



UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONA

El marketing deportivo en el entorno digital. Un análisis de la gestión de redes sociales en ligas y clubes de Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica

Edgar Romero Jara

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UNIVERSITAT^{DE}
BARCELONA

TESIS DOCTORAL

**“El marketing deportivo en el entorno digital.
Un análisis de la gestión de redes sociales en ligas y clubes de
Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica”.**

Edgar Romero Jara

2024

inefc

Institut Nacional
d'Educació Física
de Catalunya

Barcelona



UNIVERSIDAD DE BARCELONA

Facultad de Educación

Institut Nacional d'Educació Física de Catalunya (INEFC)

Centro de Barcelona

Programa de Doctorado

Actividad Física, Educación Física y Deporte

**“El marketing deportivo en el entorno digital.
Un análisis de la gestión de redes sociales en ligas y clubes de
Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica”.**

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Para optar al título de:

Doctor por la Universidad de Barcelona

Barcelona, 2024

A papá, mamá y hermano, por ser mi inspiración, motivación y fortaleza.

A mi familia, lo más importante de mi vida, por creer en mí siempre.

A mis amigos y amigas, por el apoyo incondicional.

A todas las personas que el deporte ha puesto en mi camino, por vuestra confianza, ayuda y enseñanzas para mi crecimiento personal y profesional.

Esta tesis doctoral ha sido realizada en el Instituto Nacional de Educación Física de Catalunya (INEFC), Centro adscrito a la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad de Barcelona (UB). Edgar Romero Jara ha sido beneficiado de una beca predoctoral otorgada por el Programa Nacional de Becas de Excelencia Académica Carlos Antonio López (BECAL) – Gobierno de Paraguay.

*“Es sencillo hacer cosas, pero hacer las cosas sencillas es lo más difícil que hay (...); las carencias se suplen con imaginación e ilusión (...). Debes estar en el lugar adecuado, en el momento adecuado; ni demasiado pronto ni demasiado tarde.
Salid y disfrutad”*

Hendrik Johannes Cruijff

Agradecimientos.

Esta tesis doctoral, representa uno de los viajes más emocionantes, desafiantes y gratificantes de mi vida. Este documento, ha sido fruto de años de innumerables lecturas; cientos de enriquecedoras conversaciones con otros profesionales, profesores y ejecutivos del sector; decenas de charlas, debates e intercambios de ideas y; finalmente, dedicación, disciplina y método. Sin embargo, esta tesis representa mucho más que eso. Representa el camino recorrido en este apasionante sector.

Me gustaría empezar agradeciendo muy especialmente a mi director de Tesis, Dr. Francesc Solanellas. Una persona y un profesional excepcional. Gracias por la confianza depositada desde el inicio, desde aquella primera videollamada desde Paraguay. Gracias por tu guía y por tenerme siempre presente. Gracias por tu soporte en mis momentos personales difíciles y por tu apoyo durante todo este viaje de crecimiento personal y profesional. Gracias por motivarme a seguir adelante en las pequeñas victorias que íbamos logrando. Gracias por todas las enseñanzas, pero más que todo, por creer en mí en todo momento. Espero de corazón haber retribuido esa confianza con creces y estoy seguro que este no será el final sino el inicio de nuevas aventuras juntos.

Provengo de una familia de deportistas. Mi padre, ha sido jugador de fútbol, representando a mi querido país, Paraguay, a nivel de clubes y selección nacional. Y me ha tocado vivir en diferentes países de Sudamérica durante mi niñez, gracias a su profesión. Y mi madre, aficionada al running, corriendo kilómetros y kilómetros hasta hoy día, a sus 58 años. Recuerdo que mi padre decía siempre que el fútbol había sido su única carta para salir adelante, y que había sido la puerta de salida hacia un futuro mejor, ya que, en ese entonces, tampoco había muchas opciones. Todo ese compromiso, esa entrega y pasión por salir adelante, lo aprendí de ellos, así como su convicción por intentar ser mejor cada día. El deporte ha sido siempre para nosotros un medio de superación y una herramienta para ayudar a los demás.

Por ello y muy especialmente: gracias papá, gracias mamá. Blas y Nimia, gracias por mostrarme el camino, por inculcarme siempre la importancia de la formación y el aprendizaje continuo y por transmitirme este amor por el deporte. Han sido siempre mi motivación, inspiración y modelo a seguir. Gracias a mi hermano, Blas “Beto”, por ser un verdadero gran compañero y un amigo como pocos. Gracias familia por estar siempre sin pedir nada a cambio, por vuestro aliento, por vuestra contención, por vuestra confianza. Los 10.000km de distancia entre España y Paraguay parecen nada cuando hablo con ustedes. Gracias por estar conmigo sin condiciones y por creer plenamente en mí. Nada de esto lo pude haber logrado sin ustedes.

He tenido la suerte de haber vivido una carrera futbolística que me ha formado en carácter y me ha servido para adquirir valores del deporte y aplicarlo a mi vida cotidiana, laboral y familiar, tales como el trabajo en equipo, la ética, la responsabilidad y el compromiso, así como la importancia de disfrutar del proceso. Todo esto mientras en simultaneo, lo compaginaba con mis estudios universitarios, con los retos y dificultades que eso trae consigo. Si bien este paso por el fútbol profesional se ha visto afectado por muchos traspiés que me impidieron llegar a lo más alto en este deporte, como las lesiones frecuentes y otras circunstancias extradeporativas, me quedo con el aprendizaje y los amigos, que me ha dejado esa hermosa experiencia, hoy muchos de ellos jugadores o entrenadores profesionales. Y sin saberlo en su momento, me ha permitido entender los desafíos por la que la industria atraviesa “desde dentro”, y tener esta visión holística dentro y fuera del campo de juego, lo que conlleva

una ventaja diferencial importante. Por lo tanto, gracias a todos y cada uno de los compañeros, entrenadores, dirigentes y trabajadores de los distintos clubes que me ha tocado ser parte, por vuestra amistad y por contribuir a mi crecimiento personal y profesional.

El deporte y la educación han estado muy vinculados siempre en mi vida. Y gracias a ello, he podido continuar con mi formación. Debido a mi sobresaliente desempeño deportivo, he obtenido becas tanto en el colegio como en la universidad durante mis estudios de grado, formando parte de las selecciones de fútbol representando a la universidad, lo que me ha permitido culminar mis estudios de manera sobresaliente, más allá de que en ese entonces, no tenía enfocado enfocar mi carrera en el ámbito de los negocios, el marketing y la gestión deportiva. Agradezco a cada uno de mis compañeros, profesores y profesoras, quienes me impulsaron a pesar de las dificultades a seguir adelante y que, gracias a eso, pude encaminar mi carrera hacia lo que hoy hago y disfruto hacer.

Toda esta suma de factores, sumada a mi natural deseo de contribuir socialmente todo lo que el deporte me ha dado y me sigue dando, ha sido fundamental para ser adjudicado con la Beca de Excelencia Carlos Antonio López -BECAL-, el programa de becas otorgado por gobierno de Paraguay, de gran exigencia y prestigio. Muchas gracias a BECAL, y a todos los que formaron y forman parte de esta institución: Federico Mora, Liz Garcete, María José Benítez, Rebeca Ortega, Mónica Basualdo, Víctor Aguilera, Carlos Oliveira, Lilian Guccione, Lourdes Santacruz, Augusto Ferreira, María Luisa caballero, Lorena Milessi, Eberlin Benítez, y todo el equipo humano que actualmente conforma esta institución. Valoro vuestro acompañamiento, cuidado y atenciones durante todos estos años.

Así también, agradezco al Instituto Nacional de Educación Física de Catalunya -INEFC-, por abrirme las puertas de la casa y haberme dejado ser partícipe de esta prestigiosa institución. Han sido años maravillosos rodeado de un excelente equipo humano. Gracias por vuestra hospitalidad, por vuestro trabajo y por habernos hecho disfrutar del proceso, en especial a Maribel Pérez, Míriam Rocher, Aina Solà, Diego Chaverri (como subdirector de investigación); a las compañeras de la biblioteca Gloria, Alba y Mónica; y por supuesto a Carles Ventura, Eduard Inglés, Ingrid Hinojosa, Pau Mateu, Susanna Soler y el cuerpo docente de esta casa de estudios. A los compañeros y compañeras del “Grup d’Investigació Social i Educativa” en especial a Joshua, Aaron, Joana, Maricarmen y Xènia. Me han hecho sentir como en casa desde el día uno y con orgullo puedo decir que me siento parte de la familia INEFC.

Gracias también a Johan Cruyff Institute, mi otra casa, por vuestro apoyo permanente durante todo este proceso. Cristina, Víctor, Mariel, de corazón muchas gracias.

A todas las personas que han colaborado y participado activamente en los estudios que conforman esta tesis. En especial a mis compañeros co-autores de artículos: Joshua Muñoz y Samuel López Carril. Ha sido una experiencia de aprendizaje única gracias a vosotros. Gracias por vuestro interés, acompañamiento y trabajo en equipo. Mis agradecimientos también a Dimitrios Kolyperas y en particular a Christos Anagnatopoulous, por su apertura, consejos y confianza. Ha sido una gran experiencia haber compartido con cada uno de vosotros.

A los expertos y expertas que contribuyeron a este trabajo, así como a las entidades que dedicaron su tiempo, recursos y experiencias para enriquecer los estudios que componen la presente tesis doctoral.

A mis amigos y amigas de distintas partes del mundo, quienes estuvieron apoyándome durante todos estos años, gracias por creer en mí y sus muestras permanentes de cariño.

A Noelia, gracias por tu apoyo incondicional, por estar siempre, por permitirme recorrer parte de este camino juntos, y, sobre todo, por tanto amor, comprensión e inspiración. Una aventura más juntos, de las muchas que espero seguir recorriendo contigo. Gracias por impulsarme a ser mejor cada día.

Muchas han sido las personas que me han contribuido enormemente con sus enseñanzas a lo largo de este viaje por el sector deportivo y en concreto en la realización de la presente tesis doctoral. Gracias por todo el apoyo que me han brindado a lo largo de estos años, a todos y todas aquellas personas que han hecho de este camino algo inolvidable. Este trabajo es el reflejo de una comunidad que cree en el valor del conocimiento y el poder transformador del deporte.

A todos ustedes, mi eterno agradecimiento.

Resumen.

En un contexto digital globalizado y en constante evolución, caracterizado por el auge tecnológico, el marketing deportivo enfrenta el reto de "conectar" eficazmente con los aficionados y aficionadas. En este sentido, las redes sociales cumplen un papel fundamental. La presente tesis doctoral aborda un análisis evolutivo sobre las estrategias de redes sociales en entidades deportivas, específicamente en ligas y clubes de fútbol, proporcionando un marco analítico que integra factores geográficos y de múltiples plataformas para optimizar el *engagement* entre afición y entidad deportiva.

La metodología adoptada para este estudio comprende un análisis de contenido de 36.209 posts en redes sociales de entidades deportivas de fútbol a nivel global, con un enfoque mixto que incluye tanto la revisión de literatura existente como la implementación de un instrumento de observación diseñado y validado para categorizar y cuantificar el *engagement* en posts de Facebook, Twitter y Instagram. Este enfoque se divide en una fase exploratoria y otra comparativa, abarcando tanto ligas como clubes de fútbol en regiones de Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica.

Los resultados destacan cinco áreas relevantes de estudio en estas entidades: "Deportiva", "Marketing", "Institucional", "ESG" y "Comercial". Adicionalmente, los hallazgos indican que la calidad del contenido es más determinante que la frecuencia de publicaciones para impulsar el *engagement*. Se identificaron además combinaciones de formatos específicos que potencian la interacción, siendo "texto/imagen" y "texto/video" los más efectivos. Instagram sobresale como la plataforma líder en generación de *engagement*, y contenidos específicos que favorecen el *engagement* de acuerdo a la red social. Se observó una tendencia creciente en mensajes tipo "ESG", con tasas de interacción comparables a las de contenido "Marketing" y "Deportivo", mientras que los mensajes "Institucionales" se mantienen en general constantes y los "Comerciales" presentan potencial de crecimiento. Se observó que las estrategias de gestión de redes sociales varían según la región pero logran tasas de *engagement* similares.

Esta tesis doctoral ofrece contribuciones significativas para la literatura académica y la práctica profesional. Se distingue por su enfoque simultáneo multirregional y multiplataforma, siendo una de las primeras en explorar empíricamente el uso óptimo de redes sociales para amplificar el *engagement* en el sector deportivo a través de diversas geografías. La investigación subraya la importancia de contenido de alta calidad y una combinación óptima de formatos para maximizar el *engagement* con los aficionados y aficionadas, proporcionando a las organizaciones deportivas un conjunto de prácticas recomendadas para mejorar la eficiencia y efectividad de sus estrategias de marketing digital.

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Abreviaturas

ACB:	Asociación de Clubes de Baloncesto, Liga de Baloncesto Profesional de España
BECAL:	Becas de Excelencia Carlos Antonio López, Gobierno de Paraguay
CEICGC:	Comitè d'Ètica d'Investigacions Clíniques de l'Administració Esportiva de Catalunya
CONCACAF:	Confederación de Norteamérica, Centroamérica y el Caribe de Fútbol
CONMEBOL:	Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol
EL:	Euroliga
FIFA:	Federación Internacional de Fútbol Asociación
GISEAFE:	Grup d'Investigació Social i Educativa de l'Activitat Física i l'Esport
INEFC:	Institut Nacional d'Educació Física
JCR:	Journal Citation Ranking
LL:	LaLiga, Liga de Fútbol Profesional de España
NBA:	National Basketball Association, Liga de Baloncesto Profesional de Estados Unidos
SD:	Standard Deviation
SJR:	Scimago Journal Ranking
SPSS:	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UB:	Universitat de Barcelona
UEFA CL:	Union of European Football Association Champions League
UEFA:	Union of European Football Association

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

1.1. Justificación de la investigación.

1.2. Estructura de la tesis doctoral.

1.1. Justificación de la investigación.

En un contexto de auge tecnológico y alta competitividad organizativa (Ratten, 2020), las herramientas digitales han pasado de ser un complemento esencial a elementos estratégicos y operativos cruciales en las organizaciones deportivas (Stegmann et al., 2021). Los aficionados demandan cada vez más una conexión con sus atletas y equipos favoritos (Su et al., 2020) a través de canales digitales como las redes sociales, los podcasts (Rohden et al., 2023) o los Esports (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Jordan-Vallverdú et al., 2024), entre otros. El mundo digitalizado de hoy presenta, por tanto, una oportunidad para que marcas, patrocinadores, propiedades deportivas y otras partes interesadas interactúen en un sector complejo y cargado de emociones (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010; Su et al., 2022) para aficionados de distintas generaciones de edad (Sheldon et al., 2021). Entender y conocer a los aficionados (Kolyperas et al., 2019) es uno de los principales objetivos de toda organización deportiva. En este sentido, las redes sociales se han convertido en una fuerza omnipresente tanto en nuestra sociedad como en el ámbito del deporte (Hull y Abeza, 2021) y desempeñan un papel fundamental debido a su capacidad para llegar más rápidamente a múltiples audiencias y generar un sentimiento de conexión con los aficionados a través de un elemento de medición clave: el *engagement* (Doyle et al., 2022). Las organizaciones deportivas, invierten tiempo, personas y recursos en la gestión de los medios sociales para alcanzar su posicionamiento de marca y sus objetivos comerciales y de comunicación (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018), siendo Facebook, Twitter y, más recientemente, Instagram, los más utilizados (Abeza et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2020). Sin embargo, el potencial real de las redes sociales y su uso óptimo aún plantea muchas preguntas por responder, entre ellos, el impacto real y la eficacia de los contenidos publicados por las organizaciones deportivas. Además, no se han abordado las posibles diferencias en la implicación de los mensajes al comparar simultáneamente los contenidos generados por las ligas y clubes de fútbol en diversos medios sociales (por ejemplo, Facebook, Twitter e Instagram) de distintas partes del mundo, desde una perspectiva global, así como un análisis comparativo entre organizaciones de fútbol de diferentes regiones caracterizadas por la elevada popularidad de este deporte.

Esto constituye una laguna en la literatura que puede abordarse desde la perspectiva del marketing deportivo, en concreto desde el marketing relacional y la gestión deportiva. Por lo tanto, la identificación de estos elementos críticos generados por las organizaciones de fútbol en sus perfiles oficiales en las redes sociales puede ayudarles a mejorar sus estrategias de

marketing y a apoyar mejor a sus seguidores. A día de hoy, las investigaciones empíricas se han basado en entidades deportivas muy específicas como un club de fútbol, una federación o una liga, no así desde una perspectiva global que permita una visualización y comparación entre ligas y clubes de fútbol en determinados momentos homogéneos en una era donde la interrelación e interconexión entre regiones y mercados deportivos se torna inevitable y en constante progreso.

En consecuencia y partiendo de esta necesidad y oportunidad de mejora en la gestión, considerando la limitante de estudios previos en sobre el estado en cuestión, se considera necesario ampliar la literatura sobre la gestión de las redes sociales en clubes y ligas deportivas, por lo que esta tesis doctoral aborda los siguientes aspectos: (1) diseñar y aplicar de manera exploratoria una herramienta práctica de recolección y análisis de contenido en redes sociales, en base a estudios previos en el campo, las prácticas empíricas del sector y los softwares vigentes en la actualidad, que permita obtener un diagnóstico sobre las estrategias actuales así como sobre su efectividad; (2) identificar los elementos críticos, así como las diferentes variables y combinaciones que contribuyen a un *engagement* óptimo entre entidad y aficionado en organizaciones deportivas, específicamente en fútbol y que además permita una visión multirregional, considerando las tres principales regiones de fútbol en base a su popularidad: a) Europa, b) Sudamérica y c) Norteamérica, y multiplataforma (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2021), teniendo en cuenta las plataformas de redes sociales más utilizadas en común tradicionalmente por estas entidades: a) Facebook, b) Twitter y c) Instagram; y por último (3) proponer y recomendar acciones en consecuencia que puedan contribuir a un mayor y mejor acercamiento con los aficionados mediante el *engagement* como un factor principal entre usuarios y entidades a través de las redes sociales.

Por lo tanto, la presente tesis doctoral presenta la siguiente pregunta de investigación:

RQ. ¿Cuáles son las principales características de los posts en Facebook, Twitter e Instagram de las ligas y clubes de fútbol de élite de Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica que generan mayor *engagement* entre los aficionados y aficionadas en las redes sociales?

Basado en el marco teórico del marketing relacional y otras teorías de apoyo, además de la evidencia empírica y reportes de consultoras deportivas reconocidas, el objetivo principal de esta tesis doctoral es llevar a cabo un análisis exploratorio descriptivo en primera instancia, tomando el momento coyuntural de la pandemia del COVID-19 como una primera

aproximación aplicado a ligas de fútbol y baloncesto; y comparativo desde una perspectiva analítica más profunda en segunda instancia, incorporando otras variables como la cuantificación de las interacciones y ratios de *engagement* generado a través de las publicaciones en redes sociales Facebook, Twitter e Instagram de los clubes de fútbol de élite de Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica.

Al mismo tiempo, la presente tesis doctoral pretende, mediante el abordaje, la metodología y las tipologías propuestas, así como los resultados obtenidos, y teniendo en consideración las limitaciones propias de este enfoque investigativo, sentar las bases para futuras líneas de investigación considerando las tecnologías emergentes y la permanente evolución de los hábitos de consumo de los aficionados y aficionadas en el entorno digital.

1.2. Estructura de la tesis doctoral.

La presente tesis doctoral está conformada por 8 capítulos y ha sido realizada en el marco de compendio de artículos científicos, siguiendo una secuencia estrecha y coherente con el tema principal y los objetivos generales y específicos.

En el primer capítulo, se presenta una introducción de la investigación, así como se exponen la justificación y la estructura de la presente memoria para facilitar su lectura. En el segundo capítulo se detalla el marco teórico en el que se basa este trabajo, narrando un hilo evolutivo de los estudios previos que guardan relación con los estudios que confirman la presente tesis doctoral y las bases teóricas en las que se enmarcan los estudios aquí expuestos sobre el marketing digital en el deporte y las redes sociales, por un lado, así como las metodologías y técnicas utilizadas en la literatura en el campo de estudio. En el tercer capítulo se presentan los objetivos generales y específicos de la tesis doctoral, así como los estudios que la componen. En el cuarto capítulo se explica la metodología general utilizada en los estudios, haciendo hincapié en las técnicas y enfoques que cada artículo científico ha adoptado para su desarrollo, detallando aspectos como los instrumentos utilizados, la muestra, así como los procedimientos y métodos para la recogida y el análisis de datos. En el quinto capítulo se presentan con detalle los estudios que confirman la presente memoria de tesis. Estos estudios se encuentran estructurados de la siguiente manera: a) revisión bibliográfica donde se presentan los principales elementos teóricos y conceptuales, centrándose en los medios sociales y su relación con la teoría del marketing en el deporte y el fútbol; b) aspectos metodológicos que han guiado el proceso del estudio, incluyendo la muestra, el instrumento, el procedimiento de investigación y el análisis de datos; c) los principales resultados del estudio; d) la discusión que examina críticamente los resultados en el contexto de la literatura existente, ofreciendo implicaciones prácticas y teóricas tanto para académicos como para profesionales y por último; e) las conclusiones finales, complementando con las limitaciones y futuras líneas de investigación propuestas. En el sexto capítulo se exponen los resultados generales de los tres estudios. En el séptimo capítulo se elabora una discusión general de los resultados obtenidos en cada uno de los estudios realizados, así como una única reflexión cohesiva entre los tres estudios. En el octavo capítulo, se exponen las conclusiones derivadas de la tesis doctoral, además de las limitaciones propias de esta investigación y se describe la necesidad de abordar futuras líneas de investigación. Finalmente, se exponen la bibliografía y los anexos.

2. MARCO TEÓRICO

2.1. Las redes sociales y el deporte, una simbiosis de gran potencial.

2.1.1. Conceptualización de redes sociales.

2.1.2. Marketing deportivo, redes sociales y deporte.

2.1.3. Impacto de la pandemia del COVID-19 en la industria deportiva.

2.1.4. Enfoques emergentes en el entorno digital.

2.2. El marketing deportivo y las redes sociales en el fútbol.

2.2.1. Evolución de las redes sociales aplicados al fútbol.

2.3.2. Facebook, Twitter e Instagram, las redes sociales deportivas tradicionales.

2.2.3. Órganos rectores del fútbol por regiones.

2.3. Teoría del marketing relacional aplicada al deporte.

2.3.1. Conceptualización y relevancia del marketing relacional en la industria deportiva.

2.3.2. Órganos rectores del fútbol por regiones.

2.3.3. La era del “Sportainment”: el engagement y el análisis de contenido.

MARCO TEÓRICO

2.1. Las redes sociales y el deporte, una simbiosis de gran potencial.

2.1.1. Conceptualización de redes sociales.

Las redes sociales son un término colectivo que engloba las herramientas, plataformas y aplicaciones mediáticas que permiten a los consumidores conectarse, comunicarse y colaborar (Williams y Chinn, 2010), definidos además como "un grupo de aplicaciones basadas en Internet que se apoyan en los fundamentos ideológicos y tecnológicos de la Web 2.0, y que permiten la creación y el intercambio de contenidos generados por los usuarios" (Kaplan y Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Se han integrado profundamente en nuestras vidas, constituyendo un elemento esencial del panorama mediático y comunicativo (Kaplan, 2015) y fomentan la interacción entre los usuarios y la organización y proporcionan información de los clientes y de la organización más rápidamente que a través de los medios convencionales (Kümpel et al., 2015; Shilbury et al., 2014) una consideración fundamental en el ámbito del marketing (Vander Schee et al., 2020). Además, los medios sociales son considerados un fenómeno de masas por su capacidad de transmitir información de forma ágil e interactiva (Flores-Vivar, 2009), así como una forma única de comunicación que trasciende las fronteras geográficas y sociales a través de la comunicación instantánea de información (Filo et al., 2015), utilizada en diferentes sectores para actividades de marketing (Chen, 2023), brand equity y fidelización (Malarvizhi et al., 2022) para entender el comportamiento del consumidor, el posicionamiento de la marca, las oportunidades de ingresos empresariales y la comunicación social (Ramos et al., 2019). El aspecto emocional del uso de los medios sociales tiene una relevancia significativa dentro de la psicología, especialmente en el contexto del comportamiento humano (You y Liu, 2022; Zyoud et al., 2018). Esta pertinencia se deriva no solo de la integración de estas herramientas digitales en la vida cotidiana de los individuos, transformando la comunicación, y del creciente número de horas que los individuos jóvenes les dedican (Lin et al., 2019), sino también debido a su potencial influencia en el bienestar tanto de los individuos como de los aficionados al deporte (Masciantonio et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022).

2.1.2. Marketing deportivo, redes sociales y deporte.

En el ámbito de la del marketing deportivo y la gestión del deporte, las redes sociales asumen un papel fundamental (Einsle et al., 2023) y ha acogido la proliferación de las redes sociales, estableciéndose como una faceta inseparable de la cultura deportiva (Abeza y Sanderson, 2022), ya que en esta era digital sirven para tender puentes entre las ligas deportivas, los clubes, los deportistas y sus seguidores, y ha evolucionado hasta convertirse en una relación

mutuamente beneficiosa, en la que estas herramientas digitales han surgido como activos estratégicos para que las entidades deportivas fomenten y mantengan relaciones sólidas con los aficionados y aficionadas (Pegoraro et al., 2017). Debido al alto contenido gráfico, interactivo y visual de los medios sociales, su uso en la industria del deporte, un sector de fuerte influencia emocional, se ha vuelto más relevante y omnipresente en la última década (Hull & Abeza, 2021), donde el interés del espectador se ha vuelto crucial y cada vez más exigente (Nisar et al., 2018). Además, en un sector deportivo polifacético y cargado de emociones (Su et al., 2022), en el que comprender y manejar eficazmente las emociones es una faceta fundamental del comportamiento del consumidor (Baier-Fuentes, 2020), establecer conexiones significativas con los aficionados se convierte en un objetivo primordial para las organizaciones deportivas. En este sentido, las plataformas de medios sociales desempeñan un papel fundamental para llegar rápidamente a públicos diversos y fomentar el compromiso (McCarthy et al., 2022). Dada la naturaleza dinámica de las redes sociales y su creciente importancia dentro de la industria, los estudiosos de la gestión deportiva han puesto foco a su utilización y aplicaciones potenciales (Abeza, 2023; Filo et al., 2015). Estas herramientas son fundamentales para ayudar a los gestores deportivos en diversos ámbitos, como la participación de los aficionados (Vale y Fernandes, 2017), el patrocinio (Balliau et al., 2021), la creación de marcas (Beissel et al., 2022), la comunicación con las partes interesadas (Guzmán et al., 2021) e incluso el espíritu empresarial (Ratten, 2023). Esta búsqueda es especialmente crucial teniendo en cuenta la rápida evolución del panorama tecnológico y la intensificación de la competencia entre las organizaciones deportivas (Ratten, 2020), que han subrayado el cambio de las herramientas digitales de recursos suplementarios a componentes integrales y estratégicos dentro de estas entidades deportivas (Stegmann et al., 2023). Las redes sociales, directa e indirectamente, impactan en la generación de ingresos y favorecen la negociación con patrocinadores debido a su notoriedad, visibilidad y alcance (Mastromartino & Naraine, 2022; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015). Por ello, se consideran una herramienta clave para construir y mejorar la reputación de una marca (Maderer et al., 2018) y una plataforma ideal para publicitar y aumentar la visibilidad de una marca o empresa, así como para interactuar y analizar las acciones de sus fans y seguidores (Abeza et al., 2017; García-Fernández et al., 2015; Herrera-Torres et al., 2017). Las redes sociales también se han utilizado en la educación deportiva en los últimos años (Sanz-Labrador et al., 2021). Además, su aplicación es cada vez más común en la construcción y difusión relacionada con la responsabilidad social (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2017; López-Carril & Anagnostopoulos, 2020; Sharpe et al., 2020). De este modo, también se han convertido en una herramienta clave para interactuar con los

aficionados, abordar un enfoque social reforzado y conseguir el compromiso de deportistas, patrocinadores y autoridades (Einsle et al., 2023; Oviedo et al., 2014; Su et al., 2020). Los medios sociales facilitan una difusión más amplia, fomentando una percepción positiva de los clubes de fútbol por parte de la sociedad y los aficionados. Más allá del entorno digital, Cuesta-Valiño et al., (2021) señalaron la relevancia de considerar el emergente enfoque de gestión sostenible para medir los objetivos de las organizaciones deportivas.

Las diferencias que hacen única y particular a la industria del deporte son, entre otras: resultados y cambios inmediatos (Davis & Hilbert, 2013) además de que cada decisión está "en el punto de mira" del público (aludiendo a la complejidad de aficionados, deportistas, entrenadores, medios de comunicación y otros stakeholders). Así, atletas, equipos y organizaciones deportivas vienen utilizando los medios sociales como parte de sus esfuerzos de relaciones públicas y comunicación (Filo et al., 2015; Pegoraro, 2010; Yan et al., 2019) para relacionarse con sus socios y aficionados (Zakerian et al., 2022), promoviendo interacciones y aumentando el compromiso con el producto deportivo, así como con el equipo en general (Abeza et al., 2019; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015). Por lo tanto, existe una necesidad imperiosa de seguir investigando estas herramientas digitales, especialmente en relación con la interacción y el *engagement* en la industria deportiva.

2.1.3. Impacto de la pandemia del COVID-19 en la industria deportiva.

La pandemia de COVID-19 provocó una crisis económica debida a un alto nivel de incertidumbre (Nicola et al., 2020), cambios en la comunicación digital (Nguyen et al., 2020) y estrategias de marca en diferentes industrias, que también ha repercutido en el ámbito deportivo. Sólo al inicio de la pandemia, la industria del deporte proyectaba una pérdida de 15.000 millones de dólares en términos de patrocinios, derechos de televisión y otros ingresos (Somoggi, 2020); 1,9 millones de dólares en franquicias de baloncesto de EE.UU.; más de 2.000 millones de dólares en turismo relacionado con los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio; 5.000 millones de dólares de los Juegos Olímpicos de EE.UU. (Jaramillo, 2020), y 5.000 millones de euros en el negocio del fútbol europeo (KPMG, 2021). Los gobiernos aplicaron una serie de estrategias centradas en medidas de mitigación para la comunidad (Ebrahim et al., 2020) como la cancelación de eventos en el lugar por el alto potencial de propagación; restricciones de viaje; el uso de medidas de distanciamiento social para reducir el contacto directo entre las personas de la comunidad; entre otras. En consecuencia, todas las actividades físicas en grupo, los eventos presenciales y los deportes de equipo se restringieron repentina e indefinidamente

en muchos países (Hammami et al., 2022). Con la pandemia del COVID-19 y ante la ausencia de competencias, las organizaciones deportivas, con sus eventos cancelados o aplazados, tuvieron que reorientar sus estrategias y reinventarse (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021).

2.1.4. Enfoques emergentes en el entorno digital.

Aunque la determinación del impacto real de la COVID-19 aún está en estudio (McCloskey et al., 2020), los estudios previos muestran la importancia de la generación de contenidos, la interacción con los espectadores y el aumento de los recursos en las plataformas digitales para la generación de ingresos y la activación del patrocinio. En un contexto pandémico, las organizaciones deportivas identificaron el poder de las redes sociales para difundir información incluso más rápido que el propio virus (Depoux et al., 2020). Además, los contenidos generados por las organizaciones deportivas y los propios deportistas han cobrado relevancia, así como un emergente enfoque social para generar cercanía y empatía con la audiencia y la comunidad deportiva digital. Sharpe et al., (2020) destacaron la relevancia de que atletas y organizaciones deportivas se unan a la lucha contra la pandemia a través de contenidos virales en redes sociales, recaudación de fondos y socialización online. Además, en la literatura encontramos autores como González y Tortolero, (2020); Leng y Phua, (2020); Piedra, (2020) que mostraron el impacto de COVID-19 en la gestión digital en el deporte considerando diferentes grupos de interés (deportistas, instituciones o marcas). Como objetivos comerciales e institucionales, varias organizaciones y deportistas aprovecharon la oportunidad de utilizar los medios sociales durante la pandemia de COVID-19 para defender y promover un comportamiento socialmente responsable entre sus seguidores (Sharpe et al., 2020). En un entorno pandémico, la aproximación a los contenidos en el entorno digital y en ausencia de competencias (canceladas o aplazadas) se convirtió en un reto. Durante la etapa inicial de la pandemia, los acuerdos comerciales sufrieron los efectos de la incertidumbre, las organizaciones deportivas buscaron mitigar el impacto en términos de audiencia y el resurgimiento de una visión social se hizo inminente. Por lo tanto, las redes sociales se convierten en un poderoso aliado en este periodo y vaticinan un cambio inminente sobre la relevancia del entorno digital con los espectadores. El análisis de contenido mediante categorización y los métodos utilizados en estudios anteriores son relevantes en este periodo para el propósito de esta investigación como punto de partida para explorar perspectivas consideradas en el pasado y desarrollar un marco evolutivo y adaptable para profesionales y académicos desde la perspectiva de las organizaciones deportivas.

De esta manera, en una crisis sin precedentes que coexiste con el pleno desarrollo de esta tesis doctoral, además su estrecha relación con el impacto mediático, deportivo y digital generado y más allá de la severa implicación social y de salud, esta coyuntura ha sido fundamental en la fase exploratoria del diseño y aplicación del instrumento utilizado en los estudios que componen este trabajo, así como en la consideración de nuevos enfoques como el aspecto social y de sostenibilidad en el entorno digital.

2.2. El marketing deportivo y las redes sociales en el fútbol.

2.2.1. Evolución de las redes sociales aplicados al fútbol.

En la literatura, existen estudios que hacen referencia a la exploración de la intersección de las redes sociales y el deporte. El fútbol, especialmente desde el punto de vista de los clubes y las ligas, emerge como una disciplina deportiva destacada que ha recibido una atención sustancial por parte de los investigadores por su gran potencial (por ejemplo, Krzyżowski y Strzelecki, 2023; Faria et al., 2022). Este estatus preeminente de las redes sociales en el fútbol, como sostienen Petersen-Wagner y Ludvigsen (2023), se entrelaza con la transformación de las dinámicas de producción y consumo del fútbol, lo que ha reconfigurado la relación entre clubes, aficionados y periodistas. Este deporte, reconocido por su incomparable atractivo internacional y mundial, sirve de imán para importantes inversiones de marcas prominentes (Ginesta, 2013) y tiene el potencial de monetización a través de patrocinios (Parganas et al., 2017), aunque los gestores deportivos también deben navegar por los desafíos que plantean las comunidades contrarias a la marca impulsadas por las redes sociales (Popp et al., 2016). Este atractivo se amplifica aún más a través de eventos deportivos como la Copa Mundial de la FIFA y las ligas internacionales de primer nivel, como la Premier League en Inglaterra, la Bundesliga en Alemania, La Liga en España, la Serie A en Italia y la Ligue 1 en Francia, que generan enormes niveles de participación de la audiencia y ejercen una influencia económica sustancial (Aguiar-Noury y García-del-Barrio, 2022). La gestión de los medios sociales y otras plataformas digitales por parte de las organizaciones deportivas ha sido estudiada desde diferentes perspectivas: desde deportistas (Hayes, 2020; Sharpe et al., 2020; Witkemper et al., 2012), equipos y clubes deportivos (Achen, 2019; Jordan et al., 2017; Machado et al., 2020; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015), hasta Federaciones Internacionales (Burson Cohn & Wolfe Sports, 2019; Ginesta, 2009; Vilanova, 2009; Winand et al., 2019).

En el caso de las redes sociales, superestrellas como Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi o Neymar tienen millones de seguidores en sus cuentas oficiales. Lo mismo ocurre con clubes de primer

nivel como el Real Madrid, el FC Barcelona, el Manchester United, el París Saint-Germain y la Juventus, que, según el CIES Football Observatory (2023), ocupan los cinco primeros puestos entre los clubes de fútbol con más seguidores en las redes sociales del mundo. Las principales organizaciones deportivas de fútbol, conscientes del potencial de los medios sociales y dado el papel que desempeñan las ligas de fútbol en la configuración del éxito de la organización de torneos, el fomento de las relaciones con las partes interesadas, la realización de estrategias de marketing y el fomento de las conexiones con los aficionados, se han embarcado en la gestión de sus propias cuentas en los medios sociales para construir y reforzar su marca y responder a los cambios continuos y dinámicos de un mercado cada vez más digitalizado (McCarthy et al., 2022; Petersen-Wagner y Ludvigsen, 2023). Tanto si la atención se centra en los clubes de fútbol como en los futbolistas, como afirman McCarthy et al. (2014), los clubes de fútbol deben abordar con habilidad los retos y las oportunidades que ofrecen las redes sociales. Para ello, no sólo es necesario analizar cómo aprovechan los clubes las redes sociales, sino también profundizar en la gestión de las redes sociales por parte de las ligas profesionales en las que participan, con el contenido como foco principal.

2.2.2. Facebook, Twitter e Instagram: las redes sociales deportivas tradicionales.

Varios autores han analizado y clasificado el contenido publicado en las redes sociales con el fin de observar las estrategias seguidas por las organizaciones deportivas y redefinir la relevancia en la estrategia de marketing global, tanto en Facebook (Achen, 2019; Meng et al., 2015; Pegoraro et al., 2017; Thongmak, 2022; Waters et al., 2009), Twitter (Blaszka et al., 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Winand et al., 2019; Witkemper et al., 2012) e Instagram (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Machado et al., 2020; Zakerian et al., 2022), por la relevancia en el uso de estas plataformas en el sector deportivo. Waters et al., (2009) examinaron el contenido de los medios sociales basándose en tres dimensiones: difusión de la información, divulgación e interactividad. Los autores, en lugar de centrarse en los principios de diseño, se centraron en el uso real de los medios sociales por parte de las organizaciones para determinar cómo se comunicaban con el público. Josh y Maggie (2009) adaptaron estas dimensiones para medir el estilo de comunicación y el compromiso en Twitter. A su vez, Hambrick et al., (2010) clasificaron el contenido de Twitter en seis categorías: interactividad, diversión, intercambio de información, contenido, seguidores y promocional. En su investigación, Lovejoy y Saxton, (2012) clasificaron el contenido de las redes sociales en función de tres categorías: información, comunidad y acción. Blaszka et al., (2012) crearon categorías basadas en el enfoque de usos y gratificaciones para estudiar la comunicación

deportiva en Twitter, que incluían interactividad, diversión, intercambio de información, contenido, fan, promoción y combinaciones. Desde el punto de vista del análisis de contenido en Facebook, Tejedor et al., (2020) compararon los ratios de interacción de contenido y *engagement*. Por otro lado, Winand et al., (2019) clasificaron el contenido en cuatro dimensiones: informativo, marketing, personalización y activaciones. Entre todas las plataformas de medios sociales, Facebook, Twitter e Instagram han surgido como los principales canales adoptados por las ligas de fútbol para fomentar la participación en los medios sociales en las últimas dos décadas (Abeza et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2020). La utilización de estas plataformas para establecer conexiones entre los aficionados y los clubes deportivos, lograr el posicionamiento de la marca, alcanzar el éxito comercial y aplicar estrategias de comunicación eficaces ha suscitado una gran atención por parte de los investigadores (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018).

