

# Exploring Instagram Communication: Usage of Instagram as a Marketing Tool in Professional Basketball Clubs

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study focuses on the marketing communication of basketball clubs on the Instagram social network. The aim of this study is to evaluate the Instagram marketing communication strategies and activities used by professional basketball clubs on the Instagram social network and to provide actionable insights for enhancing fan engagement and reach. This study, which uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to reveal specific deficiencies in selected professional basketball clubs in the Czech Republic, may also prove inspirational to sports organisations. In the first phase, a quantitative method is used in the form of an analysis of the Instagram accounts of four selected basketball clubs. This is followed by a qualitative method that is conducted using a focus group of basketball fans. The list of shortcomings in marketing communication is supplemented by specific recommendations for improving the communication of sports organisations on this social network. Any recommendations made could then not only help these basketball clubs but also other sports organisations. The analyses conducted show that basketball clubs operating in the same NBL competition are not on the same level within the Instagram social network. As may be observed, there is a need to reflect trends and recommendations, especially when designing and planning the publication of posts. Working with Instagram Stories as an integral part of the sports club's information channel for fans also seems to be key.

**Keywords:** marketing communication, social network analysis, sports clubs, Instagram posts, Instagram Stories

## INTRODUCTION

Professional sport has never been such a global phenomenon as it is today. In a world almost entirely connected by digital infrastructure, national borders and the distances between clubs and their audiences are becoming less important. Football fans may watch all the games of their favourite teams on TV or the internet, regardless of whether the games take place thousands of kilometres away, even on other continents. Clubs also share additional information with them on their websites or social media profiles (Aichner, 2019; Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Šíma, 2019; Kunz, 2020; Annamalai et al., 2021).

Professional sports teams have pioneered the widespread adoption of social media platforms in an effort to cultivate and maintain two-way interactive communication with their fans. Most professional sports teams now maintain an online presence on multiple social media platforms and are increasingly expanding into new ones (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Pereira et al., 2022).

Fans of sports clubs not only express their affiliation with the club by attending the stadium, but in recent years also by supporting the team on social media (Jilka, 2019). Sports clubs therefore use Instagram, Facebook or Twitter as a vital communication tool, which allows them to reach many times more fans than those who live in the city or even country where they are based (Šíma, 2019).

The number of club fans on social media also provides important information for both existing and potential sponsors of these clubs. Income from sponsorship is the dominant source of income for professional sports organisations, especially in Europe (Douvis et al., 2015; Oral, 2018; Šíma, 2019) and holds an irreplaceable position in the whole system of sport funding in general (Jedel, 2019; Šíma & Ruda, 2021).

According to recent studies (Gillooly et al., 2017; Junghagen, 2018; Alhadad, 2019; Fechner et al., 2023), sponsors today are not as interested in the number of spectators who physically come to the stadium (tens of thousands of fans at most), but rather the number of viewers on TV and on the Internet, which is many times more. They want to present their logos on the uniforms of the athletes or in the sports venue. The value of contracts between sports clubs and sponsors are thus directly dependent on the popularity of the club (Oral, 2018).

Social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and TikTok are the best indicators of the popularity of professional sports clubs today (Nisar et al., 2018). The number of viewers watching sports matches on TV and online is directly dependent on the number of followers on the official social media accounts of the participants (Gemar, 2021; Nisar et al., 2018).

Recent studies have explored how Instagram may be used to engage fans for sporting, economic and social goals (Cano Tenorio, 2017; Machado et al., 2020; H.-M. Kim & Kim, 2023). Some other studies have analysed the factors that lead fans of sports clubs to support their club on Instagram as well (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2017; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). However, they did not identify how they rate the content on this social network themselves, whether they are satisfied with this content or whether they would prefer something else. Satisfaction is a key factor in the decision to stay on the club's Instagram account and continue to actively follow it (Chow & Shi, 2015; Lv et al., 2018).

A number of researchers have in the recent past called for further empirical research across different social media platforms, both with the intention of analysing content on social media (Frederick et al., 2014; Pedersen, 2014; Westberg et al., 2018; Eddy et al., 2021; Toffoletti et al., 2021) as well as to understand consumer behaviour on social media (Cao et al., 2021; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014; Scelles et al., 2017).

It is useful to look for ways to identify the specific shortcomings and mistakes that sports clubs make in communicating with their fans. The increased popularity of Instagram among sports teams, athletes and fans, combined with its potential marketing implications, merits further exploration of this tool in the context of sports marketing.

