



The Digital Sideline: The Role of Social Media in Shaping Sports Teams' Image and Fan Loyalty

By: Ashlee Sevilla

Actor Timothée Chalamet has been actively attending the Knicks games during the NBA finals—and the Knicks' content strategy team is making sure everyone knows.

From courtside pictures to celeb row coverage and in-game reactions, the Knicks' content strategy keeps fans informed and engaged.

Sports teams build online engagement by spotlighting what happens both on and off the court—from brand deals and cross-promotions to behind-the-scenes event content.

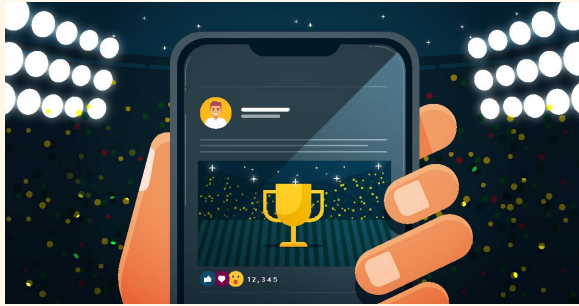
Fans want timely information. That's why Ronnie Gomez, a social media strategist, says that social media "has reshaped the way

teams, athletes, and brands engage with fans."¹

Fans rely on social media to access current information in an instant. After a game or event, fans can log onto social media to find the final score, photos from the game, highlights, statistics, and interviews. They can also find links that take them to landing pages with more information.

Hull and Abeza, researchers from the University of South Carolina and Towson University, mention how informational content makes social media "a venue where fans reunite outside of the stadium and access content to react to and bond over,"

whether it be “from the team to fans or fans to fans.”²



This technology-focused world can be leveraged by social media strategists. A study done among Big Ten athletic departments found that “social media give[s] organizations the opportunity to tell the interesting tales about the

many personalities on a team, satiating their fans’ cravings for more information about their teams on and off the playing field.”³

If social media strategists and team executives want fans to keep up with their team, the strategists and executives need to keep up with their fans. This article discusses how social media builds brand identity beyond game day, the role short-form content has in engagement, and how interactive posts help teams foster community and deepen loyalty.

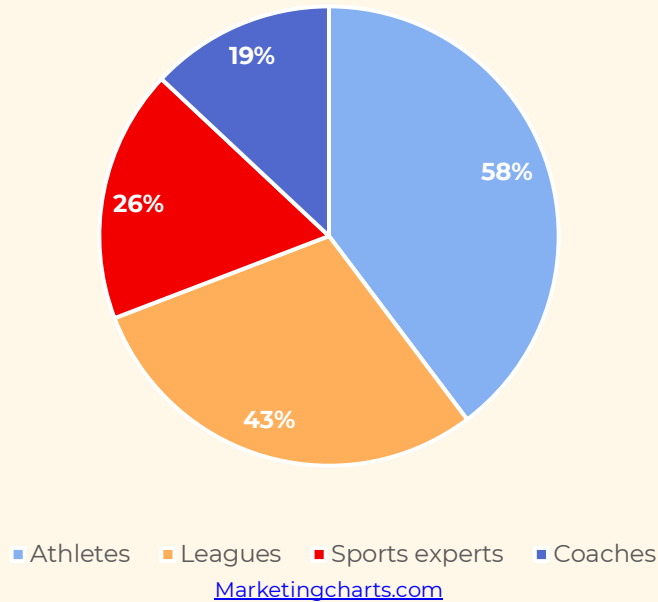
Social Media Builds Brand Identity Beyond Game Day

Because most sports don’t play or occur year-round, social media is crucial to helping professional and collegiate teams stay relevant in the off-season and between games or events. Gomez says that when leveraged effectively, “the role of social media in sports is quite literally game-changing.”⁴ Digital platforms have helped teams gain awareness within their state or country, and even globally. With fanbases growing so rapidly, they rely on and “expect real-time updates on and off season,” adds Gomez.⁵ That’s why it’s important for a team to build their own reputation before someone else builds it for them.

Sports organizations are influenced not only by what they post, but also by those who report on and contribute to their accounts.. A survey, distributed among thousands of internet users ages 16-64, found that digital media users follow not only sports teams, but

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Figure 1: Percentage of 16-24 year olds that follow different accounts on social media



also athletes, coaches, leagues, sports experts, and coaches.⁶ Among those surveyed, users within the 16-24 age demographic had higher combined totals, with 58% following athletes, 43% following leagues, 26% following sports experts, and 19% following coaches (see Figure 1). Because fans tune in to these other accounts that report on teams, it's crucial for the team itself to be timely in relaying information to its audience.⁷

Being timely helps fans stay involved. Social media, especially run by a sports organization, bridges the gap between all the separate accounts that post about

the sport's events or news.⁸ A lot happens within teams, leagues, or the lives of athletes, so social media is integral in connecting these various audiences and fostering fan engagement.⁹

For fans to stay involved with all the sports' information, relationships with fans need to be built beyond game day—especially during the off-season. If fans only remember the sport when games or meets are actively happening, then the brand identity isn't strong enough.

