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STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SPORTS MARKETING

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the strategic management of sports organizations in the context of digital transformation, with a focus on implications for sports marketing. The aim of the paper is to develop an integrative theoretical framework linking digital transformation, organizational capabilities, and value creation in sport. The study is based on a review of contemporary literature on digital strategy, dynamic capabilities, and digital innovation. Digital transformation is conceptualized as a strategic shift involving the reconfiguration of business models and positioning within digital ecosystems. The findings indicate that sports marketing is evolving from a promotional function to a strategic function focused on managing relationships, data, and fan value, with increasing importance of analytics, personalization, and digital monetization. The paper contributes to the literature by integrating strategic management and sports marketing into a unified conceptual framework.

Keywords: digital transformation, strategic sport management, sports marketing, fan engagement, digital ecosystem.

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Introduction

Digital transformation (DT) in sport has, in recent years, evolved from operational digitalization (e.g., social media presence or online ticket sales) toward a domain of strategic change, encompassing business model redesign, process restructuring, the development of organizational capabilities, and the reconfiguration of value delivered to fans, partners, and the broader ecosystem. In the general management literature, DT is most commonly conceptualized as a process of profound organizational change driven by digital technologies, where technology is not an end in itself but a means of transforming value creation, structures, and governance mechanisms (Vial, 2019; Vladisavljević et al., 2023). In this context, strategic management of sports organizations faces a central challenge: how to build and sustain competitive advantage in an environment characterized by rapid and easily imitable digital innovations, platform dominance in attention distribution, and increasing expectations of fans for personalized and interactive experiences (Mladenović, 2025).

The specificities of the sport sector further complicate DT. Sports organizations simultaneously pursue sporting success, financial sustainability, and social legitimacy; operate within regulated leagues and federations; maintain strong emotional ties with fans; and rely heavily on brand identity as a key strategic asset. Consequently, DT in sport cannot be reduced to the adoption of new technologies but requires alignment between digital initiatives and organizational mission, identity, culture, and revenue models. One of the most influential theoretical lenses for understanding this dynamic is the dynamic capabilities framework, which emphasizes the organization's ability to sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure resources as critical for success in the digital era (Warner & Wäger, 2019). In sports organizations, this translates into capabilities related to data analytics, digital skills development, agile management, and change management processes affecting traditional structures (Kostadinović & Ilievska Kostadinović, 2025).

Empirical research in sport management suggests that DT is more successful when treated as an organizational and strategic agenda rather than an isolated IT initiative. Evidence from national football associations indicates that key drivers of successful transformation include digital leadership, formalized DT structures, coordination mechanisms, and

capability development across organizational levels (Merten et al., 2022). In the non-profit segment of sport, DT is often driven by external pressures such as changes in media consumption, stakeholder expectations, and transparency requirements, while outcomes depend on how organizations manage resistance, resource constraints, and institutional demands (Thompson et al., 2024).

A particularly strong link between DT and strategic management in sport is reflected in the transformation of sports marketing. Marketing is increasingly shifting from one-way promotion toward a system of relationship management and value co-creation with fans in digital environments. Studies show that this transformation is manifested through platformization, increased fan participation, new engagement metrics, and the growing importance of digital touchpoints (Stegmann et al., 2021). From a strategic perspective, this requires a shift from reach- and awareness-based logic toward fan lifetime value, retention, personalization, and community management.

Empirical studies on digital channels further highlight operational and strategic implications. For instance, research on social media content strategies demonstrates that content type and vividness significantly affect fan engagement, with effects varying across team performance and seasonality (Annamalai et al., 2021). These findings support the need for structured digital marketing programs with clearly defined KPIs linked to revenue generation. Moreover, DT expands the strategic scope of sports organizations through increased reliance on data, analytics, and digital risk management (Qi et al., 2024). At the level of performance and sustainability, evidence suggests that DT contributes positively to organizational sustainability, although effects vary across contexts (Wang et al., 2024). At the same time, emerging phenomena such as fan tokens illustrate both new monetization opportunities and associated regulatory and reputational risks (Vidal-Tomás, 2023).

