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PARTNER MARKETING IN DIGITAL SPORTS MEDIA: SYNERGY OF INFLUENCE AND LOYALTY

ПАРТНЕРСЬКИЙ МАРКЕТИНГ У ЦИФРОВИХ СПОРТИВНИХ МЕДІА: СИНЕРГІЯ ВПЛИВУ Й ЛОЯЛЬНОСТІ

The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of affiliate marketing in digital sports media as one of the key tools for shaping public perceptions. The aim of the study is to identify and systematise partnership marketing strategies as a comprehensive system. The methodological basis consists of a combination of theoretical analysis, content analysis, case studies, and evaluation of digital ratings from localised (Gemius) and international (SimilarWeb) platforms to determine the reach, level of trust, and effectiveness of media activities. The example of sport.ua proves that the effectiveness of affiliate marketing is ensured by the integration of affiliate links, the implementation of joint branded campaigns, multi-channel promotion, and the transparency of commercial integrations. The results of the study are of practical importance for optimising the partnership strategies of digital sports media, developing effective business models and developing their functional role in state information policy and social mobilisation.

Keywords: partnership, marketing, media, sport, audience, digitalisation, rating, promotion.

У статті здійснено комплексний аналіз особливостей партнерського маркетингу в цифрових спортивних медіа як одного з ключових інструментів формування суспільних смислів, підтримки аудиторної лояльності та посилення соціальної відповідальності, що визначає їхню роль у процесах соціокультурних трансформацій. Об'єктом дослідження виступають цифрові спортивні медіаресурси українського інформаційного простору, які функціонують не лише як канали поширення спортивного контенту, а й як платформи взаємодії між аудиторією, брендами та суспільними інституціями. Мета дослідження полягає у виявленні та систематизації стратегій партнерського маркетингу як комплексної системи, що поєднує економічну результативність із соціальною відповідальністю, формує довіру та лояльність аудиторії, сприяє розвитку здорової спортивної культури й відкриває перспективи інноваційного зростання через впровадження краудфандингових ініціатив, гейміфікації та співпраці з мікроінфлюенсерами. Методологічну базу становлять поєднання теоретичного аналізу, контент-аналізу, кейс-стаді та оцінка цифрових рейтингів із локалізованих (Gemius) і міжнародних (SimilarWeb) платформ для визначення охоплення, рівня довіри та результативності медіадіяльності. На прикладі ресурсу sport.ua доведено, що ефективність партнерського маркетингу забезпечується інтеграцією афілійованих посилань, реалізацією спільних брендованих кампаній, мультиканальним просуванням і прозорістю комерційних інтеграцій. Такі підходи створюють синергію між монетизаційними моделями та зростанням довіри аудиторії, дозволяють знизувати фінансові й репутаційні ризики та водночас зміцнюють позиції медіа в конкурентному цифровому середовищі. Визначено, що стратегічне використання партнерських практик формує багатовимірну модель, у якій економічна ефективність поєднується з етичними стандартами журналістики, просвітницькою функцією та підтримкою локальних спортивних спільнот. Окрему увагу приділено інноваційним

механізмам – фандрейзингу, краудфандингу, елементам гейміфікації та співпраці з мікроінфлюенсерами, що посилюють залученість молодіжної аудиторії й формують інтегративні комунікаційні практики. Результати дослідження мають прикладне значення для оптимізації партнерських стратегій цифрових спортивних медіа, розробки ефективних бізнес-моделей та розвитку їхньої функціональної ролі у державній інформаційній політиці й соціальній мобілізації.

Ключові слова: партнерство, маркетинг, медіа, спорт, аудиторія, цифровізація, рейтинг, просування.

Statement of the problem. In the process of transforming the information society into a digital reality, modern media appear as a complex, multi-functional ecosystem that significantly goes beyond traditional information and communication models. After all, they not only provide content transmission, but also perform a number of socio-cultural functions, in particular, they contribute to the integration of communities, support collective identity and shape social self-identification in the digital environment. In this context, digital media, including sports media, are increasingly being presented as effective platforms for implementing partnership marketing strategies. Through the use of big data processing tools, a personalised approach to content and the widespread integration of platform technologies, digital sports media enable optimised interaction between brands and audiences. In particular, the ability to accurately monitor user behaviour patterns creates conditions for increasing the accountability of communications, enhancing the effectiveness of marketing messages and deepening trust between all participants in the communication process.