This crucial aspect of maintaining relationships with fans beyond game day was exemplified by three Swedish Hockey league teams during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In

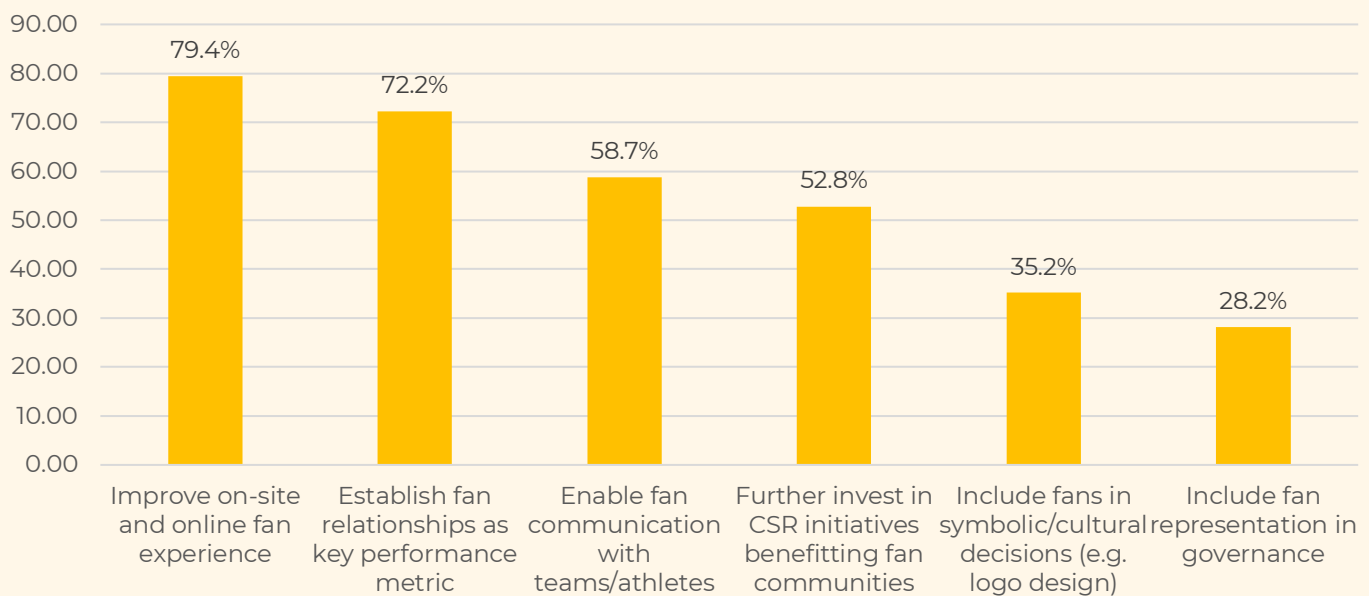
a time where all events, including sports events, were banned, teams keeping in contact with their fans was imperative, despite the uncertainty of the conditions.

Through social media, the hockey clubs were able to keep their fans up to date, reach new audiences, and increase engagement. The study notes that as the sports clubs were involved with their fans, they saw “positive fan attitude and club brand loyalty.”¹⁰

Additionally, sports industry leaders agree that engagement with fans requires initiatives. When it comes

to fostering relationships with fan communities, almost 80% of leaders viewed improving on-site and online fan experience as the most relevant (see Figure 2). That initiative, combined with establishing fan relationships as a key performance metric, helps social media strategists and industry leaders design posts, websites, and other online content in a way that puts the fans first. If online content isn’t easy for fans to digest, then they won’t be able to develop relationships with their favorite teams online.¹¹

Figure 2: Most relevant initiatives to facilitate relationships with fan communities



[Statista.com](https://www.statista.com)

Short-form Content Increases Fan Engagement and Reach

One of the easiest ways for fans to consume information is through short-form content. An increase in social media has led to a decrease in attention spans. That decrease in attention spans has made it challenging to obtain and maintain users' attention long enough for them to read or watch information, entertainment, or advertisements.¹² An article by Saket Vaidya from BW Marketing World highlights that that's why short-form videos have become "must-have instruments for marketers" to reach target audiences.¹³