### ***Theoretical background***

Sport represents one of the most important economic sectors, as the share of sport-related gross domestic product (GDP) in the European Union (EU) countries ranges from 1.76% to 3% of total GDP, and the total employment in the EU generated by sport activities is 7.3 million, equivalent to 3.5% of total employment in the EU (Popovic et al., 2021). Taxes from this industry finance state and local budgets, which to some extent enables the state to address various economic as well as social problems. As a result, modern sport is an activity of public interest for every country (Savić et al., 2018).

Professional sport in particular is capable of generating high levels of income (Gratton et al., 2000). This is especially typical for attractive sports such as football, ice hockey, tennis, basketball and, in the USA, American football and baseball (Stempel, 2020). The largest share of income of professional sports clubs is from sponsors (Andreff & Staudohar, 2000; Hammerschmidt et al., 2021; Horkey, 2021). These revenues are taxed and part of these funds are therefore also indirectly paid by the public budgets of cities, regions and the entire country (Williams & Seifried, 2013; Mayer & Cocco, 2021; Dionísio et al., 2022).

However, it is essential income, especially for the sports clubs themselves, which could not function as they do without sponsorship income (Jensen & Turner, 2017; Oral, 2018). This is typical for professional sports clubs in European countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (Šíma, 2019). Competitions and leagues in these countries are not as attractive as in Western Europe, and they are often small markets (Klobučník et al., 2019). Participants in these competitions cannot rely on income from the sale of television rights and merchandising, and thus rely largely on income from sponsors (Schubert & Hamil, 2018; Perechuda, 2020). Therefore, they have to make the running of their organisations dependent on being able to sustain sponsors (Van Rijn et al., 2019) and ideally attract new ones (Junghagen, 2018).

The goal of sponsors is to make their products, logos and brand visible through partnerships with clubs (Douvis et al., 2015; Oral, 2018). Logically, they are interested in how much fan support each club has (Junghagen, 2018; Alhadad, 2019). They track the number of spectators attending their matches, the number of viewers of TV broadcasts of those matches, and also the number of followers on social media (Y. Kim et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2017; Silva, 2020).

The number of social media followers may be positively influenced by the clubs themselves, with the help of appropriately chosen marketing communication tools (Kowalski, 2012; Schallhorn et

al., 2022). Each social network has its own specifics and therefore requires different communication (Geurin, 2023). According to Sánchez Torres et al. (2018), Instagram fans want to see images of sports celebrities who are the stars of their teams. They want to see their behind the scenes photos and lots of attractive pictures from the sporting event itself. On Facebook, on the other hand, followers want to get more detailed information from the match, they want to read match ratings, and constructive or often even harsh criticism of the performance of individual players (Scalera & Naraine, 2023).

Instagram is a social network created in 2010 for posting photos and videos with the added feature of 'liking' content and allowing interaction between users (Casaló et al., 2021). Instagram has made new features available over the years, such as 'Stories', IGTV and Reels, which aim to enhance the user experience and keep them connected. This has contributed to Instagram having even higher engagement rates than Facebook and Twitter, gaining more interactions per post (Casaló et al., 2017; Liang & Wolfe, 2022) and becoming the most influential social network (Casaló et al., 2021). It is currently the most popular social network among younger generations (Navandar et al., 2021).

Instagram plays a vital role in building the right attitudes in the minds of fans, which is essential for building a strong sports club brand (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Machado et al., 2020). To achieve this a sports club must create and share content that is unique, authentic and visually appealing (Romney & Johnson, 2020), engage the target audience and meet their expectations (Scalera & Naraine, 2023). If these expectations are met, fans are satisfied and their loyalty grows (Alkhurshan & Rjoub, 2020).

It's relatively easy to tell which club is popular compared to others through Instagram, thanks to the number of subscribers, called 'followers'. Similarly, whether subscribers are interested in specific content on a club profile may be determined through the number of interactions – comments, likes and shares (Arifianto et al., 2018). However, what followers are missing or what the shortcomings of an Instagram profile are may not be easily determined from these indicators. It is possible to develop a discussion on this topic in the comments directly on the club's profile, but the reliability of this type of inquiry is low (Burnell et al., 2021).

The aim of this study is to evaluate the Instagram marketing communication strategies and activities used by professional basketball clubs on the Instagram social network and to provide actionable insights for enhancing fan engagement and reach. There is still a relatively small amount of research evaluating the use of Instagram in the world of professional sport (Romney & Johnson, 2020). This study, which uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to reveal specific deficiencies in selected professional basketball clubs in the Czech Republic, may also prove inspirational to sports organisations. The list of shortcomings is supplemented by specific recommendations for improving the communication of sports organisations on this social network. The results may also serve as a good inspiration for other professional clubs from other countries and sports sectors, which are fighting for the favour of their fans and thus also for the favour of their sponsors. Good marketing on Instagram helps sports clubs to maintain or increase their income from sponsorship, ticket sales and merchandising and thus helps them to maintain or increase their competitiveness in competition – both sporting and economic.