At the same time, the combination of influence, determined by the ability to shape meaning and direct public opinion, with audience loyalty, which reflects long-term commitment and active engagement, remains under-researched and insufficiently integrated into current affiliate marketing models. The existing gap between the technological potential of digital sports media and the level of its implementation in terms of the synergy of these two factors necessitates targeted scientific and practical developments.

The development of affiliate marketing in digital sports media faces a number of fundamental challenges that determine its current relevance and necessitate systematic research. In particular, growing competition for user attention in an oversaturated information space complicates the formation of effective strategies for interacting with the audience and highlights the need to ensure the reliability of analytical indicators used to evaluate the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. At the same time, the increasing commercialisation of digital content exacerbates the problem of maintaining trust in platforms as independent media, which directly affects the stability of partnerships. It is important to note that the economic component plays a key role in this case, as it determines the possibility of ensuring a balance of interests between all parties involved in the interaction – media, brands and consumers.

A comprehensive approach was used to carry out the planned research, integrating source analysis, digital analytics, content analysis and case studies. In particular, source analysis allowed us to systematise and critically reflect on scientific and practical

developments, outlining theoretical paradigms and identifying gaps that require further study. In turn, the use of digital ratings (in particular, SimilarWeb data) and internal statistics from sports media provided an empirical basis for identifying leading resources and more accurately determining their degree of influence. The methods used became the basis for further content analysis, which made it possible to identify the specifics of partnership marketing strategies, the peculiarities of brand interaction with the audience, and the mechanisms of building trust and loyalty. Supplementing the study with an analysis of partnership campaign case studies was useful not only for identifying effective practices, but also for identifying problem areas and challenges in the digital environment. Accordingly, the synergy of these methods formed a comprehensive methodological framework that allowed us to formulate practical recommendations for optimising affiliate marketing in digital sports media.

Analysis of recent research and publications.

To thoroughly understand the main areas of application of affiliate marketing in digital sports media, it is necessary to refer to fundamental studies covering not only marketing and branding concepts, but also issues of consumer behaviour and identity formation in the context of digital culture. The theoretical basis for this study was provided by the works of leading foreign scholars, in particular B. Hutchins and D. Row [15], D. Duffy [13], G. Jenkins [16], S. Zuboff [19], M. Castells [7], K. Keler [17], D. Chaffey and F. Ellis-Chadwick [8]. Many of these authors emphasise that affiliate marketing goes beyond the purely commercial function of sales promotion and is a key tool for building brand trust [13]. In particular, one of the first principles to be emphasised was that the effectiveness of affiliate models directly correlates with the level of audience loyalty to the media platform that distributes advertising or affiliate content [15]. In addition, the founders of the affiliate marketing concept note that digital sports media create a unique environment for implementing affiliate strategies, where the loyalty of fan communities is transformed into commercial capital, and marketing interaction acquires not only economic but also symbolic significance, particularly in terms of supporting national identity, sports patriotism, and the culture of collective participation [10].

Within the Ukrainian scientific discourse, the topic of affiliate marketing in digital media remains underdeveloped and does not cover the full range of modern processes. At the same time, the works of a number of leading domestic scientists, in particular V. Borisovich in collaboration with N. and T. Zabashta [3], E. Kiyanytsia [1], D. Raiko [2], D. Fayvishenko [4], V. Sharko [5], T. Yankovets [6] and others. Their research covers a wide range of theoretical and ap-

plied issues of partnership marketing in the digital environment, particularly in the context of social and sports media. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of tools, mechanisms and challenges that accompany the formation of a loyal audience, the building of trust between partnership entities, and the synergy of commercial and communication components [5]. This comprehensive approach provides a better understanding of the peculiarities of affiliate marketing in the context of the digital transformation of the media space.

