



Designing a Leading Digital Marketing Excellence Model in the Sports Industry with a Focus on Digital Transformation

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Publisher: [University of Kurdistan, Sanandaj, Iran](#)

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DOI: [10.22034/sms.2025.142938.1461](https://doi.org/10.22034/sms.2025.142938.1461)

Received: 10.01.2025

Revised: 26.08.2025

Accepted: 09.10.2025

Available online: 22.12.2025

Keywords:

Digital Excellence Model, Customer Engagement, Digital Transformation, Digital Marketing, Sports Industry

ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to identify and design a leading digital excellence model in the sports industry with a focus on digital transformation. This study was conducted qualitatively using the grounded theory strategy based on the Strauss and Corbin model. The statistical population included experts in the field of sports and digital marketing in the country, who were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through 15 face-to-face and in-depth semi-structured interviews and continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Data analysis was performed using MAXQDA software version 2022 and through a three-stage coding method (open, axial, selective). To validate the findings, recoding, comparison of categories, and four criteria for the validity of qualitative research were used. The research findings showed that 65 codes were obtained from the interviews conducted, and accordingly, the digital excellence model in the sports industry is based on five main categories including digital strategy, technology and infrastructure, customer interaction, digital branding, and digital transformation, and 10 sub-themes. In the digital strategy section, emphasis was placed on developing a marketing vision and targeting customers. Technology and infrastructure highlighted the importance of digital infrastructure and new technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain. Customer engagement improves user experience and builds loyalty. Digital branding refers to developing brand identity and digital reputation management, and finally, digital transformation focuses on innovation in business models and digital sustainable development. The results showed that this framework can provide managers and policymakers with a better understanding of sports fan needs and behaviour and improve digital marketing strategies, and can facilitate the path of digital transformation in the country's sports industry. The designed model helps managers and decision-makers in this industry to improve customer interactions and create unique experiences for their fans by using new technologies and digital strategies.

How to Cite This Article:

Rezaei, M., Ghavi Panjeh, N., Roumyani, M., & Azarnoush, B. (2025). Designing a Leading Digital Marketing Excellence Model in the Sports Industry with a Focus on Digital Transformation. *Journal of Sport Marketing Studies*, 6 (4): 1-12. [10.22034/sms.2025.142938.1461](https://doi.org/10.22034/sms.2025.142938.1461)

1. Introduction

In today's environment, digital marketing has emerged as a vital tool for establishing effective communication between brands and consumers (Pashaei et al., 2024). It encompasses a series of marketing activities that utilize digital technologies and online platforms such as websites, social media, search engines, email, and mobile applications to engage audiences and foster meaningful interactions between organizations, brands, or products and their customers (Ratten, 2023). By leveraging these digital tools, brands can deliver targeted, interactive, and measurable messages, build sustainable customer relationships, and ultimately enhance sales and customer loyalty (Arabiun, 2024). Models of digital marketing excellence, incorporating advanced technologies and strategic innovations, enable brands to strengthen their engagement with consumers and maximize brand value in the digital ecosystem (Munir et al., 2024). Within the sports industry, digital marketing plays a particularly critical role, increasing public awareness, promoting sports activities, and accelerating economic growth (Mohammadi et al., 2024). Research further demonstrates that digital technologies are essential in enhancing the quality of services provided by organizations (Rahmanpoor et al., 2023). Digital marketing utilizes these technologies, including mobile devices and online advertising channels, to promote services and improve customer relationships by informing and empowering them (Nikooabadi et al., 2024; Karimi & Ahmadi, 2024). One of its distinguishing features is its ability to reach target audiences in a cost-effective and measurable manner (Melović, 2020). The integration of digital marketing with the sports industry has significantly transformed academic research and sports business models. Sports are no longer limited to competition; they now operate within complex business ecosystems that require understanding fan engagement, sponsorship value, and consumer behavior (Chaffey & Smith, 2022). While digital marketing pursues goals similar to

