

The Evolution of Fan Engagement During COVID-19

Nicholas M. Watanabe, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Big Data and Analytics, University of South Carolina

Abstract

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, sport and entertainment organizations around the world were required to shut their venues to fans as part of the protocols put into place by governments to limit the transmission of the disease. While this certainly had a significant impact on the operations and revenue of sport teams, it was still critical for these organizations to continue operating events, and continue engaging with fans. Because direct contact with consumers was not allowed, the main channel through which to communicate with fans was through media. Specifically, most sport and entertainment organizations turned focus to utilizing digital media technologies, such as social media, video communication technology, and even virtual/augmented reality to give fans special experiences. In this way, although organizations took significant financial losses from not having attendees at games purchasing tickets, concessions, and other merchandise, it still allowed them to maintain and build relationships with fans so as to ensure they would be willing to come back to events once fans were allowed back into venues. Considering this, the current case study focuses on the various strategies and technologies that were used by sport and entertainment organizations to engage with fans during the pandemic. In addition to examining the various strategies, this case will also evaluate the effectiveness of these practices, and consider their potential uses and benefits for the future of marketing and fan engagement in the sport industry.

Keywords: Digitization, Technology, Fan Engagement, Social Media

Learning Objectives:

1. Learn how sport organizations have used digitization to improve their engagement with consumers.
2. Analyze the use of digital media by sport organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue developing relationships and interacting with fans.
3. Understand the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on fan engagement, and best practices sport organizations developed to combat these challenges.

Introduction to the Case Context

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency, signaling the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that would soon spread to countries around the world creating the largest global health crisis in the last century. In order to combat the spread of the virus, governments and other stakeholders implemented a wide-range of regulations and policies limiting the travel and congregation of large gatherings of people. In some instances, entire regions were put under lockdown and states of emergency were declared to limit contact between individuals, with the hope that this would curtail the spread of the virus. Despite these efforts, the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing in several areas around the world, and continue to impact business operations.

The sport industry was particularly hit hard by COVID-19, especially for professional sport franchises and large-scale sporting events, who are often highly dependent on a large number of attendees in order to generate the revenue needed to be sustainable.¹ For example, in North America, professional sporting contests for the four major professional leagues (National

¹ Smith, Aaron CT, and James Skinner. "Sport management and COVID-19: trends and legacies." *European Sport Management Quarterly* (2021): 1-10, p. 2.

Basketball Association, National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Hockey League) were played behind closed doors with no fans in attendance.² Because individuals were prevented from coming to games, it forced the teams and leagues to try and find new ways to engage and interact with fans, while also generating revenue. One prominent solution employed by numerous sport organizations was to use digital technology to not only allow fans to continue following their favorite teams and athletes, but also to develop new and unique ways to develop interactions without having actually having anyone present. One prominent solution employed by numerous sport organizations was to use digital technology to not only allow fans to continue following their favorite teams and athletes, but also to develop new and unique ways to develop interactions without having actually having anyone present.³ With this in mind, the current case will focus on the use of digital technology by prominent sport organizations (i.e., Formula 1, National Basketball Association, etc.) during the COVID-19 pandemic, and their continued integration as their competitions re-opened to the public.

Mr. Hasan is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a major professional sport team based in the MENA region. Similar to his colleagues around the world, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has required that his organization have to undergo significant changes in terms of their operations. Although his club has already taken all the necessary precautions in terms of protecting their staff members, athletes, coaches, and attendees at events, Mr. Hasan is concerned that the club may be forced to continue operating events with either reduced capacity or no attendees present in the future. Additionally, he recognizes that as other sport teams and venues

² Reade, J. James, and Carl Singleton. "Demand for public events in the COVID-19 pandemic: a case study of European football." *European Sport Management Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2021): 391-405, p. 392.

³ Sharpe, Stirling, Charles Mountifield, and Kevin Filo. "The social media response from athletes and sport organizations to COVID-19: An altruistic tone." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 13, no. 3 (2020): 474-483, p. 476.

have continued to utilize various forms of digital technology to enhance their communication and marketing efforts in communicating with fans, it is important that his team also follow similar practices. Considering this, Mr. Hasan decides to bring in an expert in digital technologies and communications to help the team to continue engaging with fans no matter what the future brings.

