



# Strategies for popularizing the Media League within the Russian sports media environment

UDC 070.421:796



PhD **K.L. Zuikina**<sup>1</sup>

**S.V. Mudrik**<sup>1</sup>

**D.A. Khomich**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow

Corresponding author: chris-zu@yandex.ru

Received by the editorial office on 20.02.2025

## Abstract

**Objective of the study** is to identify and characterize key practices in promoting the Media Football League (MFL) in Russia. **Methods and structure of the study.** In the course of working on the study, five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of the media league management, media football teams, and sports journalists covering MFL competitions. All interviews took place from September to November 2024. The interview guide included three blocks of questions covering the MFL activities from different angles. The interviews were conducted anonymously.

**Results and conclusions.** It was found that the main media tools for promoting the MFL are YouTube and Telegram. In addition, cooperation with traditional sports media is practiced. An important factor in promoting MFL content is its focus on its target audience. Team representatives actively interact with their audience both offline and online, talking about the lives of MFL team players in various media formats and organizing meetings with fans. Thus, individual elements of the media football promotion strategy can be used in developing media strategies for professional football teams.

**Keywords:** professional football teams, sports media communications, media football league, media sports, social media, MFL clubs, promotion specifics, popularity phenomenon.

**Introduction.** Growing interest in sports in our country contributes to the emergence of new actors in sports communication – “advanced amateurs” who, thanks to social media, often become the main popularizers of certain sports, since “sports stars cannot compete in terms of demand with representatives of show business, politics and some other spheres” [1]. Also, according to M. Danilova, “modern sports depend on entertainment” [3, p. 533], and in this context, the emergence of the Media Football League (abbreviated media league, MFL) as an amateur competition of teams consisting of famous “media” players seems quite justified. The phenomenon of the media league allows us to talk about “a successful example of adapting sports to the realities of the digital environment” [4].

The MFL format is quite creative. The competition contains elements of an entertainment show: live broadcast, the presence of “challenges” in which teams compete for bonus points in the overall standings, an unlimited number of reverse substitutions, microphones on the referees, shootouts instead of penalties, blitz interviews during breaks, “clean” play-

ing time, as well as the presence of “media” players, which “aims to form a new view of the sports system, making it attractive to fans” [2, p. 216].

The first season of the Russian Media League took place in 2022 and, in terms of views on the YouTube platform, managed to bypass the Russian Premier League (RPL). The methods of interaction between the MFL and the audience demonstrate “a variety of approaches aimed at increasing engagement and retaining the interest of subscribers” [4]. Due to the originality of the format, interest in the tournament is steadily growing, which makes it necessary to take a more detailed look at the phenomenon of the popularity of media football. The purpose of the study is to identify key practices in promoting the Media Football League (MFL) in Russia.

**Methods and structure of the study.** During the study, five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of the media league management, media football teams, and sports journalists covering MFL competitions. All interviews were conducted between September and November 2024. The



Table 1. Data on the interviews conducted

Informant's code	Informant status	Format of the event	Duration
I 1	Creative Producer of the Media Football Team	Full-time	1 hour 35 minutes
I 2	Technical Director of MFL	Full-time	30 min.
I 3	SMM specialist MLF	Full-time	25 min.
I 4	Press attach of the media football club, author of the sports Telegram channel	Full-time	43 min.
I 5	MFL commentator and media football team goalkeeper	Full-time	31 min.

guide included three sets of questions, each of which was designed to reveal different aspects of the MFL's activities. The interviews were conducted on condition of anonymity, so further quotes with the informant's code will be used when describing the results.

**Results and conclusions.** Due to the variety of definitions of media football, it was important for us to first understand how the MFL representatives themselves define this term, what differences they see from professional football competitions. Thus, all informants emphasized a freer format for organizing the tournament, the presence of a bright media component, close attention to the lives of the players themselves and great emotional intensity. As I4 noted, "this is emancipation. Here, even the most reserved professional footballer will sooner or later open up. Each of us is talented, you just need to understand in what. Media football differs from professional football in that here people talk about everything they want. No frills. Everything is in plain sight, as the viewer loves.

This is not the case in professional sports." Opinion of I2: "Media football is a lot of content, availability everywhere, no boundaries and a large number of switches." I1 also noted the attention to the players: "Media football is professional football teams that talk about themselves in the most detailed and open way." However, any content is created taking into account the interests of the audience. According to interviewees, the MFL audience is predominantly men aged 15 to 35. All informants see the main goal of promotion as not only broadcasting interesting original football content, but also getting closer to the viewers. "People like to be involved in projects, people are interested in receiving feedback, being contacted, photographed, and participating in various projects. Media League is the closeness of stars and ordinary people.

This is very attractive. Therefore, our main goal in promotion is to make the viewer feel the club. Feel their involvement in the team" (I4); "the phenomenon of media football popularity is associated with freedom, which consists of several aspects. Firstly, it is

closeness to the body, in fact. Fans can come to the stadium, meet, take pictures, and chat with their idols. There is no FanID here, which is important. Plus, freedom in media football is also freedom of opinion. I think that viewers like the harshness of statements and their frankness, controversy, they like that media football is full of colors, emotions, albeit not always positive, often negative, and these are most often conflicts" (I5).