Despite the growing body of research on digital transformation and sports marketing, the literature still lacks an integrated theoretical perspective that combines strategic management, dynamic capabilities, and digital ecosystems. This paper seeks to address this gap by developing an integrative conceptual framework that links these perspectives.

Literature Review

Digital transformation is widely conceptualized in contemporary literature as a profound organizational change that goes beyond the adoption of individual digital tools and entails the reconfiguration of how organizations create, deliver, and capture value (Kostadinović & Ilievska Kostadinović, 2025b). Verhoef et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of distinguishing between digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation, highlighting that transformation involves a strategic shift toward new business models, structures, and market logics. In the context of sports organizations, this distinction is particularly relevant, as digital transformation affects not only operational processes but also brand identity, fan relationships, and monetization mechanisms.

Recent research has further advanced the understanding of the strategic role of digital technologies through the concepts of digital business strategy and digital maturity. Bharadwaj et al. (2013) introduce digital business strategy as the integration of IT and business strategy, arguing that digital technologies are no longer merely supportive but constitute a central driver of competitive advantage and value creation. This perspective is highly relevant for sports organizations, where digital platforms, data, and fan interactions increasingly serve as key resources for differentiation and monetization.

In parallel, Svahn et al. (2017) highlight the importance of digital innovation capabilities, defined as organizational capacities for continuous experimentation, iteration, and integration of digital solutions into business models. Within sports organizations, such capabilities manifest through the development of digital products (e.g., applications and OTT platforms) and the ability to dynamically adapt fan experiences. Complementing this view, Nambisan et al. (2017) develop a theoretical framework of digital innovation that emphasizes the generativity, modularity, and platform-based nature of digital technologies. This approach enables the conceptualization of sports organizations as actors embedded in digital ecosystems, where value is co-created through interactions among fans, sponsors, media, and technology partners. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that digital transformation in sport requires an integrated understanding of strategy, organizational capabilities, and digital innovation processes.

With regard to digital transformation strategy, Matt et al. (2015) argue that it must be aligned with the overall organizational strategy and involve clear decisions regarding technological investments, organizational structures, and capability development. In sports organizations, this implies aligning digital initiatives with sporting objectives, financial sustainability, and reputational capital. Wiesböck and Hess (2019) further note that digital innovations are embedded in organizational routines, reshaping existing processes and creating new patterns of value creation. In sport, this is reflected in the integration of CRM systems, content distribution platforms, analytics systems, and digital tools for sponsorship activation.

Kraus et al. (2021), through a comprehensive review of digital transformation research, identify organizational capabilities, leadership, and change management as key success factors. This is particularly relevant for sports organizations, which operate in complex institutional environments with multiple stakeholders. Empirical evidence supports this view: Corthouts et al. (2021) demonstrate that organizational innovativeness in sport federations varies depending on resources, managerial attitudes, and governance structures, while Ehnold et al. (2023) show that digitalization practices in voluntary sport clubs range from basic communication tools to advanced administrative systems, with digital maturity determining the scope of transformation.

In the domain of sports marketing, digital transformation is most visible in the evolution of fan relationships. Vale and Fernandes (2017) argue that social media platforms enable engagement through interaction, participation, and emotional connection. Similarly, Parganas et al. (2015) emphasize that effective sport brand management on social media requires strategic content design, as different types of posts generate distinct engagement outcomes. Anagnostopoulos et al. (2017) further highlight the role of visual platforms such as Instagram in shaping brand narratives and symbolic value.

Digital communities are increasingly recognized as strategic assets. Alonso-Dos-Santos et al. (2017) show that engagement in virtual sport brand communities positively influences attitudes toward sponsors, reinforcing the link between digital engagement and sponsorship value. Mastromartino and Naraine (2021) argue that sponsor value in digital environments is generated through carefully designed interactions rather than mere exposure.

Fan engagement is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Huettermann et al., 2019), requiring a strategic focus on long-term relationships. Empirical studies confirm the importance of data-driven approaches: Naraine and Bakhsh (2021) demonstrate that optimizing content and timing on social media significantly enhances engagement, while Abeza (2023) calls for more robust theoretical models to explain the impact of digital strategies on loyalty, reputation, and financial outcomes.