In order to improve engagement with fans during these uncertain times, Mr. Hasan has asked Mr. Eddie, a representative of MJK Inc., a corporation specializing in digital communications to present to his team's management and marketing staff. Specifically, Mr. Hasan requests that Eddie provide an overview of the various practices and technologies utilized by sport and entertainment organizations during the pandemic, and then to recommend best practices that could help to improve the team's communications and engagement with fans, so that they can be aware of future trends that may impact the way sport organizations market and communicate with fans.

Marketing and Digital Communications in Sport

Eddie begins his presentation to Mr. Hasan's management and marketing staff by providing an overview of digital communications and their use in sport. To date, sport teams around the world have typically followed traditional methods of engaging and communicating with fans, often adopting the best practices from other industries. That is, in previous decades sport organizations tended to examine how other businesses communicated with their fans, and did not consider the unique aspects of the sport industry that would offer potential advantages. However, in recent years, marketing and communications within the sport industry has become much more sophisticated, with focus not just on looking to other industries for best practices, but also trying to better understand the specific behaviors and interests for sport fans. As such, while

sport organizations were not the first industry to adopt the use of digital communications to market and engage with consumers, it is not surprising that they quickly became a leader in utilizing various forms of digital media (i.e., social media, video productions, etc) to reach fans.⁴

Continuing this discussion, Eddie notes that sport marketers have come to realize sport is a unique product, and that it actually differentiates itself from other products and services in a number of ways that need to be considered. First off, while consumers may show loyalty and attachment to certain products, much of the consumer decision process to make a purchase is driven by the price of a product, as well as the presence of similar substitute goods/services. However, in the case of sport, marketers have come to find that fans often build much stronger brand loyalty to their favorite sport teams, and thus price becomes less of a deciding factor in choosing whether to consume the sport product. Additionally, another unique aspect of the sport product is that fans have a lot stronger emotional attachment to teams, players, and other entities in sport. For example, when a fan attends a game of their favorite team, the emotions they feel when their favorite player scores a goal to win a game not only are much stronger than when consuming another product, but also are ones that the fan will remember for a lifetime, and will strengthen their relationship and loyalty to the sport organization.

Precisely because of the stronger loyalty and commitment that sport consumers have, it has made the various forms of digital communication as a highly effective media through which to communicate and engage with fans. Notably, sport consumers have been shown to not only have higher levels of engagement and identification with the teams they are fans of, but also spend more time engaged with sport entities than other types of product. In the manner, digital communications technology has provided a revolution in the sport industry, as they have

⁴ Hutchins, Brett. "The acceleration of media sport culture: Twitter, telepresence and online messaging." *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 2 (2011): 237-257, p. 250.

delivered an important access point for fans to be able to constantly be engaged with their favorite teams and players, without having to have games and events every day. Eddie notes that the early forms of digital communications that fans used to engage with fans were using private forums or internet message boards, where groups of fans would often get together and post information and discussion points about the various sport teams and players that they cheered for. However, as teams realized that these digital sites could serve as important sites to engage with fans, and thus have them continue being repeat customers in the future, teams placed more emphasis on building their own forums for fans. Moreover, with the growth of mobile devices and various software platforms, including social media sites, teams continued to build their online/digital presences, and became leaders in using digital communications/marketing to engage with consumers.⁵ That is, sport marketers came to realize that engagement through digital communications not only helped to build brand loyalty and team identification among consumers, but that is also made the communications process more personalized. In this, digital communications technology provided one of the most important tools for engagement, as having the ability to engage in discussions and interactions with fans provided a critical link to further connect consumers to a sport entity.

Moving along, Eddie notes that when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, it was thus natural that digital communications became one of the most important tools for sport organizations to continue to driving engagement and interactions with their fan base. That is, with fans stuck at home, often with no ability to go outside or even talk to others because of lockdown and quarantine protocols, the digital communications provided by sport entities often became important avenues through which consumers were able to communicate and feel engaged with

⁵ Hutchins, Brett. "Mobile media sport: The case for building a mobile media and communications research agenda." *Communication & Sport* 7, no. 4 (2019): 466-487, p. 480.

the rest of the world. In this manner, many of the practices that were put into place by sport organizations during the pandemic are ones that were often emulated by other organizations seeking to use digital media to interact with individuals.

