

Niche Sport

Subjects: **Communication**

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Non-conventional sports that do not attract mass audiences

traditional sport

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1. Global Sport vs. Traditional Sport

Nowadays, we are a long way from seeing sport as exclusively something for leisure and recreation. Sport as simple physical activity clearly coexists with another kind of sport which, although it has the same origin and shares the same values and principles, has a very different dimension: media-led, global sport [1].

The process of globalisation has been analysed from different points of view for decades [2] and sport, because of its universal and cultural nature, is one of the dimensions most widely examined. As Giulianotti [3] says, the relationship between global sport and consumer culture is based on three historical stages: "First, a 'take-off' phase from the late 19th century to the mid-1940s; second, an 'integrative and expansionist' phase from the late 1940s to the late 1980s; third, a 'transnational hyper-commodification' phase from the early 1990s onwards".

This process of transnational commodification began to emerge in the 1990s, involving landmarks, risks and resistance. Maguire [4] warned of Western hegemony in the world practice of sporting activities, leading to the imposition of the American model in the worldwide organisation of sport. In fact, Grainger and Jackson [5] and Giardina and Metz [6] made case studies of Nike and the 2000 Olympic Committee, whose communication campaigns met strong resistance from local communities. They questioned the "think global, act local" strategy and attempts at homogenising multiculturalism. The study by Bernstein and Blain [7] are also noteworthy, focusing on an analysis of the conflicts and tensions between global and local factors in sports communication.

One of the main concerns about the hegemony of transnational sport is the establishment of a single global sports culture [3]. This threat was detected early on. In 1997, Renson noted the trend towards local sport becoming merely residual, and the same concern was expressed by Soler, Ispizua and Mendoza 20 years later. Along the same lines, Maguire [8] warns of the danger of extinction of local sporting traditions to the detriment of modern and elite sport.

UNESCO has worked hard over the last few decades on this intersection between global sport, traditional sport and culture, generating protection programmes and recognising that "they are part of the universal heritage diversity" [9]. It is worth bearing in mind that, as Bronikowska and other experts in TSG state, "sports, and many

'traditional' sports in particular, have fallen by the wayside of modern living. Therefore, we should remember that ignoring or even neglecting traditional sporting heritage is simply like 'killing' the physical culture of individual region, country or continent" [10].

As might be expected, the issue of globalisation and sport remains just below the surface in academic circles. O'Brien et al. [11] analyse the challenges and problems involved in the governance, ownership and cultures of international sport today. For the matter we are concerned with, it is essential to know the aims, tools and frameworks of the "global media and sporting complex" as Ginesta Portet [12] calls it, consisting of sports business owners, media groups, investment funds and technology multinationals.

2. The Battle for the World's Attention in the Era of Sport as Spectacle

In this third decade of the century, there are two battlefields between these great agents of global entertainment: the battle for the attention of the citizen/consumer [13] and the exploitation of mass data [14].

Behind the enormous volume of information hitting our screens today, an enormous number of broadcasters are battling to attract audience attention. We are in what is known as the "attention economy" [15]. This is not a new concept in the field of sociology, communication and psychology, but in the times we live in, the competition between media, technological and sporting complexes has come into sharper focus [12]. Sport has become one of the sectors with the greatest economic potential and, if one thing has facilitated its transformation into an omnipresent sociocultural force and an influential commercial institution, it is sports communication [16].

Today, sport as spectacle, as mentioned by Moragas [11][17] Ratten, plays a vital role in attracting the attention of audiences of millions. The brand promise [18] of its product—a source of emotions, passions and positive values—is so powerful that it has served as an inexhaustible source of content for worldwide media [19][20], connecting fans of all generations in all corners of the world [21]. Some authors have coined the term "sportainment" for this use of the sporting phenomenon to go beyond competition and aim to achieve high indices of visibility, notoriety and positioning, for both the brand and the sport itself.

Both landmark [22][23][24] and recent studies point out the importance, impact and vitality of world sport [25]. However, executives in the sector [26] acknowledge that everything that has happened in the past year, from the emergence of the pandemic to learning to live with it, involves a paradigm shift. The main European football leagues have emptied their stadiums but, as they have strengthened their digital content, they have increased their social media followers by 10%, according to "The European Football Club Report" [27].

We are also seeing "streaming wars" [28] on the new audiovisual distribution scene between the leading OTT platforms, such as Netflix, Rakuten TV, HBO and Amazon Prime Video. Live sport could be the next battleground between them. Innovation will be decisive in this struggle for global hegemony between sports business owners, broadcasters, sponsors' brands and investment funds.

3. Fan Communities in Niche Sports

Niche sports have been extensively studied in the American literature. In the past decade, authors including Greenhalgh and Greenwell [29][30][31] and Mastromartino [32][33][34] have presented papers examining fan communities formed around niche sports and sponsorship in that context. In this sense, the definition of niche sports [10]—understood as non-conventional sports that do not attract mass audiences—must be narrowed down.

In Europe, this question has been approached mostly from an anthropological or cultural point of view [10][11][35]. There are no substantiated precedents that explore it from the point of view of marketing or strategic communication. However, academic research in the field of fan communities in relation to new media [36], technology in sporting events [37], virtual communities [38], and digital marketing [39][40] has reflected in depth on the inexorable trend towards digital content generation for fan communities.

Thus, in a market in which niche sports cannot go head-to-head against major conventional sports, professionals who manage niche sports must find a way to differentiate their product or offer from the major sporting competitions [29]. The ambition of all these professionals and managers is to consolidate their fan community, expand it in the long term and even get the fans themselves to be the prescribers of the sport [41].

Following the publication of the article by Mastromartino et al. [32] in this journal, there has been an academic debate on whether sports fans' identification with a sport or a club arises from the influence of family, peers, schools and the media [42][43][44], or whether, as the authors demonstrate with niche sports, aside from these traditional factors, the strategy and actions of a sports organisation are decisive in creating the relationship between the sport or team and the fan.

These issues are crucial in approaching the study of the diagnosis and challenges of Valencian pilota in forming a sustainable fan community, as they outline the main ways in which fans identify with a sport. According to research, if we place the generic identification factors surrounding the fan in order by level of importance, we find first the influence of family and/or friends [34][42][45], then geographical region [46][47] and then media exposure [33][47].

In the case of niche sports, as pointed out by [32] Mastromartino et al. (2020) with the case of field hockey in the Sunbelt area, the most outstanding actions initiated by sports club owners involve the individual relationship with the fan, school programmes, the experience in the arena, team victories and promotions. Geographical location and the practice of the sport itself are important in fan-initiated actions. It is worth noting that another qualitative study by these authors, carried out on club managers on the same subject, revealed the importance of attracting children as members in order to draw in their families.

Social, but not necessarily digital, media are a source of innovation and stabilisation for communities. A sport that cannot have messages channelled via the mass media can only grow if it uses social innovation to replace the dominant institutions [48] through active recommendation by its agents: "Sport innovation requires a system

approach due to the need to get input from multiple stakeholders. Increasingly sport innovation requires feedback from different entities in order to gain acceptance in the marketplace," notes Ratten [49].

Finally, the study by [29] Greenhalgh et al. presented an important difference between mainstream sport and niche sports in shaping the fan community. Specifically, fans associated "affordability" and "similarity with players" with niche sports, and "star power" and "popularity" with mainstream sport. At the same time, the authors stress the great opportunity that niche sports managers have to generate access through digital content.

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