2.2.3. *Órganos rectores del fútbol por regiones.*

La FIFA -Federación Internacional de Fútbol Asociación-, es el órgano rector del fútbol a nivel global y existe para impulsar el desarrollo del juego en todo el mundo. Presta apoyo financiero y logístico a sus 211 federaciones afiliadas a través de diversos programas en diversas áreas. Las asociaciones constituyen las diferentes Confederaciones: la AFC en Asia, la CAF en África, la CONCACAF en la zona de Norte, Centroamérica y Caribe, la CONMEBOL en Sudamérica, la UEFA en Europa y la OFC en Oceanía (Federación Internacional de Fútbol Asociación, n.d.). En esta tesis doctoral se pone énfasis en las regiones de Europa y Sudamérica por su rica historia futbolística y Norteamérica, por el potencial y las acciones que se encuentran desarrollando para potenciar este deporte en la región (véase 4.2. Muestra).

- La UEFA -Union of European Football Association- por sus siglas en inglés, es el organismo rector del fútbol europeo, agrupa a 55 asociaciones nacionales de fútbol en toda Europa (Union of European Football Association, 2019) y cuenta con 5 de las ligas más influyentes a nivel global, conocida como las “big five” (Stenheim et al., 2020), conformada por las ligas de fútbol de Inglaterra, Italia, Francia, España y Alemania. Actualmente tiene su sede central en Nyon, Suiza.
- La CONMEBOL (Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol) es el organismo rector del fútbol sudamericano y está formada por diez Asociaciones Miembro. Es responsable de la organización y gobernanza de los principales torneos internacionales de fútbol sudamericano (Confederación Sudamericana de Fútbol, n.d.). Desde 2016, la CONMEBOL

ha llevado a cabo una serie de reformas estructurales para modernizar su gobierno y sus operaciones, aumentar la competitividad global de sus torneos exclusivos y reforzar su promoción del desarrollo del fútbol mediante el aumento de los ingresos y la inversión, alcanzando cifras récord de audiencia, participación digital, asistencia a los estadios y ventas. Tiene su oficina central en Luque, Paraguay.

- La CONCACAF -Confederación de Fútbol de la Asociación del Norte, Centroamérica y el Caribe-, presta servicios a 41 Asociaciones miembro, siendo México y Estados Unidos, dos de los países de mayor desarrollo del fútbol en la región. CONCACAF brinda liderazgo para una red de competiciones unificadas y actividades de desarrollo que unen a esta diversa región en el fútbol, con los objetivos de promover activamente el acceso universal a este deporte y elevar la calidad del fútbol en toda la Confederación (Confederación de Fútbol de Norteamérica, n.d.). Actualmente cuenta con oficinas en Miami (EE. UU.), Ciudad de Guatemala (Guatemala) y Kingston (Jamaica).

2.3. Teoría del marketing relacional aplicada al deporte.

2.3.1. Conceptualización y relevancia del marketing relacional en la industria deportiva.

La industria del deporte es un mercado de rápido crecimiento y cada vez más diverso en todo el mundo (Kim & Andrew, 2016). El fútbol es uno de los deportes más populares en todo el mundo, así como una manifestación cultural, caracterizada por su alto nivel emocional y su relevancia económica, política y social (Bucher & Eckl, 2022; Petersen-Wagner & Lee Ludvigse, 2022). Sólo en España el sector deportivo genera el 3,3% del Producto Interior Bruto (PIB), del que el 1,37% se produce a través del fútbol (PWC, 2020). La globalización ha exigido una adaptación a todos los niveles debido a la búsqueda incesante de inmediatez y acceso a la información, donde el negocio del deporte se basa cada vez más en las relaciones y la importancia de generar *engagement* (Einsle et al., 2023; Fried & Mumcu, 2017; García-Fernández et al., 2017) es una de las variables más relevantes para generar fidelidad en las organizaciones deportivas (Loranca-Valle et al., 2021; Núñez-Barriopedro et al., 2021). Los consumidores deportivos son vistos como "canales" a través de los cuales se pueden promocionar los productos deportivos (O'Shea & Alonso, 2011), y los aficionados al deporte se han convertido tanto en consumidores como en defensores del producto. Las redes sociales se han convertido en un componente indispensable de las estrategias de comunicación y marketing de los equipos de fútbol (Guzmán et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2022). Esta importancia se magnifica aún más en el contexto de los nuevos ecosistemas digitales, donde

las marcas encuentran oportunidades para interactuar con los consumidores (Wang, 2021), mientras que éstos, a su vez, asumen un papel activo (Vander Schee et al., 2020). Esta participación activa, caracterizada por la colaboración o la coproducción, representa un elemento fundamental del marketing relacional (Barreto, 2015), que sirve de marco para comprender la dinámica de interacción entre las entidades deportivas, los deportistas y otras partes interesadas en el panorama deportivo (por ejemplo, Abeza et al., 2017; Abeza et al., 2019; Doyle et al., 2022; Hambrick y Kang, 2015). Es aquí donde la teoría del marketing relacional nos ayuda a comprender mejor este fenómeno. Como señalan Abeza y Sanderson (2022, p. 287), la teoría del marketing relacional "se basa en la idea de que una relación entre dos partes crea valor adicional para los implicados" y "se centra en establecer, mantener y mejorar asociaciones mutuamente gratificantes". En particular, el marketing relacional se erige como uno de los marcos teóricos más empleados para entender la relación entre los medios sociales y el deporte (Abeza y Sanderson, 2022; Achen, 2020), fundamentado en el establecimiento de conexiones entre las partes implicadas para generar valor añadido (Achen, 2019) tal y como destacan numerosos autores que la han utilizado en sus estudios (por ejemplo, Abeza et al., 2017, 2019, 2020; Su et al., 2020; Williams y Chinn, 2010). Fusionando las raíces de la teoría del marketing relacional (Möller & Halinen, 2000) y las características particulares del sector deportivo, y teniendo en cuenta la perspectiva de las transacciones a corto plazo y los beneficios económicos inmediatos (Abeza et al., 2017), los medios sociales representan oportunidades para un mejor conocimiento de los aficionados, una interacción más avanzada entre el consumidor y la organización, un compromiso eficaz de los aficionados, un uso eficiente de los recursos y una evaluación ágil de la relación entre los aficionados y la organización (Abeza et al., 2019; Abeza et al., 2020). Desde el punto de vista del equipo, cultivar relaciones de alta calidad con los aficionados puede generar una mayor intención de asistir a los partidos, interactuar con el contenido de los aficionados a través de diversos medios de comunicación y comprar productos con licencia. Por todo ello, los medios sociales se convierten así en un canal a través del cual establecer, mantener y cultivar relaciones a largo plazo beneficiosas para ambas partes y en el caso de esta tesis doctoral, entre organizaciones de fútbol y aficionados y aficionadas.

2.3.2. La era del "Sportainment": el engagement y el análisis de contenido.

El "Sportainment" fusiona el deporte y el entretenimiento y permite una redefinición del "tradicional" marketing deportivo, adaptándolo a las nuevas realidades del mercado y aportándole nuevas soluciones de explotación comercial y mediática (Lacasa Blay, 2014). Sin

embargo, este concepto ha tomado mayor fuerza en los últimos años debido al fuerte enfoque digital, las tecnologías emergentes, y el nuevo perfil de los aficionados y aficionadas de querer “ser parte del juego”. En este sentido, las organizaciones redireccionan sus estrategias hacia una tendencia más interactiva, buscando una mayor participación de los consumidores, captando nuevos nichos de mercados y ampliando la audiencia. Desde el punto de vista digital, un área cada vez más explorada en el fútbol es la participación en las redes sociales (Geurin, 2023) por su masividad, la facilidad de interacción y la generación de contenido auténtico, así como la generación de percepción de “cercanía” con las “estrellas”. Es por ello, que el *engagement* se torna un factor determinante en la estrategia de marketing digital actual en organizaciones deportivas. Según Vivek et al. (2014), el concepto de *engagement* del consumidor se refiere a la cantidad de interacciones y conexiones establecidas entre un consumidor o un consumidor potencial y la marca, las actividades o las propuestas ofrecidas por una empresa u organización. Trunfio y Rossi (2021) subrayan la naturaleza multifacética y matizada del *engagement*, que puede abordarse a través de las dimensiones afectiva, cognitiva y conductual. Entre estas dimensiones, el aspecto conductual es el que se discute con más frecuencia en la literatura, a menudo evaluado utilizando métricas que abarcan elementos como me gusta, comentarios o acciones. Por ejemplo, en el ámbito del fútbol, Nisar et al. (2018) descubrieron que el aumento de la interacción entre los consumidores en los perfiles de Facebook de treinta y dos clubes de fútbol participantes en la Copa de Campeones de Europa 2014-2015 se correlacionaba con mayores niveles de interés de los espectadores. Además, Girsang (2021) identificó el *engagement* como el aspecto de las publicaciones en redes sociales de los equipos de fútbol que más influye en la fidelidad de los aficionados. McCarthy et al. (2022) exploraron las actitudes de los clubes de fútbol del Reino Unido hacia la gestión de la marca a través de los medios sociales, revelando cómo estas herramientas son vistas por los clubes de fútbol del Reino Unido como oportunidades para relacionarse con los aficionados y mejorar su *engagement*. Aichner (2019) analizó las publicaciones en Facebook, YouTube, Instagram y Twitter de 78 clubes de fútbol europeos, clasificando el contenido en grupos: 1- Noticias/hechos, 2-Resultados/metapasadas, 3-privados, 4-emocionales y 5-anuncios, destacando que no existen diferencias significativas de *engagement* en función del tema del contenido publicado. En consecuencia, todos los tipos de contenido pueden aspirar a recibir un alto nivel de interacción de los fans, ya sea a través de likes, comentarios o shares. Por el contrario, Krzyżowski y Strzelecki (2023) profundizaron en los factores que influyen en los aficionados polacos al fútbol a la hora de establecer vínculos más fuertes con los clubes a través de las redes sociales, arrojando como resultado que los aficionados desean interactuar con otros

aficionados a través de las redes sociales. Además, los aficionados destacaron su interés por obtener información y entretenimiento. Comprender los factores que impulsan el *engagement* de los aficionados es esencial para que los gestores deportivos optimicen los recursos que los clubes y ligas de fútbol dedican a la gestión de los medios sociales (Vale y Fernandes, 2018). Este conocimiento de las preferencias de los aficionados facilita la promoción de campañas específicas en redes sociales y permite establecer relaciones personalizadas con los aficionados y aficionadas, lo que permiten ejecutar esfuerzos de *engagement* dirigidos, creando oportunidades para una publicidad eficaz (Sussman et al., 2023). Un ejemplo de este fenómeno, es la Kings League en España, fusionando el deporte (una versión adaptada del fútbol) con celebridades, *streamers* (creadores de contenido en vivo mediante diferentes plataformas como Tik Tok, Youtube y Twitch), que permiten a los internautas participar en las reglas, proponer acciones y participar de forma presencial y virtual en estos eventos. La clave de este nuevo concepto se basó en la experiencia inmersiva, la combinación de deportistas profesionales y amateurs con contenido auténtico, y el fuerte enfoque en redes sociales. De hecho, han logrado alcanzar cifras estratosféricas de participación simultánea: 945.000 espectadores en vivo, inclusive mayor que en algunas de las principales ligas europeas de fútbol. Como indican Schäfer y Vögele (2021), los estudiosos de la gestión deportiva poseen una importante capacidad para acceder a volúmenes considerables de mensajes a través de los perfiles públicos de las redes sociales de las entidades deportivas mediante softwares de análisis de cuentas de redes sociales o, como en el caso de la presente tesis doctoral, la extracción de publicaciones pasadas para un escrutinio más individualizado utilizando nuevos instrumentos de recolección y categorización de contenido. Por lo tanto, el análisis de contenido se erige como una de las metodologías más ampliamente exploradas para investigar este fenómeno (Abeza et al., 2015), especialmente en la evaluación del *engagement* en las redes sociales. Los estudios mencionados anteriormente, ponen de manifiesto la importancia de seguir explorando el fenómeno de redes sociales *fan engagement* como perspectiva estratégica (Tafesse & Wien, 2018) y el valor añadido que los medios sociales pueden generar en el deporte.

Así, la presente tesis doctoral, se apoya, entre otros, en la teoría del marketing relacional y el análisis de contenido abordando el factor *engagement* como uno de los elementos fundamentales para comprender mejor cómo los gestores deportivos pueden aprovechar al máximo las posibilidades que ofrecen los medios sociales para generar valor añadido a partir de la interacción entre los aficionados y aficionadas y los clubes de fútbol desde una perspectiva multirregional y multiplataforma.

3. OBJETIVOS

3.1. Objetivos generales.

3.2. Objetivos específicos.

OBJETIVOS

3.1. *Objetivos generales*

La presente tesis doctoral plantea los siguientes objetivos generales:

- 1) Identificar los elementos que influyen en la comprensión del comportamiento de los aficionados y aficionadas en las cuentas oficiales de redes sociales aplicado a organizaciones deportivas mediante una exhaustiva revisión de la literatura.
- 2) Diseñar, validar y aplicar un instrumento de recolección y análisis de posts en Facebook, Twitter e Instagram que permita visualizar la situación actual de las organizaciones deportivas en el entorno digital desde la perspectiva de las redes sociales.
- 3) Elaborar propuestas acerca de los aspectos a tener en cuenta para generar un mayor *engagement* en clubes y ligas de fútbol desde una perspectiva multirregional y multiplataforma.

A partir de los objetivos generales planteados en esta tesis doctoral, y en base a las lagunas y problemáticas identificadas en la literatura, esperamos contribuir de manera significativa en este creciente y evolutivo campo de estudio, así como esperamos que los resultados y reflexiones aporten una valiosa perspectiva tanto a académicos como a los profesionales en la gestión del marketing deportivo, *fan engagement* y redes sociales en el marco del entorno digital de las organizaciones deportivas.

3.2. *Objetivos específicos*

3.2.1. *Estudio I*

Este primer estudio pretende realizar una primera revisión acerca de la literatura sobre este fenómeno. Si bien la literatura nos muestra estudios previos sobre el vínculo entre las redes sociales y el deporte, existe una clara carencia acerca del análisis según enfoque multiplataforma e internacional de las redes sociales y las organizaciones deportivas. Por lo tanto, en vista a los objetivos generales de la tesis doctoral, en este primer artículo se lleva a cabo un estudio exploratorio y descriptivo acerca de la gestión de redes sociales de ligas de fútbol y baloncesto desde una perspectiva nacional (España y Estados Unidos) y regional (Europa), con el fin de un obtener una aproximación de referencia en dos deportes de alta popularidad. A raíz de la crisis del COVID-19, y aprovechando la coyuntura, hemos aplicado un primer instrumento de observación para desarrollar el estudio.

A partir de esta necesidad identificada, el primer estudio de la tesis doctoral, bajo el título “*Managing Managing the COVID-19 Crisis Through Social Media: An Analysis From Sports Organizations Perspective*”, persigue los objetivos específicos siguientes:

- Identificar las dimensiones, variables y elementos considerados relevantes por parte de las organizaciones deportivas que permitan favorecer un análisis macro sobre la gestión de las redes sociales en periodo de pandemia, mediante la aplicación exploratoria de un instrumento de observación.
- Diseñar y validar un primer instrumento de observación, recolección, escrutinio y categorización de posts en redes sociales y proceder a su aplicación y posterior análisis en periodo de pandemia y prepandemia.

3.2.2. *Estudios II y III*

En segunda instancia, siguiendo con los objetivos de la tesis doctoral una vez aplicado la primera aproximación del instrumento de observación en el estudio 1 y a raíz de los resultados obtenidos, la literatura emergente y la aportación de expertos en la materia, hemos identificado tanto en la literatura como en la gestión práctica para los profesionales, la necesidad de profundizar con los siguientes aspectos: a) analizar con mayor foco a las organizaciones de fútbol desde el punto de vista del entorno digital, en específico Facebook, Twitter e Instagram, considerando la inversión de recursos invertidos por estas organizaciones con resultados poco claros o muchas veces no esperados; b) ahondar en variables adicionales específicas y complementarias, además de las dimensiones y variables propuestas, que faciliten un análisis

de contenido en coherencia con los objetivos estratégicos de clubes y ligas de fútbol desde una perspectiva multiregional y; c) contemplar los números de interacción que dan como producto el ratio del *engagement*, como uno de los indicadores principales de cercanía entre los aficionados y aficionadas y las organizaciones de fútbol.

En consecuencia, el segundo y tercer estudio que conforman la presente tesis doctoral pretenden conseguir los objetivos específicos siguientes:

- Identificar los elementos claves que favorecen a un mayor *engagement* en organizaciones de fútbol de Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica desde un punto de vista multiplataforma.
- Analizar el contenido de las redes sociales Facebook, Twitter e Instagram desde una perspectiva multirregional y comparativa del *engagement*, generado en las cuentas oficiales de las ligas de fútbol objeto de estudio.

En el estudio II: *“The more we post, the better A comparative 47nálisis of fan engagement on social media profiles of football leagues”*, la investigación se centra a profundidad en las ligas de fútbol, aplicando el instrumento de observación adaptado del estudio I. En el estudio III: *Connecting with fans in the digital age: an exploratory and comparative 47nálisis of social media management in top football clubs”*, por su parte, aborda el análisis desde la perspectiva de otro tipo de organizaciones de gran relevancia en la industria: los clubes de fútbol. Ambos estudios buscan, como último punto, lo siguiente:

- Elaborar reflexiones y propuestas que permitan identificar elementos que favorezcan el *engagement*, así como optimizar la gestión de las redes sociales en el marco de la estrategia de marketing digital de estas organizaciones de fútbol.

Tabla 1. Objetivos específicos de la tesis doctoral.

Objetivos específicos
1. Identificar las dimensiones, variables y elementos considerados relevantes por parte de las organizaciones deportivas que permitan favorecer un análisis macro sobre la gestión de las redes sociales en periodo de pandemia.
2. Diseñar y validar un primer instrumento de observación, recolección, escrutinio y categorización de posts en redes sociales y proceder a su aplicación y posterior análisis en periodo de pandemia y prepandemia.
3. Identificar los elementos claves que favorecen a un mayor <i>engagement</i> en ligas de fútbol de Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica desde un punto de vista multiplataforma.
4. Analizar el contenido de las redes sociales Facebook, Twitter e Instagram desde una perspectiva multirregional y comparativa del <i>engagement</i> , generado en las cuentas oficiales de las ligas de fútbol objeto de estudio.
5. Elaborar reflexiones y propuestas que permitan identificar elementos que favorezcan el <i>engagement</i> , así como optimizar la gestión de las redes sociales en el marco de la estrategia de marketing digital de estas organizaciones de fútbol.

Tabla 2. Estudios que componen la presente tesis doctoral.

Estudios realizados
Estudio I <i>“Managing the COVID-19 Crisis Through Social Media: An Analysis From Sports Organizations Perspective.”</i> Autoría: Francesc Solanellas, Edgar Romero-Jara* (<i>Autor de correspondencia</i>), y Joshua Muñoz Estado: artículo publicado. Journal: SAGE Open. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231198806 Índice de impacto: JCR: 2.0; Q2 (2022) SJR: 0.46; Q2 (2022)
Estudio II <i>“The more we post, the better? A comparative analysis of fan engagement on social media profiles of football leagues.”</i> Autoría: Edgar Romero-Jara* (<i>Autor de correspondencia</i>), Francesc Solanellas, Samuel López-Carril, Dimitrios Kolyperas, Christos Anagnostopoulos. Estado: artículo publicado. Journal: International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSMS-12-2023-0252 Índice de impacto: JCR: 2.2; Q4 (2022) SJR: 0.62; Q2 (2022)
Estudio III <i>“Connecting with fans in the digital age: an exploratory and comparative analysis of social media management in top football clubs.”</i> Autoría: Edgar Romero-Jara* (<i>Autor de correspondencia</i>), Francesc Solanellas, Joshua Muñoz y Samuel López-Carril. Estado: artículo publicado. Journal: Humanities and Social Science Communications. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02357-8 Índice de impacto: JCR: 3.5; Q1 (2022) SJR: 0.71; Q1 (2022)

OBJETIVOS

4. MÉTODO

4.1. Diseño de la investigación.

4.2. Muestra.

4.3. Instrumento.

4.3.1. Validación de expertos.

4.3.2. Fiabilidad.

4.4. Procedimiento de recolección de datos.

4.5. Análisis de datos.

4.2. Diseño de la investigación.

La presente tesis doctoral, presenta un hilo evolutivo de los diferentes estudios realizados desde el punto de vista metodológico, y adopta un diseño de investigación exploratorio, descriptivo y comparativo (Andrew et al., 2011) utilizando el método observacional y técnicas de análisis de contenido (Andrew et al., 2011; Anguera-Argilaga et al., 2011; Battaglia, 2008; Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014) desde una perspectiva multirregional y multiplataforma. Los estudios exploratorios son especialmente útiles cuando el fenómeno investigado está en constante evolución (como los medios sociales como herramienta de marketing), así como cuando hay varios factores y variables en juego (Andrew et al., 2011).

- En el estudio I, están relacionadas con la identificación de dimensiones y variables aplicadas al estudio, así como una prima aproximación acerca del diseño, validación y aplicación de un instrumento de observación en redes sociales. Durante el transcurso de esta investigación, aparece la crisis sanitaria del COVID-19. En esta fase, se aprovecha la coyuntura y se aplica la primera versión del instrumento de observación en este escenario. Se recogen los datos en dos periodos: un periodo de inicio de pandemia y un período prepanidémico. Este estudio tiene se enfoca en 5 organizaciones deportivas: 2 ligas de fútbol (1 de España y 1 de Europa) y 3 ligas de baloncesto (1 de España, 1 de Europa y 1 de Estados Unidos), desde una perspectiva multiplataforma.
- En el estudio II y III se observa una continuación del estudio I y una evolución del Instrumento para la observación y recogida de datos, poniendo el foco en el fútbol. En el estudio II se realiza un análisis a profundidad teniendo en cuenta a las ligas de fútbol, mientras que en el estudio III se realiza un análisis a los clubes de fútbol que conforman las ligas analizadas en el estudio II. Ambos estudios están vinculadas con el *engagement* que puede generar el tipo de contenido o formato utilizado por los clubes de fútbol de élite en sus cuentas de redes sociales. El aspecto descriptivo del diseño de la investigación pretende describir y cuantificar los niveles de compromiso en los medios sociales de los clubes de fútbol seleccionados. Por último, el aspecto comparativo del diseño de la investigación (Andrew et al., 2011) es valioso en este estudio porque permite un análisis interregional de tres de las plataformas de medios sociales más tradicionales. De esta manera, se consiguió comparar las prácticas, los elementos y las estrategias de participación en tres regiones clave de la industria del fútbol en todo el mundo. En el

MÉTODO

estudio II se pone foco a las ligas de fútbol y en el estudio III se realiza una aproximación en el mismo deporte pero de Comprender las posibles diferencias puede ser útil para que los gestores deportivos diseñen estrategias de marketing en medios sociales más optimizadas.

El análisis de contenido ha encontrado una amplia aplicación exitosa en el ámbito de los estudios de comunicación deportiva (Schäfer y Vögele, 2021), incluidos los estudios que profundizan en la utilización de las redes sociales dentro del deporte (de Guzman et al., 2021; Hambrick y Kang, 2015; Wang y Zhou, 2015), y particularmente en el contexto del fútbol (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2022; Maderer et al., 2018; Winand et al., 2019). Esta técnica facilita la clasificación meticulosa, la codificación y la identificación de temas recurrentes o patrones inherentes a los datos textuales (Hsieh y Shannon, 2005). El análisis de contenido, utilizado de forma transversal en los tres estudios de la tesis doctoral, de naturaleza tanto cuantitativa como cualitativa, se aplican de forma sistemática y reproducible para analizar y yuxtaponer el contenido textual (Riffe et al., 2019), lo que permite interpretar las sutilezas contextuales. A continuación, podremos visualizar a detalle los apartados metodológicos de cada estudio.

4.2. Muestra.

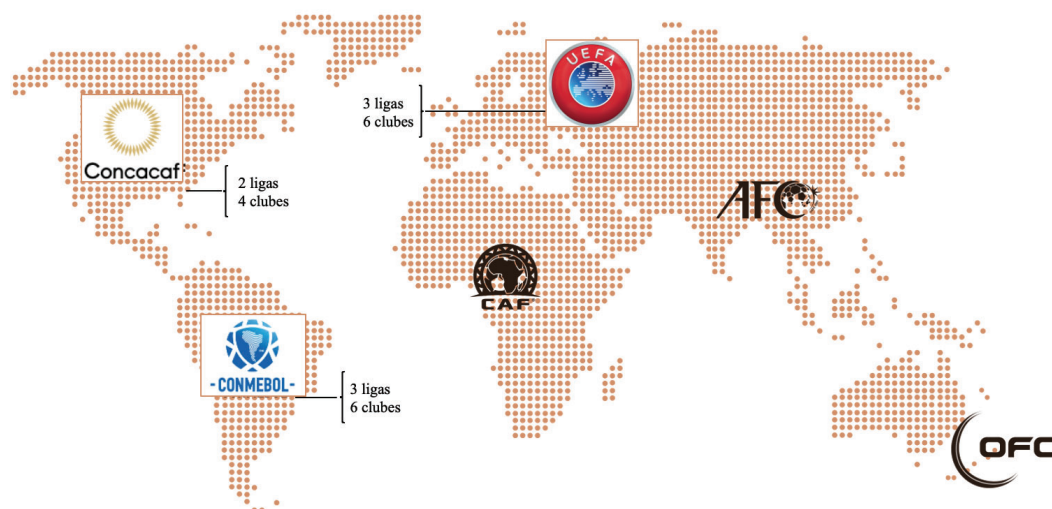
La tesis doctoral adopta un enfoque multiplataforma, debido a que ofrece una perspectiva más amplia (Aichner, 2019), que puede resultar valiosa para los gestores deportivos que buscan información sobre los tipos de contenido y formatos que suscitan un mayor *engagement* en cada plataforma.

La mayoría de los estudios que investigan las redes sociales por ejemplo en el fútbol, tienden a centrarse en una sola red social (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Guzmán et al., 2021; Faria et al., 2022). Se observó en la literatura que Facebook había sido uno de los primeros medios sociales utilizados por los clubes de fútbol y otras organizaciones deportivas, ya fuera para conectar con los aficionados o con fines puramente informativos (Achen, 2019; Waters et al., 2009). Además, tanto Facebook como Twitter, están motivada por su larga presencia y utilización dentro de la industria del deporte, así como por investigaciones previas dentro de contextos relacionados con el fútbol (Parganas et al., 2015; Maderer et al., 2019; Nisar et al., 2018; Vale y Fernandes, 2019; Winand et al., 2019). Esto permite realizar comparaciones más eficaces entre los resultados de este estudio y los hallazgos anteriores. Instagram, por su parte,

también son plataformas que han adquirido relevancia, no solo para los profesionales del marketing en el ámbito deportivo, sino también en otros sectores (Wang y Zhou, 2015), aumentando su prominencia en los últimos años en los estudios que cruzan las redes sociales y los deportes (Abeza, 2023), tal como vemos en trabajos anteriores como los de Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) y Doyle et al. (2022). Aunque se ha estudiado el uso de Facebook, Twitter e Instagram como herramienta de marketing para organizaciones de fútbol (Machado et al., 2020; Maderer et al., 2018; Nisar et al., 2018), existe una carencia en la literatura que compare su potencial *engagement* a través de una muestra de equipos de diferentes regiones geográficas. Por lo tanto, los tres estudios que forman parte de esta tesis doctoral analizan tres plataformas de redes sociales clave en el contexto deportivo: Facebook, Twitter e Instagram.

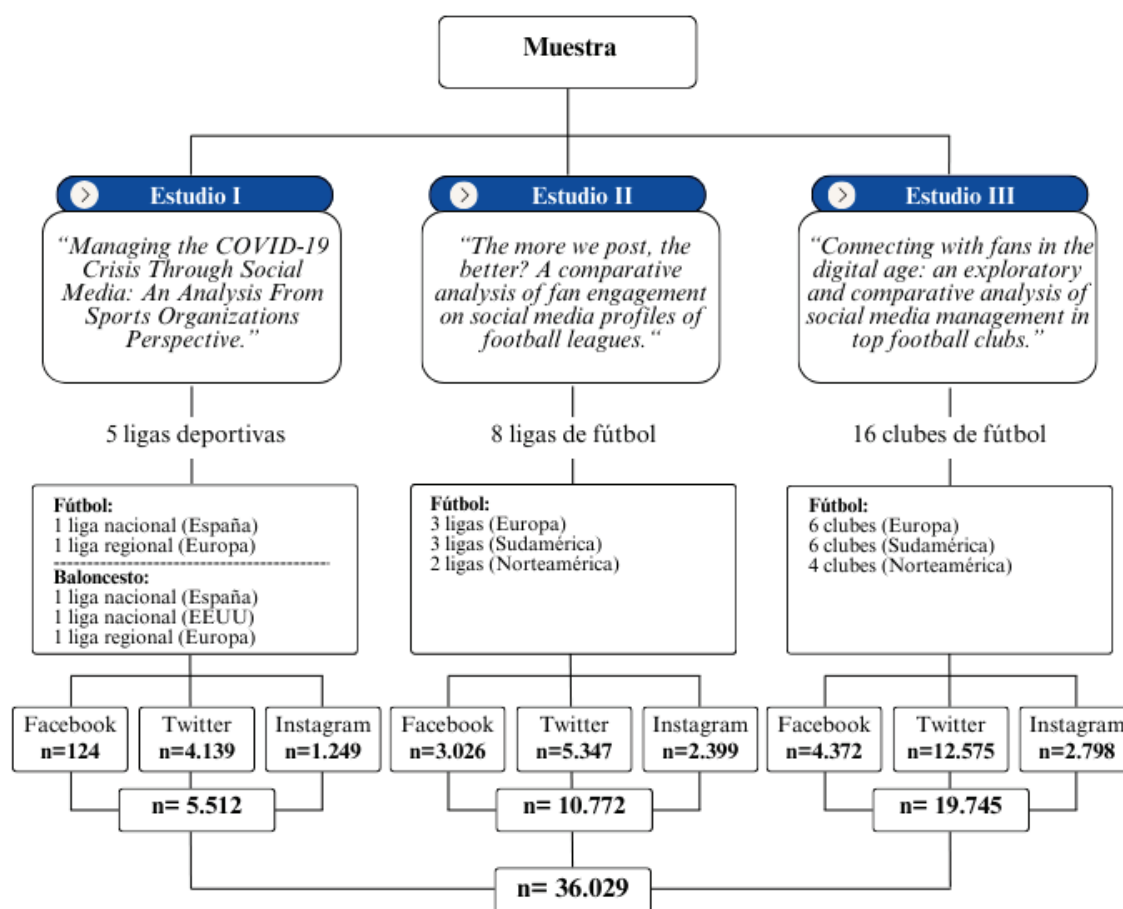
- Para el estudio I, teniendo en cuenta el diseño del estudio y el método observacional aplicado en esta investigación (Anguera-Argilaga et al., 2011) de manera exploratoria, se ha seleccionado la muestra mediante diseño muestral no probabilístico de juicio (véase Battaglia, 2008) en base a los siguientes criterios: a) dimensiones geográficas de las organizaciones deportivas (nacional e internacional); b) tipo de competición (liga regular, playoffs, clasificación de grupos) y, c) dos deportes de elevada popularidad: fútbol (soccer) y baloncesto. En consecuencia, el análisis se dirigió a las siguientes organizaciones deportivas: Liga Endesa ACB – Asociación Española de Clubes de Baloncesto (ACB); Euroliga – Turkish Airlines Euroleague (EL); LaLiga – Campeonato de España de Fútbol de Primera División (LL); NBA League – National Basketball Association (NBA); UEFA Champions League – Liga de Campeones de Europa (UCL). La muestra final de este estudio se compone de 5.512 publicaciones, recogidas de las cuentas oficiales de Facebook, Instagram y Twitter de las organizaciones consideradas en este estudio. La cronología observada considera dos escenarios: un periodo prepandémico (del 1 al 14 de abril de 2019) y un periodo pandémico inicial (del 1 al 15 de abril de 2020).
- Para el estudio II y III, en primer lugar, se utilizó un criterio geográfico para determinar el origen de las ligas y clubes de fútbol objeto de estudio. Este criterio se basó en una perspectiva integral y global, teniendo en cuenta factores como la importancia histórica, la popularidad, los logros deportivos y la modernización del fútbol en todo el mundo. Las regiones geográficas de Europa, Norteamérica y Sudamérica se eligieron específicamente para delimitar las organizaciones de fútbol de fútbol incluidas en esta tesis doctoral. Estas

tres regiones están gobernadas por los tres organismos regionales de fútbol más influyentes de la FIFA en la actualidad: UEFA (Europa), CONMEBOL (Sudamérica) y CONCACAF (América del Norte). Europa, como cuna del fútbol mundial y Sudamérica, con el segundo mayor número de copas mundiales ganadas en la historia. Las selecciones nacionales ganadoras de las 22 ediciones de la Copa Mundial de la FIFA celebradas hasta la fecha proceden de Europa y Sudamérica (Venkat, 2023). Por lo anteriormente mencionado, la selección de las regiones de Europa y Sudamérica se han considerado pertinentes. Seguidamente, se eligió Norteamérica por su ascendente crecimiento en el mercado y sus esfuerzos globales por promover el fútbol. Ejemplo de ello son los próximos hitos, como la organización de la Copa Mundial de la FIFA 2026 en Estados Unidos, México y Canadá, así como la estrategia de contratación de jugadores “estrellas” en la *Major League Soccer*, que han dotado de un notable impulso mediático y económico al torneo (Kobylinska y Medina, 2023): desde la histórica llegada de David Beckham a Los Angeles FC hasta la reciente llegada de Lionel Messi al Inter Miami FC (véase Mizrahi, 2023). En segundo lugar, para seleccionar las ligas de fútbol más relevantes de estas tres regiones, seguimos algunos de los criterios de selección establecidos en estudios similares (por ejemplo, Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018). Por lo tanto, se consideraron los rankings de cuatro de las organizaciones o sitios web de fútbol más influyentes: 1) el ranking de clubes de la Federación Internacional de Historia y Estadística del Fútbol (IFFHS), 2) el sitio web Football World Rankings, 3) el ranking de clubes y ligas de la FIFA, y 4) el sitio web de rankings de jugadores Transfermarkt (de gran relevancia en el mercado de traspasos de jugadores). Este proceso dio como resultado las 8 ligas de fútbol del estudio II y los 16 clubes de fútbol del estudio III cuyo uso de las redes sociales se analiza en esta tesis doctoral.

Figura 1. Distribución geográfica de las ligas y clubes de fútbol seleccionados.

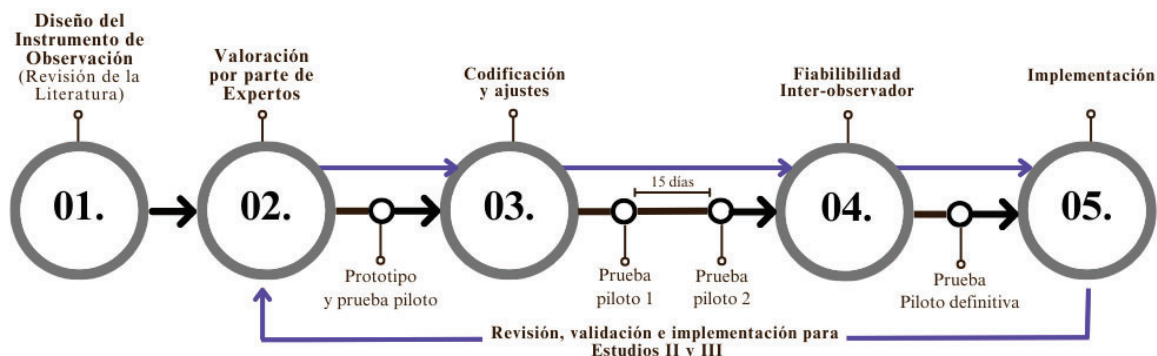
Una vez definidos los criterios de selección de la muestra, se extrajeron los enlaces de todas las publicaciones de los clubes seleccionados en el estudio en las tres redes sociales seleccionadas a través del software Fanpage Karma que permite recopilar e interpretar los datos (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2021). De esta manera, la muestra está compuesta por 10.772 posteos en el estudio II y 19.745 posteos en el estudio III, cifras muy similares y superiores a la utilizada en otros estudios relacionados (por ejemplo, Maderer et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2019).

En consecuencia, basado en los criterios antes mencionados y el diseño metodológico aplicado en la presente tesis doctoral (Andrew et al., 2011; Anguera-Argilaga et al., 2011; Battaglia, 2008; Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014), se contempla una muestra total de 36.029 posts analizados en redes sociales, distribuidas de la siguiente manera: estudio I: 5.512 posts; estudio II: 10.772 posts; estudio III: 19.745 posts.

Figura 2. Muestra de la tesis doctoral.

4.3. Instrumento.

En base a los objetivos de la tesis doctoral, se procedió al diseño, validación, desarrollo y aplicación de un instrumento *ad hoc* de observación y recogida de datos para su posterior análisis (véase Figura 3).

Figura 3. Proceso de diseño, validación e implementación del Instrumento de observación y recogida de datos utilizadas en los estudios I, II y III (Elaboración propia).

En primer lugar, se procedió a una exhaustiva revisión de la literatura acerca de las técnicas y

metodologías más apropiadas utilizadas la recolección, categorización y análisis de contenido, así como para el uso de las redes sociales como herramienta de marketing para organizaciones deportivas, dando lugar a un primer diseño del instrumento con su libro de códigos correspondiente para estudio I y su posterior adaptación para los estudios II y III.

4.3.1. Validación de expertos.

Para garantizar su rigor, el libro de códigos se sometió posteriormente a la revisión de diez expertos en la materia mediante una video entrevista semiestructurada individual en modalidad virtual. La selección de estos expertos se llevó a cabo mediante un muestreo no probabilístico de juicio, un método comúnmente empleado en la literatura debido a la naturaleza especializada y en constante evolución del tema (Andrew et al., 2011). La elección de los expertos se basó en criterios específicos, que incluían sus funciones profesionales en puestos especializados, de coordinación, gestión o dirección relacionados con el ámbito digital. Además, se tuvo en cuenta su formación académica, especialmente en marketing, metodología o herramientas digitales. Para garantizar un amplio conocimiento de la materia, los expertos elegidos debían tener un mínimo de cinco años de experiencia en el área y participar activamente en sus respectivas funciones. Con ello se pretendía incorporar puntos de vista diversos, que ofrecieran perspectivas desde un espectro de ángulos relevantes para esta investigación.