At this point, Mr. Hasan thanks Eddie for the introduction and discussion on the importance of digital communications as a tool for marketing and engagement within sport. He then asks Eddie whether it would be possible to discuss the various types of digital communications platforms that exist, how they are used by other sport organizations. Moreover, he also is curious about best practices and the unique and creative ways that digital media was used during the pandemic to engage and interact with fans, so that he and his management and marketing staff can better evaluate their own digital communications strategies for the future.

Social Media and Sport

Moving focus into the specific technologies that sport organizations utilized during the pandemic to communicate and engage with fans, Eddie starts with social media. Notably, social media are social networking sites that allow users to create content, and communicate with one another. These sites differ from traditional forms of communication in that all users are able to create content. That is, before the advent of social networking sites, information and messages were typically created by companies, and then distributed to consumers who would potentially be influenced by these communications. In this manner, traditional media messaging was unidirectional, where information flowed from companies to consumers. However, social media has changed this dynamic by instead making it so that consumers are also able to create content on these platforms. In this sense, it is not just the corporations that control the creation and distribution of media messages, but instead co-produce them with consumers.⁶ As such, social

⁶ Van Dijck, José, and Thomas Poell. "Social media and the transformation of public space." *Social Media+ Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 2056305115622482.

media allows for a bi-directional, or two-way communications between users and corporations. Moreover, this change has led to scholars to refer to users as “prosumers,” as individuals no longer just consume information, but also produce it as well. Notably, this shifting dynamic has presented both benefits and issues for organizations that use social media to communicate and engage with consumers. To begin with, because social networking sites are dynamic platforms, they have created a wealth of opportunities for interactions that were not possible using previous forms of communication.⁷ Specifically, as previously noted, where information on traditional media sources flowed from an organization down to consumers, social media sites allow for individuals to not only consume this information, but also to create their own content in response to these messages. For example, during the pandemic, the NBA launched a social media campaign called “NBA Together,” which streamed live interviews with star players on Twitter and YouTube every day. This campaign proved to be extremely popular on social media, as it allowed for a two-way exchange between consumers and organizations, and as such creates for a greater level of engagement compared to traditional media sources.

In the case of the sport industry, social media has become one of the most critical tools driving engagement and interactions with fans. Initially, sport organizations adopted social media after they observed other corporations and entities using the platform as a cost-effective marketing tool to reach consumers through the digital realm. Specifically, sport teams saw social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook (now renamed to Meta) as sites where accounts could post information related to events and other marketing materials at no cost and potentially reach wide audiences. In this manner, sport organizations initially treated social media sites as simply a

⁷ Yan, Grace, Nicholas M. Watanabe, Stephen L. Shapiro, Michael L. Naraine, and Kevin Hull. "Unfolding the Twitter scene of the 2017 UEFA Champions League Final: Social media networks and power dynamics." *European Sport Management Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (2019): 419-436.

place to re-post the same marketing material that was being distributed through traditional media channels. However, as sport organizations saw that fans were not only looking at their social media posts, but also commenting on them, liking them, and sharing them with others, they saw that these sites could provide a powerful tool to build interactions with fans.⁸ Because social media interactions are more personalized because of the ability to customize content and responses to each specific user, sport organizations have also come to the understanding that these digital platforms help to provide a more authentic experience that can boost the interest of consumers to repeatedly engage with teams, and thus further build loyalty and identification.

