoka, 2025). However, organizations need to distinguish between superficial indicators, such as views and likes, and deeper outcomes, such as trust, sustained support, attendance, and community participation. A large number of online

interactions may indicate visibility, but it does not necessarily demonstrate that fans have developed a lasting relationship with a team or athlete.

Although research on sports-related social media has expanded, the experiences of women's sports fans deserve focused attention because their engagement takes place within a broader environment of unequal media visibility and gender-related challenges. Studies of female motorsport fans and women football supporters show that online communities can provide opportunities for participation while also creating concerns about negative reactions and exclusion (Doehler, 2024; Lick et al., 2024). A focused understanding of these experiences can help sports organizations develop more inclusive and effective digital communication strategies. Therefore, this study examines the impact of social media on women's sports fan engagement, with particular attention to content strategies, emotional connections, fan participation, loyalty, and the challenges that may limit online interaction.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the influence of social media on fan awareness, participation, and engagement with women's sports.
2. To identify the social media content and interaction strategies that strengthen fans' emotional connections and loyalty toward women athletes and teams.
3. To investigate the challenges that affect fan engagement with women's sports on social media platforms.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does social media influence fan awareness, participation, and engagement with women's sports?
2. Which social media content and interaction strategies strengthen fans' emotional connections and loyalty toward women athletes and teams?
3. What challenges limit fan engagement with women's sports on social media platforms?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent literature increasingly recognizes social media as a central element of contemporary sports communication and fan relationship management. Rai et al. (2025) reviewed 203 studies on social media in sport and identified the importance of integrating different theoretical approaches to understand how digital platforms influence sports consumers. Their review suggests that social media provides opportunities for emotional engagement with athletes, teams, and sporting organizations, while also identifying the need for more connected and comprehensive research. For women's sports, this framework is especially relevant because

digital platforms can improve visibility, help fans discover competitions, and enable athletes and organizations to communicate directly with audiences. However, the effect of social media depends on how platforms are used and whether content encourages meaningful involvement rather than passive viewing.Cao and Matsuoka (2025) examined consumer engagement on social media in the sports context through a scoping review of 37 peer-reviewed articles. Their review identifies multiple factors associated with engagement, including post content, post characteristics, athlete and team features, sponsor-related factors, fan motivations, and identification with teams or communities. The review also connects engagement with outcomes such as loyalty and behavioural intentions. These findings provide a useful foundation for understanding women's sports audiences, whose engagement may be encouraged by accessible match information, inspirational stories, athlete interactions, and community-oriented campaigns. Content that invites fans to comment, share experiences, and celebrate achievements may strengthen their connection with women's sports, while repetitive or impersonal posts may be less effective at sustaining interest.

Research on women athletes' digital visibility also emphasizes the importance of athlete branding and the relationship between individual accounts and team communication. Bredikhina et al. (2025) investigated the determinants of women football players' Instagram popularity, examining the roles of team branding, media, and market-related factors. Their findings indicate that account authentication and the size of a team's audience can influence athletes' following and engagement, while shared branding arrangements can have different effects on visibility. These findings suggest that women's sports organizations should consider how individual athletes are represented across official accounts and promotional campaigns. Athlete-centred storytelling, behind-the-scenes content, and direct interaction can help create stronger relationships with audiences, but effective strategies also require consistent visibility and clear recognition of women's teams and players.Lick et al. (2024) explored female motorsport fans' participation in social media-based communities associated with Formula One teams. Their research found that some women fans hesitated to engage actively because they feared negative reactions to their comments. The study also identified differences in participation and interests in content between female and male fans, emphasizing the need for sports organizations to consider the experiences of female audiences when managing online communities. This research is important to the present study because it demonstrates that social media does not automatically create an inclusive environment. Although digital platforms can help fans find others with shared interests, gender-related hostility may discourage them from commenting, participating in discussions, or expressing their knowledge of sports. Therefore, engagement strategies should address both the quality of content and the social conditions in which fans interact.