## METHODS

This study focuses on improving the communication and content published on Instagram by selected basketball clubs. It uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to achieve this goal.

For the first phase of the research, which concerns the analysis of Instagram accounts, a quantitative method is used. Six aspects of accounts (account, gender, followers, highest follower activity over time, most active age groups, most active cities/countries) of four selected basketball clubs in the top Czech league are analysed. The data is obtained through Instagram Insights of each basketball club.

The next stage of the research is the analysis of posts, which is also quantitative. Thirteen different aspects (see Table 1) of clubs' Instagram posts are examined over two months, October and April, in the context of different phases of the sporting season. Data is systematically recorded, coded and analysed on an ongoing basis.

**Table 1. Aspects examined for posts**

Aspects examined for posts		
Day	Venue	Accounts reached
Time	Mentions in the description	Interactions
Post type	Mention in the photo	Profile activity
Posts	Hashtags	
Topic	Videos	

Source: own data

The last phase of the Instagram social network analysis focuses on Stories, where again several different aspects are analysed (Table 2). The data is recorded in tables and then analysed. Stories are analysed continuously due to the fact that some data disappears 24 hours after publication.

**Table 2. Aspects examined in Stories**

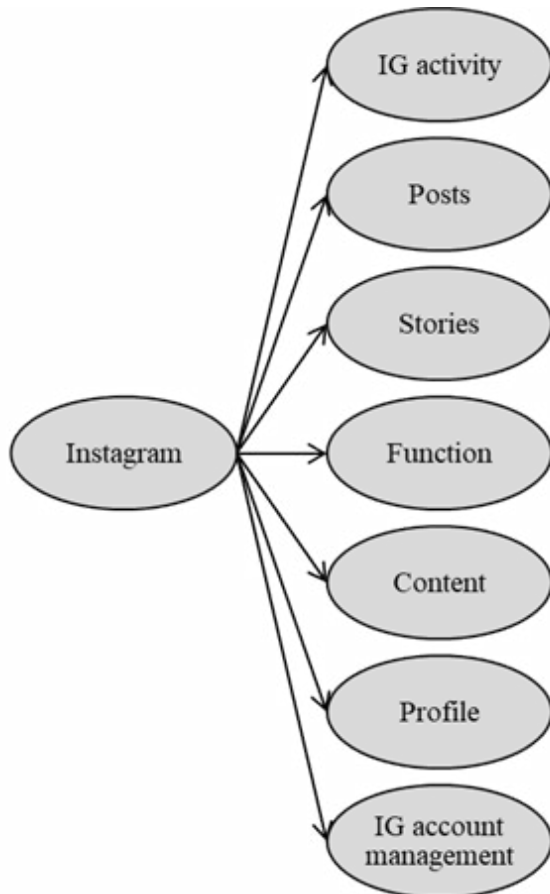
Aspects examined in Stories	
Day	Venue
Time	Mentions in the description
Post type	Mention in the photo
Posts	Hashtags
Topic	Videos

Source: own data

A qualitative method – focus group – was used to complement the quantitative analysis. In the initial phase, the procedure was based on findings from the analysis conducted using Instagram Insights. The most populous age categories of fans were selected according to the data from Instagram Insights of the respective clubs (categories 18-24 and 25-34 years), ensuring proportional representation of genders (male-female) as well as proportional representation of fans from all

selected and examined basketball entities. The method of purposeful and snowball sampling was used. Respondents were selected based on the aforementioned criteria in reflection of Instagram Insights and were also active members of basketball fan clubs. All respondents were contacted through standardized email correspondence. A total of 12 respondents were contacted, of which 8 agreed to participate in the research. The content and main topics of the focus group are illustrated by the operational link in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Operational requirements for the focal group**



Source: own data

Informed consent was obtained verbally at the commencement of the focus group session, which was digitally recorded using MS Teams. This approach not only facilitated a reliable method of obtaining consent but also ensured that all respondents were fully informed about their participation and the objectives of the study. The discussion was recorded and anonymized. After the focus group was completed, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. For the anonymization of respondents, codes A-H were used. Within the transcribed interviews, the technique of open coding was used. This phase of coding was conducted iteratively until data saturation was achieved. The initial coding framework was created through the preliminary reading of the interview transcript. The coding framework was subsequently validated by two analysts to ensure validity. Redundant or duplicate codes were merged or removed.