Consider the above benefits, it is only natural that sport organizations have placed significant emphasis on building their presence on social media sites, as they have come to understand the unique benefits that are provided from these various sites. Moreover, sport organizations have also evolved their social media strategies to understand that not all social media platforms are the same, and that each has their own unique consumer profile and functionality. Primarily, most major sport organizations currently operate several social media accounts, including ones on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and so forth. Notably, Twitter is an extremely popular social media platform that has a large user base with wide ranging demographics. Twitter has been especially useful for sport organizations, as it has allowed them to not only interact with fans through short discussions, but also to post creative content such as funny messages, videos of exciting plays, and behind-the-scenes pictures of sporting events. Indeed, research has shown that a large volume of conversations on Twitter are related to sport and entertainment, so it is only natural that sport organizations have utilized this platform to connect with fans. Next, Facebook is the social media platform with the largest user

⁸ Williams, Jo, and Susan J. Chinn. "Meeting relationship-marketing goals through social media: A conceptual model for sport marketers." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 3, no. 4 (2010): 422-437.

base in the world, with almost 3 billion users in 2021 who were registered on the site. Although somewhat similar to Twitter in terms of being able to post messages, pictures, and videos, Facebook has a different user demographic, with a much higher proportion of elderly individuals using the site as a way to post information and communicate with their friends and family.⁹

More recently, the social media sites Instagram and TikTok have also gained wide-use from sport organizations because of their unique ability to share specific types of media that tailor to the interests of younger consumers. Notably, Instagram is an app that has users post pictures with captions that can be looked at in a matter of seconds, while TikTok provides short form videos (typically less than 30 seconds) that often focus on humorous content to attract user attention. Considering this various platforms, sport organizations have placed greater emphasis on using Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, rather than on Facebook for a number of reasons. Although Facebook does have the largest user-base, because of the design and demographics of the platform, sport organizations have found that fans are more likely to interact with content on other platforms (e.g., Twitter, TikTok). The reason for this is likely based on the functionality of sites such as Twitter and Instagram, as they provide shorter form content that is easier and quicker to access and consume, meaning that organizations are able to engage with fans without the users having to put in significant effort. Moreover, because Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are more dynamic, in that they constantly display a flow of information, it allows for greater spontaneity in the interactions, which further reinforces these interactions between sport organizations and fans as being genuine and authentic.¹⁰ For example, during the pandemic,

⁹ Mellon, Jonathan, and Christopher Prosser. "Twitter and Facebook are not representative of the general population: Political attitudes and demographics of British social media users." *Research & Politics* 4, no. 3 (2017): 2053168017720008.

¹⁰ Su, Yiran, Bradley J. Baker, Jason P. Doyle, and Meimei Yan. "Fan engagement in 15 seconds: Athletes' relationship marketing during a pandemic via TikTok." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 13, no. 3 (2020): 436-446, p. 438.

sport figures such as NBA stars Giannis Antetokounmpo and LeBron James posted videos of themselves at home on TikTok, to show the world how they were spending their time while they were in lockdown, including videos of them dancing and playing guitar. These videos not only managed to show a lighter side of these athletes' lives, but also drew significant levels of engagement from social media users.

Social Media Best Practices from the Pandemic

Turning focus to the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, Eddie notes that initially sport organizations were using their standard practices in terms of posting content and interacting and engaging with fans using these platforms. However, with fans unable to attend events, and individuals forced to stay at home, it quickly became evident that social media was one of the few ways in which consumers were going to be able to interact with their favorite sport entities, as well as other fans. At the same time, social media data indicated that in the Spring of 2020, when most sporting events around the world were cancelled or postponed due to widespread outbreaks of COVID-19, that the level of interactions and engagement from fans had a large decrease. In this sense, the pandemic illustrated how important actually holding events was in drawing in consumers to the sport product, and then to have them engage with teams and other users on social media. With such recognition, sport teams quickly started developing social media strategies to continue connecting with fans during the pandemic, while also providing a potential outlet for them to try and ignore the various issues going on in the rest of the world.

Overall, sport organizations adopted a number of strategies to try and engage and interact with fans, even when there were no games. Although the social media accounts for sport organizations became important outlets to distribute news and information to fans, teams recognized that if they were only to produce content focused on COVID-19 protocols and safety,

it would likely overwhelm fans and also be lost amongst all the other online posts about the pandemic. As such, sport organizations adopted an approach of learning to balance the tone of their content, with some of the posts focused on safety, while other posts then tried to take a more humorous approach to give users most positive emotions when interacting with fans. In this, one of the best practices for digital media that was reinforced during the pandemic was in balancing the content on social media accounts. Even though sport organizations had typically diversified the type of content on their pages with a mixture of marketing materials combined with other media that would draw user interest, the pandemic further emphasized the importance of mixing different types of content. In this way, sport organizations are able to represent themselves as having authority in important matters such as health and safety, while also displaying a lighter side than emphasizes the fun and entertainment that consumers associate with sporting events.