Doehler (2024) examined the experiences of women supporting UK-based men's football teams on X, drawing on an online survey of 1,624 women supporters. The study investigated digital interactions, gendered challenges, and coping strategies, showing that women's experiences of

online fandom can be shaped by gender-based hostility. Although the research focuses on women fans of men's football rather than women's sports specifically, it offers relevant insights into the barriers that can affect women's participation in sports-related digital communities. These findings suggest that the success of fan engagement strategies should not be measured only by the volume of comments or reactions. Sports organizations also need to consider whether fans feel respected, safe, and able to contribute to discussions without experiencing harassment or exclusion.Research on sports organizations' digital strategies further indicates that successful engagement requires planned communication, active fan participation, and attention to the overall online experience. In their qualitative study of sports organizations and fans, Waving the Flames of Fan Engagement authors examined the challenges associated with digital transformation and identified the importance of effective planning, fan participation, and improving the quality of fan experiences (2024). Similarly, the SportOnSocial International Federations 2025 report documents the increasing reach of women's sports through digital platforms and online streaming. Together, these findings suggest that social media can contribute to fan engagement when organizations use it as part of a broader relationship-building strategy rather than as a channel for occasional promotion. Nevertheless, further focused research is needed to understand how digital content, fan identity, athlete visibility, and gender-related challenges work together to shape engagement with women's sports.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology based on a review of existing academic literature and relevant sports-industry reports concerning social media, women's sports, and fan engagement. The approach is suitable because the research aims to understand patterns in digital interaction, emotional connection, online participation, and the challenges experienced by fans rather than to test a specific statistical hypothesis. Academic studies published in peer-reviewed journals were considered alongside relevant reports documenting the digital growth of women's sports. The literature was selected according to its relevance to social media communication, fan behaviour, athlete visibility, online communities, and gender-related experiences. Particular attention was given to recent research published between 2024 and 2026, while recognizing that the available evidence differs in its sporting context and research methods.Data were gathered from published academic studies and reports that examine social media use in sport, fan participation, athlete branding, and women's sporting communities. Relevant materials included systematic and scoping reviews, empirical studies of women sports fans, research on Instagram engagement among women football players, and reports on the digital reach of women's sports. Each source was reviewed to identify its research focus, methodology, principal findings, and relevance to the objectives of this study. The use of multiple forms of published evidence provided a broader perspective on the ways in which social media may influence awareness, participation, emotional attachment, and loyalty.

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The collected literature was examined thematically to identify recurring concepts and differences across the studies. The main themes included digital visibility and awareness, interactive and athlete-centred content, emotional connection and community identification, fan loyalty, and gender-related barriers to participation. These themes were compared across the selected sources to identify areas of agreement and differences in emphasis. For example, research on engagement factors was considered alongside studies highlighting the concerns women fans may experience in online communities, allowing the analysis to address both the benefits and limitations of social media.The study relies on published evidence and does not claim to have collected new survey responses, conducted interviews, or accessed private social media analytics. Its conclusions are therefore based on the interpretation and synthesis of existing research rather than on original participant data. The approach provides an overview of current knowledge and identifies practical implications for sports organizations seeking to improve fan engagement with women's sports. However, the findings should be interpreted in light of differences among sports, countries, platforms, audience groups, and research methods represented in the reviewed literature.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine the relationship between social media use and fan engagement in women's sports. An exploratory design is appropriate because the subject involves several connected dimensions, including digital communication, fan identity, athlete visibility, online participation, and gender-related experiences. Rather than attempting to measure a single effect in isolation, the study examines how these dimensions are discussed and supported across existing academic studies and relevant reports. The design also allows the research to identify areas in which current evidence remains limited or requires further investigation.A document-based review strategy was adopted to organize and compare the available evidence. Sources were selected according to their relevance to the research objectives and their contribution to understanding digital fan engagement. Studies focusing on women athletes, women sports fans, social media communities, and broader sports engagement were included where their findings offered useful insights into the topic. Evidence from broader sports research was interpreted cautiously when applying it to women's sports, as findings from men's leagues or general sports audiences may not fully represent the experiences of women athletes and fans.

The analytical framework was organized around the principal concepts emerging from the research questions. These included social media visibility, content relevance, interaction and participation, emotional connection, fan loyalty, and barriers to inclusive engagement. Each source was considered in relation to these concepts, allowing similarities and differences to be identified across the literature. The framework also considered how online engagement may extend beyond platform-based reactions to influence interest in competitions, support for

athletes, attendance intentions, and participation in fan communities.The design emphasizes transparency and careful interpretation of the evidence. Findings were linked to the studies and reports from which they were derived, and differences in research scope were taken into account. Because this is a qualitative review rather than an original survey or experiment, it cannot establish that social media directly causes increased fan loyalty or attendance. Instead, it synthesizes existing evidence to explain potential relationships, identify recurring patterns, and develop recommendations for future research and sports communication practice.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis indicates that social media can increase awareness of women's sports by making athletes, teams, and competitions more visible to audiences. Match highlights, short videos, live updates, and athlete profiles allow fans to discover sporting events and follow performances without relying exclusively on traditional media. The growth of digital visibility reported in women's sports supports the view that online platforms can expand opportunities for audience reach and participation (SportOnSocial, 2025). However, the extent of engagement depends on the accessibility, relevance, and consistency of the content being shared.A second theme concerns the relationship between content characteristics and fan interaction. Research suggests that fans engage with sports content for information, entertainment, emotional connection, and a sense of community (Cao & Matsuoka, 2025; Rai et al., 2025).