Overall, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis methods is used to achieve the most comprehensive view of basketball clubs' communication and shared content on Instagram.

## RESULTS

### *Quantitative analysis*

From the results of the survey it may be deduced that in the Czech environment men are more interested in NBL clubs, which is logical on the one hand, since these are men's teams. It is quite likely that an identical situation would arise when analysing the women's teams in the top Czech league. Also, the highest user engagement by age group (18–24 and 25–34) is consistent with the fact that Instagram is a relatively young app, but not the newest, and therefore there is not as much representation of users aged 13–17 or 35 and above.

For all clubs it may be noted that the majority of followers are from the Czech Republic, and apart from Nymburk, the clubs also have the largest representation of Instagram followers from their cities. Another consistent feature is the time followers access Instagram. Sundays and the time of 6 p.m. are predominant.

The analysis of the posts focuses on the analysis of all published images that clubs posted on their Instagram accounts during October and April.

Although it is a comparison of basketball clubs belonging to the same league, we may see a significant difference in their marketing communication on Instagram (in April, Basket Brno made 70 posts, ERA Basketball Nymburk 62, Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové 26, BC GEOSAN Kolín 25; in October 2021, Basket Brno made 49 posts, ERA Basketball Nymburk 84, Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové 38, BC GEOSAN Kolín 17). This phenomenon is attributable to a number of factors ranging from the overall budget of the club to the composition and number of members of the implementation team to the social media education of the Instagram account manager.

During April, the surveyed basketball clubs posted most frequently at the beginning of the week, i.e., on Mondays, and also on Fridays. On the other hand, clubs were least active on Sunday and Thursday. An interesting difference may be noted in the comparison of the two months examined, as all four clubs published posts primarily on Saturdays in October 2021. Monday, Tuesday and Thursday were under-performing days in October 2021. Thus, during the working week, basketball clubs were most active on Wednesday. In terms of time of day, it is noticeable that apart from the night, clubs post fairly evenly, with the morning being dominated by match invitation images and the evening then being dominated by match results.

The most frequently published content are the photos themselves, which are primarily preferred by 3 clubs, namely BC GEOSAN Kolín, Basket Brno and Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové. Unlike the Nymburk club, they are not very active in adding other types of posts (video, carousel post, reels). For video type content, it seems important to not only analyse the number of views, but also the percentage of users who watched the video to the end. Here it appears that, in addition to the thematic focus, the length of the video plays an important role, as shown in Table 3. From the analysis, it is evident that the number of views until the end of the video is inversely proportional to the length of the video.

**Table 3. Examples of videos and their analytical indicators**

Video theme	Video length	Views	Number of views to the end	Rate of views to the end
Player	0:48	915	210	23%
Player	0:59	765	122	16%
Player	0:22	1943	855	44%
Highlights from the game	2:10	385	50	13%
Highlights from the game	1:30	357	57	16%
Invitation to the match	0:10	553	315	57%
Invitation to the match	0:54	724	152	21%
Player	0:10	792	507	64%
Interview	15:00	1172	12	1%

Source: own data

Within the analyzed clubs, differences in published content and post themes can be observed. During the analyzed period, Basket Brno, Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové, and BC GEOSAN Kolín preferred match invitations and match results. In contrast, ERA Basketball Nymburk prioritizes moments from the matches and even deletes posts with themes such as match invitations.

Among other tools within the published content, clubs use place mentions (however, overall only in the range of 30–50% of posts that contain place mentions – specifically Basket Brno in 74 posts, ERA Basketball Nymburk in 2 posts, Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové in 0 posts, and BC GEOSAN Kolín in 67 posts), mentions in the post in the form of player, opponent, sponsor mentions, and members of the implementation team (this is approximately 60–80% of posts, but some clubs – BC GEOSAN Kolín and Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové - do not use this at all), hashtags (especially for opponents, sponsors, players, federation, and implementation team – used by Basket Brno and ERA Basketball Nymburk) and hashtags (on average 4–10 hashtags per post – specifically see Table 4 and 5). Sharing a post with another user has only been rarely used so far in the form of collaboration with players of the team in question.