The informants named social media YouTube and Telegram as the main tools for promoting media football content. At the same time, the latter resource seems to be the most promising to representatives of the MFL, since it is key for the target audience of the league, includes various opportunities for publishing different types of content, interacting with advertisers and other sports channels. As I5 noted, "in media football, the most effective promotion resource is the Telegram channel.

The club's channels, the main dealers of the team's opinions, from where users can go to the "big" video on the YouTube platform." At the same time, an important feature of the MFL content is its focus on the life of the football team players, and not just the broadcast of competitions, which makes viewers get closer to their media idols. This fact forces representatives of the MFL to constantly come up with different ways of interacting with their audience.

For example, a documentary series about the life of the MFL Egrisi team was launched on V. Utkin's YouTube channel. A representative of this team also said that they use streams, during which any viewer can come and ask questions to the team: "We answer them honestly and openly. Plus, throughout the entire time, we very openly reported in our videos what was happening in the team, that is, if there was some kind of conflict, we left it so that people could see what was really going on inside" (I5).

At the same time, all informants noted that not all representatives of the teams are included in the frame, but the most charismatic ones, who are more capable than other representatives of the team to attract the au-



dience ("We pay attention to how he looks and speaks. Charismatic characters who will attract the viewer are always needed in the frame" (I4); "We have, God willing, five such heroes in the team, they are the recognizable faces of the team" (I1)). Partly by the same principle, "media" players are invited to the teams.

An important component of the MFL promotion is the issue of interaction with the media, which, as we assumed, can be of decisive importance for the popularization of media football. All informants expressed their opinion regarding the interest of the media in the events of the Media League. In many cases, it is the media that initiate such media cooperation ("Nobody negotiates, they come themselves, because there is interest" (I2); "We have been and are in very close cooperation with Sport.ru. We have, let's say, a friendly agreement that they support our releases and some of our posts. And we place them on the uniform, their logo.

We have a general conversation where we discuss our plans, what videos we have, when they come out, how we can integrate sports into it" (I5)). I1 noted that there is no close cooperation with the media, although the representative of the MFL (I1) is on friendly terms with many journalists: "now we have chosen a different vector – to work for our audience and for ourselves, so that it is cool, interesting, and fun for us. When you set the task of creating radio content so that the media will notice you, this is wrong."

During the interview, we also tried to find out whether there are any features of preparing MFL content that distinguish it from the content of professional competitions. In this case, I5 noted the importance of using several characters in the frame: "It is more difficult for one to work in the frame. It is much easier to work with two, three, and so on, because these are different voices, different intonations, different people. And the person who watches this video is less likely to get tired."

Another important point is related to the emotions that the organizers of the MFL try to convey to the viewers ("in 80% of cases they are sincere, because people are really worried, and they cannot always control their emotions" (I5)). Moreover, one of the informants (I1) in the question regarding the future of the MFL also outlined a "demand for sincerity" and a move away from excessive media coverage ("I feel that little by little these "throw-ins", "warming up" and other things will go away, because there is no sincerity in this").

According to the informants, these details affect

the content performance indicators (number of views, comments, clicks on links and others), which are paid attention to by sponsors, bookmakers and advertisers.

**Conclusions.** The conducted study allowed us to identify key aspects of the specifics of MFL promotion and the phenomenon of media football popularity in Russia. Thus, one of the key points is the orientation of MFL content to its target audience. This content is related not only to competitions, but also to the life of MFL teams.

Team representatives actively interact with their audience not only offline, but also online, organizing meetings with fans. Secondly, MFL teams are actively present in social media, relying on two resources – Telegram and YouTube. Cooperation with traditional sports media is also used as promotion tools.

The original format of the Media League competitions and, accordingly, creative content that focuses on people, their emotions and informal communication are a key factor in the popularity of the MFL. We believe that individual elements of the media football promotion strategy can be extremely useful in preparing media strategies for professional football teams and, in general, for stimulating interest and developing Russian professional football.

## References

1. Babyuk M.I. Sportivnyy kontent v rossiyskikh SMI v kontekste mediatizatsii sporta: rezul'taty issledovaniya. Mediaskop. 2019. No. 2. URL: <http://www.mediascope.ru/2545>. (Access date: 15.01.2025).
2. Voytik E.A. Sportivnaya mediakommunikatsiya v Rossii v nachale XXI v. Tomsk: Izdatelskiy dom Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2013. 240 p.
3. Danilova M.N. Sport kak mediakommunikatsionnyy fenomen. Voprosy teorii i praktiki zhurnalistsiki 2018. Vol. 7, No. 3. Pp. 519-538.
4. Mikhailov A.V., Kazakov D.A. Prodvizhenie mediynoy futbolnoy ligi Rossii: analiz vozdeystviya v socialnyh setyah. Rossiyskaya shkola svyazey s obshchestvennostyu. 2024. No. 33. URL: <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/prodvizhenie-mediynoy-futbolnoy-ligi-rossii-analiz-vozddeystviya-v-sotsialnyh-setyah> (Accessed: 01.02.2025).
5. Pautov A.D., Valitova N.R. Osobennosti prodvizheniya sfery sporta v seti internet (na primere blogosfery). Nauchnye trudy Sibir. gos. un-ta fizicheskoy kultury i sporta. 2017. Vol. 20. No. 1. Pp. 80-84.