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Digitalization as a Disruptive Force. New Communicative Divides in Sports Communication: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of Digital Disruptions in the German Sports Organization System

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing digital transformation is fundamentally reshaping communication processes within sports organizations. While some organizations successfully establish sophisticated digital infrastructures, platforms, and AI-supported communication ecosystems, others remain structurally underdeveloped. This paper examines how digitalization acts as a disruptive force that produces new communicative divides within sports communication. Building upon the Theory of Disruption by Clayton M. Christensen, the study analyzes how innovation dynamics generate structural inequalities between digitally innovative and traditional sports organizations. The paper combines theoretical reflections with empirical findings from reports, organizational analyses, and studies on German sports federations and clubs. Results indicate that a small number of globally operating and commercially oriented sports organizations have established integrated digital media systems that create substantial competitive advantages in communication, visibility, and audience management. In contrast, many traditional clubs and federations suffer from deficits in digital competencies, infrastructure, AI implementation, and strategic innovation management. Consequently, communicative gaps are rapidly increasing. The study argues that digital disruption processes produce long-term structural inequalities that may threaten the societal relevance and communicative visibility of traditional sports organizations unless comprehensive digital strategies and organizational reforms are implemented.

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Received: May 29, 2026; **Accepted:** June 02, 2026; **Published:** June 12, 2026

Keywords: Digitalization, Sports Communication, Disruption Theory, Sports Organizations, Artificial Intelligence, Communication Inequality, Innovation Management, Digital Transformation

Introduction

Communication with external audiences has become one of the central strategic challenges for sports organizations in the digital age. Digital technologies increasingly shape how organizations produce, distribute, manage, and control communication processes. These developments affect sports organizations economically, socially, psychologically, politically, and legally.

From an economic perspective, communication significantly influences ticketing, sponsorship, merchandising, and marketing processes [1]. Socially and psychologically, communication contributes to recognition, solidarity, motivation, and identity formation [2,3]. Politically, communication processes shape participation, public discourse, and cultural representation [4]. Legal aspects such as data protection and personality rights further increase the strategic relevance of communication management [5].

While previous research in sports communication has strongly focused on internal communication processes within organizations, external communication directed toward broad public audiences has received considerably less attention. However, the increasing

digitalization of communication environments has fundamentally transformed opportunities for external communication.

Digital technologies allow sports organizations to establish direct communication channels, platform ecosystems, data-driven communication systems, and AI-supported interaction structures. Yet organizations differ substantially in their ability to recognize, adopt, and strategically implement such innovations. As a consequence, new communicative inequalities emerge.

Against this background, the present paper investigates the following research question:

RQ: To what extent and for which reasons have communicative divides emerged within sports organizations as a consequence of ongoing digitalization?

To answer this question, the study applies the Theory of Disruption to the field of sports communication and combines theoretical considerations with empirical evidence from (German) sports organizations.

Four concepts are briefly defined here to prevent misunderstandings: communication, digitalization, innovation, and disruption. Communication is understood as public, technologically mediated communication directed toward potentially unlimited audiences. Digitalization refers to the transformation of communication processes through digital technologies that reshape communication

practices, participation structures, and interaction dynamics. Innovations are defined as breakthrough developments that fundamentally alter or replace existing technologies, structures, and communication systems. Disruptions are conceptualized as the structural consequences of innovations resulting from unequal institutional reactions to technological change. Digitalization therefore does not merely represent technological modernization but rather a profound transformation of communication cultures and organizational structures.

Literature Review

Research on digital transformation has expanded considerably in recent years across multiple disciplines [6]. Communication and media studies increasingly investigate how digital technologies reshape public communication, media systems, and organizational practices [7-9]. Within sports communication research, growing attention has been directed toward digital media ecosystems, platformization, sports journalism, and organizational communication [10-14].

However, substantial research gaps remain concerning the relationship between digitalization, organizational inequality, and communicative disparities in sports organizations. Existing studies indicate deficits regarding digital competencies, organizational capacities, and AI implementation in many sports clubs and federations, yet systematic theoretical frameworks explaining these disparities remain limited. The Theory of Disruption provides a useful framework for addressing these gaps.