Beyond communication channels, digital transformation also encompasses the infrastructure of fan experience. Panchanathan et al. (2017) highlight the role of smart stadiums enabled by IoT technologies in enhancing personalization, logistics, and data collection, while Yang (2020) conceptualizes smart stadiums as sites of technological and social innovation.

At the same time, the emergence of e-sports introduces new dimensions of strategic management in sport. Funk et al. (2017) emphasize the need to adapt sport management frameworks to digital markets, while Cunningham et al. (2017) underline the importance of conceptual clarity in defining e-sport and its implications.

Overall, the literature indicates that digital transformation in sport requires the integration of strategic management, organizational capabilities, and sports marketing. Organizational success depends not solely on technology adoption but on the ability to develop coherent strategies, manage change, leverage data for decision-making, and build long-term relationships with stakeholders (Hamadi, 2025). These insights provide the theoretical foundation for developing a model linking strategic management, digital transformation, and sports marketing.

Theoretical Framework of Strategic Management in the Digital Era of Sport

The theoretical framework of strategic management in the digital era of sport is grounded in the assumption that digital transformation is not merely a matter of technology adoption, but a shift in competitive logic, value creation mechanisms, and coordination processes both within and beyond the organization (Franjić, 2022; Lunić & Česarević, 2025). In this context, strategic management in sport must address how digital strategies are

formulated, how transformation initiatives are orchestrated across the organization, how capabilities for continuous adaptation are developed, and how sports organizations position themselves within broader digital ecosystems characterized by platforms, data, and multi-sided market relationships.

Hess et al. (2016) provide a framework that explicitly situates digital transformation within the domain of strategy by identifying key strategic questions that guide managerial decision-making regarding the direction and scope of transformation. This perspective is particularly relevant for sports organizations, which must balance sporting objectives, market demands, and institutional constraints. Within this framework, digital transformation is understood as a coherent set of strategic choices related to value propositions, channels, and monetization logic, rather than a collection of fragmented digital initiatives. In the context of sports marketing, this implies that social media, CRM, ticketing, OTT/streaming, e-commerce, and analytics should be treated as components of an integrated strategy aimed at long-term fan and partner value.

Building on this perspective, empirical evidence suggests that successful transformations are driven by clear strategic orientations that shape portfolios of digital initiatives. Sebastian et al. (2017) show that organizations undergoing transformation tend to focus on deepening customer relationships and developing digitally enabled solutions. In sport, this is reflected in the expansion of fan engagement strategies and the development of digital products such as personalized subscriptions, digital memberships, and matchday applications. A key contribution of this work lies in highlighting the need to simultaneously develop visible market innovations and underlying organizational infrastructure, including data architectures, integrated processes, and new roles and responsibilities. Without such foundations, digital growth remains fragmented and difficult to sustain.

From a theoretical standpoint, conceptualizing digital transformation as a strategic change shifts attention toward the capacity of sports organizations to continuously adapt and renew. Teece (2017) links strategy, business models, and dynamic capabilities, arguing that competitive advantage in turbulent environments depends on the ability to redesign business models while simultaneously developing capabilities that enable such

reconfiguration. In sport, this is increasingly reflected in the growing importance of digital revenue models, including direct-to-consumer offerings, digital content, data-driven sponsorships, and digital commerce. This perspective explains why similar technologies yield different outcomes across organizations: differences arise from the ability to translate technology into sustainable value logic and supporting organizational design.

However, digital transformation extends beyond internal organizational processes to reshape external forms of competition and cooperation. Jacobides et al. (2018) conceptualize ecosystems as organizational forms characterized by modularity and complementarities, enabling coordination among interdependent actors without full hierarchical control. This perspective is directly applicable to sport, where clubs, leagues, media, platforms, sponsors, and fan communities form interconnected systems of value creation. In such contexts, sports organizations increasingly operate as ecosystem orchestrators, making strategic decisions regarding partner selection, interface management, and value distribution, particularly in relation to data ownership and access.