Posts featuring personal stories, important achievements, behind-the-scenes experiences, and interactive discussions can encourage audiences to comment, share, and return to sports accounts. Athlete visibility and effective digital branding may also contribute to audience interest, although the relationship between online popularity and meaningful long-term engagement requires careful consideration (Bredikhina et al., 2025).The analysis also identifies inclusion and online safety as important dimensions of fan engagement. Digital communities can provide opportunities for women fans to exchange opinions and connect with others who share their interests, but gender-based hostility and fear of negative reactions may discourage active participation (Doehler, 2024; Lick et al., 2024). This suggests that engagement should be evaluated through both quantitative indicators, such as comments and shares, and qualitative considerations, including the tone of discussions, perceived inclusion, and the quality of fan experiences. Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that social media engagement is influenced by a combination of content quality, emotional connection, community participation, and the social environment of digital platforms.

## FINDINGS

The findings suggest that social media plays an important role in increasing the visibility and accessibility of women's sports. Digital platforms allow athletes and teams to reach audiences

through match highlights, personal stories, live updates, and interactive content. These communication opportunities can introduce new audiences to women's sporting competitions and help existing fans remain connected throughout a season. Evidence concerning women's sports digital reach indicates that online platforms have become increasingly important to the promotion and consumption of women's sporting events (SportOnSocial, 2025).The review further indicates that relevant, entertaining, and athlete-centred content can encourage stronger fan interaction. Fans may respond positively to content that recognizes athletic achievements, communicates personal experiences, invites participation, and creates a sense of belonging. Research on social media engagement in sport identifies content characteristics and identification with teams or communities as important factors associated with consumer engagement and loyalty (Cao & Matsuoka, 2025). Athlete branding and account visibility may also influence audience engagement, suggesting that women's sports organizations can benefit from coordinated and consistent digital communication (Bredikhina et al., 2025).A further finding is that online visibility alone does not ensure inclusive or sustained fan engagement. Gender-based hostility, negative reactions, and concerns about participation can discourage women fans from contributing to digital discussions (Doehler, 2024; Lick et al., 2024). Sports organizations therefore need to combine engaging content with respectful community management and clear responses to harassment. The review also highlights a need for further research focused specifically on women's sports audiences across different platforms, sports, and cultural contexts, as broader sports engagement findings may not fully capture their experiences (Rai et al., 2025).

## CONCLUSION

Social media has become an influential tool for developing fan engagement in women's sports by expanding visibility, improving access to sporting content, and enabling direct interaction between athletes, teams, and audiences. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and X allow fans to follow competitions, celebrate achievements, share opinions, and participate in digital communities. The reviewed literature suggests that these opportunities can strengthen emotional connections with athletes and teams when online communication is relevant, consistent, and interactive (Cao & Matsuoka, 2025; Rai et al., 2025).The study concludes that effective engagement requires more than frequent posting or a high number of likes and views. Sports organizations should develop content that reflects fans' interests, highlights women athletes' performances, encourages participation, and supports a sense of community. Direct athlete communication, behind-the-scenes material, storytelling, and interactive campaigns can help create meaningful digital relationships. At the same time, organizations should recognize that online engagement may be weakened by gender-based hostility and exclusion, which can prevent fans from participating confidently in sports-related discussions (Doehler, 2024; Lick et al., 2024).Overall, social media offers considerable opportunities to support the continued development of women's sports, but its benefits depend

on responsible communication and sustained engagement strategies. Sports organizations should evaluate not only the reach of their posts but also the quality of interactions, audience loyalty, and fans' experiences of inclusion. Future studies could use surveys, interviews, and platform-based engagement data to compare different sports and audiences and to examine how online participation relates to attendance, long-term loyalty, and support for women athletes. Such research would provide a stronger empirical foundation for developing effective and inclusive fan engagement strategies.

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