Theoretical Framework: Theory of Disruption

The theoretical foundation of this paper is grounded in the Theory of Disruption, which originates in the work of Joseph Schumpeter and has been substantially extended by Clayton M. Christensen. Together, these perspectives form a coherent framework for understanding technological change as a dynamic and non-linear process in which innovation not only improves existing systems but fundamentally reconfigures markets, organizational logics, and competitive structures over time [15-18].

Schumpeter's concept of "creative destruction" provides the macroeconomic foundation of disruption theory. It conceptualizes innovation as an evolutionary force that continuously dismantles established economic structures while simultaneously creating new ones. In this view, economic development is not a process of incremental and stable improvement, but rather one characterized by discontinuous shifts in which existing technologies, firms, and even entire industries are rendered obsolete by the emergence of superior alternatives. Competition, therefore, is not a static condition but an ongoing process of transformation driven by technological and organizational innovation. Organizations operate within an environment of perpetual instability, where survival depends on the ability to adapt to, anticipate, or initiate waves of innovation that reshape market structures [19-22].

Building on this foundation, Christensen refined the concept by focusing on the micro-level mechanisms through which such transformations occur. His theory of disruptive innovation explains how new entrants, often with fewer resources and lower initial performance levels, are able to challenge and ultimately displace established organizations. A central premise of this argument is that disruption does not begin with superior performance on traditional dimensions valued by mainstream customers. Instead, disruptive innovations typically emerge in niche or overlooked segments of the market, where they initially underperform relative

to incumbent technologies but offer alternative value propositions such as lower cost, greater accessibility, simplicity, or convenience.

A critical assumption of the theory is that incumbent firms are structurally incentivized to ignore such emerging technologies. Because established organizations are optimized to serve their most profitable customers, they tend to focus on sustaining innovations that improve existing products along established performance trajectories. Their resource allocation processes, performance metrics, and organizational capabilities are therefore aligned with incremental improvement rather than radical experimentation. As a result, innovations that initially appear inferior or commercially unattractive are often dismissed, not because they lack potential, but because they do not align with current market demands or profitability structures.

Over time, however, disruptive technologies tend to improve at a rapid rate, often exceeding the performance thresholds required by mainstream markets. This improvement trajectory is not merely technological but also economic and infrastructural, as scaling effects, learning curves, and ecosystem development contribute to increased efficiency, reliability, and usability. Once these innovations reach a level of performance that satisfies the needs of mass-market consumers, a critical transition occurs: the basis of competition shifts from the traditional performance dimensions dominated by incumbents to new dimensions where the disruptive innovation holds an advantage.

At this stage, market dynamics undergo a structural shift. Demand migrates from established products to the emerging technology, often at a faster pace than incumbents can adapt. Established firms face a strategic dilemma: their existing business models, cost structures, and organizational routines are typically not suited to compete effectively in the new paradigm without undergoing significant internal transformation. In many cases, attempts to respond are constrained by the very success of prior strategies, as firms risk cannibalizing their own revenue streams or disrupting established customer relationships. Consequently, incumbents often lose competitive ground despite possessing superior resources at the outset.

This process generates a persistent strategic divide between incumbent organizations and innovative entrants. While incumbents prioritize efficiency, optimization, and the protection of existing market positions, disruptive entrants are characterized by experimentation, adaptability, and a willingness to operate in uncertain and initially unprofitable market spaces. The theory thus highlights a fundamental paradox of innovation-driven competition: market leadership at one stage of technological development does not guarantee survival in the next.

In synthesis, the Theory of Disruption integrates Schumpeter's macro-level account of structural economic transformation with Christensen's micro-level explanation of firm behavior and market entry dynamics. It provides a unified framework for understanding how technological change unfolds through iterative cycles of emergence, refinement, and substitution, ultimately leading to the reconfiguration of competitive landscapes. Within this framework, innovation is not merely a source of competitive advantage but a destabilizing force that continuously reshapes the boundaries of industries and the strategic logic of firms operating within them.