The world's digital landscape is fast-paced and filled with information. Short-form videos open the door for social media strategists to connect with their audiences, produce more content, and build brand identity by focusing on more creative approaches to different trends. This is especially true since most social networks have incorporated short-form content into the rest of their content, like YouTube Shorts or Instagram Reels,

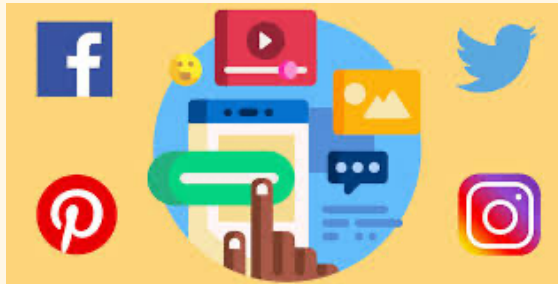
making content more platform-specific.¹⁴

Because of the vast amount of short-form content that exists on the internet, it's important for organizations to stay authentic as they produce this type of content and engage with audiences, especially as they post across multiple platforms. That authenticity and uniqueness can be achieved as organizations focus on storytelling and do it in a quick and effective way.

According to marketer Torrey Tayenaka, short-form videos have created an easy way for brands to "share compelling narratives that are quick and easy to digest."¹⁵ In sports, this can be leveraged to share behind-the-scenes content with fans like gameday prep, quick interviews with athletes, in-game highlights, and more. Tailoring different trends or content ideas to fit a specific team's brand helps fans distinguish their content from other teams or organizations.

Interactive Features Foster Community and Deepen Loyalty

While short-form content captures the attention of fans, interactive features hold their attention. A study on sports marketing and management emphasizes that sports marketing isn't just about posting—it's about creating



“memorable experiences, relevant content, and constant interaction—turning supporters into brand ambassadors.”¹⁶

Most platforms have integrated interactive features into their interface with tools like polls, Q&As, comments, and more, allowing organizations to build community

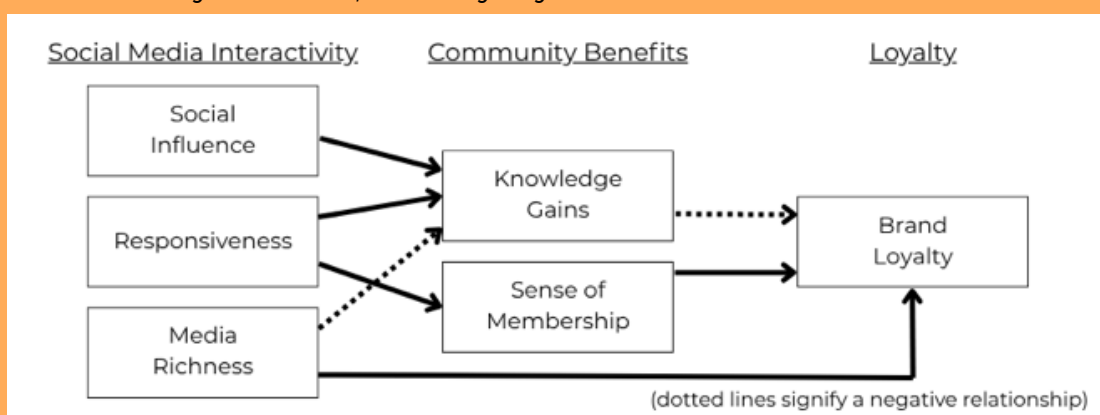
with their fans beyond publishing content. A sports marketing study states that for sports organizations, “The goal is to provide fans with more than just score updates, engaging them emotionally and strengthening the relationship with the brand.”¹⁷

In fact, fans view those brands that are highly interactive as agile on social media, which strengthens brand trust levels.¹⁸ Social media accounts that are quick on their feet stand out to fans, which increases the account's value. As previously mentioned, fans rely on social media to get information about their favorite teams.

Community and loyalty are fostered when the team's social staff is focused on interacting with fans.

To demonstrate this, a study was conducted to examine the

Figure 3: The Relationship Between Social Media Interactivity, Community Benefits, and Loyalty



[Travis K. Huang et al.](#)

correlation between social media interactivity and loyalty. The results, as seen in Figure 3, show overall positive relationships between most of the factors.¹⁹

These positive relationships help show the importance interactivity online has with brand loyalty. Many organizations use responsiveness and create a sense of membership

by responding to fans in the comments on their posts.

As sports teams interact with fans in the comment section, one article explains that they show fans that they are “valued members of [the team’s] community, not just faceless numbers on a follower count.”²⁰

In the end, social media strategists, managers, and sports executives who know how to build and maintain meaningful relationships with fanbases will build their brand’s identity online and in person. What we see online tends

to transfer to what we talk about in person.