The key indicators for analysing posts are reach and engagement. In this case it is necessary to again point out the difference between the addressed accounts and the views. In the first case, this means the number of accounts that have seen the post once, whereas views also include re-posts. The total number of accounts reached corresponds to the size of the Instagram fan base of each club. In this case, the data for views is misleading and we may not follow it directly, as some statistics including views are not available for reels. The overall average range is shown in Tables 4 and 5. An interesting observation is the lower number of views compared to accounts reached for ERA Basketball Nymburk, whereas the other examined clubs consistently showed a higher number of views than accounts reached. Fans of ERA Basketball Nymburk often view the published post only once and do not pay further attention to it or share it. This discrepancy is partly due to the absence of certain statistics, including views for reels, as 37% of the feed content consists of reels.



**Table 4. Total post reach of the monitored clubs in the period under review**

Basketball clubs	Accounts reached	Views	Main page	Profile	Explore tab	Hashtag	From elsewhere	Locality
Basket Brno	75,961	88,578	65,244	15,260	729	2	7,128	74
ERA Basketball Nymburk	135,390	75,313	58,074	8,175	2,332	910	4,728	2
Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové	9,906	11,251	7,433	1,975	693	606	229	0
BC GEOSAN Kolín	15,633	18,417	12,018	3,447	1,999	0	366	67

Source: own data

**Table 5. Average post reach of the monitored clubs in the period under review**

Basketball clubs	Accounts reached	Views	Main page	Profile	Explore tab	Hashtag	From elsewhere	Locality
Basket Brno	1,085.16	1,265.40	932.06	218.00	10.41	0.03	101.83	1.06
ERA Basketball Nymburk	1,934.14	1,537.00	1,185.18	166.84	48.58	18.57	96.49	0.04
Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové	381.00	432.73	285.88	75.96	26.65	23.31	8.81	0.00
BC GEOSAN Kolín	625.32	736.68	480.72	137.88	79.96	0	14.64	2.68

Source: own data

A significant difference may be found in the average number of views from the main page and other view methods. Thus, it may be concluded that, on average, users primarily encounter basketball posts as soon as they open the app on the main page.

The interaction is displayed in Table 6. It shows that individual clubs have relatively wide gaps between them in terms of average likes, and it is likely that the total number of followers on Instagram and, naturally, the type of content posted by clubs also plays a role to some extent.

**Table 6. Average post interaction of the monitored clubs in the period under review**

Basketball clubs	Likes	Saves	Commentaries	Profile activity
Basket Brno	123.93	1.16	0.76	21.81
ERA Basketball Nymburk	164.53	2.43	0.81	13.31
Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové	35.00	0.15	0.42	7.31
BC GEOSAN Kolín	82.48	0.88	0.32	22.44

Source: own data

Although BC GEOSAN Kolín has a higher average number of likes compared to Královští Sokoli, it performs worse in terms of the average number of comments. Based on a detailed analysis of comments (see Table 7), it can be stated that all clubs primarily receive positive comments. During

the observed period, a negative comment appeared occasionally for Královští Sokoli. Comments on ERA Basketball Nymburk's posts consist of 11.40% spam. This issue also appears for Basket Brno, but only on a smaller scale (2.90%).

**Table 7. Analysis of post comments**

<b>Basketball clubs</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Spam</b>
Basket Brno	58.60%	37.10%	1.40%	0.00%	2.90%
ERA Basketball Nymburk	60.00%	30.00%	0.00%	0.00%	11.40%
Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové	65.40%	30.80%	0.00%	3.80%	0.00%
BC GEOSAN Kolín	80.00%	16.00%	4.00%	0.00%	0.00%

Source: own data

The analysis of stories indicates that the total number of published Stories varies considerably across the clubs in both periods (in April 2022 Basket Brno published 233 Stories, ERA Basketball Nymburk 135, Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové 37, BC GEOSAN Kolín 20; in October 2021 Basket Brno published 93 Stories, ERA Basketball Nymburk 176, Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové 53, BC GEOSAN Kolín 29).

The posting tactics during the days of the week vary considerably across the monitored clubs. Both Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové and BC GEOSAN Kolín chose the tactic of adding Stories evenly throughout the week. A slight increase in activity may be observed for these two clubs on Saturday and Wednesday. It was most likely due to the games that are normally played on these days during the season. ERA Basketball Nymburk shows a trend of higher activity on the days before the game, i.e., on Fridays and Tuesdays.

The most common time of day for posting Stories also varies across the monitored clubs. The Basket Brno club is most active in Stories during the afternoon, from 12 p.m. to 6 p.m., and then also in the evening. ERA Basketball Nymburk has a more even activity in Stories, but the evening is also more prevalent along with the afternoon. The same situation occurs with the other two clubs (Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové, BC GEOSAN Kolín). The October analysis clearly shows the highest activity during the evening for all clubs.