Continuing to other best practices from the pandemic, Eddie highlights that the pandemic provided a unique opportunity for sport organizations to be more creative and experimental with their content than they usually would be. That is, where sport teams have traditionally used a mixture of content, the content they did provide before the pandemic was rather formulaic in that it was naturally concentrated on sporting events, players, and other team activities. However, because games were not being played during the pandemic, teams were required to try and find new types of content to post on social media that would be of interest to fans. For example, during the midst of the pandemic, a number of Olympic athletes shared social media posts showing various ideas about how people could work out from home. These videos proved to be very popular with users for a number of reasons. To begin with, this content gave a special inside look at the everyday lives of athletes that fans normally were not exposed to, and also provided

many people with motivation to also participate in workouts similar to those that their favorite athletes were using to stay in shape while they were stuck at home during the pandemic. At the same time, while more and more teams and athletes began to post similar videos, it quickly became evident that as others started to imitate one another, that this type of content would become stale and less interesting to fans. Thus, sport organizations continued to develop the workout videos and change the content by adding new features, humor, and other interactive elements. In this, it reveals a number of best practices for the use of social media during and after the pandemic. Specifically, it highlights that the produced content is easily imitated, and thus in order to continue having fans pay attention to a sport organization's social media account, there is constant need to update and evolve content in order to keep things fresh. As such, even though there are potential risks, being experimental and creative when developing social media content can be highly beneficial in increasing visibility and engagement with sport consumers.

To conclude his discussion on social media, Eddie notes that the pandemic has provided significant challenges and opportunities for sport organizations in the operations and management of their social networking sites. Overall, while the lack of games meant that teams were experiencing a decline in interest, it also helped many to recognize new and unique ways that they could continue to engage with fans even when there were no events happening. As all sport leagues have significant periods of time in each year when there are no events, many of the practices that were instituted during the pandemic can also provide an important framework of how to continue driving engagement in the future.

Video Communications Software Best Practices

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, video conferencing software such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and so forth, all became highly popular ways for individuals to

communicate with others using videos. Eddie highlights that as businesses, schools, and other organizations were forced to move into virtual environments during the midst of lockdowns during the pandemic, these video programs became vital tools in order to continue operations. Notably, Zoom, developed by Zoom Video Communications Inc. based in the United States, became one of the most widely used platforms because of its relatively low cost, ease of use, and ability to be accessed through multiple types of devices (i.e. desktop computers, mobile phones, tablets, etc.). Indeed, although Zoom had been around for over decade and was widely marketed as a digital platform that would allow large and small businesses to be able to conduct operations virtually, it was the lockdowns and quarantine restrictions from the pandemic which caused the program to grow significantly, becoming a common part of everyday business life around the world.

Although sport teams had used digital video before the pandemic, most of their operations were mainly focused on creating content for social media platforms such as TikTok and Twitter, or developing long form content to be consumed on the club website or other media channels. In this sense, most of the video media content that teams created was not meant to be interactive, but instead was posted to try and engage fans. However, much of this content was typically built around the traditional schedule of activities for sport organizations, including matches, training, interviews with players and coaches, and so forth. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became the case that it was impossible to create such content because various lockdown and quarantine procedures prevented teams from holding games, training, or even having contact between players and staff. As such, as sport organizations observed other industries using video technology in order to continue engagement and interactions between

individuals, they quickly began to adopt digital video conferencing software to help their own outreach to consumers.