Como resultado, el panel de expertos estuvo compuesto por los siguientes profesionales: Directores del área Digital de una importante liga europea de fútbol profesional (1), Director de Comunicación Internacional (1) y Directores de Marketing de importantes clubes de fútbol profesional (2), Directores de agencias de marketing digital y *branding* (2), Profesores académicos especializados en marketing y gestión deportiva de universidades españolas (2), Profesionales en puestos Ejecutivos y de Dirección en consultoras de inteligencia de negocio deportiva internacionales (2).

Los puntos a tratar de la entrevista virtual semiestructurada se llevaron a cabo en base a las áreas y objetivos del estudio, que fue previamente evaluado por académicos bajo los criterios de univocidad, pertinencia e importancia, resultando en un total de 20 preguntas. Estos puntos abarcaban, entre otros, las dimensiones del contenido digital en conjunción con 1) las estrategias organizativas y dimensiones a tener en cuenta; 2) los formatos de las publicaciones; 3) los plazos de observación; 4) las plataformas de captura y análisis de las publicaciones en

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las redes sociales; y 5) los elementos fundamentales de interacción pertinentes para el estudio que darán posteriormente lugar a las ratios de *engagement*.

Además, estas entrevistas incluyeron debates sobre la concepción y ejecución de la herramienta de observación, que se empleó como instrumento para la recogida de datos. En estas entrevistas se exploraron otras variables relevantes para los objetivos de la investigación. La información cualitativa obtenida de las observaciones concluyentes de los expertos ofreció valiosas sugerencias que contribuyeron a perfeccionar el desarrollo del estudio y a mejorar la herramienta de observación. Este enfoque iterativo garantizó la armonización de la herramienta con los objetivos de la investigación y su adecuación efectiva a las preguntas de investigación del estudio. Por lo tanto, luego del diseño inicial del instrumento de observación y recolección de datos en base a la revisión de la literatura y tras incorporar las modificaciones sugeridas en las evaluaciones de los expertos, el libro de códigos del estudio se ciñó a las variables y categorías ilustradas en la tabla 3 para el estudio I y en la tabla 4 para los estudios II y III.

Tabla 3. Libro de códigos utilizado en el estudio I.

Variable	Código	Descripción
Tipología de mensaje	Iniciativa social	Recaudación de fondos, festivales virtuales o cualquier acción para recaudar fondos.
	Engagement	Contenido que tenga una llamada a la acción. Videos emocionales, imágenes de eventos anteriores (en caso de que busque la emoción del que recibe el mensaje), cuestionarios, encuestas, juegos, mascotas, etc.
	Institucional	Información oficial referente a la competición, deportes, historia, comunicados.
	Comercial	Ventas, e-commerce, venta de entradas, descuentos, afiliación, abonos, sponsors (en caso de promocionar un producto/servicio con fines comerciales).
Stakeholders	Público en general	¿A que colectivo involucra la publicación? Ej.:
	Socios/Miembros	•Competición: UEFA Champions League.
	Atletas	•Miembros/Asociados: Clubes de fútbol.
	Partners	•Partners: Heineken, Gillette.

Tabla 4. Libro de códigos utilizado en los estudios II y III.

Variable	Código	Descripción
Dimensiones	Deportivo	Información sobre jugadores o entrenadores, nuevos fichajes, entrenamientos y día de partidos.
	Institucional	Historia y aniversarios del club, anuncios de asambleas, comunicados oficiales, horarios de apertura del club y felicitaciones dirigidas a instituciones o deportistas.
	ESG Ambiental, Social y Gobernanza	Actividades relacionadas con la responsabilidad social, el apoyo a la comunidad, el desarrollo del atletismo, la educación, las prácticas de buen gobierno, la sostenibilidad y el desarrollo medioambiental.
	Comercial	Acciones generadoras de ingresos: afiliación, venta de entradas, día del partido, merchandising.
	Brand/Marketing	Posicionamiento de la marca del club, experiencias de los fans, activación de patrocinios y generación de contenidos con fines emocionales y de <i>engagement</i> de los fans.
Formatos	Text - Image - Video - Link - Raffles/Trivia - Surveys	
Métricas de Interacción	Reacciones (ej. “me gusta”) - Compartir - Comentarios	

Una vez definidas y validadas las dimensiones, variables y criterios del instrumento de observación y recolección de datos, se procedió a crear el instrumento en formato hoja de cálculo .xlsx para su posterior implementación.

4.3.2. *Fiabilidad.*

Para medir el nivel de fiabilidad y precisión del instrumento (Andrew et al., 2011), se aplicó el método de fiabilidad Intraobservador, utilizando el coeficiente Kappa de Cohen como medida de consistencia, homogeneidad y concordancia en la interpretación de las variables, codificación y criterios en su implementación. El índice Kappa de Cohen mínimo aceptado fue de ($>.61$) en todos los casos, en base a la tabla siguiente.

Tabla 5. Escala de valoración de nivel de concordancia según coeficiente Kappa de Cohen (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Coeficiente Kappa	Nivel de concordancia
0,00	Pobre
0,01 – 0,20	Leve
0,21 – 0,40	Aceptable
0,41 – 0,60	Moderada
0,61 – 0,80	Sustancial
0,81 – 1,00	Casi perfecta

Durante el proceso, se incorporó como criterios adicionales, la discusión de posibles discrepancias a la hora de interpretar cada publicación como perteneciente a una u otra de las dimensiones del libro de códigos del estudio, estableciendo que cada post se clasificaría sólo en una dimensión, en función del tipo de contenido predominante en cada post.

Para el estudio I, se procedió a la observación y recolección de 21 publicaciones (7 de Facebook, 7 de Twitter y 7 de Instagram) seleccionadas de forma aleatoria. Para el estudio II y III, se procedió a la observación y recolección de 45 posts de forma aleatoria en cada caso (15 de Facebook, 15 de Instagram y 15 de Twitter) de tres ligas y tres clubes de fútbol diferentes, conformando una muestra total de 225 posts para cada estudio.

Se procedió al escrutinio individual de cada post de forma manual aplicando el instrumento de observación en la hoja de cálculo .xlsx en base al libro de códigos, incorporando pausas de 10-12 minutos cada 40-45 minutos de observación. En todos los casos, se ha establecido un periodo de 15 días entre la primera y la segunda aplicación del instrumento sobre la misma muestra.

Para el estudio I, esta prueba dio como resultado una puntuación de fiabilidad de 0,669 ($>.61$), considerado un nivel de concordancia “sustancial”. Para el estudio II y III, la prueba piloto arrojó como resultado un nivel de concordancia de 0,962 ($>.81$) y 0,949 ($>.81$), respectivamente, ambos con niveles de concordancia elevada (véase Tabla 5).

4.4. Procedimiento de recolección de datos.

Los protocolos utilizados en los estudios que conforman esta tesis doctoral fueron aprobados por el Comité de Ética de Investigaciones Clínicas de la Administración Deportiva de Cataluña (007/CEICGC/2022) (ver anexo 3).

Una vez definida la muestra (véase punto 3.1) y el instrumento de observación y recolección de datos en redes sociales (véase 3.2), se determinaron los periodos sobre los que se extraerían los posts. Entre otros autores, Ashley y Tuten (2015) señalan que, en un entorno de medios sociales, de dos a cuatro semanas son suficientes para que se produzca una amplia variedad de publicaciones en un contexto regular y cíclico, excluyendo hitos o acontecimientos excepcionales que podrían tener un impacto extraordinario en el compromiso y que podrían sesgar la lectura regular. En consecuencia:

- En el primer estudio se fijan 30 días de observación de posts en redes sociales por liga deportiva objeto de estudio: 15 días en periodo prepandemia y 15 días en periodo de pandemia.
- Para los estudios II y II, se determinan 45 días de la temporada (15 días al inicio, 15 días durante y 15 días al final) para cada club y cada liga en cada red social analizada como periodo de observación. Esta distribución de tiempos de observación se llevó a cabo con el fin de obtener una imagen más precisa sobre el rendimiento global del *engagement* durante la temporada por organización deportiva y por red social, evitando posibles sesgos causados por acontecimientos puntuales que pudieran haber distorsionado el análisis del *engagement*, y manteniendo el foco en el objetivo de cada estudio.

Por tanto, se aplicó el instrumento de observación en formato hoja de cálculo .xlsx estableciendo el siguiente procedimiento:

- a) En el estudio I, se extrajeron los links de los posts en redes sociales de Facebook, Twitter e Instagram de las ligas deportivas de fútbol y baloncesto objetos de estudio de forma manual. En los estudios II y II, se utilizó la licencia FanPage Karma para la extracción automática de los links vinculados a los posts en los periodos de tiempo seleccionados. En los tres estudios, se añadieron los links extraídos de los posts en la hoja de cálculo .xlsx del instrumento de observación;
- b) Posteriormente, se procedió al escrutinio, observación y categorización de los posts de forma

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manual uno por uno, de acuerdo con el Libro de Códigos de cada estudio durante los periodos de tiempo establecidos;

c) Finalmente, se procedió a configurar una base de datos específica en la que los datos recopilados se codificaron sistemáticamente con las variables esenciales para facilitar los análisis estadísticos posteriores para cada estudio.

4.5. *Análisis de datos.*

Las bases de datos de cada estudio que componen la presente tesis doctoral fueron analizadas con Microsoft® Excel 2021, versión 16.82 y Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) ©IBM, versión 27.

Una vez definida la base de datos producto del registro recabado a partir del Instrumento de observación, se realizó el proceso de codificación de variables. Posteriormente, se llevó a cabo un análisis exhaustivo para examinar los posts de las redes sociales Facebook, Twitter e Instagram de las organizaciones deportivas objetos de estudio, junto con sus dimensiones, formatos de contenido y métricas de interacción asociadas. Las métricas de interacción, como parte de los datos recabados, constituyeron la base para calcular la variable de *engagement*. Los cálculos del *engagement* se derivaron de fórmulas utilizadas por investigadores y profesionales en el campo del marketing digital, garantizando la incorporación de elementos cruciales específicos de cada red social. Por tanto, para el cálculo del *engagement*, se han aplicado las fórmulas adaptadas de las plataformas Fanpage Karma (2023) y Rival IQ (Feehan, 2023), proporcionando un enfoque homogéneo y comparativo para el análisis:

a) Facebook: ***Engagement (Fb)*** = $\left(\frac{Reactions+Shares+Comments}{Followers}\right) * 100$;

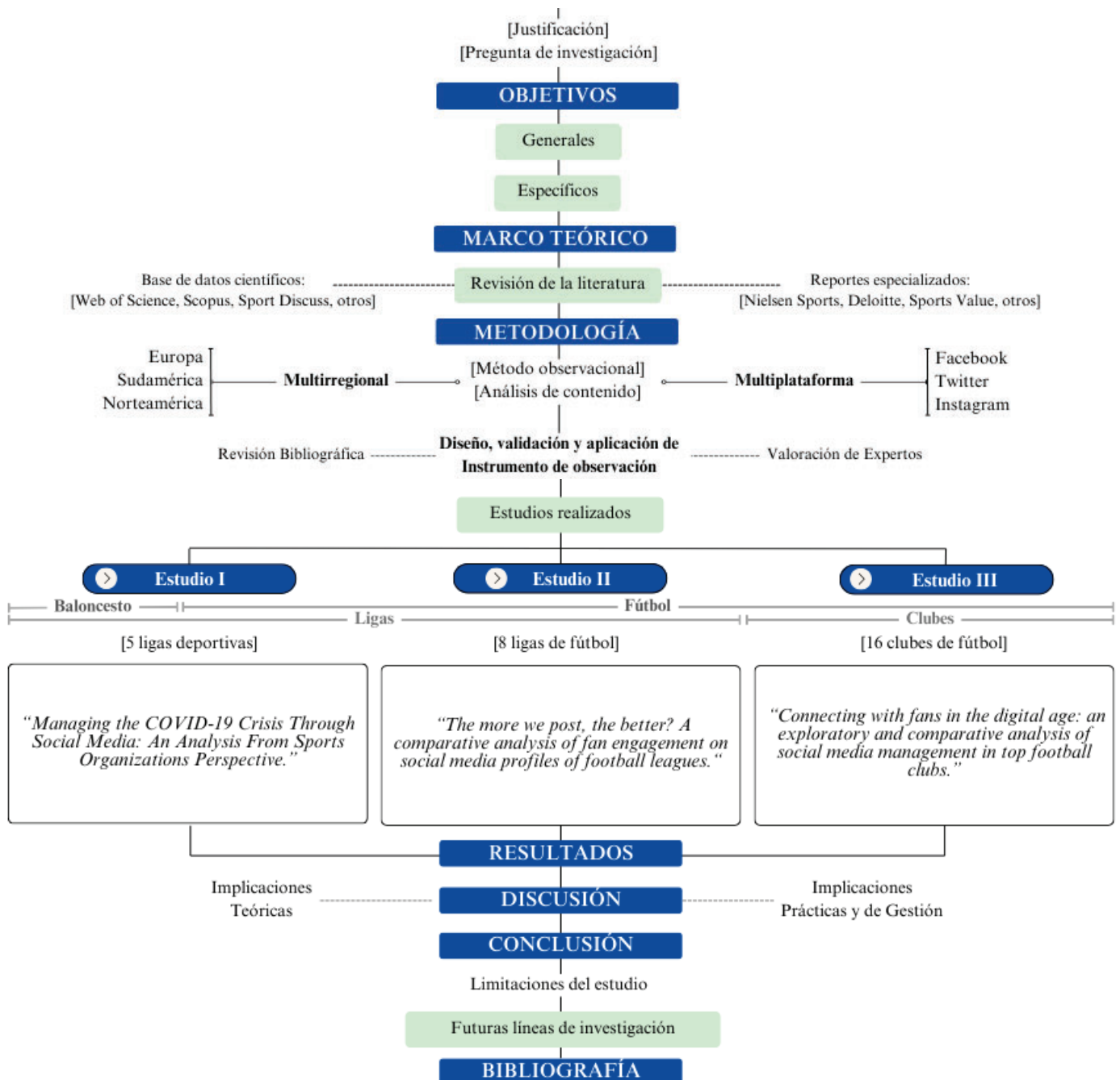
b) Twitter: ***Engagement (Tw)*** = $\left(\frac{Likes+Shares}{Followers}\right) * 100$; and

c) Instagram: ***Engagement (Ig)*** = $\left(\frac{Likes+Comments}{Followers}\right) * 100$

Para evaluar las variaciones en las frecuencias, dimensiones de estudio y el *engagement* resultante de los posts en las distintas plataformas de redes sociales, se aplicaron análisis estadísticos de tipo descriptivo y comparativo. En concreto, se emplearon para ello la prueba t de muestras independientes, análisis de frecuencias y ANOVA de un factor. El umbral de

significación establecido fue $<,05$. Además, para discernir e ilustrar las conexiones entre variables fundamentales, se ejecutaron pruebas de chi-cuadrado y análisis de correspondencias.

Figura 4. Diseño metodológico de la investigación.



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5. ESTUDIOS REALIZADOS

5.1. Estudio I: “Managing the COVID-19 crisis through social media. An analysis from sport organisations perspective”

5.2. Estudio II: “The more we post, the better? A comparative analysis of fan engagement on social media profiles of football leagues”

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5.1. Estudio I: “Managing the COVID-19 crisis through social media. An analysis from sport organisations perspective”

“Managing the COVID-19 crisis through social media. An analysis from sport organisations perspective”

Este estudio se ha publicado con la siguiente referencia:

Solanellas, F., Romero-Jara, E., & Muñoz, J. (2023). Managing the COVID-19 Crisis Through Social Media: An Analysis From Sports Organizations Perspective. SAGE Open, 13(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231198806>

La versión original del artículo se encuentra en el anexo “4”

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted directly on sports competitions, redirecting strategies to adapt to changes and giving prominence to a new ally: social media. The objective of this research is to analyse how top-level sports organisations managed their social media in pre-pandemic (from April 1 to 14, 2019) and pandemic (from April 1 to 14, 2020) periods. This study is based on the design and implementation of an observation instrument, applied to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter posts. A total of 5,512 posts from LaLiga (LL), ACB League (ACB), UEFA Champions League (UCL), Euroleague (EL) and NBA League (NBA) have been analysed. The results show a slight decrease in the total frequency of posts between both periods, but with a more homogeneous distribution over the days. Sports organisations adopted different approaches while posting on social media on these two periods. At the beginning of the pandemic, they prioritised "Social initiatives" and "*Engagement*" categories while their format preferences have generally migrated from text and image to audio-visual resources during the pandemic.

ESTUDIOS REALIZADOS

Introduction

Sports organisations managing sports teams use social media to engage with their partners, fans, promote interactions and increase *engagement* with the sports product as well as the team in general (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015). According to Filo, Lock and Karg, (2015), social media is seen as a unique form of communication that transcends geographical and social boundaries through instant communication of information. However, communication is only one of the many goals from social media channels. Williams and Chinn, (2016) defined social networks as “tools, platforms and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate and collaborate with others”, and they constitute a mass phenomenon (Vivar, 2009), due to their ability to transmit agile and interactive information in an era where immediacy is a constant.

The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic requires to sport organisations to redirect their strategies, where digital channels were key. Due to the need of keeping active the audience, maintaining closeness with partners (sponsors, clubs, athletes) and exploring new communication approaches, social media become an strategic and powerful ally for sport organisations.

The following research question guided this study: ¿how professional sport organisations managed social media in the initial period of the COVID-19 crisis? The purpose of this study is, therefore, to analyse the social media use in the initial period of the pandemic from the perspective of local and international top sport organisations and make a comparison between a similar period of time in a non-pandemic scenario to visualize and study both periods.

In addressing of the research question, this study produces evidence that seeks to demonstrate the strategies adopted by sport organisations considering the geographic scope of the competition, the sport discipline, the post frequency of both periods and the stakeholders involved by making a comparison between the initial period of the pandemic (period most uncertain) and a pre pandemic period. In doing so, we plan to make a contribution to the existing literature by developing an observation tool based in previous studies with original categories and variables of study to inform practitioners about the social media use by these sport organisations and to allow to open the scope for future studies in the field.

Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic: the beginning of a new era in sport management

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an economic crisis due to a high level of uncertainty (Nicola et al., 2020) changes in digital communication (Nguyen et al., 2020), and brand strategies in different industries, which has also impacted the sporting arena.

At the onset of the pandemic alone, the sports industry was projecting a loss of USD 15 billion in terms of sponsorships, TV rights, and other revenue (Somoggi, 2020); USD 1.9 million in US Basketball franchises; over USD 2 billion in tourism related to the Tokyo Olympics; USD 5 billion from the US Olympic Games (Jaramillo, 2020), and EUR 5 billion in the European football business (KPMG, 2021). Governments applied a series of strategies focused on community mitigation measures (Ebrahim et al., 2020) such as the cancellation of on-site events for the high propagation potential; travel restrictions; the use of social distancing measures to reduce direct contact between people in the community; among others. Consequently, all group physical activities, face-to-face events and team sports were suddenly

and indefinitely restricted in many countries (Hammami et al., 2022). With the COVID-19 pandemic and in the absence of competitions, sports organisations, with their events cancelled or postponed, had to redirect their strategies and reinvent themselves (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021).

While the determination of the real impact of COVID-19 is still under ongoing study (McCloskey et al., 2020), previous studies show the importance of content generation, interaction with spectators, and the increase of resources on digital platforms for revenue generation and sponsorship activation.

In a pandemic context, sports organisations identified the power of social media to spread information even faster than the virus itself (Depoux et al., 2020). Furthermore, content generated by sports organisations and athletes themselves has become more relevant, as well as an emerging social approach to generate closeness and empathise with the audience and the digital sports community. Sharpe et al., (2020) highlighted the relevance of athletes and sports organisations joining the fight against the pandemic through viral social media content, fundraising and online socialising.

Digital communication in sports organisations

The differences that make the sports industry unique and particular are, among others: the immediate results and changes (Davis & Zutz Hilbert, 2013) in addition to the fact that every decision is "under the microscope" of the public (alluding to the complexity of fans, athletes, coaches, media and other stakeholders). In this way, the interest of the spectator becomes key and increasingly demanding (Nisar et al., 2018).

Social media are a key tool for building and enhancing the reputation of a brand (Maderer et al., 2018), an ideal platform for publicising and increasing brand visibility, for analysing the actions of its fans and followers (Herrera-Torres et al., 2017) and to promote interaction between users and organisations, integrating different communication channels within the same network, so that information from customers and organisation arrives more quickly than by conventional channels (Shilbury et al., 2014).

The social media have a direct and indirect impact at the moment of generating income and favour negotiation with sponsors due to their notoriety, visibility and reach (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015). Therefore, their application in the management of any sports organisation, especially those involving spectators, is essential.

Furthermore, in the literature we find authors such as González and Tortolero, (2020); Leng and Phua, (2020); Piedra, (2020) who showed the impact of COVID-19 on digital management in sports considering different stakeholders (athletes, institutions or brands). Therefore, social media becomes a powerful ally in this period.

Sport organisations and social media studies

The management of social media and other digital platforms by sports organisations has been studied from different perspectives: from athletes (Hayes, 2020; Sharpe et al., 2020; Witkemper et al., 2012), teams and sports clubs (Achen, 2019; Jordan et al., 2017; Machado et al., 2020; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015), to International Federations (Burson Cohn & Wolfe Sports, 2021; Ginesta, 2009; Vilanova, 2009; Winand et al., 2019).

Several authors have analysed and classified the content posted on social media in order to observe the strategies followed by sports organisations and redefine the relevance in the global marketing strategy, for example as a tool for Integrated Communication Marketing (Rehman et al., 2022). Waters et al., (2009) examined social media content based on three dimensions: information dissemination, disclosure, and interactivity. The authors, rather than focusing on design principles, focused on the actual use of social media by organisations to determine how they communicated with audiences. These dimensions were then adapted by Josh and Maggie, (2009) to measure communication style and *engagement* on Twitter. In turn, Hambrick et al., (2010) classified Twitter content into six categories: interactivity, fun, information sharing, content, fans, and promotional. In their research, Lovejoy and Saxton, (2012) classified social network content based on three categories: information, community, and action. Blaszkia et al., (2012) created categories based on the uses and gratifications approach to study sports communication on Twitter, which included interactivity, fun, information sharing, content, fan, promotion, and combinations. From the point of view of content analysis on Facebook, Tejedor et al., (2020) compared content and *engagement* interaction ratios. On the other hand, Winand et al., (2019) classified content into four dimensions: informative, marketing, personalisation, and activations. We can see then, how the phenomenon of social media in sports organisations has been studied from different approaches, however, the potential of social media in the global strategy of the organisation is still unexplored.

The categorisation analysis and methods used in previous studies are relevant for the purpose of this research as a start point to explore perspectives considered in the past and to develop an evolving and adaptable framework for practitioners and academics from the sport organisations perspective.

Social media as a powerful management tool in sports

As commercial and institutional objectives, several organisations and athletes took the opportunity to use social media during the COVID-19 pandemic to advocate and promote socially responsible behaviour among their followers (Sharpe et al., 2020). Additionally, their application is increasingly more common in terms of construction and dissemination related to the area of social responsibility. In this way, they have also become a key tool to interact with fans, to address a strengthened social approach and to gain commitment from athletes, sponsors and authorities (Oviedo et al., 2014).

In a pandemic environment, approaches to content in the digital environment and in the absence of competitions (cancelled or postponed) became a challenge. During the initial stage of the pandemic, commercial agreements suffered from the effects of uncertainty, sports organisations sought to mitigate the impact in terms of audience, and the re-emergence of a social vision became imminent.

Based on the different methods and categorisations reviewed in the literature, the exploratory study by Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, (2015) which takes a qualitative approach to the strategies used by sport managers, is used as a starting point guide to design the variables of social media goals, adapting the qualitative findings in 4 social media goal categories: from building links with fans, generating interaction, monetising, and dealing with changes to social initiative, *engagement*, institutional and commercial. Also, message format and stakeholders variables are incorporated in this research as they considered key in the previous studies.

The main objective of this research is to analyse the social media management by sport organisations in pandemic and pre-pandemic periods by the categorisation of content, format approaches and stakeholders involved.

The aspects considered in this study, through the categorisation designed, allow the analysis of strategies of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, considering football and basketball sports organisations of different geographical scope, as well as permitting the comparison and analysis of the digital communication management in two periods: the pandemic and pre-pandemic period.

This study, which analyses different sports competitions from a multi-platform perspective and, based on previous research is motivated by extending the findings in this field of study. Is focused on the organisations sampled, the tools used and, above all, the fact that it considers different time periods in its analysis. Thus, the results obtained will give rise to future studies that take this one as reference, and that help to understand how sports organisations manage social media in this unprecedented crisis.

Methodology

An exploratory and descriptive study was conducted using content analysis techniques through an observational method to answer the research question.

Content analysis, under different classification approaches, has been widely used in social media communication research, and more specifically in sports environments, as a way of interpreting the content of textual data through the process of systematic classification, coding and identification of themes or patterns. This method consists of counting and comparison of content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context (Hsieh & Shannon E., 2005).

Following the literature review, a data collection instrument was developed, with feedback and validation from 8 experts including academics and professionals in the areas of marketing and social media management. The current research differs from other studies given the intrinsic nature of the research question itself, and therefore allows linking social media posts to the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, considering three main aspects: the categorisation of the message used in this study, the type of format, and the stakeholders involved. These considerations result in the variables and indicators in this study.

Similar to previous studies such as those carried out by Maderer et al., (2018), the application of the data collection tool in different time periods provides an analysis scenario that allows visualising the differences and similarities between the time periods analysed, as well as the influence of the pandemic on the management of digital platforms.

In a subsequent data collection, the pandemic period variable is incorporated into the message category with the question: is the publication related to COVID-19? It is considered and framed within this categorisation when it meets one of two criteria: it contains the word COVID-19 in the content (text, image, etc.) or the content reflects a direct action as a consequence of the pandemic.

The following variables are considered as a complement to Table 1 for further comparison in the message category related to COVID-19: first communication concerning COVID-19; postponement; suspension; new date of competition; recommendations.

Sample

The authors selected the sample according to the different dimensions of the sports organisations (international and national) and to the format of each competition (regular league, playoffs, group classification), as well as a multiple social media perspective in order to achieve an approach of two popular sports disciplines: football (soccer) and basketball.

Table 1. Proposal of variables and indicators used for the analysis of social media observation tool.

Variable	Coding	Description and information
Message category	Social initiative	Fundraising, virtual festivals or any other action related with charity.
	<i>Engagement</i>	Content that has a call to action. Emotional videos, images of previous events (when looking for the emotion of the person receiving the message), questionnaires, surveys, games, mascots, etc.
	Institutional	Official information about the competition, sports, history, press releases.
	Commercial	Sales, e-commerce, ticket sales, discounts, membership, subscriptions, sponsors (when promoting a product/service for commercial purposes).
Content format	Text, image, video, external link, web link, survey.	
Stakeholders	General public	Examples: Competition: UCL. Members/Affiliates: Football clubs, Federations. Partners: Heineken, Gillette.
	Members/Affiliates	
	Athletes	
	Partners	

Thus, non-probabilistic –judgmental– sampling was used. Consequently, the analysis was directed at the following sports organisations: Endesa League ACB - Spanish Basketball Clubs Association (ACB); Euroleague - Turkish Airlines Euroleague (EL); LaLiga Santander - Spanish First Division Football Championship (LL); NBA League - National Basketball Association (NBA); UEFA Champions League - European Champions League (UCL).

The final sample of this study is composed of 5,512 posts, collected from the official Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts of the organisations considered in this study. The observed timeline considers two scenarios: a pre-pandemic period (from April 1 to April 14, 2019) and an initial pandemic period (from April 1 to April 15, 2020).

Table 2. Sport organisations Analyse and competition progress at the time of study.

Sport league	Sport discipline	Geographical scope	Competition format	Cancelled/postponed	Competition progress (%)
ACB	Basketball	Nacional (Spain)	Regular league—Playoffs	Temporary suspension	73
EL	Basketball	International (Europe)	Regular league—Playoffs	Cancelled	77
NBA	Basketball	Nacional (EEUU)	Regular league—Playoffs	Temporary suspension	46
LL	Football (soccer)	Nacional (Spain)	Regular league	Temporary suspension	67
UCL	Football (soccer)	International (Europe)	Groups—Playoffs	Temporary suspension	66

Coding and data collection procedures

Data was manually extracted from the sample's official social media accounts, observed and then categorised. All information was transferred to an excel.xlsx file and then manually processed to create a database, which was used to calculate descriptive statistics. All publications in their different formats were analysed manually.

Data analysis followed deductive reasoning using the coding method proposed by the authors and validated by experts in the field.

Inter-coder's reliability was established prior to coding the entire dataset to ensure that all coders interpreted the variables and coded the dataset homogeneously. Thus, a random sample of 21 posts from the social networks under study were analysed by the three authors. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa Coefficient, which was .518, described as a moderate level of agreement with the data (Landis & Koch, 1977). As this figure was below .61, coders participated in a session where discrepancies were discussed to ensure consistency of understanding and interpretation. The main problem lay in the understanding that a publication could be multi-factorial in nature (in the category of the message and the stakeholders involved). Thus, it was decided that publications would be classified according to what was considered the main purpose the publication might pursue.

The three authors re-coded 21 more randomly selected publications, resulting in a very acceptable inter-coder reliability score of .669 ($>.61$) (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Once inter-coder reliability was established, the sporting events were randomly distributed among the researchers. Data analysis was performed with SPSS v.27 software using descriptive statistical analysis (reporting frequencies and percentages for all variables). Frequencies were calculated for a single variable and for more than one variable at a time, with double-entry tables. In addition, a descriptive correspondence analysis was performed, a dimension reduction technique that allows the exploratory analysis of categorical variables to visualise a multidimensional point cloud in two dimensions, which provides an approximation of the relationship between the different variables that converge in the analysis.

Results and analysis

This study allowed us to observe the strategies used at the digital level in two specific periods: a pre-pandemic period and an initial pandemic period. Out of the analysed sports properties, Twitter ranks first as the preferred social network, followed by Instagram and Facebook (see Figure 1).

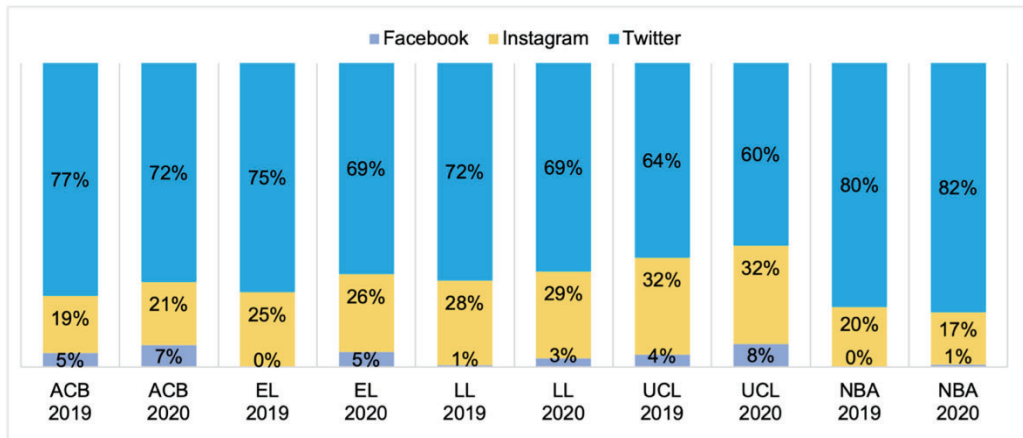


Figure 1. Distribution of publications by period and social media

Concerning Twitter, a minor decrease in the percentage of publication frequency can be seen in both national and European football competitions (EL and ACB) and football competitions (UCL and LL). On the contrary, we can observe an increase in publication frequency on Instagram in the initial period of the pandemic in all competitions, except for the UCL, which maintains this frequency in both scenarios. The NBA, however, shows an inverse behaviour, slightly increasing from 80% to 82% the publication frequency on Twitter and decreasing by 3% on Instagram. As for Facebook, the publication frequency of the analysed competitions in Spain and Europe has increased between 2% and 5%.

In the pre-pandemic period, a heterogeneous distribution of the frequency of daily publications is observed, with peaks at weekends (days when matches are held), unlike the NBA, which shows an upward trend in publication frequency from Tuesday to Friday, with peaks on Thursdays (competition day according to the Anglo-Saxon calendar). At the beginning of the pandemic (second period analysed), however, a different behaviour is observed, where the daily frequency of total publications tends to remain homogeneous during the week, in the absence of official physical sports competitions. In terms of trend, we observe a similar number of publications throughout the week between both periods, with a more even distribution of the amount of daily content in the second period analysed.

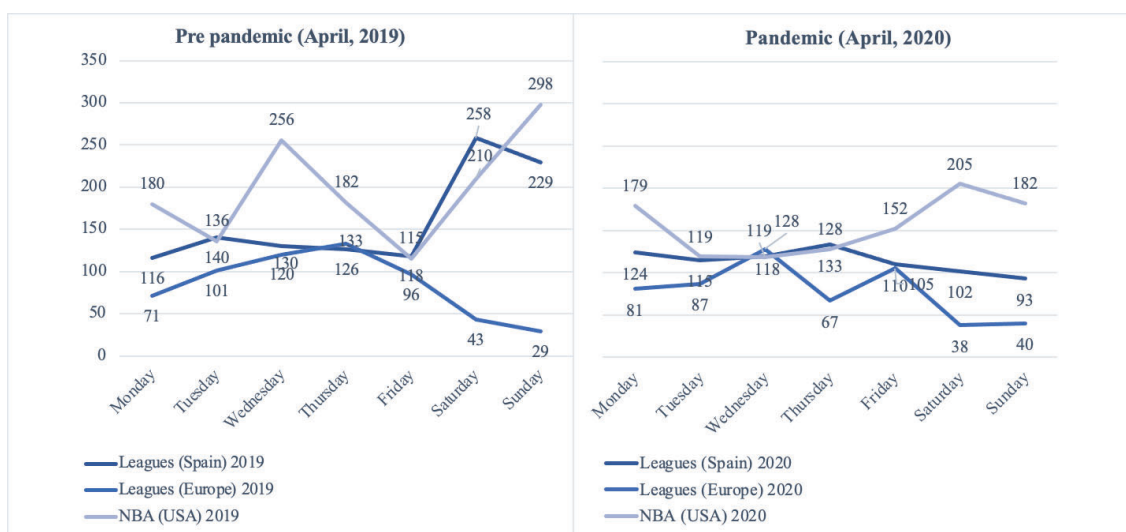


Figure 2. Frequency of daily publications pre-pandemic - pandemic

A relevant aspect of this study is the classification of content by categories according to each publication made on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook of the sample analysed.

In both periods, all basketball competitions have had zero social media action in the commercial aspect. However, LL used this approach in a pre-pandemic period.

From the *engagement* strategy point of view, the ACB (National) and EL (European) basketball competitions have opted to reduce their publications from 72% to 52%, and from 89% to 84%, respectively. In contrast, football competitions have opted to boost this strategy, increasing it drastically from 70% to 98% for LL and from 81% to 90% for UCL as shown in Table 5. The NBA, however, has remained almost unaffected, showing a reduction on this strategy by 2%.

In the "Social initiatives" category, we can observe a significant increase by the ACB, which goes from having no publications with this approach in a pre-pandemic period to allocating 47% of its social networks publications under this category. We also note that the "Institutional" approach goes through a reduction in its social networks publications from 28% to 1%, as does LL, which goes from 28% (pre-pandemic) to 0% in the pandemic period. The NBA, from a different geographical context, goes from 3% to 1%. On the other hand, continental competitions, such as EL and UCL, have chosen to increase this type of messaging during the start of the pandemic.

Table 3. Category of publications by type of content.

	ACB	ACB	EL	EL	LL	LL	UCL	UCL	NBA	NBA
	2019 (%)	2020 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)	2019 (%)	2020 (%)
Commercial	0	0	0	1	2	0	13	0	0	0
Engagement	72	52	89	84	70	98	81	90	96	98
Social initiatives	0	47	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
Institutional	28	1	10	14	28	0	6	10	3	1

Regarding publication format, irrespective of sports disciplines, scope, or geographical location, has migrated from the static image format to a more dynamic one with publications incorporating audio-visual content. However, beyond coinciding in the message categories, the format may vary according to the competition.

Nation-wide competitions in Spain such as ACB and LL increased their use of video format (+text+link) by 20.4% and 9.5% respectively, although under a different message category approach. Likewise, both competitions used the image (+text+link) format to a lesser extent in the pandemic period, although the ACB with a much larger relative margin of difference between periods. Finally, the text (+link) format has been used 14.2% more by the ACB in the pandemic period in relation to the previous period and LL has decreased the use of this format by 10.2% in the pandemic period.

With regard to European competitions, both EL and UCL have used the Image (+link) format to a greater extent during the pandemic period, with 3.7% and 16.4% respectively. However, a reverse format use was observed between the two periods analysed. EL focuses on audio-visual media in the pre-pandemic period (10.0% more) while UCL uses this format to a greater extent at the beginning of the pandemic period (9.6% more).

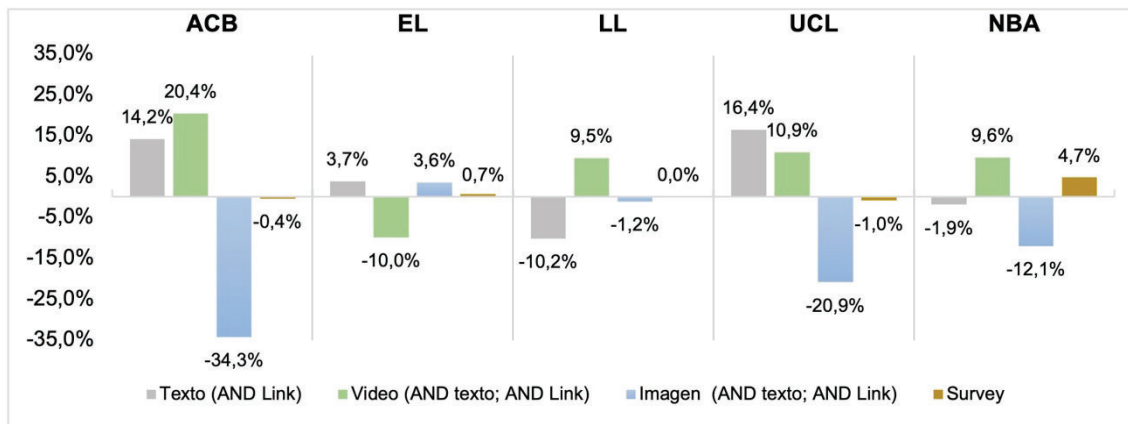


Figure 3. Relative difference in format of pre-pandemic / pandemic publications

The NBA, on the other hand, migrates from a typical image format (+text+link) in a pre-pandemic period, to a more dynamic audio-visual format at the beginning of the pandemic, specifically 9.6% more in relation to the previous period.