Instagram Stories of clubs like Basket Brno and ERA Basketball Nymburk are mostly videos, photos and sharing of their posts. In percentage terms, Basket Brno's content is made up of 38.62% videos, 25.34% photos, 27.03% sharing their own posts and, to a lesser extent, sharing posts from other accounts (4.29%) or Stories (4.72%). A similar situation occurs at ERA Basketball Nymburk, where the percentages slightly differ. The content of the club Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové is 59.45% photos. Photos are followed by sharing Stories, e.g., fan Stories from different matches. This is followed by the videos themselves and sharing both your own posts and those of other users. In this regard it is worth noting that despite the fact that the club Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové did not share its posts, the same graphics appear in its Stories as in the posts. BC GEOSAN Kolín shows similar values as Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové, except that they share their posts in their Stories.

In terms of thematic content of Stories, the most frequently posted topics are moments from matches, Stories about the players themselves, match results and invitations to matches. Compared to the topics in the traditional posts, there are a greater number of Stories related to training.

The monitored clubs tend not to include Instagram stickers in their Stories. The most used stickers include the countdown, which is mainly used before the upcoming match, as well as a link through which individual clubs direct their fans to their websites or TVCOM.CZ, where they may watch matches for free. GIFs are also often used from utilised stickers.

As with traditional posts, it is essential to analyse the key indicators of reach and engagement. For the Stories of the monitored clubs in the period under review, these indicators are presented in Tables 8 and 9.

**Table 8. Overall Stories reach and interaction of the monitored clubs in the period under review**

Basketball clubs	Accounts reached	Views	Profile activity	Likes
Basket Brno	124,789	127,385	409	158
ERA Basketball Nymburk	86,541	87,875	259	183
Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové	7,026	7,177	53	25
BC GEOSAN Kolín	5,354	5,560	82	21

Source: own data

**Table 9. Average Stories reach and interaction of the monitored clubs in the period under review**

Basketball clubs	Accounts reached	Views	Profile activity	Likes
Basket Brno	535.58	546.72	1.76	0.68
ERA Basketball Nymburk	641.04	650.93	1.92	1.36
Královští Sokoli Hradec Králové	189.89	193.97	1.43	0.68
BC GEOSAN Kolín	267.70	278.00	4.10	1.05

Source: own data

The followers are not active in liking the Stories, which may also be due to the fact that this option is relatively new and many users have not yet got used to this way of interaction.

## **Qualitative analysis**

### ***Instagram activity***

Respondents spend quite a lot of time on Instagram. Some even check Instagram every hour. The reason why they follow basketball clubs on Instagram is that respondents expect to see videos and photos from their favourite clubs, or use basketball accounts as an information channel. With the exception of one fan, all respondents agreed that they prefer Instagram Stories to actual posts. This is mainly because this form is primarily timely, faster, more interactive "...and at the same time as Stories are only available for 24 hours, I feel like it disappears and I have to see it" added one respondent. Respondents also emphasise the possibility of sharing the post in Stories, adding that if the content is interesting, there is a high probability that they will click through to the post and thus the profile.

### ***Instagram posts***

Within basketball respondents prefer short videos, especially highlights, rather than photos. For longer videos, interesting content appears to be a condition. Only one respondent said that they access Instagram for the photos, as they have TikTok for the videos. One respondent added that if the posts are interesting, there is a relatively high chance that they will forward the photo or video to a friend. Respondents do not show much interest in live-streaming posts, and they do not see this form from basketball clubs on Instagram either. Two respondents added that they had occasionally seen live broadcasts on the Nymburk profile, with advance notice having been given. A clear advantage is seen in interacting with the fans themselves, and therefore in the opportunity to ask questions. However, they agree that it all depends on the content, ideas, structure and overall how the live broadcast is conceived. They don't dismiss the idea of players from other clubs getting together to comment on the season, with one of them adding that "...if they got together, I think it would definitely be interesting." Posting regularly is very important, but it is not advisable to make too many posts.

### ***Stories***

Respondents report that they respond to Stories at most in surveys, quizzes and questions. Basketball clubs do not use the like or quick response feature. As for the added music in Stories, most respondents have their mobile phone in silent mode, so they mostly ignore the music. They also mention two important facts. First, that the music spoils the Stories quality. Second, that it is important to match the music with the video. Individual Stories may also move into selections, on which respondents are not entirely unanimous in their opinions. Here it always depends on the sophistication and timeliness of the selections. However, respondents agreed that profile selections have an irreplaceable position. Primarily because the selections make the profiles look more professional and vibrant, which may have an impact when viewing the account for the first time and making a subsequent decision to follow it.