Highlighting previously unresolved parts of the overall problem. Despite the existence of scientific research devoted to marketing strategies in the digital environment, the problem of affiliate marketing in new types of sports media still remains on the periphery of academic research. The issues of integrating partnership models into the content policy of sports resources, balancing commercial interests and social responsibility, and finding mechanisms that can simultaneously ensure economic performance and build long-term audience trust remain insufficiently studied. The aspect of reputational transparency and regulatory regulation of such practices, which determine the competitiveness and sustainability of digital sports media, requires separate attention. The prospects for using innovative tools – crowdfunding, gamification, cooperation with micro-influencers – in the context of their potential to shape national identity and support local sports communities also remain unresolved.

Objectives of the article. The aim of the article is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms of affiliate marketing in digital sports media as a multidimensional system that integrates economic performance, social responsibility and communication transparency, ensuring a balance between commercial interests and social values. Within this objective, it is envisaged to systematise scientific approaches to the interpretation of partnership marketing in the media environment and clarify its specifics in the sports segment; analyse key strategies for partnership interaction, in particular affiliate links, branded campaigns and multi-channel models, taking into account their role in combining monetisation practices with building audience trust and loyalty; studying the potential of innovative tools such as crowdfunding, gamification or collaboration with micro-influencers, which can increase user engagement and create new communication formats; as well as clarifying the role of affiliate marketing in strengthening the reputational capital of digital sports media, developing transparent and responsible commercial practices, increasing media literacy and unlocking their potential in shaping a healthy sports culture and constructing national identity.

Summary of the main results of the study. In the context of widespread digitalisation, the media remains one of the key mechanisms for influencing collective consciousness, acting as a tool for shaping national identity and stimulating state-building processes. Digital sports media occupy a special place in modern information policy. Through broadcasting

competitions, promoting a healthy lifestyle, and creating emotionally rich content, they have become a factor in social mobilisation and civic consolidation. Their effectiveness is manifested in their ability to construct strategic communicative meanings that appeal to shared values, historical symbols, and cultural codes. In this way, axiological guidelines are established – mutual assistance, discipline, perseverance, teamwork – which acquire a metaphorical dimension of social cohesion. Through the collective emotional experience of sports results in the media space, an effect of joint participation is formed, which becomes the basis of national solidarity. As M. Castells notes, it is precisely events with a high emotional charge in the context of digital communication that are capable of generating ‘networks of hope,’ forming a collective identity through the interaction of users around symbolic acts [7].

During times of war and social crisis, digital sports media are increasingly being integrated into the state's communication strategy as a means of influencing public sentiment and patriotic mobilisation. By highlighting athletes who embody civic loyalty and their participation in volunteer, charitable or defence initiatives, a symbolic image of national resilience is formed. Targeted editorial and partnership campaigns (thematic series of materials, match-day initiatives, charity events), the integration of patriotic meanings into reporting and narrative genres, as well as practices of co-creating content with fan communities (hashtag campaigns, fan videos, crowdfunding, local mobilisation). In many cases, these formats are combined with brand integrations, creating synergy that can be seen as a form of partnership marketing: it not only fulfils a social responsibility function, but also ensures the organic dissemination of key messages and increased trust among target audiences. At the same time, fan leaders and micro-influencers localise and adapt official messages to their own symbolic practices, while peer-to-peer dissemination reinforces their authenticity and increases the effectiveness of communication in the context of mass digital interaction.

Thus, digital sports media not only inform, but also build a patriotic discourse, integrating sporting victories and images into narratives of national resistance and dignity. Their role is to strengthen moral support, consolidate society and encourage citizens to participate in the common cause of building the state. Acting as active agents of social transformation, they create and disseminate purposeful semantic constructs that respond to deep collective expectations and the need for unity. As B. Zelizer emphasises, in times of profound social change, journalism is capable of rethinking the temporality of events, forming narratives that consolidate collective memory and outline a vision of the future [20].

Given that digital sports media today are not only a means of informational counteraction and protection of the communicative space, but also a channel for broadcasting socially significant meanings capable of strengthening psychological resilience, reinforcing motivational attitudes and affirming a sense of

purposeful unity, there is a need to implement strategies that combine value-based communication with tools for long-term economic development. In this context, partnership marketing emerges as an effective mechanism that simultaneously supports state information policy, promotes national narratives, and creates added value for brands. In particular, branding integrations organically woven into sports content strengthen the trust and loyalty of target audiences, while ensuring the sustainable development of the industry itself, which, in the context of digital transformation, is a key factor in national progress. The interaction of media, business and state strategy in this configuration forms the basis for synergistic enhancement of both the social and economic potential of the country in a global competitive environment.