Due to the qualitative nature of the data collection tool, contingency analysis is used to observe the relationship between two or more variables. Through this multivariate analysis, we observed the relationship between the three areas covered in this study: message category, format used, and stakeholders involved.

In 2019, a more homogeneous and similar behaviour is observed in terms of the format used in social media posts and the focus of the message category.

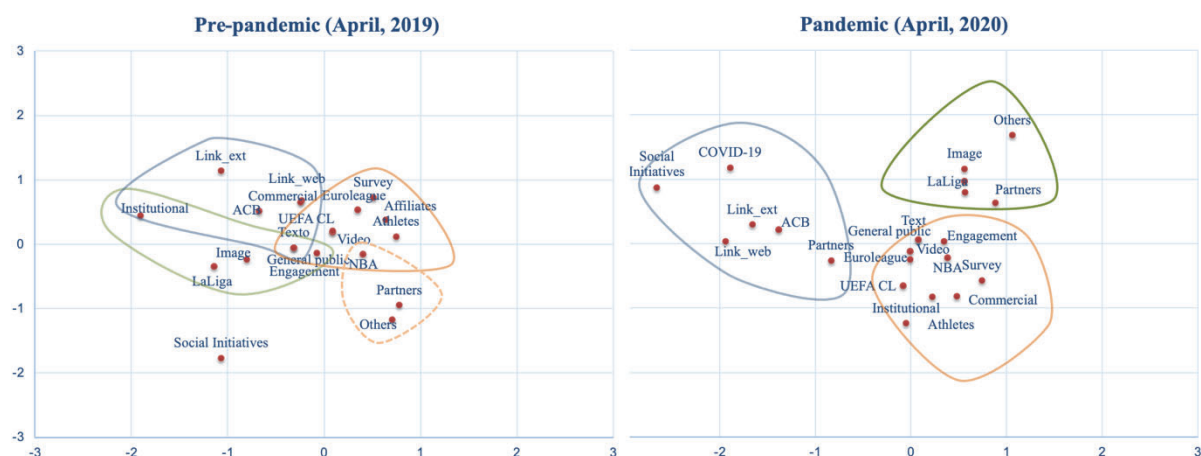


Figure 4. Pre-pandemic / pandemic contingency analysis.

At the beginning of the pandemic, considering the period analysed (April 2020), the figure shows different strategies for the same scenario. The ACB has opted for a more "social" strategy, with content linked to its website and messages referring to the COVID-19 pandemic. LL and UCL, however, have opted for a more *engagement*-oriented digital content strategy, seeking to connect and keep the audience active in a period with no current official competitions.

The NBA has decided to use survey formats (typical of the social network Twitter), as an element of interaction with the audience.

Discussion

Out of the five sports competitions analysed, we have observed different strategies when dealing with social media management at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ACB, for its part, has shown a strong inclination towards the social aspect, seeking interaction with fans through an altruistic approach. LL, however, has redirected its strategy to minimise the impact of (temporary) cancellations of sports competitions by generating *engagement* with fans, as a means of maintaining the interest and the link with the audience. Of the 5 established categories, we observed differences in key circumstances depending on the type of strategy used, the scope of the competition and sport discipline.

European-wide competitions, given the sudden pandemic situation and the prevailing uncertainty, coupled with the complexity of the stakeholders involved in the competition itself, forced the EL and UCL to make institutional publications through their social networks, in order to keep sponsors, athletes and fans updated on the future of the competition. Furthermore, the search for solutions between the parties became a key issue since the sponsorship assets committed could not be fulfilled as established.

In terms of publications frequency, Twitter ranks above in the number of publications made in both periods in all the sports competitions analysed, corroborating and in agreement with the studies by Herrera-Torres et al., (2017) and Winand et al., (2019).

We also observed a strong audio-visual focus in publication formats in a period during the pandemic, mainly due to the use of Instagram and the social focus and *engagement* strategies implemented. The statements made by Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018) reaffirm the relevance and elements of branding and fan loyalty to generate interaction with the audience by creating emotional content.

Conclusion

This research provides a comparison of differences and similarities in the management of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram in two specific periods (pre-pandemic and pandemic) by national and European football organisations (LL and UCL respectively), as well as national (ACB) and European (EL) basketball competitions, also contrasting with an external US basketball league(NBA), helping to understand this phenomenon from a model that differs from other models previously reviewed in the literature.

Regarding publications frequency, we have seen the predominance in the use of Twitter in relation to other social networks analysed. The number of posts per day is markedly different between pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. The frequency of posts is higher on competition days with a more homogeneous and linear behaviour in the pandemic period due to the cancelation of competitions. However, despite this variable, the average number of publications were similar for both periods. As a result, we can conclude that competitions organisers have chosen to redirect their strategies rather than decrease (or increase) the frequency of publications.

In terms of format, in general, posts with audio-visual content have been the fastest growing in the pandemic period due to their emotional charge combined with the need to connect with the audience despite the lack of official sporting activity.

Considering the descriptive and comparative analysis between specific pre-pandemic and pandemic periods, we conclude that the sports organisations analysed opted for a different social media communication management strategy in terms of approach (although with similar objectives) and similar strategies in terms of format.

In short, we can conclude that the research questions posed in this study have been clearly answered, under the standards of scientific rigour and reliability.

Limitations and future research

Some of the limitations that should be considered are those inherent to the data collection techniques. The content analysis focused on analysing the state of the debate in two specific time spectrums. In addition, the categories used in the present study, and the inter-coder reliability, could also become a limitation when categorizing the content analysed. The initial pandemic period taking as a reference the state of alarm in Spain (March 2020). In different geographical regions, as is the case of other continents and governmental/political and health factors are susceptible to differences in terms of epidemiological timeline, being able to reach similar pandemic scenarios in different time periods.

Future research could consider the analysis of the impact on social networks of the different messages (analysis of quantitative interactions through "Like", "Share" and "Comment" quantifications, in their respective nomenclatures according to social network). In fact, this type of study would be of interest to determine the differences over time and in terms of the type of content posted, as well as the comparative analysis of the content generated on social networks between entities and athletes.

Finally, this study is an original step in the development of a tool that differs from other existing proposals in the literature, mainly due to the need to incorporate modifications in the data collection table in order to respond to the unprecedented situation of a global health crisis. In the future, the proposal could serve to broaden and deepen other global studies by including data from other territorial and temporal scopes, variables, organizations, or even perform an analysis that achieves the objective of amalgamating different quantitative and qualitative research methods.

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5.2. Estudio II: “The more we post, the better? A comparative analysis of fan engagement on social media profiles of football leagues”

“The more we post, the better? A comparative analysis of *fan engagement* on social media profiles of football leagues”

Este estudio se ha publicado con la siguiente referencia:

Romero-Jara, E., Solanellas, F., López-Carril, S., Kolyperas, D. and Anagnostopoulos, C. (2024), "The more we post, the better? A comparative analysis of fan *engagement* on social media profiles of football leagues", International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSMS-12-2023-0252>

La versión original del artículo se encuentra en el anexo “5”

Abstract

Purpose/Rationale: In a dynamic, continuously evolving sports landscape, social media have become an indispensable tool for sports organizations to cultivate meaningful connections with fans. The rapid pace of technological advancements has elevated these digital platforms from a supplementary role to a pivotal position within strategic management frameworks. The existing literature explores how football clubs can utilize social media, but analyzing social media strategies within the context of football leagues is lacking. The absence of comparative studies benchmarking clubs across different geographical regions while simultaneously analyzing multiple social media platforms is especially noteworthy. In this study, a comprehensive analysis of social media *engagement* is undertaken within esteemed football leagues spanning Europe, South America, and North America.

Design/methodology/approach: Drawing on relationship marketing and employing content analysis as a methodological tool, the study examined 10,772 posts from the official accounts of eight football leagues on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Findings: Across the leagues, the findings reveal that content quality drives *engagement* more than frequency. In addition, several format combinations were identified that facilitate *engagement*, and Instagram emerged as the top social media platform for generating *fan engagement*.

Originality: This is one of the first empirical studies focusing on optimizing the use of social media to amplify *fan engagement* across various geographies and social media accounts and formats simultaneously.

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Introduction

Social media have become an omnipresent force in both our society and the realm of sports (Hull and Abeza, 2021). It is now challenging to envision effective sports management without leveraging the extensive array of digital tools available (e.g., YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, LinkedIn). These tools are instrumental in aiding sports managers across various domains, such as *fan engagement* and sponsorship (Balliauw *et al.*, 2021), branding (Beissel *et al.*, 2022), stakeholder communication (Guzmán *et al.*, 2021), and even entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2023). Scholars in sport management have extensively explored the utilization and potential applications of social media (Abeza, 2023; Filo *et al.*, 2015), underscoring the shift of digital tools from supplementary resources to integral and strategic components within these sport entities (Stegmann *et al.*, 2023).

The use and potential of social media has been most studied in football (e.g., Faria *et al.*, 2022; Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023). As such, sporting events like the FIFA World Cup and top-tier international leagues, including the Premier League in England, the Bundesliga in Germany, LaLiga in Spain, Serie A in Italy, and Ligue 1 in France, generate vast levels of audience *engagement* and exert substantial economic influence (Aguilar-Noury and García-del-Barrio, 2022). In addition, football superstars such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have millions of followers on their official accounts. The same applies to top clubs such as Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, Manchester United, Paris St-Germain, and Juventus (the top five football clubs in terms of social media followers according to the CIES Football Observatory, 2023).

Among social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have emerged as primary channels adopted by football leagues to foster *engagement* over the past two decades (Machado *et al.*, 2020; Maderer *et al.*, 2018). Utilizing these platforms for establishing connections between fans and sports clubs, achieving brand positioning, commercial success, and effective communication strategies has garnered significant attention from researchers (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; Maderer *et al.*, 2018). This trend is unsurprising given the context of football, a sport that attracts large crowds, where managing emotions, sometimes irrational, is crucial for the industry (Koenigstorfer *et al.*, 2010). In this vein, social media can play a highly relevant emotional role in psychology, particularly in human behavior (You and Liu, 2022; Zyoud *et al.*, 2018). This pertinence stems not only from their integration into individuals' daily lives (Lin *et al.*, 2019) but also from their potential influence on the well-being of both individuals and sports fans (Su *et al.*, 2022). Hence, a compelling need exists for further investigation into these digital tools, particularly about their interplay with *engagement* and how social media serve to bridge the gap between sports leagues, clubs, athletes, and their fans more closely than ever before (Einsle *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, in a multifaceted and emotionally charged sports sector (Su *et al.*, 2022) with an increasingly globalized football market (such as extensive international pre-season tours, multi-site sporting events (e.g., FIFA World Cup), or competitions like the Spanish or Italian Super Cup that are held outside their own countries, social media platforms play an integral role in promptly reaching and connecting diverse audiences and fostering *fan engagement* (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022).

Given the pivotal role that football leagues play in shaping the success of tournament organization, fostering stakeholder relations, conducting marketing strategies, and nurturing connections with fans, football club organizations have undertaken the management of their social media accounts (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen, 2023). This strategic initiative aims to build and reinforce their brand in response to the dynamism of the increasingly digitized marketplace (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022; Petersen-Wagner and

Ludvigsen, 2023). For instance, a football league's brand value influences its commercialization rights, such as match broadcast rights (Koenigstorfer *et al.*, 2010). These rights, in turn, directly impact the revenue obtained by football clubs competing in these leagues and, ultimately, the clubs' sporting success (Stenheim *et al.*, 2020). Since social media is a significant asset through which these leagues interact with stakeholders (e.g., brands, political entities, clubs, players), it is crucial to understand how football leagues can optimize its use based on their interests, particularly concerning the *engagement* generated with their social media publications. While studies have concentrated on examining social media usage and *fan engagement* through the lens of football clubs (e.g., López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos, 2020; Maderer *et al.*, 2018) or football players (e.g., Doyle *et al.*, 2022), there exists a notable gap in the literature concerning football leagues. Specifically, there is a lack of research employing a geographical, international comparative, and multi-platform approach. This involves analysing social media usage and *fan engagement* derived from the content shared through football leagues' official social media profiles.

Analysis of leagues rather than individual clubs or athletes can provide new insights for research for two reasons. First, by nature and structure, football competitions encourage a holistic league analysis. While football clubs compete on the field against one another, they also cooperate to develop a league brand that benefits both parties (Kunkel *et al.*, 2014). Clubs, for example, may adopt different postures based on their communication and relationship with their core stakeholders. More specifically, social media communications by individual clubs can be intrinsically competitive (or subjective) and often rely on fan loyalty and fandom cues, such as uncertainty of outcome, drama, the emotionalism of big rivalries, hatred between opposing teams, the thrill of victory, or the agony of defeat. This drives fans to consume different club products (e.g., tickets, merchandising, social media content, etc.). However, analyzing league communications rather than club or athlete (or student-athletes, for that matter (see Kunkel *et al.*, 2021) communications can eradicate this competition element and provide insight into how social media communications emerge less emotionally and how leagues (not teams) influence team fans (Kunkel, 2013). Although research has moved toward considering leagues' direct relationship with fans (Kunkel *et al.*, 2013), there is a lack of understanding of how league communications via social media can affect brand architecture, consumer involvement, or brand loyalty toward leagues.

Second, leagues communicate with all levels of football stakeholders, not only the fans of their teams. For example, official league social media is designed to reach various target audiences (a broader demographic, as well as a variety of stakeholders, including the media and the government). We anticipate that the language and messages will be more formal, emotionally detached, and polished from club idiosyncrasies. Considering that football clubs are stakeholder-embedded organizations with their own identities, locales, peculiarities, symbolisms, languages, and agendas, a league-level analysis of social media can reveal a more holistic and less stylized social media approach (as well as a less geographically restricted one). Since football clubs may convey different messages, images and postures through their own social media than through league media, the approach employed in this study adds a new level of analysis to the existing literature.

Additionally, there is a need to explore the type of content and format that generates the highest *engagement* so that sport organizations can optimize their social media management strategies. Addressing these research voids from the standpoint of sport marketing and sponsorship is paramount, serving as a crucial avenue for comprehending the inclinations and

behaviors of football fans and laying the groundwork for prospective studies within this domain. Consequently, this work is framed by two primary objectives:

1. to undertake a descriptive and comparative analysis of the *engagement* elicited by social media posts across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, focusing on international football leagues;
2. to identify the key elements inherent in high-impact social media posts.

Drawing on relationship marketing, this study employs a categorization approach derived from an existing model in the literature (Solanelas *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, a new instrument is designed, validated, and applied to analyse the use of social media as a marketing tool in sport. The results and conclusions derived from this study provide an understanding of what strategies should be used to increase *engagement* with fans through social media, highlighting the main practical and theoretical implications of using social media to increase *engagement* with fans.

Theoretical background and literature review

Social media and football: A growing symbiotic relationship

Social media, defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), have become deeply integrated into our lives (Kaplan, 2015) due to their capacity to rapidly convey information interactively (Flores-Vivar, 2009). The realm of sports has also embraced the proliferation of social media, establishing itself as an inseparable facet of sporting culture (Abeza and Sanderson, 2022). Social media and sports interaction has evolved into a mutually beneficial relationship, as sports entities foster and sustain robust consumer relationships via these platforms (Pegoraro *et al.*, 2017). Prior investigations, such as those by Abeza *et al.* (2015) and Filo *et al.* (2015), have delved into this theme, underscoring the significance of social media in the sports sector.

Amidst the extensive literature exploring the intersection of social media and sports, football is a standout sporting context that has garnered substantial attention from researchers. This preeminent status of social media in football, as argued by Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen (2023), is intertwined with the transformation in the production and consumption dynamics of football, reshaping the relationship between clubs, fans, and journalists. For instance, Faria *et al.* (2022) underline the potential of employing social media platforms such as Facebook to foster enhanced fan satisfaction and *engagement*. Furthermore, social media can empower fans to play a more participatory role in brand cultivation, exemplified by interactions on platforms like Instagram (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018) and via sponsors (Parganas *et al.*, 2017). Social media also opens avenues for friendly interactions, enabling stakeholders' *engagement* and promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (e.g., Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2017; López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos, 2020). However, sport managers must also navigate the challenges posed by social media-driven anti-brand communities (Poop *et al.*, 2016).

Another facet of the interplay between football and social media revolves around football players. Zakerian *et al.* (2022), delving into how three football players utilize Instagram to cultivate their personal brand, found that a blend of social, sporting, political, religious, economic, and personal/behavioural attributes comprise the content types that prompt individuals to follow these footballers' accounts. Doyle *et al.* (2022) investigated the posting patterns of 289 players in Major League Soccer (MLS) on Instagram. Their insights emphasized that content about athletic performance is a prime catalyst for heightened consumer

engagement, evidenced by likes and comments. Posts featuring high-quality imagery and collaborations with fellow footballers showcased a positive impact on *engagement* metrics.

Notably, a comprehensive exploration of how major football leagues (e.g., Premier League in England, Bundesliga in Germany, LaLiga in Spain, MLS in the USA) handle their official social media profiles is conspicuously absent from the literature. Existing inquiries often compare social media profiles across different sports leagues (e.g., Achen *et al.*, 2020) or within football leagues (e.g., Aicher, 2019; Maderer *et al.*, 2018). However, these analyses focus on the social media practices of the constituent clubs, leaving aside the leagues' official profiles. Recognizing that official football league profiles engage with club profiles, athletes, fans, brands, journalists, and other components of the football ecosystem, it is relevant to gain insights into the usage patterns of league profiles. Such insights can empower league managers to enact measures that amplify the brand image of these competitions, thereby augmenting their product value.

Relationship marketing and *fan engagement* in football

Social media have become indispensable to football teams' communication and marketing strategies (Guzmán *et al.*, 2021; McCarthy *et al.*, 2022). This significance is further magnified as consumers assume more active roles (Kolyperas *et al.*, 2019). This active co-creation or co-production element is key for relationship marketing (Barreto, 2015), serving as a framework to comprehend the dynamics of interaction between sport entities, athletes, and other stakeholders in the sporting landscape (e.g., Abeza *et al.*, 2019; Doyle *et al.*, 2022; Hambrick and Kang, 2015). Relationship marketing is one of the most extensively employed theoretical frameworks in understanding the relationship between social media and sport (Abeza and Sanderson, 2022; Achen, 2023). According to Abeza and Sanderson (2022), this centres on establishing, maintaining, and enhancing mutually rewarding associations.

Within the context of consumer behaviour in the digital realm of social media, a burgeoning area under exploration in football pertains to social media *engagement* (Guerin, 2023). Trunfio and Rossi (2021) underscore the multifaceted and nuanced nature of *engagement*, which can be approached through affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions. Among these dimensions, the behavioural aspect is the one most frequently discussed in the literature, often evaluated using metrics encompassing elements like likes, comments, or shares.

In football, Nisar *et al.* (2018) found that increased interaction among consumers on the Facebook profiles of 32 football clubs participating in the 2014-2015 European Champions Cup correlated with heightened levels of spectator interest. Additionally, Girsang (2021) identified *engagement* as the aspect of football teams' social media posts that most significantly impact fan loyalty. For instance, Aichner (2019) analyzed Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter posts from 78 European football clubs, categorizing content into groups: 1-News/facts, 2-Results/goals/saves, 3-private, 4-emotional, and 5-advertisements. Conversely, Krzyżowski and Strzelecki (2023) delved into the factors influencing Polish football fans in establishing stronger bonds with clubs through social media, revealing the importance of fan-to-fan interactions, information, and entertainment. This awareness of fan preferences facilitates the promotion of targeted social media campaigns, enables personalized relationships with fans, and creates opportunities for effective advertising (Sussman *et al.*, 2023).

Solanellas *et al.* (2022) and Romero-Jara *et al.* (2023) present a comprehensive approach to content categorization that spans various social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) across multiple sports competitions. Content that pertains to 'sports'

(i.e., players, coaches, results, etc.), ‘brand/marketing’ (fan experiences, *fan engagement*, sponsorship activations, etc.), ‘institutional’ (history, announcements, opening hours, etc.), ‘commercial’ (e.g., ticket sales, merchandising, etc.) and ‘ESG’ (i.e., environment, social, governance). Building upon this model and guided by the relationship marketing framework, this study delves into using social media accounts by football leagues across diverse geographical regions worldwide to foster *engagement* with fans. The focus is on the nature of the content published and the format of posts, among other facets. Thus, the insights garnered from this study are anticipated to lay a foundation for the application of social media by football leagues, empowering football leagues to make informed decisions and optimize their digital *engagement* endeavours, thereby refining their social media strategies and cultivating stronger connections with their target audiences.

In a context where football is increasingly globalized and internationalized, coupled with the greater digitization of sport, it is crucial to understand how various football stakeholders utilize their official social media accounts to interact with the sports ecosystem. While the existing literature is prolific regarding the use of social media by sports clubs or athletes (e.g., Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; McCarthy *et al.*, 2022; Zakerian *et al.*, 2022), there exists a gap specific to how football leagues employ these digital channels. This study addresses this gap by adding an international perspective, analyzing the social media accounts of leagues from different geographic areas (Europe, North America, and South America). Moreover, it does so by simultaneously examining three different social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and various types of formats (e.g., text, images, video). This approach introduces a new perspective to the literature, enhancing our understanding of the different dynamics linked to the use of social media in promoting *fan engagement*. The insights gained from this study are anticipated to establish a foundation for applying social media by football leagues, contributing to the knowledge base for practitioners and scholars. Ultimately, this study empowers football leagues to make informed decisions, optimize their digital *engagement* endeavors, and refine their social media strategies to cultivate stronger connections with their target audiences.

Method

This research employs a descriptive and comparative research design (Andrew *et al.*, 2011) to explore *engagement* levels across football leagues' official social media accounts spanning diverse geographical regions worldwide. In pursuit of this objective, it adopts content analysis techniques. Content analysis has found extensive successful application within the realm of sport communication studies (Schäfer and Vögele, 2021), including studies considering the utilization of social media within sports in general (de Guzman *et al.*, 2021; Hambrick and Kang, 2015; Wang and Zhou, 2015), and football (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; Doyle *et al.*, 2022; Maderer *et al.*, 2018; Winand *et al.*, 2019). This technique facilitates the meticulous classification, coding, and identification of recurring themes or patterns inherent within textual data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

Sampling procedure

A non-probability sampling design guided by Battaglia's guidelines (2008) was established to select the football leagues under examination in this study. This process encompassed three key determinations, addressing the following aspects: 1) the selection of football leagues for inclusion, 2) the choice of relevant social media platforms, and 3) the specific temporal scope of the investigation.

The geographical regions of Europe, North America, and South America were specifically chosen to delineate the football leagues examined in this study. The selection of these regions was grounded in historical significance and football tradition. Europe, as the birthplace of football, and South America, boasting the second-highest number of World Cups, were deemed pertinent. Additionally, emerging markets like North America, propelled by events such as the arrival of football players stars from David Beckham at LA Galaxy to the recently Lionel Messi at Inter Miami and the forthcoming hosting of the FIFA 2026 World Cup in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, have imparted a notable media and economic impetus, particularly to endeavors such as MSL in the United States (Kobylinska and Medina, 2023). Subsequently, from the array of existing international professional leagues within these geographical areas, the selection of football leagues was undertaken by evaluating the significance of the teams they comprised. This process closely adhered to the methodology established in similar studies (e.g., Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; Maderer *et al.*, 2018). To this end, the rankings offered by four prominent football organizations or websites were conscientiously considered: 1) the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS) club ranking, 2) the Football World Rankings website club ranking, 3) the FIFA club and league ranking, and 4) the Transfermarkt website player ranking. The joint application of these four criteria, along with an alignment with the study's objectives, methodological design, and consensus among authors (Andrew *et al.*, 2011; Battaglia, 2008; Hernández-Sampieri *et al.*, 2014), led to the formation of an initial cohort comprising 8 football leagues (3 from Europe, 3 from South America, and 2 from North America). Subsequently, a systematic application of the random draw methodology was executed to pursue optimal representation and the establishment of equilibrium across the chosen regions. This process derived from the refined selection of three football leagues from Europe, three from South America, and two from North America, culminating in a purposive cohort of eight football leagues (as depicted in Table 1) whose content on their official social media accounts was analysed. This sampling strategy considers potential cultural and institutional differences, encompassing major football leagues from diverse countries in three football-passionate regions (Europe, South America, and North America). These factors may influence patterns of social media use in football, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon under study.

Secondly, the selection of social media platforms for analysis was determined. We adopt a multi-platform approach, as most studies investigating social media in football tend to focus on a single platform (e.g., Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; Guzmán *et al.*, 2021; Faria *et al.*, 2022). Simultaneously analysing multiple social media platforms offers a broader perspective (e.g., Aichner, 2019), which can prove valuable for sport managers seeking insights into the types of content and formats that elicit higher *engagement* across each platform. Therefore, this study analyses three key social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Including the first two platforms is motivated by their longstanding presence and utilization within the sports industry, as well as previous research within football-related contexts (e.g., Parganas *et al.*, 2015; Maderer *et al.*, 2019; Winand *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the prominence of Instagram has escalated in recent years in studies intersecting social media and sports (Abeza, 2023).

The third procedural step involved determining the timeframe for data extraction. Following Ashley and Tuten's (2015) framework, a period of 45 days for each club on various social media platforms was deemed appropriate. This timeframe, covering the beginning, middle, and end of the 2019 season (15 days each), ensures a comprehensive understanding of social media activity while mitigating the impact of transient or exceptional occurrences. The exclusion of out-of-range *engagement* posts aims to minimize potential biases caused by

external factors or anomalies, aligning with the study's objective to provide an overall and accurate depiction of social media performance throughout the league season.

To procure data from the eight focal leagues' official Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, we employed the Fanpage Karma software due to its efficacy and reliability in collecting and mining social media data (e.g., Lozano-Blasco *et al.*, 2023). Encompassing the entire sequence delineated in this sub-section, a cumulative total of 10,772 social media publications were collected (as delineated in Table 1).

Table 1: Number of posts analysed extracted from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram official accounts of the football leagues selected

Region	Country	League	Facebook		Twitter		Instagram	
			Posts analysed (n)	%	Posts analysed (n)	%	Posts analysed (n)	%
Europe	Germany	Bundesliga	233	8%	328	6%	484	20%
	Spain	LaLiga	460	15%	793	15%	372	16%
	UK	Premier League	325	11%	1,033	19%	283	12%
South America	Brazil	Brasileirão	260	9%	126	2%	518	22%
	Argentina	Superliga (AFA)	212	7%	593	11%	87	4%
	Paraguay	Copa de Primera	151	5%	107	2%	55	2%
North America	Mexico	Liga BBVA	810	27%	1,217	23%	425	18%
	USA	Major League Soccer	575	19%	1,150	22%	175	7%
			3,026	100%	5,347	100%	2,399	100%
10,772								

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- Manual compilation of data took place within the .xlsx observation instrument sheet, wherein each post was individually scrutinized and coded in line with the study's codebook.
- The establishment of a dedicated database ensued, wherein the compiled data was systematically coded with the essential variables to facilitate subsequent statistical analyses.

Data analysis

A comprehensive analysis examined the *engagement* stemming from posts across the three social media platforms alongside their associated content dimensions and formats. The data formed the foundation for calculating the *engagement* variable. The *engagement* calculations were derived from established formulas utilized by researchers and practitioners in the digital marketing field. These formulas draw inspiration from prior works, including Herrera-Torres *et al.* (2017), Benito-Colio *et al.* (2022), and Romero-Jara *et al.* (2023). Special attention has been given to the unique characteristics of each social network, ensuring the incorporation of crucial interaction elements specific to each platform. The calculations were adapted using the Fanpage Karma (2023) and Rival IQ (Feehan, 2023) platforms, providing a homogeneous and comparative approach to data analysis:

- a) Facebook: ***Engagement (Fb)*** = $\left(\frac{\text{Reactions} + \text{Shares} + \text{Comments}}{\text{Followers}} \right) * 100$;
- b) Twitter: ***Engagement (Tw)*** = $\left(\frac{\text{Likes} + \text{Shares}}{\text{Followers}} \right) * 100$; and
- c) Instagram: ***Engagement (Ig)*** = $\left(\frac{\text{Likes} + \text{Comments}}{\text{Followers}} \right) * 100$

Statistical analyses were applied to evaluate the variances in *engagement* resulting from posts on individual social media platforms. Precisely, the independent samples t-test and one-factor ANOVA were employed for this purpose. The established significance threshold was <.05. Furthermore, a chi-square test and correspondence analysis were executed to discern and illustrate connections between pivotal variables. Data analysis was conducted utilizing the SPSS statistical software version 27.0.

Findings

The global descriptive results (Table 2) reveal that Twitter, boasting a total of n=5,347 posts, stands out as the platform with the highest post frequency, constituting 50% of the analysed sample. Following Twitter, Facebook exhibits n=3,026 posts (28% of the sample), while Instagram encompasses n=2,399 posts (22% of the sample). However, a notable contrast emerges when evaluating the level of *engagement* generated in that Instagram exhibits the highest *engagement* mean (0.661), surpassing both Facebook (0.048) and Twitter (0.015).

Table 2: Frequency, *engagement* means and SD of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram

	n	%	<i>Engagement</i>			
			Means	SD	Min	Max
Facebook	3,026	28%	.048	.132	.000	2.471
Twitter	5,347	50%	.015	.031	.000	.429
Instagram	2,399	22%	.661	.645	.008	5.395
	10,772	100%				

Quality vs. quantity: post frequency and *engagement* per leagues

European football leagues

In more detail, the research findings reveal intricate patterns across leagues, geographical regions, and social media platforms (see Figure 1). Among the European leagues on Facebook, post frequency ranges from n=233 in the case of the Bundesliga to n=460 in LaLiga. In the meantime, the Premier League documents a post frequency of n=325. In terms of *engagement* ratios, the three leagues exhibit comparable levels, with *engagement* generation values of 0.033, 0.043, and 0.047, respectively. Turning to Twitter, the Premier League records a post frequency of n=1,033 and an *engagement* mean of 0.017. Conversely, LaLiga showcases a post frequency of n=793, resulting in an *engagement* mean of 0.028. Lastly, the Bundesliga presents n=328 posts, yielding an *engagement* mean of 0.007. Regarding Instagram, the investigation uncovers the following observations: the Bundesliga exhibits a higher frequency of posts compared to the other two leagues (n=484), with an *engagement* mean of 0.062, while LaLiga (n=372) registers a higher *engagement* mean (0.951). Lastly, the Premier League, with the least number of posts (n=283), records an *engagement* means higher than the Bundesliga and similar to LaLiga (0.043).

South American football leagues

Shifting the focus to the South American leagues on Facebook, the Brasileirão league records a post frequency of n=260, with an *engagement* mean of 0.188. This is followed by the Argentinean Superliga AFA (n=212), with an *engagement* mean of 0.013, and the Paraguayan Copa de Primera League, with n=151, resulting in an *engagement* mean of 0.087. On Twitter, the Argentine Superliga displays a high post frequency compared to the other two leagues (n=593), yet it reports the lowest level of *engagement* (0.006). The Brasileirão posts n=126 times, yielding an *engagement* mean of 0.074, while the Copa de Primera league posts n=107 times, resulting in an *engagement* mean of 0.036. Regarding Instagram, a significant disparity emerges, with the Brasileirão league showcasing a notably higher post frequency (n=518) and an *engagement* mean of 0.400. Following closely is the Argentine AFA Superliga (n=87), with an *engagement* mean of 0.129. The Copa de Primera league posts less frequently (n=55) yet records a slightly higher *engagement* ratio than the other two leagues in the same region (0.414).

North American football leagues

Concluding the examination across the diverse geographical regions studied, the analysis of the North American leagues reveals a notable post frequency on Facebook for both Liga MX (n=810) and MLS (n=575), resulting in similar *engagement* mean returns of 0.021

and 0.038, respectively. On Twitter, both leagues exhibit the highest activity level, yet their *engagement* ratios are comparatively lower compared to other leagues analysed in this study. Specifically, Liga MX posts $n=1,217$ times and achieves an *engagement* mean of 0.009, while MLS posts $n=1,150$ times, resulting in an *engagement* mean of 0.008. Concerning Instagram, the evidence highlights a contrasting *engagement* behaviour. Liga MX posts 425 times and achieves an *engagement* ratio of 0.384. At the same time, MLS, with a frequency of only $n=175$, attains the highest *engagement* return among all analysed leagues on this platform (1.296).

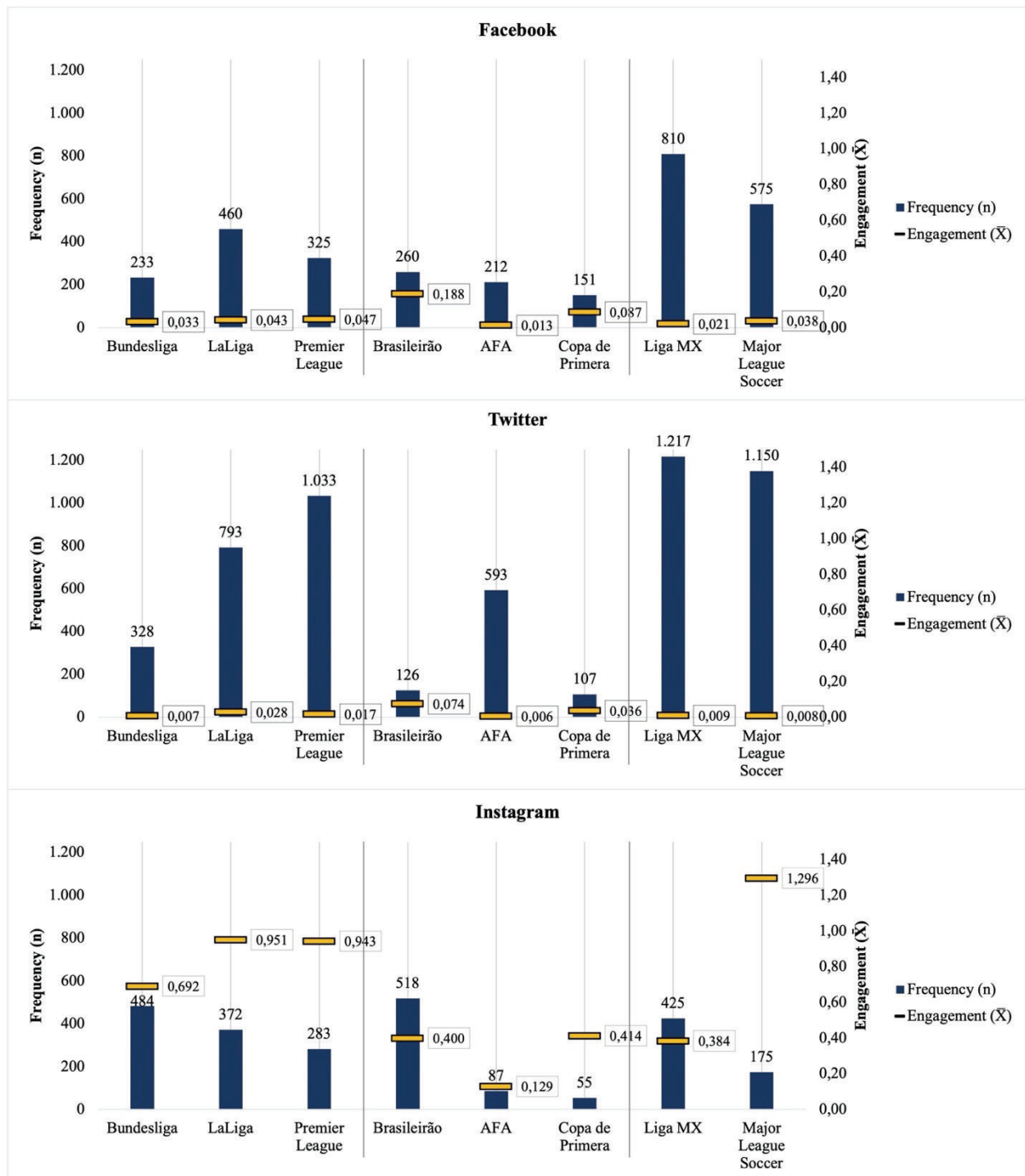


Figure 1: Patterns across leagues, geographical regions, and social media platforms.

Content dimensions strategies adopted on social media by football leagues

In Figure 2, the research findings unveil the social media content strategies adopted by the analyzed leagues, based on the dimensions proposed in this study, alongside their corresponding *engagement* returns. On Facebook, the most frequently posted content dimensions encompass "Sports" (44%) and "Brand/Marketing" (42%), with observed *engagement* ratios of 0.042 and 0.058, respectively. Additionally, "Institutional" messages comprise 10% of the total posts on this platform, yielding an *engagement* mean ratio of 0.023. Conversely, the least utilized message types on Facebook pertain to the dimensions "Commercial" (4% of total posts) and "Environmental, Social, and Governance" (ESG) (1% of total posts), generating *engagements* of 0.023 and 0.043, respectively.

On Twitter, a comparable pattern emerges, with "Sports" (46%) and "Brand/Marketing" (42%) also being the most frequent message dimensions, accompanied by *engagement* ratios of 0.011 and 0.019, respectively. Similarly, "Institutional" messages rank third in terms of frequency (8% of posts), displaying an *engagement* ratio of 0.021, while "Commercial" messages occupy the fourth place (3% of posts) with an *engagement* return of 0.008. Lastly, "ESG" dimension-type messages are observed in 1% of the total number of posts on this platform, achieving an *engagement* mean of 0.017, consistent with the patterns seen on Facebook.

Turning to Instagram, the findings indicate that over half of the posts revolve around the "Brand/Marketing" dimension, accounting for 51% of the total and displaying a notably high *engagement* ratio of 0.765. Posts concerning the "Sports" dimension-type constitute 34% of the total, with an *engagement* mean return of 0.521. This is followed by "Institutional" dimension-type posts, representing 12% of the total and demonstrating an *engagement* mean of 0.626. While "Commercial" dimension type strategies make up only 2% of the posts, they are the content type that has garnered the highest *engagement* on this platform, with a ratio of 0.780. Finally, in alignment with patterns seen on Facebook and Twitter, the "ESG" dimension content comprises 1% of the total number of posts on this social media, achieving an *engagement* mean of 0.442.