In the case of the radical innovation of artificial intelligence, however, this mechanism appears to apply only partially. From

a theoretical perspective, insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that such innovations unfold their distinctive creative potential when they can be fully integrated into organizational structures. In the context of such innovations, market leaders and established incumbents possess significant advantages and may even further consolidate their market position-as the following section will illustrate using the example of sports organizations.

Digital Disruption in Sports Organizations

Sports organizations, which operate globally and commercially are more likely to develop digital infrastructures, integrated communication systems, and AI-supported processes [23,24]. Traditional clubs and federations, by contrast, tend to react more cautiously and incrementally, thereby increasing their vulnerability to disruption processes [25]. The use of artificial intelligence thus gives rise to an increasingly widening divide: global sports organizations gain a disproportionate increase in communicative power, while traditional clubs and associations are becoming progressively marginalized in communicative terms. This development can be illustrated through a two-phase model.

Phase I: Structural-Organizational Transformation

The first phase of digital disruption consists of structural and organizational transformations. Leading sports organizations increasingly established:

- Digital content creation systems,
- Digital data infrastructures,
- Cloud-based IT systems,
- Digital distribution systems,
- AI-supported algorithmic structures,
- Digital archives,
- Platform ecosystems, and
- Integrated communication hubs.

Organizations such as the FIFA, the International Olympic Committee, the DFL Deutsche Fußball Liga, and Red Bull developed vertically integrated media structures combining production, distribution, data management, and audience analytics.

Substantial financial investments accelerated these developments. Examples include large-scale broadcasting infrastructures, digital media houses, global platform systems, and proprietary content ecosystems.

As a result, fully integrated digital communication architectures emerged that increasingly allow automated and data-driven communication processes.

Phase II: Processual Effects and Communicative Divides

The second disruption phase involves processual consequences resulting from earlier structural investments.

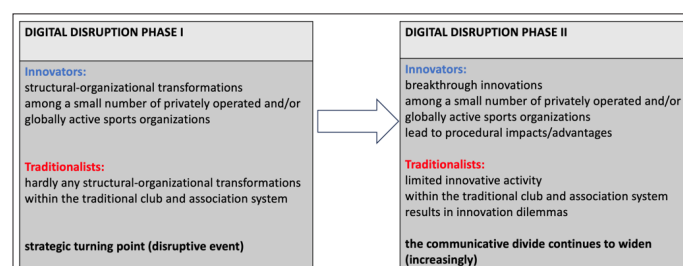
These effects include:

- Exponential network effects,
- Positive feedback loops,
- Economies of scale,
- Platform economy dynamics,
- Subscription-based OTT systems,
- Data-driven communication services, and
- Algorithmic communication steering.

Organizations possessing advanced digital infrastructures gain increasing advantages regarding communication reach, flexibility, personalization, and visibility. Communication processes become scalable, automated, and strategically optimized.

In contrast, many traditional sports clubs and federations in Germany display substantial deficits concerning digital infrastructures, AI competencies, strategic communication management, and organizational innovation capabilities. Empirical studies from traditional organizations indicate deficits in digital competencies, financial resources, personnel structures, and strategic digital planning.

Consequently, communicative divides between innovators and traditional organizations continue to widen (see following graphic).



The empirical evidence reveals several core findings regarding the state of digital transformation in German sports organizations, which can be defined as traditionalists [25].

First, many organizations possess only rudimentary digital infrastructures. Digital transformation processes are often underdeveloped and lack strategic coherence. Second, significant deficits exist concerning AI implementation, digital competencies, and data management capacities. Smaller organizations particularly struggle with financial, personnel, and technological limitations. Third, dependencies on external digital platforms and service providers are increasing. Many organizations rely heavily on third-party infrastructures such as social media platforms or external streaming services. Fourth, communicative displacement effects emerge. Digitally advanced organizations dominate communication spaces and public attention, while smaller organizations increasingly lose visibility.

To examine the structural transformations and potentials of artificial intelligence in greater detail, the following section focuses on four major organizations that can be regarded as exemplary innovators within the sports industry: the German Bundesliga, FIFA, the IOC, and Red Bull. In contrast to many traditional sports associations and clubs, these organizations demonstrate a fundamentally different developmental trajectory regarding digitalization, technological integration, and strategic communication infrastructures.