This ecosystem logic is especially evident in the transformation of the professional sport media landscape. Zheng (2022) demonstrates how digitalization and evolving media infrastructures are reshaping multi-sided sport markets and destabilizing traditional mass media models. From a strategic perspective, this implies a shift toward managing channel portfolios, developing direct relationships with audiences, and designing digital experiences that sustain engagement in a broader attention economy. Central to this transformation is the strategic role of data, as control over audience data increasingly determines the ability to generate market and sponsorship value.

To ensure theoretical and methodological consistency, it is necessary to incorporate insights from information systems research. Haffner et al. (2025) propose a stakeholder ecosystem perspective on sports digitalization, emphasizing the interdependencies among actors and the transformative role of digital technologies in redefining relationships. This perspective aligns closely with strategic management by shifting the focus from isolated organizational decisions to the governance of relational networks involving leagues, platforms, sponsors, and fans.

Finally, Saarikko et al. (2020) conceptualize digital transformation as a top management priority embedded within corporate strategy, highlighting the importance of digital awareness and strategic focus. Although not sport-specific, this perspective offers valuable guidance for sports organizations by framing digital transformation as a structured process involving prioritization, portfolio management, iterative learning, and continuous alignment between sporting and commercial objectives.

Synthesizing these perspectives, the theoretical framework of strategic management in the digital era of sport can be understood as the integration of three interrelated layers. The first layer concerns the formulation and coherence of digital transformation strategy (Hess et al., 2016; Sebastian et al., 2017). The second layer explains sustained adaptation through dynamic capabilities and business model innovation (Teece, 2017; Saarikko et al., 2020). The third layer extends the analysis to ecosystem positioning, platforms, and multi-sided markets (Jacobides et al., 2018; Zheng, 2022; Haffner et al., 2025). This integrative perspective provides the foundation for linking strategic management decisions with implications for sports marketing, particularly in the domains of fan experience, data management, distribution channels, and sponsorship value.

Implications of Digital Transformation for Sports Marketing: Strategic Models and Value Management

Digital transformation, viewed through the lens of strategic management, inevitably redefines the marketing function in sports organizations. If the previous section demonstrated that digital transformation requires a coherent strategy, the development of dynamic capabilities, and positioning within digital ecosystems, then sports marketing is the area in which these strategic choices are most visibly operationalized. Marketing is no longer merely a communication function focused on promoting events or brands; rather, it becomes a central mechanism for managing relationships, data, and fan value (Dašić, 2018).

Contemporary relationship marketing literature emphasizes that digital technologies enable a shift from a transactional to a relational model of value creation. Kumar and Reinartz (2016) argue that customer relationship management should be based on customer lifetime value (CLV), with organizations allocating resources to segments that generate sustainable value. In the sports context, this implies that the fan is no longer viewed

simply as a spectator or merchandise buyer, but as a long-term stakeholder whose value is reflected through attendance, subscriptions, digital engagement, sponsorship influence, and reputational contribution. Digital transformation enables more precise collection and analysis of fan behavior data, thereby moving sports marketing toward more sophisticated models of segmentation and personalization.

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) highlight that customer experience management becomes critical in digital environments, as value emerges through a series of interconnected touchpoints. In sport, these include digital platforms such as apps, social media, and OTT services, as well as stadium experience, sponsor interactions, and post-event communication. Digital transformation requires the integration of these touchpoints into a unified system, in which CRM is no longer merely a database but a strategic infrastructure for managing fan experience. In this sense, marketing becomes the coordinator of the digital architecture of fan relationships.

In the context of fan engagement, Brodie et al. (2019) emphasize that engagement should be understood as a dynamic and multidimensional process involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. Digital platforms enable the continuous monitoring and stimulation of engagement, while simultaneously creating a need to redefine success metrics. Traditional indicators such as reach and follower counts lose prominence relative to deeper measures such as interaction rates, engagement duration, repeat purchases, and conversion to subscription or membership. In this respect, the digital transformation of sports marketing can be described as a shift from visibility metrics to value metrics (Dašić & Buzurović, 2017).

This shift toward value is further supported by the literature on platforms and digital markets. Parker, Van Alstyne, and Choudary (2016) demonstrate that platforms operate by orchestrating interactions among multiple sides, while control over data becomes a key source of competitive advantage. Sports organizations that develop their own digital platforms or strategically manage their presence on existing ones gain the ability to directly monetize data and interactions. As a result, sports marketing acquires a new dimension: platform management becomes a strategic function, and monetization is no longer dependent solely on traditional media rights or sponsorship revenues.