As affiliate marketing in digital sports media increasingly takes on the characteristics of a soft power tool within the implementation of state information policy, it becomes important to analyse ratings, reach indicators and the level of trust in the relevant platforms. This approach makes it possible to identify priority media resources for strategic communication focused on both broad coverage and ethical responsibility, which is critically important in the process of forming a cohesive and sustainable society.

In the context of the dynamic development of the digital environment, there are a number of analytical services available that offer tools for measuring the popularity of online sports resources. At the same time, the effectiveness of their application largely depends on the thematic focus and territorial specificity of the research. In particular, the *Comscore*, *SimilarTech*, *StatCounter*, *Social Blade* and *App Annie* (data.ai) platforms record a wide range of metrics, from technical traffic parameters to indicators of interaction with mobile applications and activity on social networks. However, these services often demonstrate limitations in analytical depth due to their focus on the global market, disregard for the national context, and concentration on narrowly functional indicators, which does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of media processes in Ukraine, especially in the field of sports digital media. Under such conditions, localised sources become particularly valuable, primarily the *Gemius* research system, which provides an accurate and representative assessment of Ukrainian audience behaviour, taking into account cultural and regional characteristics. It is also worth involving data from *SimilarWeb*, an international platform with advanced web resource

analysis functionality that covers traffic, traffic sources, geographical distribution of users, engagement levels, and provides competitive comparison tools. Within the outlined media, this makes it possible to identify leading resources, study the dynamics of content consumption, and evaluate the effectiveness of digital communications. The combination of analytical data from *Gemius* and *SimilarWeb* demonstrates the feasibility of an integrative approach that ensures a comprehensive and balanced assessment of the popularity, behavioural trends and consumption patterns of online sports media in the Ukrainian information space (Table 1).

An analysis of the metrics presented shows that the digital resource sport.ua, despite its relatively moderate monthly traffic (2.6 million users) and comparatively low level of external links, demonstrates consistently high audience reach according to two independent sources – *SimilarWeb* (10.66%) and *Gemius* (9.3%). This indicates an established and loyal readership that ensures consistent traffic and keeps the media at the top of the national sports resource segment. This stability, combined with a high level of brand recognition, increases the relevance of *sport.ua* as a platform for implementing partnership marketing strategies, in particular long-term collaborations aimed at strengthening social responsibility and developing communication practices that contribute to audience consolidation.

In turn, research into the content of sport.ua shows that references to live streaming platforms serve as a structured tool for embedded affiliate marketing. In this context, the media acts as a communicative intermediary between the audience and the service provider. Monetisation is carried out through a system of referral links and commercial agreements, which may include both a fixed fee for placement and variable payment depending on the number of clicks and conversions. This approach simultaneously promotes affiliate payments and increases audience retention by providing access to premium video content. The effectiveness of this mechanism is assessed based on click-through rate (CTR), conversion rate, average revenue per referral, time on page, and return rate. At the same time, there are risks, including a decline in trust due to insufficiently transparent labelling of advertising materials, a possible weakening of editorial independence, and difficulties with revenue attribution in multi-channel traffic models. To optimise integration, it is recommended to implement clear labelling, use UTM tags and tracking tools, A/B test

Table 1

Digital sports media rankings for July 2025

Place	Media	Visitors (million)	Citations ($\approx$ external links)	SimilarWeb reach (%)	Gemius reach (%)
1	sport.ua	2.6	$\approx$ 1.2 million (approximate)	10.66	9.3
2	football.ua	2.0	$\approx$ 15.6 million	8.48	2.9
3	tribuna.com	1.8	$\approx$ 0.069 million (401.8 thousand)	4.74	1.5 (approximate)
4	terrikon.com	0.872	$\approx$ 0.402 million (401.8 thousand)	3.65	3.2
5	livetv.sx	5.9	$\approx$ 92 million	3.63	2.0 (approximate)

Source: compiled by the authors based on sources [14, 18]

formats, and agree on key performance indicators (CPA, CPL, CPM) with partners [9].