The following figure illustrates selected key milestones implemented by these organizations between 2000 and 2020. The overview does not aim to provide a complete historical reconstruction; rather, it highlights particularly significant developments and innovation steps that exemplify the increasing integration of digital technologies, platform structures, data-driven communication systems, and AI-related transformation processes within leading sports organizations.

When these measures are organized according to a media value-creation logic-as illustrated in the corresponding framework-it becomes evident that all central domains of contemporary media production and distribution are comprehensively addressed.

To contextualize the scale of investments required for such structural and organizational transformations, three exemplary measures may be considered briefly in detail. First, the technological service provider of the German Bundesliga, the subsidiary Sportcast GmbH, receives approximately €65 million annually for the production and continuous development of the live broadcasting signal. Second, international social media commercialization activities are conducted by Digital Sports, a company generating annual revenues of roughly €60 million. Third, the initial investments associated with the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) digital transformation strategy were estimated by former IOC President Thomas Bach at approximately €100 million in 2014, solely for the establishment of the so-called Olympic Channel's digital infrastructure.

During Digitalization Phase I, the various media innovations became increasingly interconnected at the architectural level. The integration of media value-creation stages subsequently resulted in the establishment of internalized media structures and the development of fully integrated media organizations. Through these integration processes, innovators created architectural innovation structures and near fully integrated media ecosystems that enabled partially and fully automated processes. The structural and organizational transformations implemented during the first two decades of the twenty-first century continue to generate significant procedural advantages for innovators. In particular, these developments provide substantial benefits in a second phase of digitalization, during which the communicative divide between innovators and traditionalists is widening considerably.

Indeed, pronounced secondary communication effects are becoming increasingly observable. These include exponential dynamics, exponential network effects, positive feedback mechanisms, economies of scale and scope, optimized fixed-cost depression effects, and forms of informational gerrymandering. In addition, filter bubbles and echo chambers can be strategically utilized for communicative purposes.

Further developments include platform economy effects, subscription-based over-the-top (OTT) business models, and data-driven services. Collectively, these dynamics have generated an unprecedented level of capability with regard to communication steering and control, communication depth, communication formats, communicative flexibility, and adaptive communication behavior. Importantly, these capacities remain highly scalable and continue to expand.

In contrast to a limited number of sports organizations that may be classified as innovators, the majority of German sports federations and clubs did not undergo a consistent digital transformation during the first phase of digitalization. Empirical findings consistently point toward deeper structural insecurities within sports clubs and federations following the conclusion of Digitalization Phase I [26,27].

The principal findings can be summarized as follows:

- a limited understanding of the urgency and strategic relevance of digital transformation processes;

- comparatively young and underdeveloped digital structures;
- substantial deficits in data protection and competence development;
- hesitant adoption of artificial intelligence and remote technologies;
- a lack of practical use cases and empirically tested implementation scenarios;
- the apparent absence of an overarching digital architecture.

Due to inadequate digitalization, sports federations and clubs are consequently placed in a disadvantageous position with regard to artificial intelligence, platform ecosystems, and remote technologies. The architectural foundation described above frequently constitutes a prerequisite for product and service innovation in digital environments, as it enables networking capabilities, full automation processes, and algorithmic computation.

Accordingly, there is substantial reason to assume that, as digital effectiveness and technological capabilities continue to accelerate, the digital divide between innovators and traditionalists will expand at an increasingly rapid pace.

The central disadvantages facing traditional sports organizations are already becoming increasingly evident. Artificial intelligence, for example, can only be deployed in highly rudimentary ways within many organizations. Moreover, distortion effects are likely to emerge, as external datasets frequently have to be utilized while simultaneously only limited proprietary data are available. As a consequence, dependencies on external digital service providers and platforms - such as TikTok - become extraordinarily high.

A further disadvantage arises from the rapidly developing digital platform ecosystems, which fundamentally depend on digital core innovations such as sophisticated big-data management infrastructures. Without adequate big-data management capabilities, organizations are likewise unable to operate inbound marketing strategies and content-management systems efficiently.