One of the biggest challenges for sport teams during the pandemic was that even as quarantine and lockdown restrictions were being lifted, many governments and leagues prevented the opening of any mass-gathering facilities because of the higher potential to spread COVID-19 among the population.¹¹ In this sense, even though sport teams were able to start hosting competitions again, one thing that was missing from games were all of the fans in attendance.¹² The lack of fans at games was not just an issue in terms of lost revenue from ticket sales, but also in terms of being an important part of the atmosphere and environment of sporting events. In order to try and get around this issue, a number of sport teams turned to video conferencing software to try and create more of a game-like atmosphere. Notably, during the midst of the pandemic, the National Basketball Association (NBA) setup a special bubble where all games were to be played under quarantine in a single location with no fans present. To get around the issue of missing fans, the league installed large video boards next to the court.¹³ These fan boards allowed select fans of each NBA team to display live videos of themselves watching the game in real-time, and thus not only did it allow fans to interact with the game, but also showed the presence, emotions, and excitement of fans during live television broadcasts. This practice proved to be so successful that it was quickly emulated by other sport

¹¹ Cardazzi, Alexander, Brad R. Humphreys, Jane E. Ruseski, Brian Soebbing, and Nicholas Watanabe. "Professional sporting events increase seasonal influenza mortality in US cities." Available at SSRN 3628649 (2020).

¹² Reade, J. James, and Carl Singleton. "Demand for public events in the COVID-19 pandemic: a case study of European football." *European Sport Management Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (2021): 391-405, p. 392.

¹³ Watanabe, Nicholas. "Sport 2050: Three ways attending sport as a fan could change." *BBC.com*, Accessed October 28, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/57068992>

organizations, including the English Premier League, who setup similar video boards behind the goals at matches to also give the image of having fans being present.

Continuing, Eddie notes that while these video boards were useful during the pandemic, continuing to have them after the end of the pandemic would not be sustainable as they would block the views of fans who were actually present within a venue. Moreover, while video boards were able to have fans be part of events, the ability to engage and interact was somewhat limited as consumers were only able to watch games, and not directly communicate with players or other fans. Considering this issue, perhaps the best of video meeting technology during the pandemic was video cameras that were setup by Formula 1 (F1) at the entrance of races. Specifically, these cameras were setup to broadcast to fans around the world, but also had screens that allowed fans to be able to interact with anyone who went up to the cameras in real-time.¹⁴ In this way, F1 fans were able to engage and interact directly with their favorite drivers as they entered each venue, which not only lead to high interest from consumers, but did so in a way that was highly entertaining and genuine. As such, this provided a unique way that sport organizations could use video meeting software to build relationships with fans not just during the pandemic, but is something that could be sustained long afterwards.

Conclusion

In concluding his presentation, Eddie notes that the pandemic demonstrated that there are a number of ways in which digitization could bring benefits to sport organizations in terms of engaging with consumers, but that not all of them were sustainable. Notably, perhaps the most important lesson from the pandemic was the need for all forms of digital communications to be integrated with the overall marketing and sales strategy of an organization. That is, not only

¹⁴ Watanabe, Nicholas. "Sport 2050: Three ways attending sport as a fan could change." *BBC.com*, Accessed October 28, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/57068992>

should sport organizations engage in digitization, but that it is critical for it to work in conjunction with the other marketing and management operations of the organization in order to maximize benefits. At the same time, as previously mentioned there is need for some level of freedom for those creating strategies and content for digital communications so as to continue having successful engagement with fans.

Case Assignment Questions

1. Following the presentation, Mr. Hasan has tasked you to help improve the social media strategy for his sport team. His first task is that he asks that you research at least five different social media platforms (i.e. Twitter, WeChat, WhatsApp, TikTok, etc) and discuss the specific features and functionality of each one.
2. Next, using the exact same five social media platforms, Mr. Hasan requests that you also research the market size and demographics for each of these platforms in MENA region. Combining this information with your answer to the previous question, discuss which social media platforms would be best for sport organization in the MENA region to use, and explain your reasoning. In this, you should account for the popularity, ease of use, as well as other marketing and socio-cultural factors which may impact the willingness of consumers to use social media.
3. For the final stage of the report, Mr. Hasan requests that you create an overall strategic plan for the digitization of communications for a MENA region sport organization. In this, you should discuss what forms of social media and other digital communications should be used, and how they could be best integrated to help organizations interact and engage with fans during and after the pandemic.