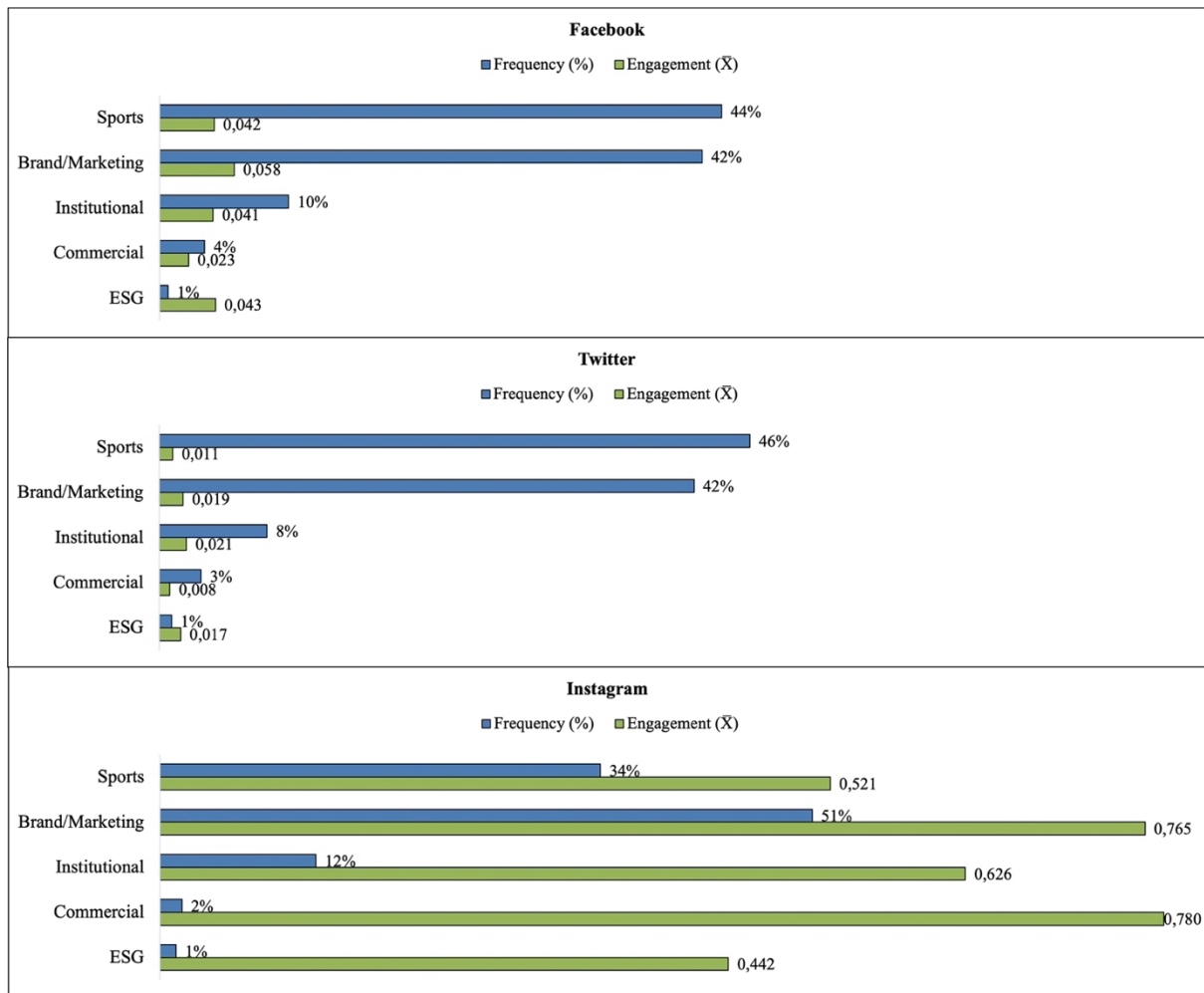


Figure 2: Frequency and *engagement* of posts by according of the dimensions

The “how” matters: varieties of social media post formats

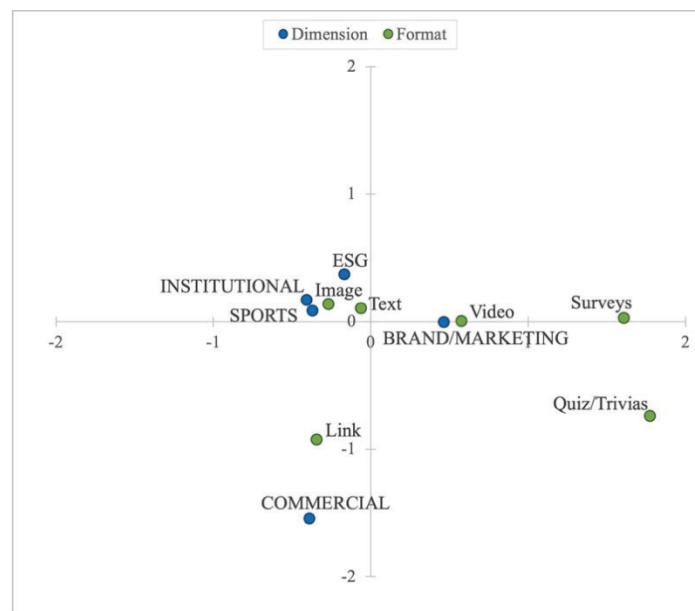
The research has yielded findings concerning the post formats employed by sports leagues on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as presented in Table 3. The analysis identified three primary formats: "Text," "Image," and "Video", and further revealed six prominent format combinations most frequently employed across these social media platforms. The format combination "Text/Image" emerges as the most prevalent choice across all three platforms, constituting 38.43% on Facebook, 38.71% on Twitter, and a dominant 64.43% on Instagram. However, results also highlighted noteworthy distinctions in terms of *engagement* generated by specific formats on each platform. Notably, the "Image" format garners the highest *engagement* on Facebook and Twitter, with an *engagement* mean of 0.21 and 0.03, respectively. In contrast, on Instagram, a different trend emerges, where the format combination "Text/Video/Link" achieves the highest *engagement* mean of 1.13.

Table 3: Post format combinations and corresponding *engagement* means

Format	Facebook			Twitter			Instagram		
	n	%	Engagement $\bar{X}$	n	%	Engagement $\bar{X}$	n	%	Engagement $\bar{X}$
Text	11	0,36%	0.04	358	6,71%	0.01	0	0,00%	0,00
Image	98	3,24%	0.21	13	0,24%	0.03	147	6,10%	0,65
Text/Link	160	5,28%	0.02	165	3,09%	0.00	462	19,18%	0,63
Text/Video	903	29,81%	0.04	1,276	23,92%	0.02	0	0,00%	0,00
Text/Video/Link	16	0,53%	0.00	199	3,73%	0.01	4	0,17%	1,13
Text/Image	1,164	38,43%	0.06	2,065	38,71%	0.02	1,552	64,43%	0,64
Text/Image/Link	411	13,57%	0.01	871	16,33%	0.00	24	1,00%	0,35
Video	6	0,20%	0.04	8	0,15%	0.00	31	1,29%	0,42
Text/Image/Surveys	44	1,45%	0.04	92	1,72%	0.01	46	1,91%	0,98
Others	216	7,13%	0.03	287	5,38%	0.01	143	5,94%	1,05
Total	3,029			5,334			2,409		

The correspondence analysis (see Figure 3) illustrates the level of association between the variables and the proposed categorization dimensions in this study, as represented in a relative position map. The chi-squared test yielded a result of 917.25, indicating a statistically significant relationship among the variables under investigation. Specifically, the "Branding/Marketing" dimension exhibits a stronger association with resources in the "video" formats. Conversely, the "Sports", "ESG" and "Institutional" content dimension types demonstrate an affinity with the "Image" and "Text" formats. Furthermore, the "Commercial" dimension, which is constructed based on categorization attributes, displays a connection with the "Link" format, identified as ideal points of association.

Figure 3: Correspondence analysis (dimensions and format)



Discussion

While the relationship between social media and football has previously been studied, primarily from the perspective of clubs or footballers (e.g., Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; Doyle *et al.*, 2022; Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023; Zakerian *et al.*, 2022), there is a gap in understanding of how football leagues utilize their social media profiles for communication, branding, commercial purposes, and *fan engagement*, among other activities. This study bridges this research gap by employing the relationship marketing framework to examine eight professional football leagues' Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram profiles from three geographical regions (Europe, South America, and North America).

Does posting frequency matter?

Our findings show that Twitter is the most utilized digital platform in terms of the number of posts published by the examined football leagues, followed by Facebook and Instagram. This pattern is not unexpected, considering that Twitter and Facebook were introduced and integrated earlier into sport management operations. The prominence of Twitter as the social media platform with the highest post count among the studied leagues could probably also be attributed to its character limit, which may require multiple tweets to convey content that can be communicated in a single post on Facebook and Instagram. This discrepancy in post volume across social media aligns with findings from similar research (e.g., Achen *et al.*, 2020; Maderer *et al.*, 2018).

Notably, Twitter stands out as having the lowest *engagement* per post compared to Facebook (in line with Achen *et al.*, 2020; Maderer *et al.*, 2018). Despite previous studies (e.g., Maderer *et al.*, 2018; Parganas *et al.*, 2015) highlighting Twitter's advantages in enhancing club branding and *fan engagement*, its *engagement* rate remains notably lower than that of Instagram. Given this contrast, greater attention should be directed toward understanding Instagram's potential. This social media platform, as acknowledged by Abeza (2023) and Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, (2018), continues to gain traction both in terms of academic interest and user adoption, especially among the younger demographic.

When focusing on the comparison of posting frequency and *engagement* across leagues, it becomes evident that both Facebook and Twitter exhibit similar levels of *engagement*. These results align with Aichner (2019) (albeit with a focus on clubs rather than leagues), who indicated that no significant differences existed in the utilization of social media accounts across different countries and cultures. Notably, amid these findings, a noteworthy exception arises: emerging leagues in North America, such as Liga MX (Mexico) and MLS (USA), tend to publish a higher number of posts on Facebook and Twitter compared to leagues with more established traditions and wider media coverage, such as the Bundesliga (Germany), LaLiga (Spain), and the Premier League (UK). In contrast, Instagram stands out as the social media platform with the highest *engagement* in relation to the number of posts published. This distinction highlights the significant *engagement* observed in the publications of MLS, followed by the major European leagues included in this study. For this reason, it is worth considering studying the case of MLS as a future success story with Instagram. Notably, this is especially pertinent considering that during the data collection period, footballer Lionel Messi had yet to join the league as a player. As Kobylinska and Medina (2023) noted, the "Messi effect" is expected to catalyse a media surge within the league.

Deriving from the observations above, the findings in this study unveil a nuanced pattern that challenges conventional assumptions about the relationship between post-frequency and *engagement* across different leagues. Contrary to the notion that higher post frequency directly equates to heightened *engagement*, our research indicates that the

contemporary audience places a premium on content quality over quantity (echoing Aichner, 2019).

Does content type in posts matter?

Focusing on the content types shared by football leagues across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, a consistent pattern emerges where "Sports" and "Brand/Marketing" messages hold a predominant presence. This observation reflects the leagues' concerted endeavors to establish emotional bonds with their audience, employing social media to enhance branding efforts (Maderer *et al.*, 2018). The prevalence of "Sports" content aligns logically with its high frequency, as Machado *et al.* (2020) noted, indicating that fans are inherently seeking entertaining and enjoyable content related to the sporting events they follow. In the context of "Brand/Marketing" content, the pivotal role of social media has become increasingly evident in recent years (e.g., McCarthy *et al.*, 2022; Zakerian *et al.*, 2022), proving instrumental in positioning football competitions and attracting potential sponsors (Balliauw *et al.*, 2021). Leagues as organizers leverage diverse players, venues, and cultural nuances to elicit robust emotional reactions from their audience (Su *et al.*, 2022).

Our investigation also accentuates the substantial role of "Institutional" content, a direct consequence of the leagues' organizational responsibilities and the augmented necessity for institutional communication. Notably, we observed restrained efforts in the "Commercial" and "ESG" dimensions. These disparities potentially signify differing priorities among individual football entities, such as clubs. While commercial objectives remain crucial for football leagues, their execution might diverge from traditional clubs, leading to a diversity of messaging strategies.

Remarkably, the "ESG" dimension surfaces as a significant driver of *engagement* across Facebook and Twitter, catering to an audience that values transparency, social responsibility, and broader societal impact beyond the realm of sports. This finding aligns with López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos (2020), who view social media as a distinct avenue for sport entities to communicate their CSR initiatives. Conversely, Instagram manifests distinctive user behavior, where "Commercial" messages provoke the highest *engagement*. This phenomenon could be attributed to the platform's audio-visual nature, which fosters stronger emotional connections with users. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Instagram generates high *engagement* across all content dimensions analyzed. Contrary to Aichner's (2019) study, where post topics did not significantly impact user *engagement*, our findings reveal that, in addition to the aforementioned "Commercial" dimension, the "Brand/Marketing" and "Institutional" dimensions also stand out significantly on Instagram.

Does the format of posts matter?

Regarding the publication formats, an interesting observation emerges. On platforms like Facebook and Twitter, where images are not the predominant element, it is noteworthy that posts consisting solely of images garner higher *engagement*. This aligns with the popular saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words," suggesting that social media account managers should consider favoring this format. In the context of Instagram, in addition to the image format, format combinations have demonstrated high *engagement* rates, such as Text/Video/Link. Various other formats, such as text/image and text/link, have also proven effective. Therefore, it is advisable for sports managers to embrace a diverse array of formats to enhance *fan engagement* on this platform effectively.

Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications of this paper are significant across sport marketing, sport management, and *fan engagement* domains. First, this study contributes to the existing literature by adopting a strategic perspective rooted in relationship marketing, which fills a gap in the literature regarding the use of social media by soccer leagues, as opposed to previous studies that focused on clubs or athletes (e.g., Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; McCarthy *et al.*, 2022; Zakerian *et al.*, 2022). In contrast to previous research, which has demonstrated the use of social media to facilitate direct communication between fans, athletes, and clubs, our research points towards a different dimension. We like to refer to it as "institutional" social media communication, where content on social media results from constant negotiations between managers, athletes, fans, club demands, and league priorities. Often, such overarching communications are accompanied by disparities that represent differing priorities among individual football entities but also foster direct communication between fans and leagues (instead of clubs). For instance, our results indicate that commercial objectives remain crucial for football leagues but are not always the priority. Therefore, their execution might differ from football clubs, resulting in diverse messaging strategies.

Second, it establishes a connection between studied dimensions and overarching strategies implemented by football leagues, advancing our understanding of how these leagues leverage social media for *fan engagement* and brand presence. Third, it introduces a novel frequency-*engagement* approach that challenges conventional wisdom by demonstrating that post-frequency alone does not dictate user *engagement*. Identifying critical factors beyond post frequency aligns with Web 2.0 principles, emphasizing meaningful interactions and connections with fans rather than mere content dissemination. Finally, by focusing on international football leagues, this study provides valuable insights that transcend geographic boundaries, contributing to a more complete understanding of social media dynamics in the increasingly globalized football domain.

Practical implications

Our research findings point to a critical practical dimension. This indicates that league social media communications may differ from relative club and/or athlete communications. Since clubs formulate leagues but are not always adequately managed by them (in that leagues may develop different agendas and priorities), our research calls for better cooperation across football club social media managers and league managers. Such managers need to ensure collaboration with each other and, where possible, utilize both platforms better to avoid replication of content, mixed messages, or boomerang effects from untargeted communications. Our findings indicate that such collaboration emerges at different levels, especially if we look at MLS (given its governance structure) compared to the other leagues examined.

Limitations and future research directions

Despite the contributions of this study to the realm of social media management by sports organizations, certain limitations should be acknowledged. While these limitations restrict the generalizability of the results, they also provide potential avenues for future research. Firstly, the sample is confined to a single sport (football) and specific league profiles from various regions worldwide. Exploring *engagement* dynamics across different geographical regions, a more comprehensive array of football leagues, and various sports would be beneficial to ascertain the broader applicability of the findings.

Secondly, while this study concentrates on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, emerging social media platforms like TikTok and Twitch, as well as less explored platforms such as

YouTube, warrant investigation in the future, as indicated by several authors (e.g., Abeza, 2023; Su *et al.*, 2022). This exploration is crucial to acquiring a diversified understanding of the potential that different social media platforms hold for sports marketing and *fan engagement*, and perhaps the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) could pave the way forward.

Finally, this study presents an analysis of the use of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram by the leagues under study over three periods of 15 days each. We recommend conducting analyses over more extended periods for future studies to gain a comprehensive, longer-term perspective. For instance, similar time windows could be analyzed in successive seasons. Additionally, it is worth noting that the analysis windows studied in this work may align with different time frames for each league due to their distinct geographical locations and individual season schedules.

Conclusions

This study is pioneering in exploring how eight professional football leagues from diverse geographical regions utilize their official Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, with a specific emphasis on post *engagement* and relationship marketing. The findings further solidify both practical and scholarly understanding, pinpointing the most efficient content types and formats for *engagement*. In summary, this study yields several noteworthy conclusions:

- a) Instagram's dominance over Facebook and Twitter in terms of *engagement* is unequivocal. Sport managers should prioritize enhancing their presence on this social media platform.
- b) A higher frequency of posts does not inherently result in increased audience *engagement*. Therefore, the quality of content must take precedence over quantity to ensure its appeal to football fans.
- c) Achieving optimal *engagement* hinges on aligning message content strategy and format. Football leagues are more likely to achieve higher *engagement* rates when they meticulously blend suitable message content with the appropriate format. Understanding the preferences and interests of the target audience is crucial in this regard.
- d) The balanced relationship between "Brand/Marketing" and "Sports" dimensions in terms of content strategy frequency and subsequent audience *engagement* should be emphasized. These two content types resonate well with the audience and maintain a harmonious frequency-to-*engagement* ratio.
- e) The emerging significance of the "ESG" content aspect cannot be overlooked. This content theme garners notably higher *engagement* on Facebook and Twitter, signifying the audience's growing interest in sustainability and social responsibility matters.
- f) "Commercial" content exhibits more significant impact and audience interaction on Instagram than Facebook and Twitter. This underscores the multifaceted nature of social media *engagement* and emphasizes the importance of tailoring content strategies and formats to specific platforms and target audiences.

As social media continues to evolve, the findings from this study will function as a guiding compass, directing football leagues toward informed decision-making and enhancing their social media strategies.

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5.3. Estudio III: “Connecting with fans in the digital age: an exploratory and comparative analysis of social media management in top football clubs”

“Connecting with fans in the digital age: an exploratory and comparative analysis of social media management in top football clubs”

Este estudio ha sido publicado con la siguiente referencia:

Romero-Jara, E., Solanellas, F., Muñoz, J. et al. Connecting with fans in the digital age: an exploratory and comparative analysis of social media management in top football clubs. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 10, 858 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02357-8>

La versión original del artículo se encuentra en el anexo “6”

Abstract

In a globalised society, characterised by increasingly demanding markets and the accelerated growth of the digital approach, sports organisations face the challenge of connecting with fans, generating and maintaining audiences and communicating with stakeholders creatively and efficiently. Social media has become a fundamental tool, with *engagement* as a critical measurement element. However, despite its popularity and use, many questions about its application, measurement and real potential in the sports sector still need to be answered. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to carry out a descriptive and comparative analysis of the *engagement* generated through social media posts by elite football clubs in Europe, South America and North America. To this purpose, 19,745 Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts were analysed, through the design, validation and application of an observation instrument, using content analysis techniques. The findings show evidence of a priority focus on "Marketing" and "Sports" type messages in terms of frequency, with high *engagement* rates. They were also showing a growing stream of "ESG" type messages, with a low posting frequency but *engagement* rates similar to "Marketing" and "Sport". "Institutional" messages remain constant in all football clubs. "Commercial" messages still have growth potential in both regards, frequency and engaging fans, representing an opportunity for digital assets. Also, specific format combinations that generate greater *engagement* were identified: "text/image" and "text/videos" are the format combinations more used by football clubs on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; however, resulting in different *engagement* rates. This study showed evidence of different social media management strategies adopted according to region, obtaining similar *engagement* rates. This research concludes with theoretical and practical applications that will be of interest to both academics and practitioners to maximise the potential of social media for *fan engagement*, social initiatives and as a marketing tool.

ESTUDIOS REALIZADOS

Introduction

In a context of booming technology and high organisational competitiveness (Ratten, 2022), digital tools have evolved from an essential add-on to crucial strategic and operational elements in sports organisations (Stegmann et al., 2021). Fans increasingly demand a connection with their favourite athletes and teams (Su et al., 2020) through digital channels such as social media, podcasts (Rohden et al., 2023), Esports (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022), among others. Today's digitized world presents therefore, an opportunity for brands, sponsors, sports properties, and other stakeholders to interact in a complex and emotionally charged sector (Su et al., 2022) for fans from different age generations (Sheldon et al., 2021). Understanding and getting to know fans are at the forefront of every sports organisation's objective.

Social media plays a fundamental role due to their ability to reach multiple audiences faster and generate a sense of connection with fans through a key measurement element: *engagement* (Doyle et al., 2022). Sports organisations, specifically football clubs, invest time, people and resources in managing social media to achieve their brand positioning and commercial and communication objectives (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018), with Facebook, Twitter and more recently, Instagram, being the most widely used (Abeza et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2020). However, the real potential of social media and its optimal use still poses many questions to be answered.

Although there are previous studies that have explored some aspects of social media in a sports context (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Mastromartino & Naraine, 2022; Su et al., 2020), the potential of impact and efficiency of content posted by football clubs on their social media channels remains unclear. For example, several studies point to various factors that contribute to *fan engagement* on social media depending on elements such as the type of content, the format used (e.g. photo, text or a combination of both) or the social media platform (see Einsle et al., 2023; Maderer et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020). This gap in the literature prompts a call to action from across the domains of sport marketing and sport management. Identifying the elements generated by football clubs on their official social media profiles can help them improve their marketing strategies and better support their fans. Based on this need and opportunity for management improvement, this study addresses the following research question:

RQ. What are the main characteristics of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts from elite football clubs to understand the content type, format and social media platform that generate the highest *engagement* among social media consumers?

Grounded on the theoretical framework of relationship marketing, the main objective of this study is to carry out a descriptive and comparative analysis of the *engagement* generated through social media posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram by elite football clubs in Europe, South America and North America, using a categorisation approach developed from an existing model in the literature (see Solanellas et al., 2022), as well as the identification of key elements of high-impact social media posts. For this purpose, a new instrument was designed, validated and applied to analyse the use of social media as a marketing tool in sports management. By conducting this exploration, this paper contributes to the literature on sports marketing by identifying which social media and which types of content provoke the most interaction among fans. As a result, football team managers can gain a better understanding of how to target and personalize potential commercial and branding actions, thereby reinforcing the loyalty and commitment of fans to football clubs, and opening or consolidating new lines of action aligned with the strategic objectives of sport entities. Furthermore, the findings and conclusions presented in this study can assist sport managers in the decision-making process,

as well as in planning, organizing, directing, and effectively controlling social media platforms, thus enhancing *engagement* with fans in a digital environment.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, the literature review presents the main theoretical and conceptual elements, focusing on social media and their relationship with marketing theory in sports and football. Secondly, the methodological aspects guiding the study's process are detailed, including sample, instrument, research procedure, and data analysis. Thirdly, the study's main results are presented. Fourth, the discussion section critically examines the findings in the context of existing literature, offering practical and theoretical implications for both academics and practitioners. Finally, the study concludes with the main conclusions and limitations.

Literature Review

Social media and sports, a combination of great potential.

Social media is a collective term for media tools, platforms, and applications allowing consumers to connect, communicate, and collaborate (Williams & Chinn, 2010). They encourage interaction between users and the organisation and provide information from customers and the organisation faster than through conventional media (Kümpel et al., 2015; Shilbury et al., 2014). Furthermore, social media is considered a mass phenomenon due to its ability to transmit information in an agile and interactive way (Vivar, 2009), as well as a unique form of communication that transcends geographical and social boundaries through the instantaneous communication of information (Filo et al., 2015), used in different sectors for marketing activities (Chen, 2023), brand equity and loyalty (Malarvizhi et al., 2022) to understand consumer's behaviour, brand positioning, business revenue opportunities and social communication (Ramos et al., 2019). However, although the first studies about this phenomenon have been explored in the sports industry field, there is still a need for more evidence about its real potential, essential elements, and efficiency measurement in the sector.

Due to the high graphic, interactive and visual content of social media, their use in sports industry, a sector of strong emotional influence, has become more relevant and pervasive in the last decade (Hull & Abeza, 2021), where the interest of the viewer has become crucial and increasingly demanding (Nisar et al., 2018). The differences that make the sports industry unique and particular are, among others: immediate results and changes (Davis & Hilbert, 2013) in addition to the fact that every decision is "in the spotlight" of the public (alluding to the complexity of fans, athletes, coaches, media and other stakeholders). Thus, athletes, teams and sports organisations have been using social media as part of their public relations and communication efforts (Filo et al., 2015; Pegoraro, 2010; Yan et al., 2019) to engage with their partners and fans (Zakerian et al., 2022), promoting interactions and increasing *engagement* with the sport product, as well as with the team in general (Abeza et al., 2019; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015).

The linking of social media within the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) process has changed communication strategies and consumer outreach, where marketing managers must include these tools when developing and executing their customer-focused promotional strategies (Lee & Kahle, 2016; Rehman et al., 2022). On the other hand, social media, directly and indirectly, impacts revenue generation and favours negotiation with sponsors due to their notoriety, visibility, and reach (Mastromartino & Naraine, 2022; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015). They are therefore considered a key tool for building and enhancing a brand's reputation (Maderer et al., 2018; Rosenbröijer, 2019) and an ideal platform to advertise and increase the visibility of a brand or company, as well as to interact with and

analyse the actions of their fans and followers (Abeza et al., 2017; García-Fernández et al., 2015; Herrera-Torres et al., 2017).

Social media has also been used in sports education in recent years (Sanz-Labrador et al., 2021). Moreover, their application is increasingly common in construction and dissemination related to social responsibility (López-Carril & Anagnostopoulos, 2020; Sharpe et al., 2020). In this way, they have also become a key tool for interacting with fans, addressing a strengthened social approach, and gaining *engagement* from athletes, sponsors, and authorities (Einsle et al., 2023; Oviedo et al., 2014; Su et al., 2020). Beyond the digital environment, Cuesta-Valiño et al., (2021) pointed out the relevance of considering the emerging sustainable management approach to measure sports organisations' goals. One of the most relevant challenges for this industry is to issue social media posts efficiently, using the proper formatting resources and at the right time, to generate the most significant possible impact and *engagement*.

Relationship marketing theory applied to social media in sports.

The sports industry is a fast-growing and increasingly diverse market worldwide (Kim & Andrew, 2016). Football (soccer in North America) is one of the most popular sports worldwide as well as a cultural manifestation, characterised by its high emotional level and economic, political and social relevance (Bucher & Eckl, 2022; Petersen-Wagner & Ludvigse, 2022). Only in Spain the sports sector generates 3.3% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), of which 1.37% is produced through football (PWC, 2020).

Globalisation has demanded an adaptation at all levels due to the endless search for immediacy and access to information, where the business of sports is becoming more and more relationship-based and the importance of generating *engagement* (Einsle et al., 2023; Fried & Mumcu, 2017; García-Fernández et al., 2017) is one of the most relevant variables in generating loyalty in sports organisations (Loranca-Valle et al., 2021; Núñez-Barriopedro et al., 2021). Sports consumers are seen as "channels" through which sports products can be promoted (O'Shea & Alonso, 2011), and sports fans have become both the consumer and the advocates of the product. This is where relationship marketing theory helps us to better understand this phenomenon. As Abeza and Sanderson (2022, p. 287) point out, relationship marketing theory "is based on the idea that a relationship between two parties creates additional value for those involved". This theory is one of the most widely used to understand the phenomenon of social media in sports (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022) as highlighted by numerous authors who have used it in their studies (e.g., Abeza et al., 2017, 2019, 2020; Su et al., 2020; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Merging the roots of relationship marketing theory (Möller & Halinen, 2000) and the particular characteristics of the sports sector, and taking into account the perspective of short-term transactions and immediate economic benefits (Abeza et al., 2017), social media represents opportunities for better knowledge about fans, more advanced consumer-organisation interaction, efficient *fan engagement*, efficient use of resources and agile evaluation of the relationship between fans and organisation (Abeza et al., 2019; Abeza et al., 2020). In view of this, and in line with Abeza and Sanderson (2022), social media thus becomes a channel through which to establish, maintain and cultivate long-term relationships beneficial to both parties (in our study, football clubs and fans).

Previous studies have addressed the use of specific social media in the context of sports, such as Facebook (Achen, 2019; Meng et al., 2015; Pegoraro et al., 2017; Waters et al., 2009), Twitter (Blaszka et al., 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Winand et al., 2019; Witkemper et al., 2012) and Instagram (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Machado et al., 2020; Zakerian et al., 2022), because of the relevance in the use of these platforms in the sports

sector. From another broader perspective, Solanellas et al. (2022) propose a practical analysis of multiple social media in sports organisations from a content categorisation point of view.

The results and contributions of the studies mentioned above, reveal the importance of further exploring social media *fan engagement* phenomenon as a strategic perspective (Tafesse & Wien, 2018) and the added value that social media can generate in sports. In this sense, it is relevant for sports managers to know which techniques, methodologies and perspectives to use. Furthermore, as stated by Abeza and Sanderson (2022), it is necessary to go deeper into the theories behind its use. Taking these aspects into account, this work presents a new instrument of observation and measurement of social media posts by football organisations, as a basis for understanding and deepening the knowledge about the digital audience and its impact on the different objectives of the organisation. Thus, the study draws on relationship marketing theory to better understand how sport managers can make the most of the possibilities offered by social media to generate added value from the interaction between fans and football clubs. Particularly, the developed instrument focuses on the analysis of the type of content published by football clubs, categorizing it into dimensions, as well as the *engagement* of the different publications according to the type of dimension to which they belong.

With a view to the implementation of the instrument, and to contribute to the literature related to the use of social media as a marketing tool in sports, this study analyses Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts issued by elite football clubs from Europe, South America and North America, using a practical approach to content categorisation and taking the *engagement* factor as a key element for comparison.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory, descriptive, and comparative research design (Andrew et al., 2011) using the observational method and content analysis techniques. Content analysis involves the recounting and comparison of content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context. It has been widely used in social media communication research, specifically in sports settings (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Winand et al., 2017), to interpret textual data through systematic classification, coding, and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon E., 2005). First, exploratory studies are particularly useful when the phenomenon under investigation is in constant evolution (such as social media as a marketing tool), as well as when there are several factors and variables at play (Andrew et al., 2011). In this study, these are linked to the *engagement* that can be caused by the type of content or format used by elite football clubs on their social media accounts. Second, the descriptive aspect of the research design aims to describe and quantify the *engagement* levels in social media for the selected football clubs. By Collecting and analysing quantitative data on the interaction metrics, including likes, comments, shares, and follower counts, the study provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of *engagement*, and other variables, among the clubs, helping to build a foundation for further analysis and comparison. Lastly, the comparative aspect of the research design (Andrew et al., 2011) is valuable in this study because it enables a cross-regional analysis of three of the most traditional social media platforms. The study compared the *engagement* practices, elements, and strategies across three key regions of the football industry worldwide. Understanding potential differences can be useful for sports managers to design more optimized social media marketing strategies.

Sample

Considering the study design and observational method applied in this research (Anguera-Argilaga et al., 2011), a nonprobable sample design (see Battaglia, 2008) was established following several steps to make the following three decisions: 1) selection of football clubs, 2)

social media platforms, and 3) period of time studied.

First, a geographical criterion was used to determine the origin of the football clubs under study. This criterion was based on a comprehensive and global perspective, considering factors such as historical significance, popularity, sporting achievements, and the modernization of football worldwide. Based on these considerations, three regions were selected for analysis: Europe and South America, renowned for their broad global relevance and football tradition (e.g., the winning national teams of the 22 editions of the FIFA World Cup so far are from Europe and South America [Venkat, 2023]). Next, North America was chosen for its ascending market growth potential and global efforts to promote football. This is exemplified by upcoming milestones, such as the organization of the FIFA World Cup 2026 in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, as well as the recent arrival of Lionel Messi into Major League Soccer (see Mizrahi, 2023). These three regions are governed by the three most influential regional football bodies of FIFA: Europe (UEFA), South America (CONMEBOL), and North America (CONCACAF). Second, to select the most relevant football clubs in these three regions, we followed some of the selection criteria set in similar studies (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018). Therefore, the rankings of four of the most influential football organizations or websites were considered: 1) the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS) club ranking, 2) the Football World Rankings website, 3) the FIFA club and league ranking, and 4) the Transfermarkt player ranking website (of great relevance in the player transfer market). As a result of this process, 24 teams were pre-selected (9 from Europe, 9 from South America and 6 from North America) according to the objectives and the study design and the authors agreement (Andrew et al., 2011; Anguera-Argilaga et al., 2011; Battaglia, 2008; Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014). Finally, a random draw was made resulting in a selection of six teams from Europe, six from South America and four from North America (with a limit of two teams per league). This process resulted in the 16 teams whose use of social media is analysed in this study (see Table 1).

Following, social media to be analysed in the study were selected. It was noted in the literature that Facebook had been one of the first social media to be used by football clubs and other sports organisations, either to connect with fans or purely for informational purposes (Achen, 2019; Waters et al., 2009). Twitter and Instagram are also platforms that have become relevant, not only for marketers in sports but also in other sectors (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Wang & Zhou, 2015). Although the use of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as a marketing tool for football clubs has been studied (e.g., Machado et al., 2020; Maderer et al., 2018; Nisar et al., 2018), there is a lack in the literature comparing their potential *engagement* across a sample of teams from different geographic regions. Thus, it was deemed appropriate to select these three social media sources for our study.

Finally, the periods over which the publications were to be extracted were determined. Among other authors, Ashley and Tuten (2015) point out that, in a social media environment, two to four weeks are sufficient for a wide variety of posts to be made in a regular and cyclical context, excluding exceptional milestones or events that could have an extraordinary impact on *engagement* and that could bias regular reading. Therefore, 45 days for each club and each social media is set as an appropriate observation period.

Once the sample selection criteria had been defined, the links of all publications from the clubs selected in the study on the three social media were extracted through the Fanpage Karma software that allows data to be collected and interpreted (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2021). After prior data analysis, the final sample consisted of 19,745 publications, a very similar figure to that used in other related studies (e.g., Maderer et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2019).

Table 4. Number of posts extracted for analysis from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram official accounts by region and football clubs selected.

Region	Country	Club	Social Media Posts Analysed (Q)		
			Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
Europe	Germany	Borussia Dortmund	218	745	107
	Germany	FC Bayern Munich	242	680	76
	Spain	FC Barcelona	195	794	147
	Spain	Real Madrid CF	118	544	73
	UK	Manchester United FC	445	761	244
	UK	Liverpool FC	486	850	278
South America	Brazil	SE Palmeiras	289	1,140	91
	Brazil	CR Flamengo	644	1,606	515
	Argentina	CA River Plate	150	575	149
	Argentina	CA Boca Juniors	299	684	256
	Paraguay	Club Olimpia	199	356	165
	Paraguay	Club Cerro Porteño	230	13	220
North America	Mexico	CF América	241	774	154
	Mexico	CD Guadalajara	382	610	91
	USA	LA Galaxy	92	347	112
	USA	Atlanta United FC	142	2,096	120
			4,372	12,575	2,798
			19,745		

Instrument and research procedure

Based on the review of the techniques and methodologies used to analyse the use of social media as a marketing tool for football clubs in previous studies, we proceeded to design and develop an observation and data collection instrument in a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet (.xlsx format), taking as a starting point the model of content analysis proposed by Solanellas et al., (2022). Due to the nature of the study, the .xlsx data collection format was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for manual data collection and the application of the categorization tool post by post. This format has been successfully used as a data collection tool in previous social media content analysis studies in football (e.g., López-Carril & Anagnostopoulos, 2020).

To ensure its rigor, the codebook was subsequently submitted for review to nine field experts. The selection of these experts was undertaken via judgmental nonprobability sampling, a method commonly employed in the literature due to the specialized and ever-evolving nature of the subject (Andrew et al., 2011). These individuals were chosen based on specific criteria, encompassing their professional roles in specialized, coordinating, managerial, or directorial positions tied to the digital domain. Moreover, their academic background, particularly in marketing, methodology, or digital tools, was considered. To ensure an extensive grasp of the subject matter, the chosen experts were required to have a minimum of five years of experience in the area and to be actively participating in their respective roles. This approach aimed to incorporate diverse viewpoints, offering insights from a spectrum of angles relevant to this

research. As a result, the panel of experts was comprised of the following professionals: the Head of Digital from a prominent European professional football league (1), a Marketing Manager and an International Communications Manager from leading professional football clubs (2), Directors of digital marketing and branding agencies (2), professors specializing in marketing and sports management at Spanish universities (2), and the VP of Sales along with the Head of Digital from sports business intelligence consultancies (2).

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with these chosen experts to delve into pertinent aspects linked to the study. An interview guide was developed, following the methodological aspects indicated in specialized works in this field (see Andrew et al., 2011; Anguera-Argilaga et al., 2011). Furthermore, the interview guide encompassed critical aspects of social media management and relevant facets of football club management (e.g., post formats, observation timeframes, platforms for capturing and analysing social media posts), drawing upon the elements and variables derived from studies conducted by Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) as well as Solanellas et al. (2022). Additionally, these interviews comprised discussions about the conception and execution of the observation tool, which was employed as a supplementary instrument for data collection. Further variables relevant to the research objectives were explored within these interviews.

The qualitative insights garnered from the experts' conclusive remarks offered valuable suggestions that contributed to refining the study's development and enhancing the observation tool. This iterative approach ensured the harmonization of the tool with the research objectives and its effective alignment with the study's research questions. After incorporating the modifications suggested in the experts' evaluations, the study's codebook adhered to the variables and categories illustrated in Table 2.

Table 5. Study codebook. Adapted from Solanellas et al. (2022)

Variable	Code	Description
Dimensions	Sports	Information on players or coaches, new signings, training sessions, training activities, and matches.
	Institutional	History and anniversaries of the club, announcements of assemblies, official communiqués, club opening hours, and congratulations addressed to institutions or athletes.
	ESG Environmental, Social and Governance	Activities relating to social responsibility, community support, athlete development, education, good governance practices, sustainability, and environmental development.
	Commercial	Revenue-generating actions: membership, ticket sales, matchday, and merchandising.
	Marketing	Club brand positioning, fan experiences, <i>fan engagement</i> , sponsorship activation, and content generation for emotional and <i>fan engagement</i> purposes.
Formats	Text - Image - Video - Link - Raffles/Trivia - Surveys	
Interaction metrics	Likes - Share - Comments	

The .xlsx instrument sheet was then pilot tested. Forty-five publications (15 from Facebook, 15 from Instagram and 15 from Twitter) from three different football clubs were randomly selected, conforming a total sample of 225 publications. The data were collected in an observation sheet in .xlsx format for analysis purposes. During the analysis process,

including the discussion of possible discrepancies in interpreting each publication as belonging to one or another of the dimensions of the study's codebook, the authors decided that each publication would be classified only in one dimension, depending on the type of content that predominates in each post.

To measure the level of reliability and accuracy of the instrument (Andrew et al., 2011), the intra-observer reliability method was applied, incorporating 10-12 minute breaks every 40-45 minutes of observation. After 15 days, the same publications were re-coded using the same established protocol. The results of the coding provided a Kappa coefficient of 0.949, demonstrating a very high level of agreement and reliability, following the scale of Landis and Koch (1977).