traditional marketing, it relies on modern digital tools and technologies, functioning as a management process that emphasizes organizational-customer interactions (Arabiun, 2024; Belz & Peattie, 2010). The rapid advancement of digital marketing has attracted considerable attention due to its close link with digital transformation. Digital transformation helps organizations navigate complex and competitive environments, providing a pathway for achieving success (Alghizzawi et al., 2024; Chaffey & Smith, 2022; Byon & Phua, 2021). In this context, digital marketing acts as a visible manifestation of an organization's digital transformation, with insights derived from digital marketing enabling innovation and enhancing competitiveness (Alghizzawi et al., 2024). Digital transformation, defined as the adoption and integration of digital technologies within organizational processes, has increasingly influenced sports marketing strategies (Ajiva et al., 2024). Digital transformation reshapes marketing perspectives and strategies by emphasizing digital tools, the Internet, and artificial intelligence. Studies indicate that these transformations enable brands to communicate with customers more precisely and enhance the overall customer experience (Alghizzawi et al., 2024; Arabiun et al., 2024; Hendrawan et al., 2024).

Through data analytics and artificial intelligence, digital marketing allows brands to make informed decisions about customer interactions and optimize marketing strategies. Scholars such as Byon & Phua (2021) and Chaffey & Smith (2022) highlight the importance of using digital tools, including data analysis and content personalization, to respond accurately to customer needs and create added value. Additionally, content marketing and social media have become essential elements of digital marketing strategies in the era of digital transformation (Ercan, 2023). Another critical aspect of advanced digital marketing excellence models is the use of analytical tools to anticipate market trends and continuously refine marketing strategies (Theodorakopoulos & Theodoropoulou, 2024).

Digital analytics platforms, such as advanced customer relationship management systems, allow brands to improve customer experiences and gain detailed insights into consumer behaviors (Sadhu et al., 2024). Artificial intelligence and big data analytics play a key role in the effectiveness of these models. Research by Krishen et al. (2021) demonstrates that AI enables brands to leverage consumer data to predict purchasing behavior and implement more precise and effective marketing strategies. Finally, these models emphasize robust customer relationship management. Studies by Rahmanpour et al. (2023) and Zhang et al. (2018) indicate that implementing CRM strategies and personalizing customer experiences within digital marketing processes helps brands build long-term relationships and enhance customer loyalty. Research has consistently shown that digital marketing has a significant impact on the sports industry. For instance, Naeimi et al. (2024) found that digital marketing positively and meaningfully influences competitive capability, competitive intelligence, and entrepreneurial activity, providing managers with valuable tools to enhance the competitiveness of sports clubs (Montazeri & Karimi, 2024). Similarly, Roufengarnejad et al. (2021) emphasized that internet-based advertising incurs lower costs while effectively increasing sales. Miry (2022) highlighted the critical role of digital marketing in promoting sports products and achieving a competitive advantage. Rahmanpour et al. (2023) suggested that successful digital marketing in sports requires the development of localized models and the creation of infrastructure to produce innovative content. Sadrhashemi et al. (2023) stressed the importance of understanding customer needs and preferences and using digital marketing to strengthen customer loyalty. Likewise, Kavand et al. (2023) demonstrated that combining digital marketing strategies with high-quality customer relationships can significantly influence the behavioral intentions of sports retail consumers. Alghizzawi and Angawi (2024) indicated that engagement through new media is a primary factor in maintaining continuous interactions between fans and athletes. Sports

teams can leverage this engagement to enhance brand image and consumer awareness, ultimately driving preference for popular athletes and specific products. Ercan (2023) further emphasized that technology and software companies, by collecting valuable consumer data and collaborating with sports sponsors, can increase brand awareness and generate value. These interactions allow organizations to reach wider audiences, with consumers participating in joint digital marketing initiatives alongside sponsors and stakeholders. Digital marketing is increasingly recognized as a critical tool in the sports industry, driven by technological advancements and the necessity for more effective audience engagement. However, existing research primarily focuses on specific facets of digital marketing, such as online advertising, content marketing, or social media. Comprehensive studies or conceptual frameworks for implementing and enhancing digital marketing in sports especially emphasizing digital transformation remain scarce.