Thus, the editorial policy of sport.ua reveals the practice of channel cross-promotion through the integration of calls to switch to an associated Telegram channel in publications (for example, with the message 'all moments live'). This acts as a marketing funnel that transfers the user from the website to the instant messaging platform, providing direct communication, increasing the frequency of contacts, and forming sustainable content consumption habits. The mechanism is based on organic or sponsored promotion of the Telegram channel as a unique platform for operational information, which enhances audience engagement and creates the conditions for its monetisation through paid subscriptions or promo codes. Effectiveness is determined by the rate of subscriber growth (new subscribers/day), the share of referral traffic from Telegram (% referrals), engagement (open rate, engagement) and retention rate. At the same time, there are limitations, including dependence on platform algorithms, the risk of audience fragmentation, and differences in traffic quality, which can reduce conversion rates. To improve performance, unique identifiers (promo codes, UTM), exclusive content in Telegram, and coordination of the editorial plan between channels are used [12].

Another important aspect is the use of licensed photos from Getty Images and Global Images Ukraine, as this is another element of cooperation with content partners in media practices. Although this is not a traditional affiliate marketing model, such interaction forms the basis of the partnership economy, ensuring high-quality visual content and copyright compliance through appropriate attribution and licence fees. The use of licensed images increases the audience's perceptual trust, minimises legal risks and creates a professional image, which has indirect commercial value for branding and cooperation with advertisers. To assess the impact, indicators such as content distribution (shares), average viewing time (dwell time), and quality perception studies using UX analytics and surveys are used. Limitations include increased operating costs, risks of incorrect attribution, and potential standardisation of style, which may weaken brand uniqueness. It is recommended to enter into long-term co-marketing agreements, transparently display licensing information in metadata, and balance between licensed and proprietary photo content [11].

Thus, the identified practices of embedded affiliate marketing combine referral models, cross-platform promotion, and content partnerships as part of a comprehensive monetisation strategy, but at the same time have significant drawbacks, including increased operating costs associated with the integration of licensed content and the complexity of coordinating the technical and legal aspects of cooperation. In addition, there is a risk of visual design unification, which can lead to a loss of uniqueness in the media's brand identity and a reduction in its differentiation in a competitive market. Another important aspect is the potential mismatch between the quality and tar-

get audience engagement across different channels, which creates challenges for the effective allocation of resources and accurate measurement of the effectiveness of marketing initiatives.

Therefore, it is worth considering affiliate marketing strategies not only as a source of stable income, but also as a mechanism for strengthening social responsibility, building trust and supporting a healthy sports culture. To do this, we recommend:

- Paying more attention to integrating affiliate links into content related to sports goods, tickets or live streaming platforms. This approach significantly reduces the financial and reputational risks associated with traditional advertising, as payment is made on a conversion basis, creating a transparent and measurable economy of cooperation. For example, using referral links to ticket services, where the media receives a percentage of each purchase, simultaneously increases audience engagement through relevant and valuable content;

- Implement joint thematic campaigns with leading sports brands covering clothing, nutrition and accessories segments. As part of such partnerships, content platforms are filled with branded materials: interviews with company representatives, exclusive videos and other unique formats that enhance interaction with the target audience. Such integration promotes the association of media with leading players in the sports market, which increases user trust and expands reach through active content distribution. For example, a joint campaign with a sports nutrition brand, which includes a series of exclusive video interviews with athletes and product recommendations, increases the commercial potential of the media and at the same time strengthens the loyalty of the audience, which receives relevant and valuable content [5, pp. 12–18];

- Collaborate with other platforms, including mobile applications and social networks. This multi-channel approach creates synergy between different communication platforms, forming a single ecosystem where users interact with content in different formats and contexts. At the same time, integrated advertising and subscription models allow for revenue optimisation through more accurate targeting and personalisation. For example, media collaboration with a popular mobile application while simultaneously promoting content through Instagram increases reach and provides in-depth analytics on user behaviour across different platforms. This makes it possible to identify correlations between channels, quickly adapt advertising campaigns and increase conversion rates, forming a sustainable and mutually beneficial model for the development of digital media [4, pp. 48–58];