To measure the reliability and accuracy of the instrument (Andrew et al., 2011), the intra-observer reliability method was applied. In the first stage, the data was collected and coded post-by-post by applying the .xlsx. sheet, incorporating 10-12 minute breaks every 40-45 minutes of observation to ensure the quality of the data observed and collected. The same posts were re-coded using the same established protocol in the second stage. To ensure a more accurate application of the codebook and to avoid potential bias, a 15-day impasse was established between the two data collections. The coding results between the two stages provided a Kappa coefficient of 0.949, demonstrating a very high level of agreement and reliability, following the scale of Landis and Koch (1977).

Finally, based on the interaction data collected with the data collection instrument, the variable of *engagement* with the publications was calculated by adapting the formulas used by the Fanpage Karma (2022) and Rival IQ (Feehan, 2023) platforms (Figure 1).

$$\begin{array}{l}
 \textbf{Facebook} \quad \left[\frac{(N^{\circ} \text{"reacciones"} + N^{\circ} \text{"shares"} + N^{\circ} \text{"comments"})}{N^{\circ} \text{ followers}} \right] \times 100 \\
 \textbf{Twitter} \quad \left[\frac{(N^{\circ} \text{"likes"} + N^{\circ} \text{"retweets"})}{N^{\circ} \text{ followers}} \right] \times 100 \\
 \textbf{Instagram} \quad \left[\frac{(N^{\circ} \text{"likes"} + N^{\circ} \text{"comments"})}{N^{\circ} \text{ followers}} \right] \times 100
 \end{array}$$

Figure 5. *Engagement* formulas used on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Adapted from Fanpage Karma (2022) and Rival IQ (Feehan, 2023) platforms.

Therefore, after the protocol and the .xlsx observation instrument sheet were tested and validated, the final procedure was established as follows: a) social media posts from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram of the selected football clubs were extracted automatically using the FanPage Karma license and added to the .xlsx observation instrument sheet; b) according to the Study Codebook (see Table 2) the data was collected and registered manually into the .xlsx observation instrument sheet by clicking the posts one by one; c) we proceeded to set up a data base coding the variables from the data collected to perform the statistical analyses.

Data analysis

A descriptive analysis of the *engagement* generated by publications on social media and their content (dimensions and formats) on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter was carried out. To analyse the differences in *engagement* generated by the posts on each social media according to their content, we used the t-test for independent samples and the one-factor ANOVA. The significance value established is <.05. A chi-square test and correspondence analysis was

applied to identify and visualise points of association between the key variables. Data analysis was performed using the SPSS statistical package, version 27.0.

Results

As shown in Table 3, of the 19,745 posts observed and analysed, Twitter accounted for 64%, followed by Facebook at 22% and Instagram at 14%. However, from the point of view of *engagement*, Instagram reflects an average of 1.873, well above the other social media. Facebook follows it with 0.112 and Twitter with 0.045, showing an inverse behaviour to the number of posts made.

Table 6. Means, standard deviations, minimums and maximums of *engagement* generated by publications on the social media of the football clubs analysed.

	n	%	<i>Engagement</i>			
			Means	SD	Min	Max
Facebook	4,372	22%	0.112	0.180	0.000	2.406
Twitter	12,575	64%	0.045	0.071	0.000	0.457
Instagram	2,798	14%	1.873	1.091	0.002	5.528
	19,745	100%				

Frequency and engagement

In Figure 2, we can observe the strategy used by each club in terms of the frequency of posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as the levels of *engagement* obtained. On Facebook, the football clubs analysed posts at different frequencies. In Europe, we observe that the clubs with the highest frequency of posts are Liverpool FC and Manchester United FC, with n=445 and n=486, respectively. In contrast, the Spanish clubs (Real Madrid FC and FC Barcelona) have the lowest frequency of posts (n=195 and n=118, respectively). On the other hand, beyond this difference in frequency, they have very similar *engagement* ratios.

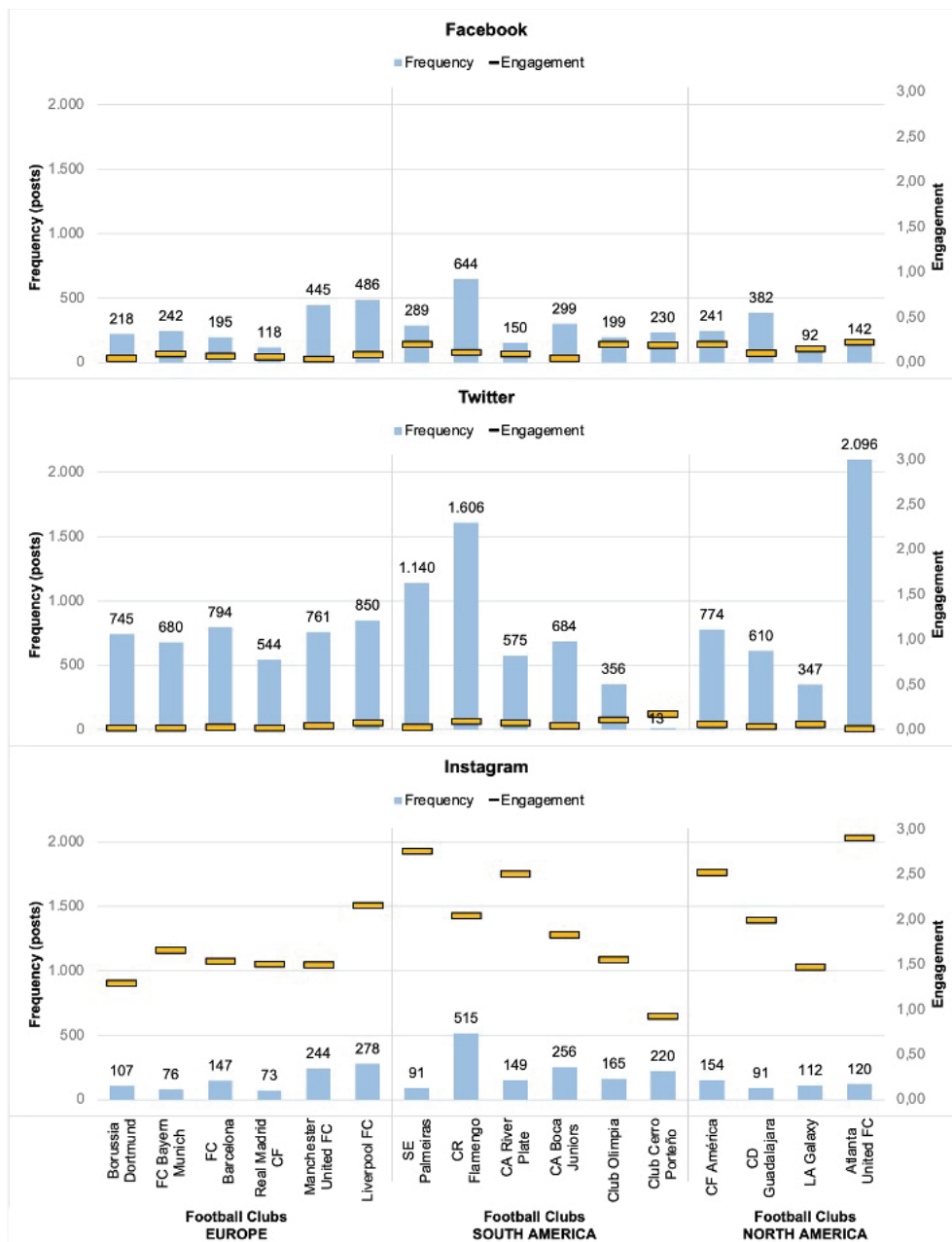


Figure 6. Frequency of posts and level of *engagement* generated on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram by the football clubs selected for this study (organised by regions)

The club with the highest frequency of publications is CR Flamengo from Brazil ($n=644$); however, SE Palmeiras, the other Brazilian club studied, despite registering fewer publications in the same period ($n=289$), shows much higher levels of *engagement*. SE Palmeiras (Brazil), Club Olimpia and Club Cerro Porteño (Paraguay), CF America (Mexico) and Atlanta United FC (USA) show the highest levels of *engagement*, with similar posting frequencies (between $n=142$ and $n=241$). On Twitter, the highest frequencies of posts were published compared to Facebook and Instagram, with CR Flamengo and Atlanta United FC being the clubs that posted the most ($n=1,606$ and $n=2,096$, respectively). However, the levels of *engagement* identified show similar and homogeneous levels in the period analysed, regardless of the frequency of publications. On the other hand, the highest *engagement* levels were observed on Instagram, with a lower frequency of publications in all cases. Football clubs SE Palmeiras, CA River Plate, CF America and Atlanta United FC have the highest *engagement* values (2.5 and 3), with

posting frequencies ranging from $n=91$ to $n=154$. European football clubs have very similar *engagement* ratios (around 1.00), while North American football clubs have different *engagement* values despite having similar posting frequencies ($n=91$ and $n=154$).

Content dimensions of publications

As shown in Figure 3, we observe the dimensions proposed in this study, comparing the social media analysed and the *engagement* generated by each category. From this point of view, in terms of frequency, the "Marketing" and "Sport" dimensions are observed as the most used publication approaches by football clubs, followed by the "Institutional" dimension, "Commercial" and, finally, "ESG". This order of frequency applies to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

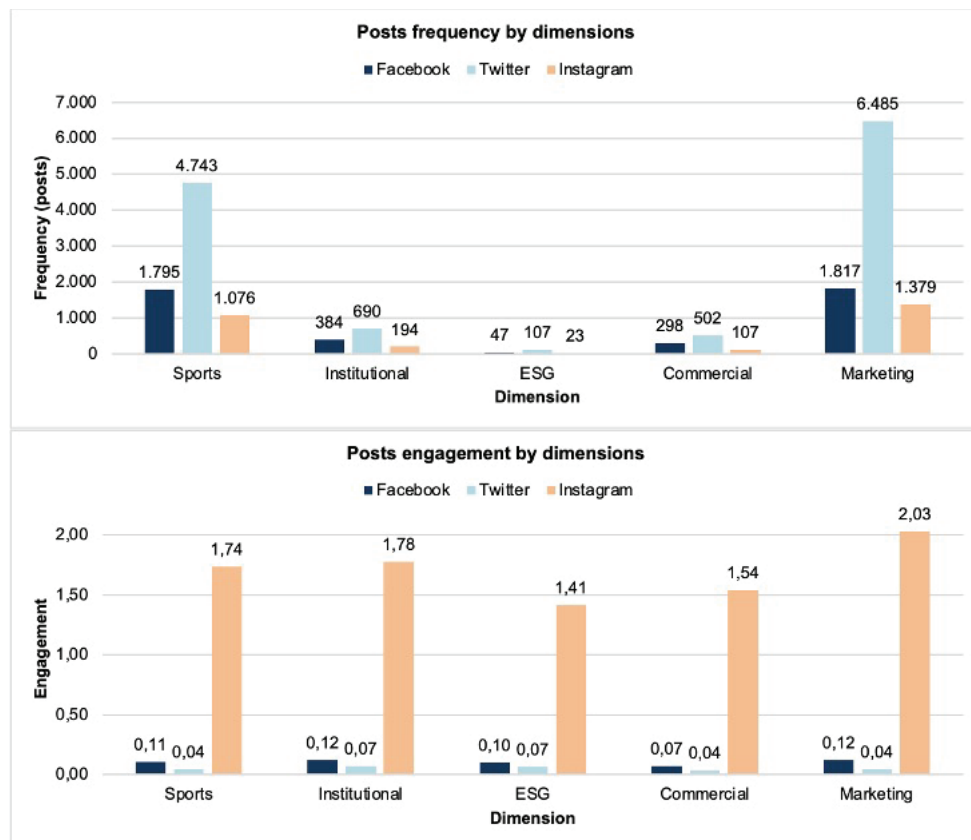


Figure 7. Categorisation in the posts' dimensions and their relationship with the *engagement* generated by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram of the football clubs analysed.

In terms of *engagement*, the social media Instagram is the one that registers considerably higher values than the rest of the social media analysed, with the "Marketing" dimension generating the highest *engagement* (2.03). It is followed by the "Institutional" dimension (1.78) and the "Sports" dimension (1.74), closing with the "Commercial" and "ESG" dimensions, with values of 1.54 and 1.41, respectively. Facebook is the following social media that generates the highest *engagement*.

In the case of Facebook (see Supplementary Table S1), the findings show a significance of the *engagement* means between the "Commercial" and the "Sports" ($p=0.000<0.05$), "Institutional" ($p=0.001<0.05$) and "Marketing" type of the posts in Facebook.

On the other hand, Twitter (see Supplementary Table S2) is the one that generates the minor *engagement*, with very similar values between the different dimensions, despite being

the one with the highest frequency of publications (Figure 3). Unlike the previous dimensions, the "Institutional", "ESG", and "Commercial" dimensions are those with the highest *engagement* values (0.07), followed by the "Marketing" and "Sports" dimensions (both with 0.04). However, in this social media platform, the "Institutional" type of content is statistically significant with "Sports" ($p=0.000<0.05$), "Commercial" ($p=0.000<0.05$) and "Marketing" ($p=0.000<0.05$). Also, we can find a significant *engagement* results between the "ESG" and the "Commercial" ($p=0.033<0.05$) dimensions.

On Instagram (see Supplementary Table S3), the "Marketing" dimension has the highest *engagement* value, as does the "Institutional" dimension (both with 0.12). It is followed by the "Sports" dimension (0.11), "ESG" (0.10) and finally, "Commercial" (0.07) (Figure 3). Nevertheless, as difference of Facebook and Twitter, the findings show a strong relevance of "Marketing" dimensions posts (Supplementary Table S3), linked significantly with "Sports" ($p=0.000<0.05$), "Commercial" ($p=0.000<0.05$) and "Institutional" ($p=0.002<0.05$).

Types of formats in publications

Nine combinations of the most relevant formats have been identified in the publications analysed (Table 4), both in the frequency of use and *engagement* they generate.

Table 4. Combinations of formats used, and *engagement* means generated by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts.

Format	Facebook		Twitter		Instagram	
	n	Engagement means	n	Engagement means	n	Engagement means
Text	58	0.06	2,499	0.02	0	0.00
Image	89	0.23	1,534	0.00	147	2.20
Text/Link	136	0.07	470	0.03	7	1.72
Text/Video	1,265	0.12	2,239	0.07	550	1.59
Text/Video/Link	94	0.09	313	0.04	12	0.93
Text/Image	2,031	0.13	4,412	0.07	1,986	1.95
Text/Image/Link	520	0.07	832	0.03	50	1.49
Video	72	0.10	47	0.03	13	1.84
Text/Image/Polls	19	0.03	29	0.04	8	1.93
Others	79	0.05	169	0.03	22	1.74

On Facebook, the most frequent formats are "Text/Image" and "Text/Video" ($n=2,031$ and $n=1,265$, respectively). However, the format with the highest *engagement* is "Image" (0.23), followed by "Text/Image" (0.13), "Text/Video" (0.12) and "Text/Link" (0.07). On Twitter, on the other hand, the "Text/Image" format is the most used ($n=4,412$), "Text" ($n=2,499$), "Text/Video" ($n=2,239$) and "Image" ($n=1,534$), with the "Text/Video" and "Text/Image" format combinations (0.07) registering the highest *engagement*. On Instagram, due to the nature of the social media, the most frequent format is "Text/Image" ($n=1,986$). In terms of *engagement*, the formats "Image" (2.20), "Text/Image" (1.95), "Text/Image/Polls" (1.93) and "Video" (1.84) have the highest values.

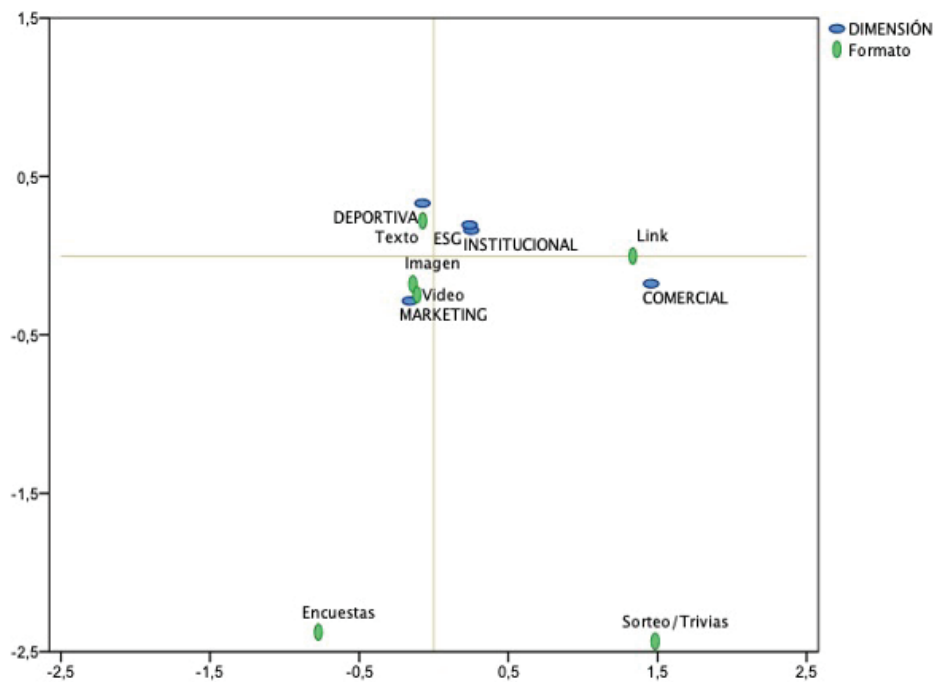


Figure 8. Correspondence analysis (dimensions and formats)

The correspondence analysis (Figure 4) shows the degree of association between the variables and the categorisation dimensions proposed in this study in a relative position map. The chi-squared test yielded a result of 1,027.65. The "Marketing" dimension shows a closer relationship with the "video" and "image" format resources. The "ESG" and "Institutional" content type shows an association with the "Image" and "Text" formats. The "Commercial" dimension, based on the characteristics of the categorisation, shows a relationship with the "Link" format as ideal points of association, considering the frequency and *engagement* analysed.

Discussion

Nowadays, sports organisations and athletes use social media for communication purposes, brand positioning, visibility (Maderer et al., 2018; Winand et al., 2019; Zakerian et al., 2022) and even for potential business (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015), dedicating effort and resources. Previous studies reinforce the need to categorise the message delivered to understand this phenomenon according to the objective (Filo et al., 2015) and content analysis for effect (Meng et al., 2015). However, its optimal use still leaves many questions. The complexity of the market is evolving towards the need to understand the fan as a premise in a sector characterised by its high emotional charge. In the past, strategies focused on attracting and retaining fans. However, the current trend shows increased relevance in generating *engagement* (Oviedo et al., 2014) to generate links with fans. The sports industry, especially in the digital environment, is in an era where the goal is not just getting new followers and post social media content but interact and engage "to know the users better".

First, this study provides evidence of relevant frequency-*engagement* relationships according to the dimensions of the study, depending on the type of social media used (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Regarding the dimensions of the content published, the posts related to "Marketing" and "Sport" are the most frequent due to the natural and traditional use of these tools as communicative, brand positioning and informative elements (Lee & Kahle, 2016; Rehman et al., 2022; Winand et al., 2019). This is attributable to the need for clubs to

generate emotional content (such as videos or images of past iconic matches or campaigns involving athletes), on the one hand, and to broadcast messages alluding to sporting performance and results. Nevertheless, the findings show different *engagement* impacts not directly linked to the frequency of the posts, but influenced by other elements, such as the social media platform, the dimension of the content and the format. The evidence shows there are specific contents dimensions that statistically generate more *engagement* in each platform.

On Facebook, the most traditional platform football clubs use provides a more balanced frequency-*engagement* ratio, with a strong *engagement* with “commercial” contents. This platform was one of the social media platforms that started monetizing in other industries, characterised for its high brand impact, where the know-how and the platform interphase is more friendly to focus on this type of posts (and in some cases, to launch joint posts with brands). Even with the positive *engagement* impact in this platform, it is observed that efforts of this nature in the digital sphere are scarce in comparison to the rest, making this a relevant aspect is the spectrum of growth and an opportunity to explore, especially with the new assets that are appearing in the market and the growth of e-commerce.

On Twitter, on the other hand, the dimension that works best for engaging is “Institutional” linked to “Sports”, “Marketing” and “Commercial” content, but no with “ESG”. However, the “ESG” linked with “Commercial” dimensions statically gets significantly more impact on this platform. The “ESG” dimension is emerging as this platform is used for promoting socio-political activities and promoting more altruistic purposes as previous authors as López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos (2020), and Sharpe et al. (2020) noted. This strategy shows a possible intention to use social media not only for marketing (communication) or sporting purposes but also as an element with socio-political aspects. The nature of Twitter as a microblogging site with the highest number of posts with the lower means of *engagement*, is more attractive for the audience looking for quick and summarised information because of its ability to increase the visibility and awareness of fans (Abeza et al., 2017). Sports managers can focus on this type of message for a potential higher *engagement* on Twitter.

In contrast, on Instagram the focus is on “Marketing” contents. This platform shows the lowest number of post frequency, with a high *engagement* means, attributable to the platform's audio-visual formats and more interactive content, ratifying its growing popularity among users. As a fast-growing platform, there is a major link with “Sports”, “Institutional” and “Commercial” dimensions, which makes it an ideal platform for emotional content, easy to connect with brands, athletes, and sport properties, counting with a larger and more varied audience looking mainly, as the evidence suggests, for entertainment and club's closeness perception. Therefore, like Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018), we recommend sports managers to use Instagram for marketing purposes, considering the context as a relevant factor.

Finally, this study reveals the post format's relevance as another key element. In this sense, on Facebook, the highest *engagement* values are generated by “Image” and “Text/Image” formats, as on Instagram and Twitter; however, in each social media platform, the frequencies generated by these records are different. In any case, the power of the image as valuable content in marketing stands out, as it has also been highlighted in previous studies (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2022; Machado et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the results obtained regarding the *engagement* triggered by video format posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are not as conclusive, as other studies have pointed out (e.g., Su et al., 2020). Probably because these social media are not focused on that format as other social media such as TikTok or YouTube may be. Regardless, based on the results obtained, it is necessary for sport managers and academics to continue to explore and make the appropriate

combinations of the dimensions of content type categorized in this study, the publication format, as well as the social media used to channel them.

Theoretical Implications

Built upon the framework of relationship marketing, this study brings theoretical value to the realms of sports marketing, sports management, and *fan engagement*, spanning across four distinct lines of action.

Firstly, research introduces a novel theoretical approach to social media strategies by employing a 5-dimensional content categorization system aligned with the strategic pillars of football organizations. Previous studies have predominantly approached the role of social media in sports reactively, primarily focusing on communication and branding aspects. In contrast, this study contributes to the literature by adopting a strategic perspective towards social media, establishing a linkage between the study dimensions and football club strategies. This foundation paves the way for future research to delve deeper into each proposed dimension, potentially identifying sub-groups and exploring them in greater detail. The proposed dimensions serve to systematically organize the primary facets of football organizations for digital context analysis, a realm of increasing importance within the sports industry. As such, this work marks a pioneering step towards a novel approach in this area of study.

Secondly, this study establishes a fresh frequency-*engagement* approach for social network management, dispelling the notion that post frequency directly correlates with generated *engagement*. In doing so, this work highlights additional pivotal factors beyond post frequency that influence *engagement* among users of football-related social media. This perspective is aligned with the ethos of web 2.0, underscoring the significance of engaging and connecting with fans.

Thirdly, from a theoretical perspective, this study introduces an innovative analytical proposition focusing on prominent international football clubs. This innovation is realized through the calculation and translation of *engagement* ratios, facilitating cross-entity comparisons independent of geographical location and follower count. The instrument developed and applied in this study acts as a tool to identify valuable digital practices within the industry.

Finally, this study stands out by conducting simultaneous analyses of posts across three prominent social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), adopting a distinctive multi-platform approach that is seldom observed in comparable studies which often focus on a single social media platform. Gaining insights into the effects of cross-platform and cross-format postings can empower sports managers to make strategic decisions with a comprehensive perspective.

Practical Implications

This study introduces a novel practical tool designed for the computation of *fan engagement* across the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts of football clubs globally. Consequently, sports managers can employ this instrument to gain a more realistic comprehension of the performance of social media accounts belonging to clubs. Furthermore, the developed tool facilitates the assessment of *fan engagement* in relation to the content type being published. This capability can aid sports managers in fortifying the bond between clubs and their followers by generating heightened value through strategic social media initiatives.

It is important to note that sports managers should consider both internal factors (club tradition, organizational culture) and external factors (competition, fan behaviour, sports results) within the context of clubs. This consideration is essential for developing and planning

optimal digital strategies and for generating the best possible *engagement* with the audience. This research furnishes empirical evidence for understanding, in a practical and actionable manner, the pivotal components of a social media post. This understanding permits the visualization of optimal combinations of these elements, thereby increasing the likelihood of sports managers guiding the club toward success and fostering substantial user *engagement*. Therefore, football team managers can apply the findings of this study to plan, monitor, and evaluate the club's social media content for increased *engagement* and "closeness" with digital fans. They can combine various formats based on individual post requirements to achieve the desired results. Additionally, football team managers can analyze club identity and overall strategies more practically and coherently, facilitating the planning and execution of more effective commercial, brand positioning, institutional, and other relevant digital goals, with *engagement* serving as a key metric.

Conclusions

Social media plays a key role in today's sports management, especially in football clubs, due to its global reach and ability to interact and connect with fans in an industry of great popularity, emotional charge, and economic, political and social impact. This exploratory research grounded in relationship marketing theory provided a comparison of the *engagement* generated by elite football clubs under a unique categorisation proposal, derived and adapted from existing literature, which addresses dimensions linked to strategic areas of football organisations and takes into consideration key elements such as frequency and format combinations used to analyse the efficiency of posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Based on the results obtained, three lines of action stand out. First, concerning the type of content of the post, the "Marketing" and "Sports" dimensions are the preferred categories for football clubs in terms of posts frequency. Regarding the *engagement* rates, on Facebook, the "Commercial" dimension shows an opportunity for growth and development due to the good *engagement* impact and due to the technological boom and the emergence of new digital assets. On Twitter, the emerging "ESG" linked to "Commercial" perspective and the "Institutional" dimension gets significant impact on Twitter. On Instagram, the "Marketing" dimension linked to "Sports", "Institutional" and "Commercial", makes this platform ideal for emotional and marketing purposes. Second, concerning social media source, this study provides evidence that Instagram is the social media that generates the most *engagement* using the lowest frequency of posts, followed by Facebook and Twitter. There is no direct evidence that links the posts frequency with the *engagement* generated. Finally, concerning the type of format of the post, the combination of formats that generates the most *engagement* in all cases is "Image", "Text/Image", and "Text/Video".

In short, this research stimulates a practical reflection for professionals and academics on the exploration, analysis, and evaluation of the management of social media in football clubs, using the observation method and content analysis techniques, applying elements of reliability and scientific rigour. The results obtained in this study offer practical and managerial implications in sports management, *fan engagement*, digital marketing, and social media, among others, through a proposal for categorisation and unique variables, taking *engagement* and its influence within the context of analysis as the axis.

The above conclusions should be taken into consideration viewing a series of limitations of the study. Firstly, the sample is limited to one sport (football) and not a large number of football clubs from different regions of the world. Secondly, despite the high number of posts analysed, these are located over a short period of time, and it may be relevant to analyse the *engagement* of posts at different times of the season, as these can influence the type of

content and the *engagement* of fans with the posts. Thirdly, the study is limited to analysing *engagement* on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, leaving aside the analysis of the possibilities that other booming social media, such as TikTok or Twitch, are having in the field of marketing. Nevertheless, these limitations can be a starting point for future research lines including, among others: a) to assess the application and feasibility of the technique for measuring social media *engagement* included in this work in other football organisations (e.g. leagues) or social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Twitch); b) to incorporate new variables of study (e.g., size of the social mass of sports clubs, financial budget, trophies won); c) to conduct the study considering different phases of the sport season (e.g.; preseason, season, playoffs; postseason); d) to analyse *fan engagement* relation of geographical regions to understand the digital users behaviours; e) to conduct the study adding *engagement* prediction models in social media and; f) to incorporate this model on an AI language to suggest and predict digital user *engagement* in a simulated context.

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ESTUDIOS REALIZADOS

6. RESULTADOS

6.1. Resultados del Estudio I.

6.2. Resultados del Estudio II.

6.3. Resultados del Estudio III.

A continuación, se exponen los resultados de cada uno de los estudios realizados en el marco de la presente tesis doctoral.

6.1. Resultados del Estudio I.

Este estudio nos permitió observar de forma exploratoria las estrategias utilizadas a nivel digital en dos periodos concretos: un periodo prepandémico y un periodo pandémico inicial.

6.1.1. Frecuencia. Twitter ocupa el primer lugar como red social preferida, seguida de Instagram y Facebook, donde se aprecia un ligero descenso en el porcentaje de frecuencia de publicación tanto en las competiciones nacionales y europeas de fútbol (EL y ACB) como en las competiciones de fútbol (UCL y LL). Por el contrario, se observa un aumento de la frecuencia de publicación en Instagram en el periodo inicial de la pandemia en todas las competiciones, excepto en la UCL, que mantiene esta frecuencia en ambos escenarios. La NBA, sin embargo, muestra un comportamiento inverso, aumentando ligeramente del 80% al 82% la frecuencia de publicación en Twitter y disminuyendo un 3% en Instagram. En cuanto a Facebook, la frecuencia de publicación de las competiciones analizadas en España y Europa ha aumentado entre un 2% y un 5%. En el periodo prepandémico se observa una distribución heterogénea de la frecuencia de publicaciones diarias, con picos los fines de semana (días de celebración de partidos), a diferencia de la NBA, que muestra una tendencia ascendente de la frecuencia de publicación de martes a viernes, con picos los jueves (día de competición según el calendario anglosajón). Al inicio de la pandemia (segundo periodo analizado), sin embargo, se observa un comportamiento diferente, donde la frecuencia diaria del total de publicaciones tiende a mantenerse homogénea durante la semana, en ausencia de competiciones físico-deportivas oficiales. En cuanto a la tendencia, se observa un número similar de publicaciones a lo largo de la semana entre ambos periodos, con una distribución más homogénea de la cantidad de contenidos diarios en el segundo periodo analizado.

6.1.2. Dimensiones de contenido. Un aspecto relevante de este estudio es la clasificación del contenido por categorías según cada publicación realizada en Twitter, Instagram y Facebook de la muestra analizada.

En ambos periodos, todas las competiciones de baloncesto han tenido una nula acción en redes sociales en el aspecto comercial. Sin embargo, LL utilizó este enfoque en un periodo pre-pandémico. Desde el punto de vista de la estrategia de *engagement*, las competiciones de

baloncesto ACB (Nacional) y EL (Europea) han optado por reducir sus publicaciones del 72% al 52%, y del 89% al 84%, respectivamente. Por el contrario, las competiciones de fútbol han optado por potenciar esta estrategia, aumentándola drásticamente del 70% al 98% en el caso de LL y del 81% al 90% en el caso de UCL, tal y como se muestra en la Tabla 5. La NBA, sin embargo, casi no se ha visto afectada, mostrando una reducción en esta estrategia del 2%. En la categoría "Iniciativas sociales", podemos observar un aumento significativo por parte de la ACB, que pasa de no tener ninguna publicación con este enfoque en un periodo prepandémico a destinar el 47% de sus publicaciones en redes sociales a esta categoría. También observamos que el enfoque "Institucional" experimenta una reducción de sus publicaciones en redes sociales del 28% al 1%, al igual que LL, que pasa del 28% (prepandemia) al 0% en el periodo pandémico. La NBA, desde un contexto geográfico diferente, pasa del 3% al 1%. Por otro lado, las competiciones continentales, como EL y UCL, han optado por aumentar este tipo de mensajería durante el inicio de la pandemia. Al inicio de la pandemia, considerando el periodo analizado (abril de 2020), la figura muestra diferentes estrategias para el mismo escenario. La ACB ha optado por una estrategia más "social", con contenidos vinculados a su página web y mensajes referidos a la pandemia COVID-19. LL y UCL, sin embargo, han optado por una estrategia de contenidos digitales más orientada al *engagement*, buscando conectar y mantener activa a la audiencia en un periodo sin competiciones oficiales en curso. La NBA ha decidido utilizar formatos de encuesta (típicos de la red social Twitter), como elemento de interacción con la audiencia. Sin embargo, más allá de coincidir en las categorías de mensajes, el formato puede variar según la competición.

6.1.3. Tipos de formato. En cuanto al formato de las publicaciones, independientemente de las disciplinas deportivas, ámbito o localización geográfica, se ha migrado del formato de imagen estática a uno más dinámico con publicaciones que incorporan contenidos audiovisuales. Competiciones de ámbito nacional en España como ACB y LL incrementaron el uso del formato vídeo (+texto+enlace) en un 20,4% y 9,5% respectivamente, aunque bajo un enfoque de categoría de mensaje diferente. Asimismo, ambas competiciones utilizaron en menor medida el formato imagen (+texto+enlace) en el periodo pandémico, aunque la ACB con un margen relativo de diferencia entre periodos mucho mayor. Por último, el formato texto (+enlace) ha sido utilizado un 14,2% más por la ACB en el periodo pandémico en relación al periodo anterior y LL ha disminuido el uso de este formato en un 10,2% en el periodo pandémico.

En cuanto a las competiciones europeas, tanto EL como UCL han utilizado en mayor medida el formato Imagen (+enlace) durante el periodo pandémico, con un 3,7% y un 16,4% respectivamente. Sin embargo, se observa un uso inverso del formato entre los dos periodos analizados. EL se centra en los medios audiovisuales en el periodo prepandémico (un 10,0% más) mientras que UCL utiliza este formato en mayor medida al inicio del periodo pandémico (un 9,6% más). La NBA, por su parte, migra de un formato típico de imagen (+texto+enlace) en periodo prepandémico, a un formato audiovisual más dinámico al inicio de la pandemia, concretamente un 9,6% más en relación al periodo anterior.

Debido a la naturaleza cualitativa de la herramienta de recogida de datos, se utiliza el análisis de contingencia para observar la relación entre dos o más variables. A través de este análisis multivariante, observamos la relación entre las tres áreas tratadas en este estudio: categoría del mensaje, formato utilizado y partes interesadas implicadas.

En 2019, se observa un comportamiento más homogéneo y similar en cuanto al formato utilizado en las publicaciones en medios sociales y el enfoque de la categoría del mensaje.

6.2. Resultados del Estudio II.

Los resultados descriptivos globales (Tabla 2) revelan al igual que en el estudio I Twitter destaca como la plataforma con mayor frecuencia de publicaciones, constituyendo el 50% de la muestra analizada con un total de $n=5.347$ posts. Tras Twitter, Facebook presenta $n=3.026$ publicaciones (28% de la muestra), mientras que Instagram abarca $n=2.399$ publicaciones (22% de la muestra). Sin embargo, se observa un notable contraste al evaluar el nivel de *engagement* generado, ya que Instagram presenta la media de compromiso más alta (0,661), superando tanto a Facebook (0,048) como a Twitter (0,015).

6.2.1. Frecuencia y *engagement* en ligas de fútbol.

- *Ligas europeas de fútbol.* Más detalladamente, los resultados de la investigación revelan patrones intrincados entre ligas, regiones geográficas y plataformas de medios sociales (véase la Figura 1). Entre las ligas europeas en Facebook, la frecuencia de publicación oscila entre $n=233$ en el caso de la Bundesliga y $n=460$ en LaLiga. Mientras tanto, la Premier League documenta una frecuencia de publicación de $n=325$. En términos de ratios de *engagement*, las tres ligas muestran niveles comparables, con valores de generación de

engagement de 0,033, 0,043 y 0,047, respectivamente. En Twitter, la Premier League registra una frecuencia de publicaciones de $n=1.033$ y una media de *engagement* de 0,017. Por el contrario, LaLiga presenta una frecuencia de publicaciones de $n=793$, con una media de participación de 0,028. Por último, la Bundesliga presenta $n=328$ publicaciones, con una media de *engagement* de 0,007. En cuanto a Instagram, la investigación revela las siguientes observaciones: la Bundesliga muestra una mayor frecuencia de publicaciones en comparación con las otras dos ligas ($n=484$), con una media de *engagement* de 0,062, mientras que LaLiga ($n=372$) registra una media de *engagement* más alta (0,0951). Por último, la Premier League, con el menor número de posts ($n=283$), registra una media de *engagement* superior a la Bundesliga y similar a LaLiga (0,043).

- *Ligas de fútbol sudamericanas.* Si nos centramos en las ligas sudamericanas en Facebook, la liga Brasileirão registra una frecuencia de publicaciones de $n=260$, con una media de participación de 0,188. Le sigue la Superliga argentina, con una media de participación de 0,188. Le siguen la Superliga AFA argentina ($n=212$), con una media de *engagement* de 0,013, y la Copa de Primera División paraguaya, con $n=151$, lo que arroja una media de *engagement* de 0,087. En Twitter, la Superliga Argentina presenta una frecuencia de publicación elevada en comparación con las otras dos ligas ($n=593$), aunque registra el nivel más bajo de compromiso (0,006). El Brasileirão publica $n=126$ veces, con una media de participación de 0,074, mientras que la Copa de Primera publica $n=107$ veces, con una media de participación de 0,036. En lo que respecta a Instagram, se observa una disparidad significativa, ya que la liga Brasileirão presenta una frecuencia de publicación notablemente superior ($n=518$) y una media de participación de 0,400. Le sigue de cerca la Superliga AFA argentina ($n=87$), con una media de participación de 0,129. La Copa de Primera publica con menos frecuencia ($n=55$), pero registra un índice de participación ligeramente superior al de las otras dos ligas de la misma región (0,414).
- *Ligas de fútbol norteamericanas.* Concluyendo el examen de las diversas regiones geográficas estudiadas, el análisis de las ligas norteamericanas revela una notable frecuencia de publicaciones en Facebook tanto para la Liga MX ($n=810$) como para la MLS ($n=575$), lo que resulta en unos rendimientos medios de *engagement* similares de 0,021 y 0,038, respectivamente. En Twitter, ambas ligas muestran el mayor nivel de actividad, aunque sus ratios de *engagement* son comparativamente más bajos en comparación con otras ligas analizadas en este estudio. En concreto, la Liga MX publica $n=1.217$ veces y alcanza una media de *engagement* de 0,009, mientras que la MLS publica $n=1.150$ veces, lo que resulta en una media de *engagement* de 0,008. En lo que respecta a Instagram, los

datos ponen de manifiesto un comportamiento contrastado. La Liga MX publica 425 veces y alcanza una ratio de *engagement* de 0,384. Al mismo tiempo, la MLS, con una frecuencia de sólo n=175, alcanza el mayor retorno de *engagement* entre todas las ligas analizadas en esta plataforma (1,296).