Applying these strategies will help organizations foster fan loyalty and strengthen brand image on and off game day.

¹ Ronnie Gomez, "Social media in sports marketing: Takeaways from the Chicago White Sox's game-changing strategy," Sprout Social, August 11, 2020, <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-in-sports/>.

² Kevin Hull and Gashaw Abeza. "Introduction to Social Media in Sport." In Social Media in Sport. Volume 2. WORLD SCIENTIFIC, 2021. doi:10.1142/9789811237669_0001.

³ Makayla Hipke and Frauke Hachtmann. "Game Changer: A Case Study of Social-Media Strategy in Big Ten Athletic Departments", International Journal of Sport Communication 7, 4 (2014): 516-532, accessed Jun 4, 2025, doi:10.1123/IJSC.2014-0022.

⁴ Gomez, Social media in sports marketing.

⁵ Gomez, Social media in sports marketing.

⁶ Marketing Charts, "Sports Fans Display Strong Social Engagement," Marketing Charts, June 8, 2021, <https://www.marketingcharts.com/industries/sports-industries-117340>.

⁷ Kevin Hull and Gashaw Abeza. "Introduction to Social Media in Sport."

⁸ Edgar Romero-Jara et al., "The More we Post, the Better? A comparative Analysis of Fan Engagement on Social Media Profiles of Football Leagues," International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship 25, no. 3 (2024): 578-599, doi:10.1108/IJSMS-12-2023-0252.

⁹ Edgar Romero-Jara et al., The More we Post, the Better?

¹⁰ Ehsanul Huda Chowdhury et al., "Building Sports Brand and Fan Relationships through Social Media during Covid-19 Pandemic and Post Pandemic Era," International Journal of Marketing Studies 16, no. 2 (November 3, 2024): 39, doi:10.5539/ijms.v16n2p39.

¹¹ PwC. "Most relevant initiatives to facilitate relationships with fan communities according to sports industry leaders worldwide as of August 2021." Chart. September 22, 2021. Statista. Accessed May 24, 2025. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1310463/sports-industry-fan->

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engagement/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20global%20survey,facilitate%20relationships%20with%20fan%20communities.

¹² Carstens, Deborah S, PhD, PMP, Samuel K. Doss PhD, and Stephen C. Kies. "Social Media Impact on Attention Span." *Journal of Management & Engineering Integration* 11, no. 1 (2018).

¹³ Saket Vaidya, "The Rise of Short-Form Video Ads & Social Media Domination," *Business World*, October 03, 2024, <https://www.bwmarketingworld.com/article/the-rise-of-short-form-video-ads-social-media-domination-534956>.

¹⁴ Saket Vaidya, *The Rise of Short-Form Video*.

¹⁵ Torrey Tayenaka, "Build Anticipation for Your Events with Short-Form Video on TikTok and YouTube Shorts," *Special Events Magazine* (December 16, 2024), <https://www.specialevents.com/sales-marketing/build-anticipation-for-your-events-with-short-form-video-on-tiktok-and-youtube-shorts>.

¹⁶ Gheorghe Jinga, "Sports Marketing and Management: Strategies for Success in the Digital Age." *Revista De Management Comparat International* 25, no. 3 (07, 2024): 586-594. doi:10.24818/RMCI.2024.3.586.

¹⁷ Gheorghe Jinga, *Strategies for Success in the Digital Age*.

¹⁸ Siddik Bozkurt et al., "The Impact of Perceived Social Media Interactivity on Brand Trust. the Mediating Role of Perceived Social Media Agility and the Moderating Role of Brand Value," *Journal of Marketing Analytics* 12, no. 3 (September 2024): 523-536, doi:10.1057/s41270-023-00268-w.

¹⁹ Travis K. Huang et al., "How Does Social Media Interactivity Affect Brand Loyalty?," *scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu*, January 3, 2018, doi:10.24251/HICSS.2018.266.

²⁰ Josh Krakauer, "How to Nail Social Media Replies as a Brand," *Sculpt*, August 19, 2024, <https://wearesculpt.com/blog/social-media-replies/>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Ashlee Sevilla is a junior at Brigham Young University, studying public relations with a minor in business.

She is passionate about creating meaningful connections and solving problems through strategic communication. As a social media strategist for BYU Athletics, she has created content strategies that boost engagement and visibility for the swim and dive, track and field, softball and volleyball teams. Her

coursework at BYU has given her hands-on experience with the RPIE (research, planning, implementation, and evaluation) process and tools like Meltwater and Muck Rack, helping her analyze trends and craft data-driven communication strategies.

She is eager to continue growing in the PR and sports marketing industries by leveraging her skills to create compelling campaigns, foster connections, and help organizations achieve their goals.

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