- Ensure transparency regarding commercial integrations. Openly informing users about the advertising nature of content increases media literacy and prevents manipulative practices, which strengthens the media's reputation capital. This approach complies with ethical standards of journalism and creates the conditions for establishing long-term relationships based on mutual respect and transparency [1, pp. 98–105]. For example,

the introduction of clear markers of advertising content in the form of appropriate labels or warnings in publications and video materials promotes conscious consumption of information and builds trust in the platform. In the long term, this increases audience loyalty and strengthens the media's position in the face of fierce competition in the digital information space;

- Create conditions for the development of local sports communities and support inclusiveness in the media space. This approach not only enriches the regional information environment, but also stimulates social cohesion and the activation of youth initiatives, which is key to the sustainable development of sport as a socio-cultural phenomenon. At the same time, the development of educational partnership campaigns covering topics such as proper nutrition, sports injury prevention and ethical behaviour plays an important educational role. For example, the implementation of a joint project with medical experts and coaches in the form of interactive webinars and informational materials raises awareness among young athletes and coaches, reducing the risk of injury and promoting healthy sports practices [2].

Despite the fact that the proposed recommendations for implementing affiliate marketing in digital sports media, in particular the integration of affiliate links, the implementation of joint branded campaigns, multi-channel partnerships, ensuring transparency of commercial integrations, and supporting local sports communities, are important measures for the sustainable development of media platforms and partnerships, they no longer cover the full range of challenges of the modern digital environment. Today's realities require the addition of innovative mechanisms to classic models, among which the following should be highlighted: the introduction of fundraising and crowdfunding initiatives that open up new horizons for financial support and increase audience engagement; the use of gamification elements in partnership programmes that stimulate activity and increase user loyalty; and cooperation with nano- and micro-influencers, organised through automated platforms, in particular with the help of AI chatbots, which ensure personalisation and optimisation of communication processes [5, pp. 12–18]. Thus, the effectiveness of affiliate marketing in sports digital media should be viewed as a complex, multidimensional system that integrates economic efficiency with social responsibility, contributing not only to increased revenue but also to the formation of trust, improving media literacy and supporting healthy sports practices, which are fundamental factors for sustainable development in the digital age.

Conclusions. Based on the analysis, it can be stated that digital sports media are an important resource for social mobilisation, contributing to the formation of collective identity and community integration through personalised communication in the digital space. It provides an effective platform for brands to interact with their audience, which not only increases trust and engagement but also strengthens social cohesion in an environment of information overload. Therefore, based on relevant rating data, in particular

SimilarWeb and Gemius, it was found that the leading sports channels (top 5) have an average of about 2.5 million unique visitors with a coverage of approximately 6.5%. At the same time, the leader in this category – sport.ua – demonstrates significantly higher indicators, reaching about 10% audience coverage. This resource was selected for a deeper analysis of affiliate marketing tools as an example of their application in the digital sports media space. However, the results of the study indicate that sport.ua does not pay enough attention to the development of affiliate marketing as part of a comprehensive strategy that enables the realisation of 'soft power' – the potential to influence the formation of information policy and sociocultural processes of shaping public opinion. Therefore, we proposed a number of mechanisms, including: the introduction of partner referral links, the organisation of cooperative advertising projects involving well-known brands, cross-channel interaction through various communication platforms, ensuring the transparency of commercial transactions, and supporting the development of regional sports communities. These tools will serve as a basis for strengthening social cohesion, forming sustainable models of interaction between the media, brands and audiences, and will also contribute to the consolidation of sports culture at the local level. At the same time, their implementation must be accompanied by compliance with ethical norms and professional standards, which will ensure long-term trust and support from users, as well as increase the effectiveness of partnership marketing strategies in the digital environment.

Therefore, our further research will focus both on a detailed study of media resources and their contribution to state-building processes, and on the integration of traditional partnership marketing approaches with innovative methods that expand funding opportunities, activate interaction with the audience, and promote the individualisation and improvement of communication strategies. At the same time, these new tools can stimulate the development of national patriotic identity, which is an integral part of the formation of state unity and social consolidation.

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