6.2.2. Dimensiones de contenido y *engagement* en ligas de fútbol. Los resultados de la investigación revelan las estrategias de contenido en redes sociales adoptadas por las ligas analizadas, basadas en las dimensiones propuestas en este estudio, junto con sus correspondientes retornos de *engagement*. En Facebook, las dimensiones de contenido publicadas con mayor frecuencia abarcan "Deportes" (44%) y "Marca/Marketing" (42%), con ratios de participación observados de 0,042 y 0,058, respectivamente. Además, los mensajes "institucionales" suponen el 10% del total de las publicaciones en esta plataforma, con un ratio medio de participación de 0,023. Por el contrario, los tipos de mensajes menos utilizados en Facebook pertenecen a las dimensiones "Comercial" (4% del total de mensajes) y "Medioambiental, Social y de Gobernanza" (1% del total de mensajes), generando una participación de 0,023 y 0,043, respectivamente. En Twitter, se observa un patrón comparable, con "Deportes" (46%) y "Marca/Marketing" (42%) como las dimensiones de mensaje más frecuentes, acompañadas de ratios de participación de 0,011 y 0,019, respectivamente. Del mismo modo, los mensajes "Institucionales" ocupan el tercer lugar en términos de frecuencia (8% de los mensajes), mostrando un ratio de *engagement* de 0,021, mientras que los mensajes "Comerciales" ocupan el cuarto lugar (3% de los mensajes) con un retorno de *engagement* de 0,008. Por último, los mensajes del tipo de dimensión "ESG" se observan en el 1% del número total de posts en esta plataforma, alcanzando una media de *engagement* de 0,017, coherente con los patrones observados en Facebook. En cuanto a Instagram, los resultados indican que más de la mitad de las publicaciones giran en torno a la dimensión "Marca/Marketing", con un 51% del total y un índice de participación notablemente alto, de 0,765. Las publicaciones relativas a la dimensión "Deportes" representan el 1% del total y alcanzan una media de participación de 0,017, en consonancia con los patrones observados en Facebook. Los posts relativos a la dimensión "Deportes" constituyen el 34% del total, con un retorno medio de *engagement* de 0,521. Le siguen los mensajes de la dimensión "Institucional", que representan el 12% del total y presentan una media de compromiso de 0,626. Aunque las estrategias de tipo "comercial" representan sólo el 2% de los mensajes, son el tipo de contenido que ha obtenido la mayor participación en esta plataforma, con una media de 0,780. Por último, en consonancia

con los patrones observados en Facebook y Twitter, el contenido de la dimensión "ESG" comprende el 1% del número total de publicaciones en esta red social, alcanzando una media de compromiso de 0,442.

6.2.3. Formatos de posts y *engagement* en ligas de fútbol. La investigación ha arrojado resultados relativos a los formatos de publicación empleados por las ligas deportivas en Facebook, Twitter e Instagram. El análisis identificó tres formatos principales: "Texto", "Imagen" y "Vídeo", y reveló además seis combinaciones de formatos prominentes empleadas con mayor frecuencia en estas plataformas de medios sociales. La combinación de formatos "Texto/Imagen" es la más frecuente en las tres plataformas, con un 38,43% en Facebook, un 38,71% en Twitter y un 64,43% en Instagram. Sin embargo, los resultados también ponen de relieve diferencias notables en cuanto a la participación generada por formatos específicos en cada plataforma. En particular, el formato "Imagen" es el que más *engagement* genera en Facebook y Twitter, con una media de 0,21 y 0,03, respectivamente. Por el contrario, en Instagram se observa una tendencia diferente, ya que la combinación de formatos "Texto/Vídeo/Link" alcanza la media de interacción más alta, de 1,13.

El análisis de correspondencias ilustra el nivel de asociación entre las variables y las dimensiones de categorización propuestas en este estudio, representadas en un mapa de posición relativa. La prueba chi-cuadrado arrojó un resultado de 917,25, lo que indica una relación estadísticamente significativa entre las variables investigadas. En concreto, la dimensión "Marca/Marketing" muestra una asociación más fuerte con los recursos en los formatos de "vídeo". Por el contrario, las dimensiones "Deportes", "ESG" e "Institucional" muestran afinidad con los formatos "Imagen" y "Texto". Además, la dimensión "Comercial", que se construye a partir de atributos de categorización, muestra una conexión con el formato "Enlace", identificados como puntos ideales de asociación.

6.3. Resultados del Estudio III.

A raíz de las 19.745 publicaciones observadas y analizadas se observa una consistencia en la cantidad de posts realizadas en relación a los estudios I y II, donde Twitter representó el 64%, seguido de Facebook con un 22% e Instagram con un 14%. Sin embargo, desde el punto de vista del *engagement*, Instagram refleja una media de 1,873, muy por encima de las demás redes sociales. Le sigue Facebook con 0,112 y Twitter con 0,045, mostrando un comportamiento inverso al número de publicaciones realizadas.

6.3.1. Frecuencia y *engagement* en clubes de fútbol. En Facebook, los clubes de fútbol analizaron los posts con diferentes frecuencias. En Europa, observamos que los clubes con mayor frecuencia de publicaciones son el Liverpool FC y el Manchester United FC, con $n=445$ y $n=486$, respectivamente. Por el contrario, los clubes españoles (Real Madrid FC y FC Barcelona) tienen la menor frecuencia de posts ($n=195$ y $n=118$, respectivamente). Por otro lado, más allá de esta diferencia de frecuencia, tienen ratios de *engagement* muy similares. El club con mayor frecuencia de publicaciones es el CR Flamengo de Brasil ($n=644$); sin embargo, el SE Palmeiras, el otro club brasileño estudiado, a pesar de registrar menos publicaciones en el mismo periodo ($n=289$), muestra niveles de *engagement* muy superiores. SE Palmeiras (Brasil), Club Olimpia y Club Cerro Porteño (Paraguay), CF América (México) y Atlanta United FC (EE.UU.) muestran los mayores niveles de *engagement*, con frecuencias de publicación similares (entre $n=142$ y $n=241$). En Twitter, se publicaron las mayores frecuencias de posts en comparación con Facebook e Instagram, siendo el CR Flamengo y el Atlanta United FC los clubes que más postearon ($n=1.606$ y $n=2.096$, respectivamente). Sin embargo, los niveles de *engagement* identificados muestran niveles similares y homogéneos en el periodo analizado, independientemente de la frecuencia de publicaciones. Por otro lado, los mayores niveles de *engagement* se observaron en Instagram, con una menor frecuencia de publicaciones en todos los casos. Los clubes de fútbol SE Palmeiras, CA River Plate, CF América y Atlanta United FC presentan los valores más altos de *engagement* (2,5 y 3), con frecuencias de publicación que oscilan entre $n=91$ y $n=154$. Los clubes de fútbol europeos tienen ratios de compromiso muy similares (en torno a 1,00), mientras que los clubes de fútbol norteamericanos tienen valores de compromiso diferentes a pesar de tener frecuencias de publicación similares ($n=91$ y $n=154$).

6.3.2. Dimensiones de contenido y *engagement* en clubes de fútbol. Desde este punto de vista, en términos de frecuencia, las dimensiones "Marketing" y "Deporte" se observan como los enfoques de contenido más utilizados por los clubes de fútbol, seguidos de la dimensión "Institucional", "Comercial" y, por último, "ESG". Este orden de frecuencia se aplica a Facebook, Twitter e Instagram. En términos de *engagement*, la red social Instagram es la que registra valores considerablemente más altos que el resto de redes sociales analizadas, siendo la dimensión "Marketing" la que genera mayor *engagement* (2,03). Le sigue la dimensión "Institucional" (1,78) y la dimensión "Deportes" (1,74), cerrando con las dimensiones "Comercial" y "ESG", con valores de 1,54 y 1,41, respectivamente. Facebook es el siguiente

medio social que genera mayor *engagement*. En el caso de Facebook (ver Tabla Suplementaria S1), los resultados muestran una significación de las medias de *engagement* entre el tipo "Comercial" y "Deportes" ($p=0,000<0,05$), "Institucional" ($p=0,001<0,05$) y "Marketing" de los posts en Facebook. Por otro lado, Twitter (ver Tabla Suplementaria S2) es la que genera un menor *engagement*, con valores muy similares entre las diferentes dimensiones, a pesar de ser la que presenta una mayor frecuencia de publicaciones (Figura 3). A diferencia de las dimensiones anteriores, las dimensiones "Institucional", "ESG" y "Comercial" son las que presentan mayores valores de *engagement* (0,07), seguidas de las dimensiones "Marketing" y "Deportes" (ambas con 0,04). Sin embargo, en esta plataforma de medios sociales, el tipo de contenido "Institucional" es estadísticamente significativo con "Deportes" ($p=0,000<0,05$), "Comercial" ($p=0,000<0,05$) y "Marketing" ($p=0,000<0,05$). Asimismo, podemos encontrar resultados de compromiso significativos entre las dimensiones "ESG" y "Comercial" ($p=0,033<0,05$). En Instagram, la dimensión "Marketing" tiene el valor de *engagement* más alto, al igual que la dimensión "Institucional" (ambas con 0,12). Le sigue la dimensión "Deportes" (0,11), "ESG" (0,10) y, por último, "Comercial" (0,07) (Figura 3). No obstante, como diferencia de Facebook y Twitter, los resultados muestran una fuerte relevancia de las publicaciones de la dimensión "Marketing", vinculada significativamente con "Deportes" ($p=0,000<0,05$), "Comercial" ($p=0,000<0,05$) e "Institucional" ($p=0,002<0,05$).

6.3.3. Tipos de formatos y *engagement* en clubes de fútbol. Se han identificado nueve combinaciones de los formatos más relevantes en las publicaciones analizadas (Tabla 4), tanto en la frecuencia de uso como en el *engagement* que generan.

En Facebook, los formatos más frecuentes son "Texto/Imagen" y "Texto/Vídeo" ($n=2.031$ y $n=1.265$, respectivamente). Sin embargo, el formato con mayor *engagement* es "Imagen" (0,23), seguido de "Texto/Imagen" (0,13), "Texto/Vídeo" (0,12) y "Texto/Link" (0,07). En Twitter, por su parte, el formato "Texto/Imagen" es el más utilizado ($n=4.412$), "Texto" ($n=2.499$), "Texto/Vídeo" ($n=2.239$) e "Imagen" ($n=1.534$), siendo las combinaciones de formato "Texto/Vídeo" y "Texto/Imagen" (0,07) las que registran un mayor *engagement*. En Instagram, debido a la naturaleza de la red social, el formato más frecuente es "Texto/Imagen" ($n=1.986$). En términos de *engagement*, los formatos "Imagen" (2,20), "Texto/Imagen" (1,95), "Texto/Imagen/Polls" (1,93) y "Vídeo" (1,84) registran los valores más altos.

Finalmente, el análisis de correspondencias muestra el grado de asociación entre las variables y las dimensiones de categorización propuestas en este estudio en un mapa de posición relativa.

INFORME DE RESULTADOS

La prueba de chi-cuadrado arrojó un resultado de 1.027,65. La dimensión "Marketing" muestra una relación más estrecha con los recursos en formato "vídeo" e "imagen". El tipo de contenido "ESG" e "Institucional" muestra una asociación con los formatos "Imagen" y "Texto". La dimensión "Comercial", en base a las características de la categorización, muestra una relación con el formato "Link" como puntos ideales de asociación, considerando la frecuencia y el *engagement* analizados.

7. DISCUSIÓN

- 7.1. Propuesta de marco estratégico aplicado a las redes sociales en el deporte y el engagement como foco fundamental en la gestión de redes sociales.*
- 7.2. Relación frecuencia-engagement por red social en organizaciones de fútbol.*
- 7.3. Dimensiones de estudio y engagement: reflexiones y propuestas.*
- 7.4. Como transmitir el mensaje: tipos de formato de contenido que favorecen al engagement según red social.*

A partir de los objetivos de esta tesis doctoral y en vista a los resultados obtenidos en los tres estudios que confirman esta memoria, se realiza una discusión general que contempla varias observaciones y cuya estructura se expone mediante apartados específicos.

Primeramente, se pone en debate los resultados del primer estudio, cuyos objetivos fueron, por un lado, realizar una primera aproximación sobre la gestión de las redes sociales mediante el diseño y aplicación de un primer instrumento *ad hoc* de observación y, por otro lado, identificar dimensiones y otros indicadores claves de gestión de estas plataformas digitales, aplicando el prototipo en una época coyuntural clave: la pandemia del COVID-19. Seguidamente, para los estudios II y III, se procede a una evolución del instrumento de observación con foco en ligas y clubes incluyendo métricas adicionales como los datos de interacción que posteriormente da lugar a las ratios de *engagement* y a su vez, analiza elementos clave en la gestión de redes sociales de estas organizaciones de fútbol desde una perspectiva comparativa internacional.

Si bien algunos estudios han abordado la relación entre las redes sociales y el deporte (concretamente en fútbol), principalmente desde la perspectiva de los clubes o los futbolistas (p. ej., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2022; Krzyżowski y Strzelecki, 2023; Zakerian et al., 2022), existe un vacío en la comprensión de cómo las ligas de fútbol utilizan sus perfiles en las redes sociales para la comunicación, la creación de marca, los fines comerciales y la participación de los aficionados, entre otras actividades. Este estudio cubre este vacío de investigación empleando el marco del marketing relacional para examinar los perfiles de Facebook, Twitter e Instagram de, en primera instancia 5 ligas deportivas (2 de fútbol y 3 de baloncesto), para luego poner el foco de investigación en 8 ligas de fútbol de élite y posteriormente en 16 clubes de fútbol pertenecientes a estas ligas, comprendidas en tres regiones geográficas (Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica).

Por lo tanto, la discusión de la tesis doctoral aborda los siguientes aspectos:

7.1. Propuesta de marco estratégico aplicado a las redes sociales en el deporte y el engagement como foco fundamental en la gestión de redes sociales.

En la actualidad, las organizaciones deportivas y los deportistas utilizan las redes sociales con fines de comunicación, posicionamiento de marca, visibilidad (Maderer et al., 2018; Winand et al., 2019; Zakerian et al., 2022) e incluso para potenciales negocios (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015), dedicando esfuerzos y recursos. Estudios previos refuerzan la necesidad de categorizar el mensaje emitido para comprender este fenómeno en función del objetivo (Filo et al., 2015) y el análisis de contenido para obtener efectos (Meng et al., 2015). Sin embargo, su uso óptimo sigue dejando muchos interrogantes.

DISCUSIÓN

En el estudio I, se aplica una primera categorización de contenido, clasificando los posts en redes sociales en 4 dimensiones: “Institucional”, “*Engagement*”, “Iniciativa Social” y “Comercial”. De las cinco competiciones deportivas analizadas (2 de fútbol y 3 de baloncesto), hemos observado diferentes estrategias a la hora de abordar la gestión de los medios sociales al inicio de la pandemia del COVID-19. Esta primera aproximación ha sido fundamental para tener una panorámica acerca de cómo gestionan las redes sociales las ligas deportivas de fútbol y baloncesto seleccionadas. La complejidad del mercado evoluciona hacia la necesidad de entender al aficionado como premisa en un sector caracterizado por su alta carga emocional. En el pasado, las estrategias se centraban en atraer y retener a los fans. Sin embargo, la tendencia actual muestra una mayor relevancia en la generación de *engagement* (Oviedo et al., 2014) para generar vínculos con los fans.

Es por ello, que para los estudios II y III, se incorporan las variables de interacción que dan lugar al cálculo de *engagement*, que ha permitido de forma más precisa, analizar el rendimiento del contenido en redes sociales entre el aficionado y los clubes y las ligas de fútbol, específicamente. Además, en base a la literatura, la valoración de expertos y los resultados del estudio I, se estableció una versión 2.0 de las dimensiones estratégicas para los estudios II y III: “Deportivo”, “Institucional”, “ESG (Social, Medioambiental, Gobernanza)”, “Brand/Marketing” y “Comercial”. La industria del deporte, especialmente en el entorno digital, se encuentra en una era en la que el objetivo no es sólo conseguir nuevos seguidores y publicar contenidos en redes sociales, sino interactuar, enfocarse en la calidad del contenido y generar *engagement* para “conocer mejor a los usuarios”.

7.2. Relación frecuencia-engagement por red social en organizaciones de fútbol.

Los estudios que conforman esta tesis doctoral muestran evidencias de relaciones frecuencia-*engagement* relevantes según las dimensiones del estudio y dependiendo del tipo de red social utilizado: Facebook, Twitter e Instagram. El estudio I ha sido clave para aportar un primer panorama sobre el foco de contenido en redes sociales a nivel de ligas de fútbol y baloncesto que ha sido explorado con mayor profundidad en los estudios II y III en las ligas y clubes de fútbol. En cuanto a la frecuencia de publicaciones, Twitter se sitúa por encima en el número de publicaciones realizadas en ambos periodos en todas las competiciones deportivas analizadas, corroborando y en concordancia con los estudios de Herrera-Torres et al., (2017) y Winand et al., (2019) en los estudios I, II y III, siendo esta la plataforma digital más utilizada en términos de número de publicaciones de las ligas de fútbol examinadas, seguida de Facebook e Instagram. Este patrón se debe principalmente a que Twitter y Facebook se introdujeron e

integraron antes en las operaciones de gestión deportiva, y además podría atribuirse también a su límite de caracteres, que puede requerir varios tweets para transmitir un contenido que puede comunicarse en una sola publicación en Facebook e Instagram. Esta discrepancia en el volumen de publicaciones en las distintas redes sociales coincide con los resultados de investigaciones similares (por ejemplo, Achen et al., 2020; Maderer et al., 2018). No obstante, los resultados muestran diferentes impactos en el *engagement* que no están directamente relacionados con la frecuencia de las publicaciones, sino influidos por otros elementos, como la plataforma de medios sociales, la dimensión del contenido y el formato. En particular, Twitter destaca por tener el menor *engagement* por publicación en comparación con Facebook (en línea con Achen et al., 2020; Maderer et al., 2018). A pesar de que estudios anteriores (por ejemplo, Maderer et al., 2018; Parganas et al., 2015) destacan las ventajas de Twitter a la hora de potenciar la marca del club y el *engagement* de los fans, su tasa de *engagement* sigue siendo notablemente inferior en el sector. Dado este contraste, debería prestarse mayor atención a la comprensión de la plataforma y evaluar combinaciones de dimensiones de contenido que puedan favorecer al *engagement*.

Cuando nos centramos en la comparación de la frecuencia de publicación y el *engagement* entre ligas, tanto Facebook como Twitter muestran niveles similares de *engagement*. Estos resultados coinciden con los de Aichner (2019) (aunque centrándose en los clubes y no en las ligas), quien indicó que no existían diferencias significativas en la utilización de las cuentas de redes sociales en los distintos países y culturas. Cabe destacar que, en medio de estos hallazgos, surge una excepción digna de mención: las ligas emergentes de Norteamérica, como la Liga MX (México) y la MLS (Estados Unidos), tienden a publicar un mayor número de posts en Facebook y Twitter en comparación con las ligas con tradiciones más consolidadas y una cobertura mediática más amplia, como la Bundesliga (Alemania), LaLiga (España) y la Premier League (Reino Unido). Así también, Instagram destaca como la plataforma de medios sociales con mayor *engagement* en relación con el número de posts publicados. Esta distinción pone de manifiesto el importante *engagement* observado en las publicaciones de la MLS y los clubes de fútbol analizados (principalmente de Sudamérica), seguida de las principales ligas europeas incluidas en este estudio. Por este motivo, merece la pena considerar el estudio del caso de la MLS como una futura historia de éxito con Instagram. Esto es especialmente pertinente si se tiene en cuenta que, durante el periodo de recopilación de datos, el futbolista Lionel Messi aún no se había incorporado a la liga como jugador. Como señalaron Kobylinska y Medina (2023), se espera que el "efecto Messi" catalice un auge mediático dentro de la liga. Esta plataforma de medios sociales, como reconocen Abeza (2023) y Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018), sigue

ganando tracción tanto en términos de interés académico como de adopción por parte de los usuarios, especialmente entre el grupo demográfico más joven. Por lo tanto, las evidencias demuestran que existen dimensiones específicas de contenidos que estadísticamente generan más *engagement* en cada plataforma.

7.3. Dimensiones de estudio y engagement: reflexiones y propuestas.

En el estudio I, se observan categorizaciones de dimensiones de contenido como base de los estudios II y III, donde las evidencias muestran una aproximación acerca de la estrategia utilizada para la gestión de las redes sociales. Se ha observado que la ACB, por su parte, ha mostrado una fuerte inclinación hacia el aspecto social, buscando la interacción con los aficionados a través de un enfoque altruista. LL, sin embargo, ha reorientado su estrategia para minimizar el impacto de las cancelaciones (temporales) de competiciones deportivas enfocando el contenido de tipo “*Engagement*” con los aficionados, como medio de mantener el interés y el vínculo con la audiencia. Las competiciones de ámbito europeo, dada la repentina situación de pandemia y la incertidumbre reinante, unidas a la complejidad de los grupos de interés implicados en la propia competición, obligaron a la EL y a la UCL a realizar publicaciones institucionales a través de sus redes sociales, con el fin de mantener actualizados a patrocinadores, deportistas y aficionados sobre el devenir de la competición. Además, la búsqueda de soluciones entre las partes se convirtió en una cuestión clave, ya que los activos de patrocinio comprometidos no pudieron cumplirse según lo establecido.

De acuerdo a las dimensiones de contenido compartidos por las ligas de fútbol (en el estudio II) y los clubs de fútbol (en el estudio III) en Facebook, Twitter e Instagram, surge un patrón consistente en el que los mensajes de “Deportes” y “Brand/Marketing” tienen una presencia predominante, debido al uso natural y tradicional de estas herramientas como elementos comunicativos, de posicionamiento de marca e informativos (Lee & Kahle, 2016; Rehman et al., 2022; Winand et al., 2019). Esto es atribuible, por un lado, a la necesidad de las organizaciones deportivas de generar contenidos emocionales (como vídeos o imágenes de partidos icónicos del pasado o campañas en las que participen deportistas) y, por otro, a la difusión de mensajes alusivos al rendimiento y los resultados deportivos. Esta observación refleja los esfuerzos concertados de las ligas para establecer vínculos emocionales con su audiencia (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010), empleando los medios sociales para mejorar los esfuerzos de marca (Maderer et al., 2018).

La prevalencia del contenido de "Deportes" se alinea lógicamente con su alta frecuencia, como señalaron Machado et al. (2020), lo que indica que los aficionados buscan intrínsecamente contenido entretenido y agradable relacionado con los eventos deportivos que siguen.

En el contexto del contenido de "Brand/Marketing", el papel fundamental de las redes sociales se ha hecho cada vez más evidente en los últimos años (por ejemplo, McCarthy et al., 2022; Zakerian et al., 2022), resultando decisivo para posicionar las competiciones de fútbol y atraer a posibles patrocinadores (Balliau et al., 2021). Las ligas, como organizadores, aprovechan la diversidad de jugadores, sedes y matices culturales para suscitar fuertes reacciones emocionales en su público (Su et al., 2022) en todas las redes sociales. En el caso de los clubes de fútbol, vemos a Instagram como principal plataforma para promover contenidos de este tipo. Si bien esta plataforma muestra el número más bajo de frecuencia de publicaciones, las evidencias muestran un significativo grado elevado de *engagement*, atribuible a los formatos audiovisuales de la plataforma y a los contenidos más interactivos, lo que ratifica su creciente popularidad entre los usuarios. Como plataforma de rápido crecimiento, existe un importante vínculo con las dimensiones "Deportiva", "Institucional" y "Comercial", lo que la convierte en una plataforma ideal para contenidos emocionales, de fácil conexión con marcas, atletas y propiedades deportivas, contando con un público más amplio y variado que busca principalmente, como sugieren las evidencias, el entretenimiento y la percepción de cercanía del club. Por lo tanto, al igual que Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018), recomendamos a los gestores deportivos utilizar Instagram con fines de marketing, considerando el contexto como un factor relevante.

Nuestra investigación también acentúa el papel sustancial del contenido "Institucional", consecuencia directa de las responsabilidades organizativas de las ligas y de la mayor necesidad de comunicación institucional. En particular, observamos esfuerzos limitados en las dimensiones "Comercial" y "ESG". Estas disparidades pueden significar diferentes prioridades entre las entidades futbolísticas individuales, como los clubes. Aunque los objetivos comerciales siguen siendo cruciales para las ligas de fútbol, su ejecución puede diferir de la de los clubes tradicionales, lo que lleva a una diversidad de estrategias de contenido. Para ello, Twitter parece ser la plataforma ideal para este tipo de contenido. La naturaleza de Twitter como sitio de microblogging con el mayor número de publicaciones con los medios más bajos de *engagement*, es más atractiva para el público que busca información rápida y resumida debido a su capacidad para aumentar la visibilidad y el conocimiento de los aficionados (Abeza et al., 2017). Los gestores deportivos pueden centrarse en este tipo de mensajes para conseguir un mayor *engagement* potencial en Twitter.

DISCUSIÓN

En cuanto a los contenidos con fuerte foco en el tipo “Comercial”, Facebook lleva la delantera. Esta red social, caracterizada por ser la más tradicional que utilizan los clubes de fútbol, muestra una relación más equilibrada entre frecuencia y *engagement* y fue una de las que empezó a monetizarse en otras industrias, caracterizada por su alto impacto de marca, donde el know-how y la interfase de la plataforma es más amigable para centrarse en este tipo de posts (y en algunos casos, para lanzar posts conjuntos con marcas). Aún con el positivo impacto de *engagement* en esta plataforma, se observa que los esfuerzos de esta naturaleza en el ámbito digital son escasos en comparación con el resto (en clubes más que en las ligas de fútbol), haciendo de este un aspecto relevante es el espectro de crecimiento y una oportunidad a explorar, especialmente con los nuevos activos que están apareciendo en el mercado y el crecimiento del comercio electrónico.

La dimensión "ESG" aparece como un motor significativo del *engagement* en Facebook y Twitter, atendiendo a un público que valora la transparencia, la responsabilidad social y un impacto social con fines altruistas más amplio más allá del ámbito del deporte y que se utiliza para promover actividades socio-políticas y actividades con fines más altruistas. Vemos además que en en Instagram, la dimensión "ESG" vinculada a "Comercial" obtiene estáticamente un impacto significativamente mayor, por el contenido emocional y reputacional. Esta estrategia muestra una posible intención de utilizar los medios sociales no sólo con fines de marketing (comunicación) o deportivos, sino también como un elemento con aspectos sociopolíticos. Esta conclusión coincide con la de López-Carril y Anagnostopoulos (2020) y Sharpe et al. (2020), que consideran que las redes sociales son una vía distinta para que las entidades deportivas comuniquen sus iniciativas de RSC.

A partir de las observaciones anteriores, los resultados revelan un patrón matizado que desafía las suposiciones convencionales sobre la relación entre la frecuencia de publicación y el *engagement*. Contrariamente a la noción de que una mayor frecuencia de publicaciones equivale directamente a un mayor *engagement*, nuestra investigación indica que la audiencia contemporánea da más importancia a la calidad del contenido que a la cantidad (en acuerdo con Aichner, 2019).

7.4. Como transmitir el mensaje: tipos de formato de contenido que favorecen al engagement según red social.

En el estudio I, observamos un fuerte enfoque audiovisual en los formatos de publicación en un periodo durante la pandemia, debido principalmente al uso de Instagram. Las afirmaciones de Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018) reafirman la relevancia y los elementos de branding y fidelización de fans para generar interacción con la audiencia mediante la creación de contenidos emocionales.

En el estudio II surge una observación cuanto mínimo llamativo en las ligas. En plataformas como Facebook y Twitter, donde las imágenes no son el elemento predominante, cabe destacar que las publicaciones compuestas únicamente por imágenes obtienen un mayor *engagement*. En el contexto de Instagram, además del formato de imagen, las combinaciones de formatos han demostrado altos índices de *engagement*, como Texto/Vídeo/Vínculo. Otros formatos, como texto/imagen y texto/enlace, también han demostrado su eficacia.

En el estudio III por su parte, en Facebook, los mayores valores de *engagement* son generados por los formatos "Imagen" y "Texto/Imagen", al igual que en Instagram y Twitter; sin embargo, en cada plataforma de redes sociales, las frecuencias generadas por estos registros son diferentes. En cualquier caso, destaca el poder de la imagen como contenido de valor en marketing, como también se ha puesto de manifiesto en estudios anteriores (por ejemplo, Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2022; Machado et al., 2020). Sin embargo, los resultados obtenidos sobre el *engagement* que desencadenan las publicaciones en formato vídeo en Facebook, Twitter e Instagram no son tan concluyentes, como han señalado otros estudios (por ejemplo, Su et al., 2020). Probablemente porque estos medios sociales no están enfocados a ese formato como pueden estarlo otros medios sociales como TikTok o YouTube. En definitiva, es aconsejable que los gestores deportivos adopten una gama diversa de formatos para mejorar eficazmente el *engagement* de los seguidores según la red social y es necesario que los gestores y académicos del deporte continúen explorando y realizando las combinaciones adecuadas entre las dimensiones del tipo de contenido, el formato de publicación, así como las redes sociales utilizadas para la optimización del contenido ofrecido a la audiencia en el entorno digital.

8. CONCLUSIONES

8.1. Limitaciones.

8.2. Futuras líneas de investigación

Este capítulo presenta las conclusiones basadas en los objetivos generales de la tesis doctoral y de los tres estudios que la componen, desde una perspectiva multirregional: Europa, Sudamérica y Norteamérica y multiplataforma: Facebook, Twitter e Instagram.

Las redes sociales juegan un papel clave en la gestión deportiva actual, especialmente en los clubes de fútbol, debido a su alcance global y a su capacidad para interactuar y conectar con los aficionados en un sector de gran popularidad, carga emocional e impacto económico, político y social.

En primer lugar, se lleva a cabo una aproximación sobre el instrumento de observación preliminar que da como resultado las primeras dimensiones estratégicas de contenido en redes sociales, así como otros indicadores de gestión relevantes aplicados a ligas deportivas populares (fútbol y baloncesto) de alcance nacional e internacional. Seguidamente, se realiza una adaptación del instrumento inicial y se abordando dimensiones de estudio complementarias y específicas, incorporando la variable “*engagement*” como indicador de medición crucial de la gestión de las redes sociales, enfocando los estudios siguientes a las ligas de fútbol y a los principales clubes que la componen. Finalmente, se exponen una serie de reflexiones que permitirán a profesionales y académicos sentar las bases de futuras investigaciones en el ámbito de la gestión deportiva, el marketing deportivo, la gestión de redes sociales y el *fan engagement* en el entorno digital dirigida a organizaciones deportivas.

1. Se han identificado elementos clave que influyen en la comprensión del comportamiento de los aficionados desde la perspectiva de la gestión en organizaciones deportivas en el entorno digital.
 - a. En el estudio I, se obtiene una primera categorización que facilite el enfoque estratégico del contenido en redes sociales en ligas de fútbol y baloncesto, identificando primeramente 4 dimensiones de estudio: “Iniciativa Social”, “Institucional”, “Informativo” y “Comercial”; complementando con la frecuencia de posts, el formato utilizado y las partes interesadas.
 - b. En el estudio II y III, se da lugar a una versión ampliada y más detallada de las dimensiones propuestas en el estudio I, enfocados a ligas top a nivel mundial y sus principales clubes, identificando las dimensiones de estudio siguientes: “Deportivo”, “Institucional”, “ESG”, “Brand/Marketing” y “Comercial”. Además de la frecuencia y el formato, se añadieron variables más precisas como

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métricas de interacción , para dar lugar a las ratios de *engagement*, un elemento de medición clave entre la audiencia y las redes sociales.

2. Se ha diseñado, validado y aplicado un Instrumento de observación y recolección de datos en redes sociales de aplicación práctica para visualizar y posteriormente analizar la gestión del marketing deportivo y específicamente de las redes sociales en organizaciones deportivas.
 - a. En cuanto a la frecuencia de publicaciones, hemos visto el predominio en el uso de Twitter seguido por Facebook e Instagram, respectivamente.
 - b. Instagram es el medio social que genera más *engagement* utilizando la menor frecuencia de publicaciones, seguido de Facebook y Twitter.
 - c. Los organizadores de las competiciones han optado por reorientar sus estrategias en lugar de disminuir (o aumentar) la frecuencia de las publicaciones en periodo de pandemia.
 - d. El dominio de Instagram sobre Facebook y Twitter en términos de *engagement* es inequívoco. Los gestores deportivos deberían priorizar su presencia en esta red social.
 - e. Una mayor frecuencia de publicaciones no se traduce intrínsecamente en un mayor *engagement* de la audiencia. No hay pruebas directas que relacionen la frecuencia de las publicaciones con el *engagement* generado. Por lo tanto, la calidad del contenido debe primar sobre la cantidad para garantizar su atractivo para los aficionados al fútbol según la red social.
 - f. Los posts con contenido audiovisual han sido las que más han crecido en el periodo pandémico debido a su carga emocional combinada con la necesidad de conectar con la audiencia a pesar de la falta de actividad deportiva oficial.
 - g. En las ligas y clubes de fútbol, la combinación de formatos que genera más *engagement* predomina "Imagen", "Texto/Imagen", y "Texto/Vídeo".
3. Se han expuesto reflexiones y propuestas para generar un mayor *engagement* a través de la gestión de redes sociales en ligas y clubes de fútbol de élite a nivel global, y que contribuyan activamente en la gestión del marketing deportivo en el entorno digital.
 - a. Las dimensiones "Marketing" y "Deportes" son las preferidas por las ligas y clubes de fútbol en cuanto a frecuencia de posts.
 - b. En Instagram, la dimensión "Marketing" vinculada a "Deportes", "Institucional" y "Comercial", hace que esta plataforma sea ideal para fines emocionales y de marketing en clubes de fútbol.

- c. Existe una relación equilibrada entre las dimensiones "Brand/Marketing" y "Deportes" en cuanto a la frecuencia de la estrategia de contenidos y el consiguiente *engagement* de la audiencia. Estas dimensiones mantienen una relación armoniosa entre frecuencia y *engagement*.
- d. Se ha observado una visión emergente del aspecto "ESG" de los contenidos. Este tema de contenido obtiene un *engagement* notablemente superior en Facebook y Twitter en las ligas de fútbol, lo que indica el creciente interés de la audiencia por la sostenibilidad y la responsabilidad social. En clubes de fútbol, la dimensión "ESG" vinculado a la perspectiva "Comercial" y la dimensión "Institucional" obtienen un impacto significativo en Twitter.
- e. El contenido "comercial" muestra un impacto y un *engagement* de la audiencia más significativos en Instagram que en Facebook y Twitter. En Facebook, la dimensión "Comercial" muestra una oportunidad de crecimiento y desarrollo debido al auge tecnológico y la aparición de nuevos activos digitales. Esto pone de relieve la naturaleza polifacética de la participación en las redes sociales y subraya la importancia de adaptar las estrategias y los formatos de los contenidos a plataformas y públicos específicos.
- f. Lograr un *engagement* óptimo depende de alinear la estrategia (dimensiones) y el formato del contenido de los mensajes. Las organizaciones de fútbol tienen más probabilidades de lograr mayores índices de *engagement* cuando combinan meticulosamente el contenido adecuado del mensaje con el formato apropiado. Comprender las preferencias e intereses del público objetivo es crucial en este sentido.

En definitiva, las conclusiones presentadas en esta investigación invitan a una reflexión práctica sobre la exploración, análisis y evaluación de la gestión de las redes sociales en organizaciones deportivas, utilizando el método de observación y técnicas de análisis de contenido y aplicando elementos de fiabilidad y rigor científico, permitiendo a profesionales y académicos identificar puntos de mejora en las estrategias aplicadas en el entorno digital en organizaciones deportivas. Además, sientan las bases de futuras investigaciones sobre este fenómeno y contribuyen a la literatura en el campo de la gestión deportiva, el marketing deportivo, la gestión de redes sociales y el *fan engagement*.

8.1. Limitaciones.

La presente tesis doctoral, pone a consideración una serie de limitaciones que se deben tener en cuenta.

Primeramente, este trabajo se limita a analizar el *engagement* en Facebook, Twitter e Instagram, dejando de lado el análisis de las posibilidades que otras plataformas digitales en auge, como TikTok o Twitch, están teniendo en el ámbito del marketing.

Además, se consideran otras limitaciones como las inherentes a las técnicas de recogida de datos. El análisis de contenido se centró en analizar el estado del debate en espectros temporales concretos.

La capacidad de generalizar los hallazgos a todas las ligas y clubes de fútbol podría verse limitada por la selección específica de entidades deportivas analizadas.

Así también, los factores gubernamentales/políticos son susceptibles de diferencias en cuanto a la cronología en diferentes regiones geográficas desde este enfoque multirregional.

En cuanto a la muestra, se limita predominantemente a un único deporte (fútbol) y a organizaciones específicas de varias regiones del mundo. El análisis se basa en parte, mediante datos recopilados de las publicaciones en redes sociales, lo que implica ciertas limitaciones inherentes a este enfoque y pueden estar sujetos a sesgos de presentación. El estudio podría centrarse en el impacto a corto plazo de las estrategias de redes sociales en el *engagement* de los aficionados y aficionadas, sin abordar los posibles efectos a largo plazo de estas interacciones en la lealtad de los aficionados y aficionadas y el valor de la marca.

La medición del *engagement* se basa en métricas disponibles públicamente como likes, comentarios y compartidos. Sin embargo, existen otras métricas complementarias que los administradores de las cuentas de las plataformas utilizadas pueden utilizar para profundizar el análisis.

La aparición de nuevas tecnologías y plataformas digitales puede ofrecer nuevas oportunidades para el *engagement* de los aficionados que no se hayan considerado en el estudio, como el cambio de nombre de la plataforma “Twitter” a “X”.

Finalmente, los posts analizados se localizan periodos específicos de tiempo, y más allá de contemplar el rendimiento promedio de la temporada, podría ser relevante analizar el *engagement* evolutivo y cíclico de los posts en diferentes momentos de la temporada.

8.2. *Futuras líneas de investigación.*

Las limitaciones presentadas en el apartado anterior y a raíz de los resultados obtenidos en la presente tesis doctoral, se abren nuevas oportunidades de exploración para futuras líneas de investigación en el campo de estudio.

En primer lugar, las reflexiones de esta tesis invitan a evaluar la aplicación y viabilidad de la técnica de medición del *engagement* en redes sociales en otras organizaciones futbolísticas o marcas (por ejemplo, deportistas) o; replicar la técnica en otras plataformas de medios sociales emergentes (por ejemplo, TikTok, Twitch). En este sentido, se podrían explorar las dinámicas de *engagement* en otros deportes de diferentes regiones geográficas además del fútbol, para determinar la aplicabilidad más amplia de los resultados.

En cuanto al instrumento de observación, sería beneficioso incorporar nuevas variables de estudio (por ejemplo, tamaño de la masa social de los clubes deportivos, presupuesto financiero, trofeos ganados; resultados deportivos) para abarcar otros espectros de análisis.

En cuanto a los periodos de tiempo de observación y análisis, podemos mencionar: a) realizar el análisis durante periodos más amplios en futuros estudios para obtener una perspectiva global y a más largo plazo, analizando ventanas temporales similares en temporadas sucesivas; b) llevar adelante un análisis longitudinal en diferentes ventanas de tiempo en una misma temporada para evaluar el ciclo de *engagement* según red social y c) analizar el *engagement* teniendo en cuenta diferentes fases de la temporada deportiva (por ejemplo, pretemporada, temporada, playoffs, posttemporada).