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Teaching Notes

This case introduces the concept of digitization in sport, with special focus on the digital communications strategies and practices that sport organizations have used to engage and interact with consumers. Notably, this case study specifically focuses on how sport organizations utilized social media and other digital platforms during the pandemic to continue building relationship with fans at a time when there were either no events being held, or no fans allowed into venues to watch sporting events. In this, the key points that learners will need to focus on within this case study to successfully answer the questions are: how digital communications can be used to connect with consumers, the various digital communications platforms that were utilized by sport organizations, as well as the best practices that have emerged from the pandemic that are sustainable for the long run. It is recommended that instructors who use this case in any class setting should make use of the accompanying powerpoint presentation, which not only covers the case material, but also provides additional examples. Moreover, learners can also watch the powerpoint presentation on their own, as there are audio recordings of the lecture within the slides, and thus if they wish to do so, learners can work through the concepts in the case on their own as well.

This case has been designed to be flexible in its use by both instructors and learners, as the material contained within is relevant to a wide-variety of content within sport management and marketing courses. Notably, because the case examines different ways sport organizations can use digitization and technology to increase engagement and interactions with fans, the case can be easily integrated as an assignment or lesson in sport marketing, sales, and sponsorship courses. Specifically, any units within these courses that focus on using digital platforms and social media to market to fans would potentially benefit by including this case for learners to be

able to further work with this material. Additionally, for instructors teaching courses in sport communications and social media, the case material naturally fits with the focus of such courses, and can be used to highlight the use and impact of technologies to connect with fans, or even on how digital media communications for an organization can play a role in marketing strategy. Finally, the case material could also apply to other courses, including management and current events, as it not only deals with how organizations use digitization to enhance their brand image, but also considers the positives and negatives of using digital technology during a crisis situation. As such, the positioning of this case during the COVID-19 pandemic makes the case flexible in terms of how it could be utilized by both instructors and learners alike.

For both instructors and learners, there is also potential to use this case study as a springboard for larger and more in-depth focus and research into the use of digitization and video technology to enhance the interactions between sport organizations and consumers. That is, while this case focused on social media and video conferencing/meeting software, there are other types of digital tools that could be used to build and maintain relationships with fans. For example, some sport organizations have begun experimenting with the use augmented or virtual reality to allow fans to have viewing experiences that make them feel like they are at the game. As such, there are a range of technologies that could also be added alongside those discussed within this case study to enhance discussions focused on digitization and its impact on fan engagement.

Another aspect of this case that could be further utilized is the bibliography, which not only serves as references, but also is a list of readings that can be utilized by the instructors and learners to go deeper into the various uses of digital media. For example, if one considers the reading from the BBC entitled “*Sport 2050: Three ways attending sport as a fan could change*,”

the article presents a number of aspects of how sport organizations are changing the way they interact and engage with fans, and what these trends may look like in the future. Notably, the article highlights how the digitization strategies of sport organizations allowed for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics to be able to quickly adapt when it was announced that fans would be barred from attending the Games because of further COVID-19 outbreaks in Japan, and thus still manage to keep consumers engaged with the event. Moreover, the article notes how such practices of having events with limited consumers and reductions and travel may be more common in the future as sport organizations try to become more environmentally sustainable, and thus digital media engagement will be highly critical for sport organizations to build and foster relationships with consumers in the future.

Optional Questions for Learners:

1. Mr. Hasan asks that you do further research on the use of social media by sport organizations. Specifically he asks that you examine five sport organizations within the MENA region and analyze what type of social media platforms they use, what type of content they create, and how they engage and interact with fans. Additionally, he asks that you compare and contrast these organizations and consider whether there are best practices for the use of social media in the MENA region.
2. Next Mr. Hasan asks that you continue your research by examining the social media from five sport organizations outside of the MENA region. He asks that you again look at the platforms they use, the content they create, and how they interact with consumers. From this, he then asks you to compare and contrast the use of social media between sport organizations in the MENA region and the rest of the world. From this, he asks you to consider if there are certain practices

that might be adopted by MENA region sport teams to further their digitization efforts to engage with fans.

3. Mr. Hasan wants his organization to be state-of-the-art in their digitization efforts. As such, he asks that you do research on new uses of digital technology that could be used by sport organizations to build relationships with fans. For example, Mr. Hasan suggests that you could look at virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, machine learning, or other such innovations. In this, he asks that you write a report detailing how the technology that you focus on could be used by sport organizations, and what type of benefits they could provide in regards to engagement and interactions with fans.