Many studies overlook the unique requirements of the sports industry, the integration of emerging technologies with industry-specific characteristics, and the challenges posed by digital transformation. This gap limits the industry's ability to fully exploit digital marketing's potential, resulting in lost growth opportunities. The present study aims to design a model of digital marketing excellence tailored to the sports industry, with a particular focus on digital transformation. Achieving this goal requires identifying and analyzing the various dimensions of digital marketing that impact the implementation and optimization of digital processes in sports. The proposed model should not only highlight effective digital tools and techniques but also explore how these tools can be integrated with sports strategies and the sector's unique needs. The main research question is: What constitutes a comprehensive and leading model for digital marketing in the sports industry with an emphasis on digital transformation?

2. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach using the grounded theory framework proposed by Strauss and Corbin, aiming to conduct an in-depth analysis of digital marketing and digital transformation in the sports industry. Participants included experts in sports and digital marketing with either academic or practical expertise in these

fields. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were collected through 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each lasting 20–25 minutes, conducted in person with prior arrangements. Table 1 provides detailed information about the research participants.

Table 1. Information about research participants

Row	Code	Gender	Education	Organizational post (side)	Expertise
1	M1	Female	PhD	University Faculty Member	Researcher in Digital Marketing
2	M2	Male	PhD	University Faculty Member	Researcher in the Sports Industry
3	M3	Male	PhD	Government Manager	Experienced in Digital Marketing
4	M4	Male	PhD	University Faculty Member	Researcher in Digital Marketing
5	M5	Male	PhD	University Faculty Member	Researcher in Digital Marketing
6	M6	Female	PhD	University Faculty Member	Experienced in Digital Marketing
7	M7	Male	PhD	University Faculty Member	Researcher in the Sports Industry
8	M8	Male	PhD	Company Manager	Marketing Company Manager
9	M9	Female	Master's	Company Manager	Marketing Company Manager
10	M10	Female	PhD	Company Manager	Experienced in Digital Marketing
11	M11	Male	PhD	University Faculty Member	Researcher in the Sports Industry
12	M12	Male	PhD	Government Manager	Researcher in the Sports Industry
13	M13	Male	PhD	University Faculty Member	Researcher in Digital Marketing
14	M14	Male	PhD	Government Manager	Experienced in Digital Marketing
15	M15	Female	PhD	University Faculty Member	Researcher in the Sports Industry

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. Coding was conducted systematically during and after each interview, with previous interviews revisited when necessary. The coding process followed Strauss and Corbin's three-stage approach, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. To ensure the reliability of the results, methods such as re-coding a previously coded interview after one month were employed to verify the accuracy and consistency of the coding.

Additionally, a comparative analysis of the data and emerging categories was performed to examine their coherence and alignment. The final research model was validated by comparing it with previous studies and assessed based on four criteria: relevance, effectiveness, transferability, and adaptability. These validation procedures established the model as a reliable and practical framework for digital marketing and digital transformation in the sports industry. Data

collection adhered to ethical principles, including obtaining informed consent from all participants. For data analysis, MAXQDA version 2022 was

used to code and analyze the data obtained from each interview.