### ***Function***

Respondents tended to be unaware of the option to mention their favourite Instagram accounts, adding that they would not use this feature after the discussion was over. They do not use the Alerts feature either, as they are in the basketball environment and have the necessary insight. Most respondents, however, welcome the mention feature, especially in situations where they do not know the players and may look at their profiles and find out more information about them through the mention.

### ***Content***

In this regard, three themes resonated in particular. It was about moments from the matches, the result of the match and also behind the scenes of the club. According to the respondents, the greatest interest is in highlights, whether in the form of videos or photos. Respondents agree that in addition to these topics, basketball clubs could also focus on trending/viral videos. The respondents also shared the view that if these videos are published at a reasonable rate, this may ultimately result in greater reach and new viewers.

### ***Profile***

Within the profiles of the monitored clubs, respondents placed great importance on a high-quality and visually interesting feed and selections. In copy writing, the optimal ratio of text to

emoji and the clarity of the text itself were also important. In these criteria, respondents also place high demands on the management of Instagram accounts for their approach to fans.

### ***Summary of Qualitative Analysis***

Respondents prefer using Instagram Stories due to their timeliness and interactivity. They favor short videos, particularly highlights, over photographs. Live broadcasts are not very popular, but fan interaction is viewed positively if it is well-executed. Within Stories, respondents most frequently engage with polls, quizzes, and questions. Music in Stories is generally ignored, so clubs do not need to invest much effort in this aspect. Highlights on profiles are important for the professional appearance of the club's Instagram account, which underscores the overall brand strategy of sports clubs. Content-wise, respondents prefer moments from matches, results, and behind-the-scenes information. Trending videos can increase reach and attract new followers, making their use crucial in the competitive environment among sports clubs.

Profiles should have a high-quality and visually appealing feed and highlights, with an optimal balance of text and emojis. Respondents have high expectations for the management of Instagram accounts, which confirms the importance of the visual aspect of Instagram profiles.

### ***Recommendations for communication on Instagram***

Knowing the followers is important to running Instagram properly. Audience information is available through basic analytical tools called Instagram reports. Another option is to harness the power of Instagram Stories. Through stickers such as polls, quizzes and the slider emoji, it is possible to ask followers questions and then work with an idea based on their answers. Although the sticker question itself falls into the interactive category, it is clear from respondents' statements that they prefer quick responses. Thus, this option is not proposed as a suitable solution in this respect.

Beyond the content itself, the timeline is very important and should be well thought out by the Instagram manager. Consistency is power, as one of the focus group respondents mentioned, and not only saves time, but creates a habit or awareness of posting for that audience, so they know when and what to expect.

From the available data it may be further concluded that the majority of respondents rather follow Stories. This may be a springboard for further strategy development on Instagram. This brings us to another important point, and that is the topics themselves. Within the focus group, birthday templates resonated strongly, which are not so appealing to followers. However, there are several ways to make this content more attractive. It is possible to add a Carousel post and create Stories. The original template remains, and subsequent posts may include videos of games in which a particular player excelled. The next photo may also include a message from a team-mate, coach or youth player. The post may also be interspersed with a short video in which the player is asked how they will celebrate their birthday, etc. In the off-season, it is advisable to focus on funny and light-hearted videos. In this respect it is also important to keep up to date with the latest trends. In the free period it is also possible to design several competitions, virtual runs, etc., together with the sponsors. It is clearly advisable for clubs to also comment on current situations in the world. These reactions have been seen in most basketball clubs in the recent Russia-Ukraine conflict. Here, the

Hootsuite Blog can be recommended to clubs, where all sorts of Instagram management ideas and tricks are provided.

## DISCUSSION

The article focused on assessing the current state of the Instagram accounts of four selected basketball clubs. This research combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. The Instagram analysis of these clubs was supplemented with the Focus Group method. The analysis showed that basketball clubs use Instagram as a corporate account. Even though some clubs have an account set up as a creator account, there are no significant differences in the use of features and analysis of account performance. Youth is one of the most active groups on social media (Navandar et al., 2021), which was confirmed in the case of the examined basketball accounts. Clubs should publish content that appeals to their target audience, i.e., fans, and take their preferred content formats into account. For Instagram, this is particularly confirmed by Romney & Johnson (2020) and Scalera & Naraine (2023).