In addition, the absence of modern cloud infrastructures and fiber-optic network systems significantly constrains the seamless transmission and distribution of media content. These technological deficits impair both communicative responsiveness and digital scalability.

Furthermore, so-called squeezing effects increasingly emerge: innovators, through their superior communicative capacities, displace less technologically advanced actors from relevant communication spaces and, consequently, from large segments of the public sphere. Such developments are clearly explained by transaction-cost theory as well as by core principles of the attention economy.

The majority of German sports federations and clubs continue to rely primarily on traditional forms of online presence and are only capable of implementing highly rudimentary passive inbound communication measures with limited communicative impact. In terms of disruption theory, these organizations may therefore be classified as traditionalists.

As a result, comprehensive digital structures have scarcely been established, while the associated competitive and communicative disadvantages are becoming increasingly pronounced.

Discussion

The findings support the assumption that digitalization functions as a disruptive force that generates new communicative inequalities within sports communication. In particular, the Theory of Disruption offers a useful framework for explaining why a small number of highly innovative and market-oriented sports organizations are able to establish dominant communication ecosystems, while many traditional clubs and federations struggle to adapt to rapidly changing digital environments.

Current developments indicate a process of creative destruction within the sports sector. Innovative and globally operating organizations increasingly benefit from advanced digital infrastructures, integrated communication systems, and scalable technological architectures. As a consequence, they gain significant strategic advantages in terms of visibility, audience engagement, and communicative autonomy.

At the same time, a rapidly widening digital divide can be observed between a limited number of commercially oriented and globally acting sports organizations and the traditional association- and club-based sports system. Digital infrastructures increasingly determine organizational visibility, communication power, and long-term strategic relevance. Organizations that fail to invest in digital architectures, artificial intelligence competencies, and innovation-oriented transformation processes risk long-term marginalization within public communication environments.

Moreover, digital transformation processes produce self-reinforcing dynamics. Organizations possessing strong digital infrastructures benefit from network effects, data accumulation, algorithmic optimization, and scalable communication systems, thereby continuously strengthening their competitive advantages. The resulting communicative inequalities should therefore not be interpreted as temporary transitional phenomena, but rather as structurally embedded consequences of digital transformation.

The findings also suggest a necessary extension of the Theory of Disruption. Future theoretical approaches should differentiate more precisely between various forms, intensities, and strategic applications of radical innovation in sports communication. Such differentiation would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the heterogeneous effects of digital disruption on organizational structures, communicative capacities, and societal relevance.

Conclusion

Digitalization represents a profound disruptive force within sports communication. While a small number of innovative organizations have successfully established integrated digital communication systems, many traditional sports clubs and federations remain structurally underdeveloped in this regard.

The resulting communicative divides entail far-reaching economic, social, political, and cultural implications. Without substantial investments in digital infrastructures, AI competencies, and strategic communication systems, traditional sports organizations risk losing communicative visibility, societal relevance, and long-term legitimacy.

For the German association- and club-based sports sector in particular, additional negative consequences can be expected if no strategic action is taken. Early, systematic, and strategically planned approaches toward engaging external stakeholders in the digital age therefore appear urgently necessary.

Furthermore, if policymakers and sports institutions aim to preserve and strengthen the recognition culture surrounding the UNESCO-recognized intangible cultural heritage of community-oriented sports club culture, comprehensive digital strategies and sustainable communication structures become indispensable. Only through the development of clear digital architectures and communicative innovation capacities can traditional sports organizations maintain societal connectivity and preserve their cultural relevance within increasingly digital public spheres.

Consequently, comprehensive digital strategies, organizational reforms, and innovation-oriented change management processes are urgently required in order to ensure the long-term communicative viability and societal relevance of traditional sports organizations.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses primarily on German sports organizations and therefore cannot fully capture international differences in digital transformation processes.

Future research should investigate:

- intercultural comparisons,
- AI implementation in sports communication,
- digital platform governance,
- communication inequalities,
- and organizational adaptation strategies in sports ecosystems.

Furthermore, quantitative analyses regarding communication reach, audience engagement, and algorithmic visibility would substantially enrich future investigations.

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