The monetization of data and digital interactions is also closely related to the concept of customer value across multiple channels. Rust and Huang (2014)

argue that digital environments enable precise behavioral tracking and the optimization of marketing investments through analytics. In sport, this means that sponsorship activation can be assessed through digital impressions, conversions, and sentiment analysis, while fan value can be estimated through integrated data on purchases, attendance, and online engagement. Digital transformation therefore redefines the relationship between marketing and finance, as marketing activities become quantifiable and directly linked to revenue generation.

At the same time, an intensive reliance on data raises important issues of ethics, privacy, and reputational risk. Martin and Murphy (2017) argue that privacy management has become a central strategic concern, as consumer trust directly influences willingness to share data. In the sports context, where fans are often highly emotionally attached, breaches of trust may have long-term consequences for reputation and loyalty. Accordingly, the digital transformation of sports marketing must incorporate clear policies of transparency, consent, and responsible data use.

Reputational risk is further amplified in the context of social media, where communication is immediate and highly visible. Einwiller and Steilen (2015) show that digital interactions can quickly escalate into reputational crises if organizations fail to manage communication and audience relationships effectively. For sports organizations, whose brands are often strongly emotionally charged, the management of digital reputational risk becomes an integral part of marketing strategy.

Digital transformation also affects the way sponsorships and partnerships are evaluated. Watanabe, Yan, and Soebbing (2015) show that the value of sport sponsorship in the digital era is increasingly assessed through online metrics and engagement rather than through traditional media exposure alone. This changes the bargaining position of sports organizations and requires a more sophisticated approach to analytics and partner reporting.

Overall, digital transformation redefines sports marketing at three interrelated levels. First, marketing becomes the locus of data and experience management, rather than merely communication. Second, value is measured through long-term relational and financial indicators, such as lifetime value, instead of short-term reach. Third, the management of ethics and reputation becomes an integral part of strategy, as digital environments increase both transparency and public sensitivity.

The answer to how digital transformation redefines the role and strategy of sports marketing can therefore be summarized as follows: marketing shifts from an operational function of promotion to a strategic function of value management. It integrates CRM, analytics, platforms, sponsorship activation, and reputation management into a unified system that enables sports organizations to create, measure, and sustain long-term value for fans and partners within a digital ecosystem.

Conclusion

This paper is based on the premise that digital transformation in sport constitutes a profound strategic change rather than mere technological modernization. The literature review has shown that digital transformation requires the integration of strategic decisions, organizational capabilities, and positioning within a broader digital ecosystem. Sports organizations face the need to redesign business models, develop dynamic capabilities, and align technological innovations with sporting objectives, market demands, and social legitimacy.

The theoretical framework developed in this study indicates that competitive advantage in the digital era does not arise simply from possessing technology, but from the ability to orchestrate it strategically. Particular emphasis has been placed on the role of ecosystems and platforms, where sports organizations no longer operate in isolation but as part of interdependent networks of actors that jointly create and distribute value.

The most visible implications of digital transformation emerge in sports marketing. The marketing function evolves from a promotional activity into a strategic system for managing relationships, data, and long-term fan value. The focus shifts from reach-based metrics toward engagement, loyalty, and fan lifetime value, while CRM, analytics, and digital platforms become central components of value management. At the same time, demands related to ethics, data protection, and reputational management continue to grow.

Digital transformation thus redefines the strategic management of sports organizations through the integration of technology, organizational adaptation, and market logic, while sports marketing becomes a key instrument for operationalizing this strategy. Future research should empirically examine the relationships among digital capabilities, marketing

metrics, and organizational performance in order to further strengthen both the theoretical and practical understanding of digital transformation in sport.

A limitation of this paper lies in its conceptual nature, as the proposed theoretical framework has not been empirically tested. Although the study integrates relevant theoretical perspectives, the absence of empirical data limits the possibility of generalization and the confirmation of causal relationships. Future research should therefore focus on the empirical validation of the model and on measuring the impact of digital transformation on the performance of sports organizations.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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