3. Research Findings

According to Table 2, approximately 66.7% of participants were male, and 33.3% were female. The largest age group was 31–40 years (46.7%), followed by 41–50 years (40%), and 51 years and

above (13.3%). Most participants held a doctoral degree. Regarding work experience, 26.7% had less than five years, 40% had between five and ten years, and 33.3% had over ten years of experience.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of interviewees

(Number of Participants)	(%) (Percentage)	(Demographic Characteristics)
(Gender)		
10	66.7	(Male)
5	33.3	(Female)
(Age)		
7	46.70	(30 to 40 years)
6	40.00	(40 to 50 years)
2	13.30	(+50 years)
(Education)		
14	93/33	(PhD) ¹
1	6/66	(MS)
(Work Experience)		
4	26.7	(- 5 years)
6	40	(5 to 10 years)
5	33.3	(+ 10 years)

In Table 3, the main and subcategories for designing a leading digital marketing excellence model in the sports industry, with a focus on digital transformation, are presented. Both primary and secondary concepts have been outlined to guide the development of a model relevant to the research. Based on data obtained from semi-structured interviews, 65 codes were classified into 10 subthemes and 5 main themes. The main themes include Digital Strategy, Technology and Infrastructure, Customer Engagement, Digital Branding, and Digital Transformation. In the Digital Strategy category, concepts such as marketing vision development and customer

targeting are emphasized. Technology and Infrastructure highlights the role of digital infrastructures and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and blockchain. Customer Engagement focuses on enhancing user experience and fostering loyalty. In Digital Branding, the development of brand identity and management of digital reputation are emphasized. Finally, Digital Transformation refers to innovation in business models and sustainable digital development. This framework aids in a better understanding of sports fans' needs and supports the improvement of digital marketing strategies in the sports industry.

Table 3. Primary Categories and Core Category

main categories	Subcategories	Concepts
(Digital Strategy)	(Marketing Vision)	Developing a comprehensive digital marketing vision to attract and retain sports fans
		Aligning digital marketing objectives with the overall sports

(Technology and Infrastructure)		organization strategy
		Establishing key performance indicators to measure the impact of digital marketing campaigns
		Conducting competitor analysis in the sports industry to identify digital marketing opportunities
		Introducing innovative marketing approaches focused on fan needs
	(Customer Targeting)	Precisely identifying target audiences through behavioral data analysis
		Utilizing big data to determine the specific needs of sports fans
		Creating audience segments to deliver tailored marketing offers
		Defining marketing strategies for each audience segment
		Focusing on priority target groups
	(Digital Infrastructure)	Allocating marketing resources for maximum impact
		Investing in customer management systems to enhance fan experience
		Developing integrated digital platforms
		Facilitating communication with fans
		Leveraging modern technologies for hosting online sports events
		Establishing data processing infrastructures
		Applying advanced analytics to predict fan behavior
	(Emerging Technologies)	Optimizing websites and mobile applications for improved user experience
		Using artificial intelligence to simulate fan experiences
		Implementing blockchain to ensure transaction transparency and security
		Developing virtual reality experiences for fans
		Employing virtual and augmented reality to enhance fan engagement
		Analyzing big data to forecast fan trends
		Conducting fan surveys to predict preferences
(Customer Engagement)	(Improve user experience)	Using the Internet of Things to improve communication at sports events
		Optimizing fans' online experiences on websites
		Optimizing mobile app experiences for fans
		Providing real-time support and instant communication through digital channels
		Designing personalized services for fans based on their preferences
		Collecting feedback from fans to improve experiences according to engagement history
		Maintaining continuous interaction with fans via email
	(Loyalty Building)	Using fan-generated content to enhance communication and engagement
		Maintaining ongoing social media engagement with fans
		Offering rewards and special discounts to loyal fans
(Digital Branding)	(Brand Identity Development)	Designing digital loyalty programs to encourage repeat engagement
		Developing loyalty initiatives to sustain brand commitment
		Using customer feedback to predict loyalty behaviors
		Evaluating loyalty programs' effectiveness in retaining fans
		Creating unique experiences for loyal members
		Designing a strong digital identity for fans
		Establishing digital identity indicators for sports fans
		Aligning the sports brand with its digital identity across all communication platforms
		Creating emotional connections between fans and the sports brand
		Promoting and reinforcing brand values through digital