Although the hours of Instagram activity are similar for all of the monitored clubs, the audience is more active during the afternoon than in the morning. Clubs should use this information when planning the timing of their posts to increase interactions and thus increase the popularity of the club (Arifianto et al., 2018). This popularity then increases the attractiveness of the club for sponsors (Gillooly et al., 2017; Junghagen, 2018; Oral, 2018; Alhadad, 2019; Fechner et al., 2023). Research has shown that clubs are not exploiting the full potential of Reels content, which is currently seen as key to increasing reach and interaction (Casaló et al., 2021). This type of content could bring a new way to engage fans and increase their loyalty (Alkhurshan & Rjoub, 2020). Another finding is the potential of live broadcasts, which is not often exploited in the Czech basketball environment. Clubs could especially use this form of communication in the off-season, reflecting the requirement for appropriately chosen marketing communication tools (Kowalski, 2012; Schallhorn et al., 2022) during this period.

The Collab feature on Instagram, which has only been used by one club, has the potential to reach new audiences and increase interaction. Other clubs could use this opportunity to expand their reach. The analysis of hashtags showed that clubs should take care to use hashtags appropriately in line with the knowledge of their audience. Paid advertising on Instagram is not a priority for these clubs as their primary focus is on organic reach, however, given the importance of sponsorship (Schubert & Hamil, 2018; Perechuda, 2020) this is an area for further exploration of potential. To achieve more interaction, clubs should make more use of communication through Instagram Stories, especially using various audience engagement tools (Casaló et al., 2021). Due to fan preferences, clubs should favour Stories over the main feed.

This research has several limitations. One of them is being time limited to October and April, which may affect the analysis of the results and respondents' opinions in relation to the basketball season. The respondent pool was also relatively small, which limits the extent to which the results could be generalised to all professional basketball clubs. Another limitation is that of Instagram Insights, which only provides statistics for the last 90 days. This may affect the analysis of the

performance of the accounts, especially if there are seasonal fluctuations. Future research should include monitoring of individual indicators across the entire season, including the off-season. Comprehensive results may be obtained for a more strategic focus when working with Instagram (Chow & Shi, 2015; Lv et al., 2018).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is not enough to add posts once in a while to keep fans satisfied with the management of their teams' Instagram accounts. Instead, constant communication based on informative, educational, and entertaining components is essential. The aim of this study was to evaluate the Instagram marketing communication strategies and activities used by professional basketball clubs on the Instagram social network and to provide actionable insights for enhancing fan engagement and reach. It is the planning of posts and the creation of so-called publication calendars that may lead to greater efficiency in the marketing communication of sports clubs. An analysis of the Instagram accounts of each club shows that they all have deficiencies in different areas. Each club has a different strategy for post themes. Two primary approaches are evident: one focuses on objective information about sports matches, such as invitations and results, while the other emphasizes highlights, notable actions, and individual players. Several recommendations were made in view of the identified imperfections. For example, working with Instagram Stories.

An interesting finding in the results was that respondents preferred Stories to actual posts, which is a significant advantage for the managers of individual accounts. Respondents are primarily interested in current events, which may be fulfilled through Stories in a matter of minutes, whether it is footage from matches, training sessions, locker room or team building Stories. It should be noted that tools such as hashtags, place mentions, etc., are used differently and with varying results, making it difficult to provide a uniform recommendation.

However, despite the certain authenticity offered by Instagram Stories, clubs should not forget about the overall appearance of their profiles and the editing of individual posts. At first glance it should be noticeable that this is a basketball club belonging to the top basketball league in the country. Clubs should reflect the graphical sequencing and coherence of individual posts. This may be seen, for example, in the thoughtful and structured use of hashtags for individual posts. Consistent and regular content publication is crucial for maintaining fan engagement. The quality and professionalism of posts vary among clubs, with some clubs having room for improvement, particularly in the areas of visual design and interactivity. These findings provide valuable insights for enhancing the marketing communication of basketball clubs on Instagram and can help increase fan engagement and reach. The analysis also indicates the unsuitability of Instagram for publishing long videos, where length appears to be a critical factor. Based on the results, the recommended length is between 10 to 20 seconds. It is also important to remember that the overall communication on Instagram should be created in the context of the overall marketing strategy and be linked to its offline elements.

Further research into the use of Instagram in the marketing communications of sports entities should reflect a long-term study of posts, i.e., examining posts throughout the season, leading to a

more detailed analysis of when and what types of posts and content to publish. It is also advisable to conduct separate research regarding off-season communication on Instagram, which could be effectively used by clubs to communicate in relation to partnerships or sponsorships.

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