(Digital Transformation)	(Digital Reputation Management)	strategies
		Applying transparency and honesty in brand communications to build fan trust
		Monitoring fan-generated content on social media continuously
		Monitoring content posted by social media managers
		Managing and addressing negative feedback from fans
		Implementing rapid response strategies during brand crises in digital spaces
		Aligning the brand with national, religious, and social developments
		Using sentiment analysis to detect brand issues and threats
		Enhancing digital brand reputation through effective positive campaigns
	(Business Model Innovation)	Developing new digital business models to attract fans online
		Allowing fans to propose digital business models
		Using digital data to optimize marketing strategies
		Transforming traditional processes into digital models to improve efficiency
		Designing new digital products and services for fans
		Redefining brand value propositions with a focus on fans' digital needs
	(Sustainable Digital Development)	Promoting digital culture in sports organizations to achieve sustainability
		Investing in digital skills training and development for staff
		Investing in digital skills development for fans
		Using green technologies to reduce environmental impact in digital processes
		Promoting green technologies and encouraging fans' adoption
		Developing management policies to support sustainable digital development
		Implementing innovative approaches in data management to enhance digital sustainability



Figure1. Leading Digital Marketing Excellence Model in the Sports Industry with a Focus on Digital Transformation

4. Discussion and Conclusion

With the rapid advancement of emerging technologies and the evolving behavior of consumers, digital marketing has become a critical

component of success across industries, particularly in sports. Today, sports fans no longer rely solely on in-person events or traditional media

to connect with teams and sports brands; they increasingly seek meaningful digital interactions and unique online experiences. This shift has driven the sports industry to adopt advanced digital tools, including artificial intelligence (AI), big data, blockchain, and augmented reality. In this context, digital transformation in sports not only enhances methods of fan engagement but also introduces innovative business models for attracting, retaining, and fostering fan loyalty. The present study proposes a leading digital marketing excellence model with a focus on digital transformation in the sports sector. The model emphasizes the strategic integration of digital technologies and innovative practices to improve fan experiences and strengthen sports brand development.

The findings indicate that a clear digital strategy and a well-defined digital marketing vision are essential for attracting and retaining sports fans. [Sbrighi \(2024\)](#) highlights the integration of advanced technologies, particularly AI, into digital marketing and emphasizes how AI can enhance fan engagement. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the increasing role of AI in fostering deeper connections with sports audiences. Developing a holistic digital marketing vision must align with the broader strategic goals of the sports organization, ensuring that digital marketing objectives complement overall organizational aims. By leveraging competitor and market data, organizations can identify new opportunities. Strategies should focus on innovation, particularly in digital marketing, to effectively address fan needs. Establishing key performance indicators (KPIs) is also crucial to evaluate the success of digital marketing campaigns, allowing for continuous improvement and refinement of strategies, which ultimately enhances fan engagement ([Kristiana et al., 2024](#)). Precise customer targeting in digital marketing is facilitated through the analysis of behavioral data. [Lessmann et al. \(2021\)](#) propose a hybrid learning framework to support marketing decisions, designed to identify target customers and

maximize profitability. The study demonstrates how advanced machine learning algorithms can improve targeting accuracy and support effective marketing decisions in complex environments.

Additionally, big data analytics enables organizations to understand fans' specific needs and segment audiences more effectively. These segments allow sports organizations to tailor marketing strategies for each group and implement targeted promotional campaigns, increasing the effectiveness of fan acquisition and retention efforts. Prioritizing marketing resources based on the significance of each segment not only improves efficiency but also substantially contributes to achieving marketing objectives.

The findings indicate that in the technology and infrastructure domain, investment in customer management systems particularly those aimed at enhancing the sports fan experience is a primary priority, aligning with the results reported by [Van Trung et al. \(2024\)](#). Such systems enable sports organizations to improve customer experiences and establish stronger connections with fans. The development of integrated digital platforms is equally important, as these platforms facilitate communication and enable the hosting of online sports events, thereby fostering greater fan interaction. Moreover, implementing advanced data processing and analytics can help predict fan behavior and deliver personalized experiences, ultimately boosting engagement. Optimizing websites and mobile applications to provide an enhanced user experience is crucial in attracting and retaining fans. Emerging technologies in sports digital marketing provide significant opportunities to elevate fan experiences. Artificial intelligence (AI) can simulate fan interactions on digital platforms, anticipating needs and enhancing engagement. Blockchain technology ensures transparency and security in transactions, which strengthens fan trust. Additionally, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are increasingly used to enrich fan experiences at sports events, as highlighted by [Kim & Manoli \(2024\)](#). Big data analytics enables organizations to predict fan

preferences, allowing for more effective engagement and retention strategies. Furthermore, the Internet of Things (IoT) can enhance interaction during sports events, offering fans a more interactive and innovative experience.

In the customer interaction dimension, optimizing online fan experiences through websites and mobile applications is particularly important, consistent with findings by [Xanthakis et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Karimi et al. \(2020\)](#). Such optimizations include improving accessibility, designing appealing interfaces, and ensuring smooth platform performance. Providing real-time support and immediate communication through digital channels such as live chat or prompt responses on social media enhances user experience and fosters a stronger sense of belonging among fans. Designing personalized services based on individual fan preferences and maintaining continuous engagement through emails and social media can increase fan satisfaction and loyalty. Incorporating user-generated content strengthens the relationship between fans and the organization, promoting a sense of participation and value. Reward programs, discounts for loyal fans, and tailored digital loyalty programs provide incentives for repeated engagement. Predictive analytics can be employed to anticipate loyalty behaviors, enabling organizations to implement effective long-term retention strategies. Evaluating these programs' effectiveness in maintaining fans and creating unique experiences for loyal supporters is essential for sustaining engagement and attracting new fans.

In the digital branding dimension, establishing a strong brand identity is a key factor in fostering meaningful relationships with sports fans. This is consistent with the findings of [Escobar-Farfán et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Karimi & Beirami \(2019\)](#). Developing a compelling digital identity that aligns with fans' needs requires precise, targeted strategies to create emotional connections with the audience. Ensuring consistency between the sports brand and its digital identity across all communication channels means that messaging and interactions align with brand values.

Promoting these values through digital strategies contributes to strong, lasting brand equity. Transparency and honesty in brand communications are also critical for building trust and loyalty. Digital reputation management plays a significant role in shaping the brand's online image ([Dinh et al., 2024](#)). Continuous monitoring of fan-generated content on social media allows timely and appropriate responses to feedback. Effectively managing negative comments and providing rapid responses during crises helps maintain credibility. Sentiment analysis tools can identify potential threats, enabling swift interventions to prevent larger crises. Positive campaigns and initiatives further strengthen the digital reputation and expand the brand's online presence.

Finally, the findings suggest that digital transformation significantly drives innovation in sports business models. [Ágnes et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasize that a major aspect of this transformation is creating new digital business models that engage fans online. These models leverage digital data to optimize marketing strategies and analyze fan behavior, converting traditional processes into efficient digital workflows. Developing digital products and services that meet fans' needs is an essential part of this transformation, redefining the brand's value proposition and focusing on the digital expectations of fans. Alongside business model innovation, digital sustainability is a critical principle of transformation in sports organizations. [Kaur et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight that fostering a digital culture supports sustainability goals. Investment in training and digital skill development enables staff to effectively utilize emerging technologies ([Alabdali et al., 2024](#)). Implementing green technologies to minimize environmental impacts in digital processes is another crucial component. Establishing management policies to support digital sustainability, along with innovative data management practices, enhances the overall sustainability of digital initiatives and positively contributes to the ongoing digital transformation of the sports industry.

5. Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

6. Financing

The article has no financial sponsor or research funding, nor is it derived from a research project.

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7. Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to the staff of the Journal of Sports Marketing Studies and the esteemed referees who provided valuable feedback to improve the article.

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