Finalmente, futuras líneas de estudio podrían conducir a explorar modelos de predicción del *engagement* en los medios sociales e incorporar este modelo en un lenguaje de IA para sugerir y predecir el *engagement* de los usuarios digitales en un contexto simulado.

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ANEXOS

Anexo 1.

Entrevista ad hoc de la entrevista a expertos.



UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONA



INEFC

Institut Nacional
d'Educació Física
de Catalunya
Barcelona

Generalitat
de Catalunya

Análisis de la gestión de marketing digital en entidades deportivas. El papel de las redes sociales en el deporte.

La presente entrevista forma parte de la investigación de tesis doctoral a cargo del Sr. Edgar Romero, proyecto dirigido por el Dr. Francesc Solanellas, cuyo objetivo es realizar un análisis de las estrategias de marketing deportivo (específicamente en el área de redes sociales) y su relación con la misión general de la institución adoptada por Clubes y Ligas de Fútbol a nivel global.

Esta entrevista semi estructurada está dirigida a expertos, académicos y profesionales ejecutivos en gestión deportiva y áreas afines. La duración aproximada de la entrevista es de 20 minutos.

El objeto de esta entrevista es obtener datos que permitirán analizar la gestión de las estrategias de marketing deportivo en el ámbito digital con especial foco en la gestión de redes sociales de las organizaciones deportivas y su vinculación con la estrategia global de la organización.

Los datos obtenidos se tratarán según el Reglamento (UE) 2016/679 del Parlamento Europeo y del Consejo, de 27 de abril de 2016, relativo a la protección de las personas físicas en lo que respecta al tratamiento de datos personales y a la libre circulación de estos datos y a la Ley Orgánica, 3/2018, del 5 de diciembre, de protección de datos personales y garantía de derechos digitales.

Los datos obtenidos son anónimos, se tratarán de forma global y se emplearán solo con la finalidad del estudio. Todos los datos se almacenarán de forma segura bajo la responsabilidad directa del investigador principal y se conservarán sólo el tiempo que sea necesario.

Este estudio tiene como fin beneficiar a organizaciones deportivas, académicos y profesionales del sector a evaluar, innovar y proponer alternativas de mejora a las prácticas de gestión analizadas. El investigador dará a conocer los resultados de la investigación al participante una vez que la misma esté concluida.

Su participación es totalmente voluntaria y los/as participantes tienen derecho a rechazar o retirarse del proyecto en cualquier momento. Los/as participantes también tienen derecho a hacer tantas preguntas como consideren necesarias sobre las características del estudio y su participación en él.

Si desea recibir información adicional, puede enviar un correo electrónico a los investigadores responsables del proyecto:

Sr. Edgar Romero Jara (eromeria7@doct.ub.edu)

Dr. Francesc Solanellas (fsolanellas@gencat.cat)

Muchas gracias de antemano por su colaboración.

Cordialmente,

Edgar Romero Jara.

Código participante:

1- Institución (Nombre del Club o Federación)

2- Sexo

☐ Hombre ☐ Mujer ☐ No binario

3- Año de nacimiento

DD/MM/AAAA

4- Años de experiencia en la industria del deporte

☐ 0-1 años
☐ 1-5 años
☐ 5-10 años
☐ +10 años

5- Años trabajando en esta Institución

☐ 0-3 años
☐ 3-6 años
☐ 6-9 años
☐ +10 años

6- Nombre genérico del cargo en la institución que actualmente se encuentra

7- Principales funciones

Áreas de estudio

1. Áreas prioritarias estratégicas de la organización deportiva y su vínculo con la estrategia de marketing.
2. Plataformas digitales de mayor relevancia en organizaciones deportivas.
3. Redes sociales prominentes en el club/liga.
4. Instrumento de observación y recolección de datos.
 - a. Dimensiones
 - b. Formato
 - c. Stakeholders
 - d. Tiempos de observación
 - e. Otros aspectos a considerar
5. Indicadores clave.
 - a. Métricas de interacción

Análisis de la estrategia de marketing digital de organizaciones deportivas.

Una mirada a las federaciones y clubes de fútbol.

Diseño de la herramienta de observación

Objetivo específico:

Diseñar e implementar un instrumento de observación de publicaciones realizadas por ligas y clubes de fútbol que permita categorizar cualitativa y cuantitativamente el contenido para posteriormente realizar un análisis comparativo entre organizaciones.

Diseño preliminar del Instrumento de observación

Club/Federación

Federación/Confederación

País

Web site

Facebook official page Followers

Twitter official page Followers

Instagram official page Followers

Período de datos observados al Duración

Fecha del inicio oficial de la competición

Nombre del torneo

Fecha de publicación

Red Social

Dimensiones							
Deportivo	Institucional	Social	Comercial				
Primer Equipo	Formatos / Formas de disciplina	Eventos / Actividades (Arbitraje)	Historia / Club	Responsabilidades	Inclusión / Accesibilidad	Broadway	Marketing (Ticketing, lin. Merchandising)

Tipo de contenido

Mediciones de Interacción

Pole

1- Información General del Club/Federación

Club/Federación		
Federación/Confederación		
País		
Web site		
Facebook official page		Followers
Twitter official page		Followers
Instagram official page		Followers

(Escriba aquí)

2- Identificación de plataforma y fecha

(Logo)

Club/Federación	
Federación/Confederación	
País	
Web site	
Facebook official page	Followers
Twitter official page	Followers
Instagram official page	Followers

Período de datos observados _____ al _____

Inicio Oficial del Torneo _____

Nombre del torneo _____

training, Partit, Postpartit, Preparit, ruedas de prensa, Matchday Information, Entertainment, Personal Identity, Integration and so

Fecha de publicación	Red Social	Dimensiones										Contenido				
		Deportivo	Institucional	Social	Comercial	Marketing	Image	Video	Link to Web	Link content						
		Primer Equipo	Formativas / Otras disciplinas	Eventos internos (Asamblea)	Historia del Club	Responsabilidad social	Accesibilidad	Broadcast	Matchdays (ticketing, lineup)	Marketing (sponsors, abonados, merchandising)						
	Facebook															
	Twitter															
	Instagram															

(Escriba aquí)

3- Categorización/Dimensiones del contenido

Categorías	Subcategorías	Descripción
Deportivo	Primer Equipo	contenido referente a los jugadores, nuevos fichajes, el entrenador, entrenamiento, partido.
	Formativas / Otras disciplinas	
Institucional	Eventos internos (Asamblea)	contenido referente a cuestiones políticas, historia del club, anuncio de asambleas, comunicados oficiales, aniversarios del club, horarios de atención al socio.
	Historia del Club	
Social	Responsabilidad social	contenido referente a actividades relativas a responsabilidad social corporativa, ayudas a la comunidad, desarrollo de atletas, educación.
	Accesibilidad	
Comercial	Abonos/Socios	contenido referente a la generación de ingresos a través de los canales comerciales del club: Broadcasting, abonos, socios, sponsors
	Matchdays (ticketing, lineup)	
	Membresías	
Marketing	Activación con sponsors	contenido referente a generación de marca, posicionamiento, contenido emocional dirigido a los fans, publicaciones que generen <i>call to action</i> e interacción
	Contenido emocional	

(Escriba aquí)

4- Tipo de contenido

De acuerdo a la naturaleza común y las características de las redes sociales analizadas (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), y en base a la literatura revisada se propone realizar una clasificación de acuerdo a los siguientes tipos de contenidos:

Contenido	Texto
	Imagen
	Video
	Link to Web
	Link to E-commerce
	Sorteos
	Survey

(Escriba aquí)

5- Métricas de Interacción

Métricas de Interacción	Likes
	Share
	Comments

(Escriba aquí)

(Reaction) para una refencia global . incluye todos las emociones (en caso de facebook)

6- Período de observación

Período de datos observados	al	Duración	XX semanas
Fecha del inicio oficial de la competición			
Nombre del torneo			

Periodo de observación

- Antes, durante y después
 - 1 semana antes (previo al inicio de la competición)
 - 1 semana durante (a mediados de la competición)
 - 1 semana después (luego de finalizar la competición)
 - TOTAL: 3 semanas
- Antes y después
 - 2 semanas antes (previo al inicio de la competición)
 - 2 semanas después (a mediados de la competición)
 - TOTAL: 4 semanas
- Durante
 - 4 semanas durante (a mediados de la competición)
 - TOTAL: 4 semanas

(Escriba aquí)

(Escriba aquí)

Softwares para extracción de posts en redes sociales.

7- Comentarios finales:

(Escriba aquí)

Anexo 2.

Instrumento de recolección de datos utilizados en los estudios que conforman la tesis doctoral.

Estudio I. Instrumento de observación en hoja de cálculo .xlsx

[illegible]

Estudios II y III. Instrumento de observación en hoja de cálculo .xlsx (ejemplo)

[illegible]

Anexo 3.

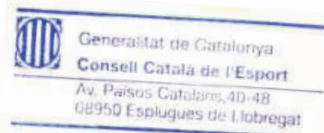
Certificado del Comité de Ética de Investigaciones Clínicas de la Administración Deportiva de Cataluña.

DR. RAMON BALIUS MATAS,
ACTING AS SECRETARY OF THE ETHICS COMMITTEE
FOR CLINICAL RESEARCH
OF THE CATALAN SPORTS COUNCIL.

CERTIFIES

At the meeting on March 23, 2022, the Ethics Committee agreed to favorably assess the project presented by Edgar Romero Jara , Francesc Solanellas, number 007/CEICGC/2022, entitled “Análisis de la estrategia de marketing digital en organizaciones deportivas. Una mirada a las federaciones y clubes de fútbol.”.

We note this favorable assessment for the appropriate purposes.



Dr. Ramon Balius Matas
Esplugues de Llobregat, March 23, 2022

Anexo 4.

Estudio I: “Managing the COVID-19 from the Managing the COVID-19 Crisis Through Social Media: An Analysis From Sports Organizations Perspective”

Managing the COVID-19 Crisis Through Social Media: An Analysis From Sports Organizations Perspective

Francesc Solanellas¹, Edgar Romero-Jara² , and Joshua Muñoz¹

SAGE Open
July-September 2023: 1–10
© The Author(s) 2023
DOI: 10.1177/21582440231198806
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo


Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted directly on sports competitions, redirecting strategies to adapt to changes and giving prominence to a new ally: social media. The objective of this research is to analyze how top-level sports organizations managed their social media in pre-pandemic (from April 1 to 14, 2019) and pandemic (from April 1 to 14, 2020) periods. This study is based on the design and implementation of an observation instrument, applied to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter posts. A total of 5,512 posts from LaLiga (LL), ACB League (ACB), UEFA Champions League (UCL), Euroleague (EL), and NBA League (NBA) have been analyzed. The results show a slight decrease in the total frequency of posts between both periods, but with a more homogeneous distribution over the days. Sports organizations adopted different approaches while posting on social media during these two periods. At the beginning of the pandemic, they prioritized “Social initiatives” and “Engagement” categories while their format preferences have generally migrated from text and image to audio-visual resources during the pandemic.

Keywords

communication and media, COVID-19, social media, sport organizations, fan behavior, sport marketing

Introduction

Sports organizations managing sports teams use social media to engage with their partners and fans, promote interactions and increase engagement with the sports product as well as the team in general (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015). According to Filo et al. (2015), social media is seen as a unique form of communication that transcends geographical and social boundaries through instant communication of information. However, communication is only one of the many goals of social media channels. Williams and Chinn, (2016) defined social networks as “tools, platforms and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate and collaborate with others,” and they constitute a mass phenomenon (Vivar, 2009), due to their ability to transmit agile and interactive information in an era where immediacy is a constant.

The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic requires to sports organizations to redirect their strategies, where digital channels were key. Due to the need of keeping active the audience, maintaining closeness with partners

(sponsors, clubs, and athletes) and exploring new communication approaches, social media become a strategic and powerful ally for sports organizations.

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to analyze the social media use in the initial period of the pandemic from the perspective of local and international top sports organizations and make a comparison between a similar period of time in a non-pandemic scenario to visualize and study both periods.

In addressing of the research question, this study produces evidence that seeks to demonstrate the strategies adopted by sports organizations considering the geographic scope of the competition, the sports discipline,

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the post frequency of both periods and the stakeholders involved by making a comparison between the initial period of the pandemic (period most uncertain) and a pre-pandemic period. In doing so, we plan to contribute to the existing literature by developing an observation tool based on previous studies with original categories and variables of study to inform practitioners about the social media use by these sports organizations and to allow to open the scope for future studies in the field.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 Pandemic: The Beginning of a New Era in Sport Management

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an economic crisis due to a high level of uncertainty (Nicola et al., 2020) changes in digital communication (Nguyen et al., 2020), and brand strategies in different industries, which has also impacted the sporting arena.

At the onset of the pandemic alone, the sports industry was projecting a loss of USD 15 billion in terms of sponsorships, TV rights, and other revenue (Somoggi, 2020); USD 1.9 million in US Basketball franchises; over USD 2 billion in tourism related to the Tokyo Olympics; USD 5 billion from the US Olympic Games (Jaramillo, 2020), and EUR 5 billion in the European football business (KPMG, 2021). Governments applied a series of strategies focused on community mitigation measures (Ebrahim et al., 2020) such as the cancellation of on-site events for the high propagation potential; travel restrictions; the use of social distancing measures to reduce direct contact between people in the community; among others. Consequently, all group physical activities, face-to-face events and team sports were suddenly and indefinitely restricted in many countries (Hammami et al., 2022). With the COVID-19 pandemic and in the absence of competitions, sports organizations, with their events cancelled or postponed, had to redirect their strategies and reinvent themselves (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021).

While the determination of the real impact of COVID-19 is still under ongoing study (McCloskey et al., 2020), previous studies show the importance of content generation, interaction with spectators, and the increase of resources on digital platforms for revenue generation and sponsorship activation.

In a pandemic context, sports organizations identified the power of social media to spread information even faster than the virus itself (Depoux et al., 2020). Furthermore, the content generated by sports organizations and athletes themselves has become more relevant, as well as an emerging social approach to generate closeness and empathize with the audience and the digital sports community. Sharpe et al., (2020) highlighted the relevance of athletes and sports organizations joining the

fight against the pandemic through viral social media content, fundraising and online socializing.

Digital Communication in Sports Organizations

The differences that make the sports industry unique and particular are, among others: the immediate results and changes (Davis & Zutz Hilbert, 2013) in addition to the fact that every decision is “under the microscope” of the public (alluding to the complexity of fans, athletes, coaches, media, and other stakeholders). In this way, the interest of the spectator becomes key and increasingly demanding (Nisar et al., 2018).

Social media are a key tool for building and enhancing the reputation of a brand (Maderer et al., 2018), an ideal platform for publicizing and increasing brand visibility, for analyzing the actions of its fans and followers (Herrera-Torres et al., 2017) and to promote interaction between users and organizations, integrating different communication channels within the same network, so that information from customers and organization arrives more quickly than by conventional channels (Shilbury et al., 2014).

Additionally, social media have a direct and indirect impact at the moment of generating income and favor negotiation with sponsors due to their notoriety, visibility and reach (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015). Therefore, their application in the management of any sports organization, especially those involving spectators, is essential.

Furthermore, in the literature, we find authors such as González and Tortolero (2020), Leng and Phua (2022), and Piedra (2020) who showed the impact of COVID-19 on digital management in sports considering different stakeholders (athletes, institutions, or brands). Therefore, social media becomes a powerful ally in this period.

Sport Organizations and Social Media Studies

The management of social media and other digital platforms by sports organizations has been studied from different perspectives: from athletes (Hayes, 2020; Sharpe et al., 2020; Witkemper et al., 2012), teams, and sports clubs (Achen, 2019; Jordan et al., 2017; Machado et al., 2020; Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015), to International Federations (Burson Cohn & Wolfe Sports, 2019; Ginesta, 2009; Vilanova, 2009; Winand et al., 2019).

Several authors have analyzed and classified the content posted on social media to observe the strategies followed by sports organizations and redefine the relevance in the global marketing strategy, for example as a tool for Integrated Communication Marketing (Rehman

et al., 2022). Waters et al., (2009) examined social media content based on three dimensions: information dissemination, disclosure, and interactivity. The authors, rather than focusing on design principles, focused on the actual use of social media by organizations to determine how they communicated with audiences. These dimensions were then adapted by Josh and Maggie (2009) to measure communication style and engagement on Twitter. In turn, Hambrick et al. (2010) classified Twitter content into six categories: interactivity, fun, information sharing, content, fans, and promotional. In their research, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) classified social network content based on three categories: information, community, and action. Blaszk et al. (2012) created categories based on the uses and gratifications approach to study sports communication on Twitter, which included interactivity, fun, information sharing, content, fan, promotion, and combinations. From the point of view of content analysis on Facebook, Tejedor et al. (2020) compared content and engagement interaction ratios. On the other hand, Winand et al. (2019) classified content into four dimensions: informative, marketing, personalization, and activations. We can see then, how the phenomenon of social media in sports organizations has been studied from different approaches, however, the potential of social media in the global strategy of the organization is still unexplored.

The categorization analysis and methods used in previous studies are relevant for this research as a starting point to explore perspectives considered in the past and to develop an evolving and adaptable framework for practitioners and academics from the sports organizations perspective.

Social Media as a Powerful Management Tool in Sports

As commercial and institutional objectives, several organizations and athletes took the opportunity to use social media during the COVID-19 pandemic to advocate and promote socially responsible behavior among their followers (Sharpe et al., 2020). Additionally, their application is increasingly more common in terms of construction and dissemination related to the area of social responsibility. In this way, they have also become a key tool to interact with fans, addressing a strengthened social approach and gaining commitment from athletes, sponsors, and authorities (Oviedo et al., 2014).

In a pandemic environment, approaches to content in the digital environment and in the absence of competitions (cancelled or postponed) became a challenge. During the initial stage of the pandemic, commercial agreements suffered from the effects of uncertainty, sports organizations sought to mitigate the impact in

terms of audience, and the re-emergence of a social vision became imminent.

Based on the different methods and categorizations reviewed in the literature, the exploratory study by Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) which takes a qualitative approach to the strategies used by sports managers, is used as a starting point guide to design the variables of social media goals, adapting the qualitative findings in four social media goal categories: from building links with fans, generating interaction, monetizing, and dealing with changes to social initiative, engagement, institutional, and commercial. Also, message format and stakeholder variables are incorporated in this research as are considered key in the previous studies.

The main objective of this research is to analyze the social media management by sports organizations during the initial period of pandemic and pre-pandemic periods by the categorization of content, format approaches, and stakeholders involved.

The aspects considered in this study, through the categorization designed, allow the analysis of strategies of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, considering football and basketball sports organizations of different geographical scopes, as well as permitting the comparison and analysis of the digital communication management in two periods: the pandemic and pre-pandemic period.

The following research question guided this study: ¿how professional sports organizations managed social media in the initial period of the COVID-19 crisis? This study, which analyzes different sports competitions from a multi-platform perspective and, based on previous research, is motivated by extending the findings in this field of study. Is focused on the organizations sampled, the tools used and, above all, the fact that it considers different time periods in its analysis. Thus, the results obtained will give rise to future studies that take this one as a reference, and that help to understand how sports organizations manage social media in this unprecedented crisis.

Methodology

An exploratory and descriptive study was conducted using content analysis techniques through an observational method to answer the research question.

Content analysis, under different classification approaches, has been widely used in social media communication research, and more specifically in sports environments, as a way of interpreting the content of textual data through the process of systematic classification, coding, and identification of themes or patterns. This method consists of counting and comparison of content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Table 1. Proposal of Variables and Indicators Used for the Analysis of Social Media Observation Tool.

Variable	Coding	Description and information
Message category	Social initiative Engagement	Fundraising, virtual festivals, or any other action related to charity Content that has a call to action. Emotional videos, images of previous events (when looking for the emotion of the person receiving the message), questionnaires, surveys, games, and mascots
	Institutional Commercial	Official information about the competition, sports, history, and press releases Sales, e-commerce, ticket sales, discounts, membership, subscriptions, and sponsors (when promoting a product/service for commercial purposes).
Content format	Text, image, video, external link, web link, and survey	
Stakeholders	General public Members/affiliates Athletes Partners	Examples: competition: UCL. Members/Affiliates: Football clubs, Federations. Partners: Heineken, Gillette

Following the literature review, a data collection instrument was developed, with feedback and validation from eight experts including academics and professionals in the areas of marketing and social media management. The current research differs from other studies given the intrinsic nature of the research question itself, and therefore allows linking social media posts to the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, considering three main aspects: the categorization of the message used in this study, the type of format, and the stakeholders involved.

These considerations result in the variables and indicators in this study.

Similar to previous studies such as those carried out by Maderer et al. (2018), the application of the data collection tool in different time periods provides an analysis scenario that allows visualizing the differences and similarities between the time periods analyzed, as well as the influence of the pandemic on the management of digital platforms.

In subsequent data collection, the pandemic period variable is incorporated into the message category with the question: is the publication related to COVID-19?

It is considered and framed within this categorization when it meets one of two criteria: it contains the word COVID-19 in the content (text and image) or the content reflects a direct action as a consequence of the pandemic.

The following variables are considered as a complement to Table 1 for further comparison in the message category related to COVID-19: first communication concerning COVID-19; postponement; suspension; new date of competition; recommendations.

Sample

The authors selected the sample according to the different dimensions of the sports organizations (international and national) and to the format of each competition (regular league, playoffs, and group classification), as well as

a multiple social media perspective in order to achieve an approach of two popular sports disciplines: football (soccer) and basketball.

Thus, non-probabilistic-judgmental-sampling was used. Consequently, the analysis was directed at the following sports organizations: Endesa League ACB—Spanish Basketball Clubs Association (ACB); Euroleague—Turkish Airlines Euroleague (EL); LaLiga Santander—Spanish First Division Football Championship (LL); NBA League—National Basketball Association (NBA); UEFA Champions League—European Champions League (UCL; Table 2).

The final sample of this study is composed of 5,512 posts, collected from the official Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts of the organizations considered in this study. The observed timeline considers two scenarios: a pre-pandemic period (from April 1 to April 14, 2019) and an initial pandemic period (from April 1 to April 15, 2020).

Coding and Data Collection Procedures

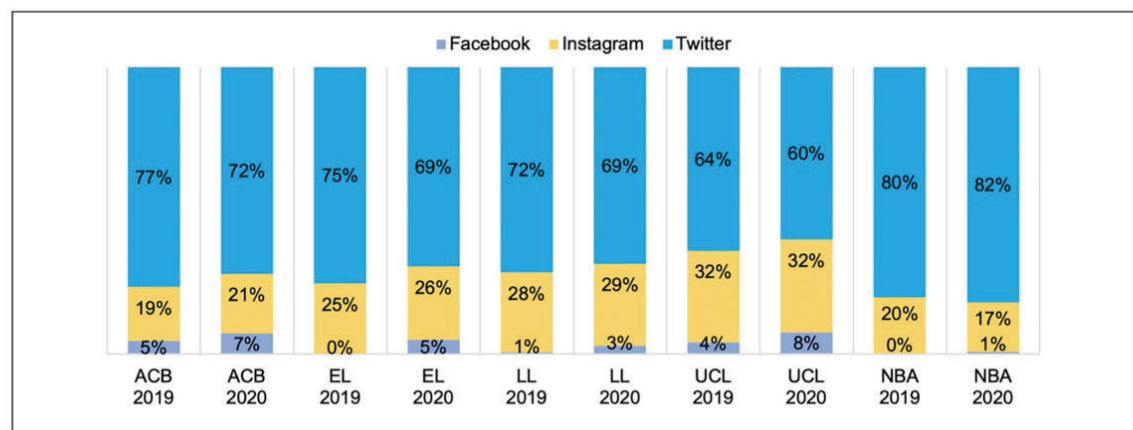
Data were manually extracted from the sample's official social media accounts, observed, and then categorized. All information was transferred to an excel.xlsx file and then manually processed to create a database, which was used to calculate descriptive statistics. All publications in their different formats were analyzed manually.

Data analysis followed deductive reasoning using the coding method proposed by the authors and validated by experts in the field.

Inter-coder reliability was established before coding the entire dataset to ensure that all coders interpreted the variables and coded the dataset homogeneously. Thus, a random sample of 21 posts from the social networks under study was analyzed by the three authors. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa Coefficient, which was .518, described as a moderate

Table 2. Sports Organizations Analyzed and Competition Progress at the Time of the Study.

Sport league	Sport discipline	Geographical scope	Competition format	Cancelled/postponed	Competition progress (%)
ACB	Basketball	Nacional (Spain)	Regular league—Playoffs	Temporary suspension	73
EL	Basketball	International (Europe)	Regular league—Playoffs	Cancelled	77
NBA	Basketball	Nacional (EEUU)	Regular league—Playoffs	Temporary suspension	46
LL	Football (soccer)	Nacional (Spain)	Regular league	Temporary suspension	67
UCL	Football (soccer)	International (Europe)	Groups—Playoffs	Temporary suspension	66

**Figure 1.** Distribution of publications by period and social media. Source. Own elaboration based on the results obtained in this study.

level of agreement with the data (Landis & Koch, 1977). As this figure was below .61, coders participated in a session where discrepancies were discussed to ensure consistency of understanding and interpretation. The main problem lay in the understanding that a publication could be multi-factorial (in the category of the message and the stakeholders involved). Thus, it was decided that publications would be classified according to what was considered the main purpose the publication might pursue.

The three authors re-coded 21 more randomly selected publications, resulting in a very acceptable inter-coder reliability score of .669 (>.61; Landis & Koch, 1977).

Once inter-coder reliability was established, the sporting events were randomly distributed among the researchers. Data analysis was performed with SPSS v.27 software using descriptive statistical analysis (reporting frequencies and percentages for all variables). Frequencies were calculated for a single variable and for more than one variable at a time, with double-entry tables. In addition, a descriptive correspondence analysis was performed, a dimension reduction technique that allows the exploratory analysis of categorical variables to visualize a multidimensional point cloud in two dimensions, which provides an approximation of the

relationship between the different variables that converge in the analysis.

Results and Analysis

This study allowed us to observe the strategies used at the digital level in two specific periods: a pre-pandemic period and an initial pandemic period. Out of the analyzed sports properties, Twitter ranks first as the preferred social network, followed by Instagram and Facebook (see Figure 1).

Concerning Twitter, a minor decrease in the percentage of publication frequency can be seen in both national and European football competitions (EL and ACB) and football competitions (UCL and LL). On the contrary, we can observe an increase in publication frequency on Instagram in the initial period of the pandemic in all competitions, except for the UCL, which maintains this frequency in both scenarios. The NBA, however, shows an inverse behavior, slightly increasing from 80% to 82% publication frequency on Twitter and decreasing by 3% on Instagram. As for Facebook, the publication frequency of the analyzed competitions in Spain and Europe has increased between 2% and 5% (Figure 2).

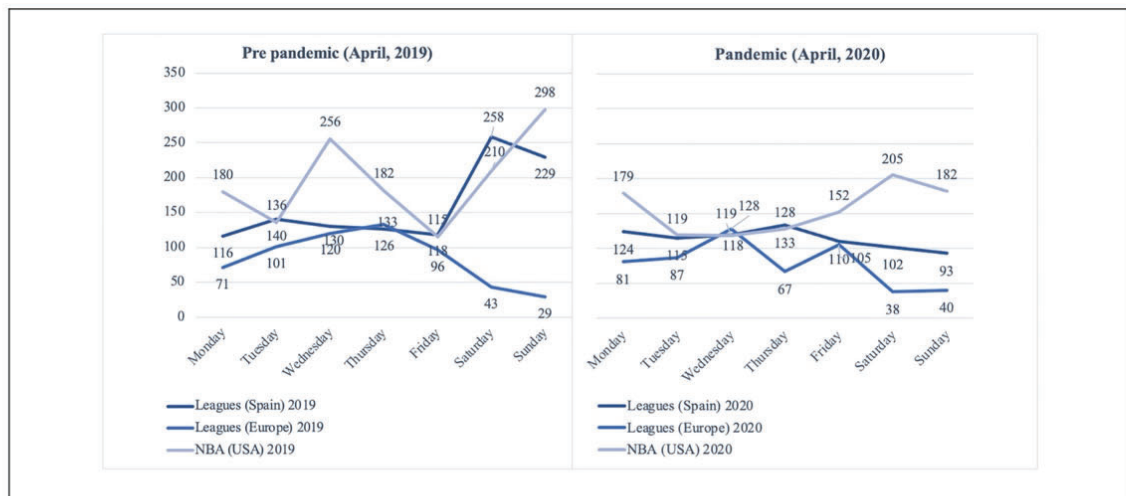


Figure 2. Frequency of daily publications pre-pandemic–pandemic.

Source. Own elaboration based on the results obtained in this study.

Table 3. Category of Publications by Type of Content.

	ACB 2019 (%)	ACB 2020 (%)	EL 2019 (%)	EL 2020 (%)	LL 2019 (%)	LL 2020 (%)	UCL 2019 (%)	UCL 2020 (%)	NBA 2019 (%)	NBA 2020 (%)
Commercial	0	0	0	1	2	0	13	0	0	0
Engagement	72	52	89	84	70	98	81	90	96	98
Social initiatives	0	47	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
Institutional	28	1	10	14	28	0	6	10	3	1

In the pre-pandemic period, a heterogeneous distribution of the frequency of daily publications is observed, with peaks at weekends (days when matches are held), unlike the NBA, which shows an upward trend in publication frequency from Tuesday to Friday, with peaks on Thursdays (competition day according to the Anglo-Saxon calendar). At the beginning of the pandemic (the second period analyzed), however, different behavior is observed, where the daily frequency of total publications tends to remain homogeneous during the week, in the absence of official physical sports competitions. In terms of trend, we observe a similar number of publications throughout the week between both periods, with a more even distribution of the amount of daily content in the second period analyzed.

A relevant aspect of this study is the classification of content by categories according to each publication made on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook of the sample analyzed.

In both periods, all basketball competitions have had zero social media action in the commercial aspect.

However, LL used this approach in a pre-pandemic period.

From the engagement strategy point of view, the ACB (National) and EL (European) basketball competitions have opted to reduce their publications from 72% to 52%, and from 89% to 84%, respectively. In contrast, football competitions have opted to boost this strategy, increasing it drastically from 70% to 98% for LL and from 81% to 90% for UCL as shown in Table 3. The NBA, however, has remained almost unaffected, showing a reduction in this strategy by 2%.

In the “Social initiatives” category, we can observe a significant increase by the ACB, which goes from having no publications with this approach in a pre-pandemic period to allocating 47% of its social social publications under this category. We also note that the “Institutional” approach goes through a reduction in its social networks publications from 28% to 1%, as does LL, which goes from 28% (pre-pandemic) to 0% in the pandemic period. The NBA, from a different geographical context, goes from 3% to 1%. On the other hand, continental

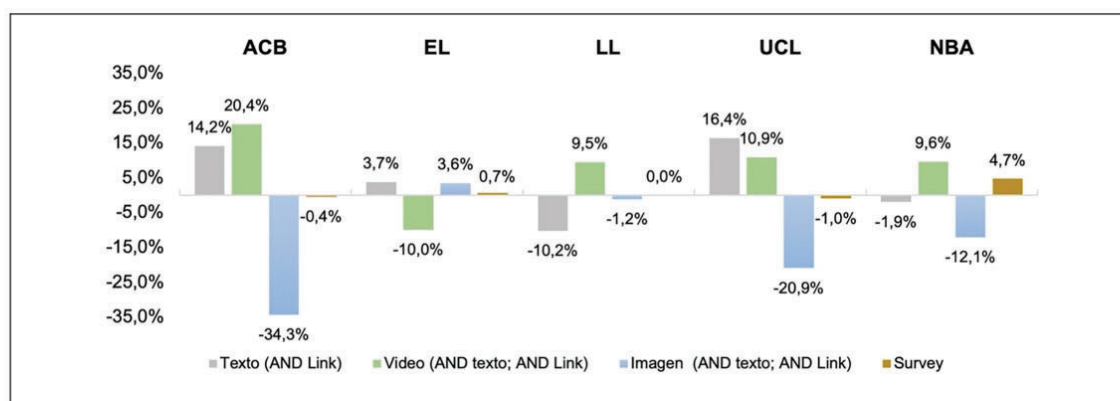


Figure 3. Relative difference in the formats used in pre-pandemic/pandemic publications.
Source. Own elaboration based on the results obtained in this study.

competitions, such as EL and UCL, have chosen to increase this type of messaging during the start of the pandemic (Figure 3).

Regarding publication format, irrespective of sports disciplines, scope, or geographical location, has migrated from the static image format to a more dynamic one with publications incorporating audio-visual content. However, beyond coinciding in the message categories, the format may vary according to the competition.

Nation-wide competitions in Spain such as ACB and LL increased their use of video format (+ text + link) by 20.4% and 9.5% respectively, although under a different message category approach. Likewise, both competitions used the image (+ text + link) format to a lesser extent in the pandemic period, although the ACB with a much larger relative margin of difference between periods. Finally, the text (+ link) format has been used 14.2% more by the ACB in the pandemic period in comparison to the previous period and LL has decreased the use of this format by 10.2% in the pandemic period.

Concerning European competitions, both EL and UCL have used the Image (+ link) format to a greater extent during the pandemic period, with 3.7% and 16.4% respectively. However, a reverse format use was observed between the two periods analyzed. EL focuses on audio-visual media in the pre-pandemic period (10.0% more) while UCL uses this format to a greater extent at the beginning of the pandemic period (9.6% more).

The NBA, on the other hand, migrates from a typical image format (+ text + link) in a pre-pandemic period, to a more dynamic audio-visual format at the beginning of the pandemic, specifically 9.6% more in comparison to the previous period.

Due to the qualitative nature of the data collection tool, contingency analysis is used to observe the

relationship between two or more variables. Through this multivariate analysis, we observed the relationship between the three areas covered in this study: message category, the format used, and stakeholders involved.

In 2019, a more homogeneous and similar behavior is observed in terms of the format used in social media posts and the focus of the message category (Figure 4).

At the beginning of the pandemic, considering the period analyzed (April 2020), the figure shows different strategies for the same scenario. The ACB has opted for a more “social” strategy, with content linked to its website and messages referring to the COVID-19 pandemic. LL and UCL, however, have opted for a more engagement-oriented digital content strategy, seeking to connect and keep the audience active in a period with no current official competitions.

The NBA has decided to use survey formats (typical of the social network Twitter), as an element of interaction with the audience.

Discussion

Out of the five sports competitions analyzed, we have observed different strategies when dealing with social media management at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ACB, for its part, has shown a strong inclination toward the social aspect, seeking interaction with fans through an altruistic approach. LL, however, has redirected its strategy to minimize the impact of (temporary) cancellations of sports competitions by generating engagement with fans, as a means of maintaining the interest and the link with the audience. Of the five established categories, we observed differences in key circumstances depending on the type of strategy used, the scope of the competition and sports discipline.

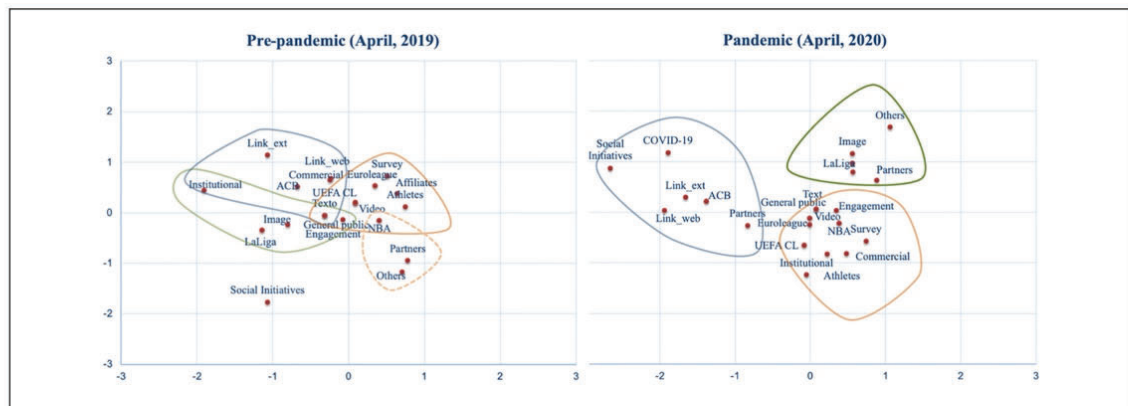


Figure 4. Pre-pandemic/pandemic contingency analysis.
Source. Own elaboration based on the results obtained in this study.

European-wide competitions, given the sudden pandemic situation and the prevailing uncertainty, coupled with the complexity of the stakeholders involved in the competition itself, forced the EL and UCL to make institutional publications through their social networks, to keep sponsors, athletes and fans updated on the future of the competition. Furthermore, the search for solutions between the parties became a key issue since the sponsorship assets committed could not be fulfilled as established.

In terms of publication frequency, Twitter ranks above in the number of publications made in both periods in all the sports competitions analyzed, corroborating, and in agreement with the studies by Herrera-Torres et al. (2017) and Winand et al. (2019).

We also observed a strong audio-visual focus in publication formats in a period during the pandemic, mainly due to the use of Instagram and the social focus and engagement strategies implemented. The statements made by Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) reaffirm the relevance and elements of branding and fan loyalty to generate interaction with the audience by creating emotional content.

Conclusion

This research provides a comparison of differences and similarities in the management of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in two specific periods (pre-pandemic and pandemic) by national and European football organizations (LL and UCL respectively), as well as national (ACB) and European (EL) basketball competitions, also contrasting with an external US basketball league (NBA), helping to understand this

phenomenon from a model that differs from other models previously reviewed in the literature.

Regarding publication frequency, we have seen the predominance in the use of Twitter to other social networks analyzed. The number of posts per day is markedly different between pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. The frequency of posts is higher on competition days with a more homogeneous and linear behavior in the pandemic period due to the cancellation of competitions. However, despite this variable, the average number of publications was similar for both periods. As a result, we can conclude that competition organizers have chosen to redirect their strategies rather than decrease (or increase) the frequency of publications.

In terms of format, in general, posts with audio-visual content have been the fastest growing in the pandemic period due to their emotional charge combined with the need to connect with the audience despite the lack of official sporting activity.

Considering the descriptive and comparative analysis between specific pre-pandemic and pandemic periods, we conclude that the sports organizations analyzed opted for a different social media communication management strategy in terms of approach (although with similar objectives) and similar strategies in terms of the format.

In short, we can conclude that the research questions posed in this study have been answered, under the standards of scientific rigor and reliability.

Limitations and Future Research

Some of the limitations that should be considered are those inherent to the data collection techniques. The content analysis focused on analyzing the state of the debate in two specific time spectrums. In addition, the categories

used in the present study, and the inter-coder reliability, could also become a limitation when categorizing the content analyzed. The initial pandemic period takes as a reference the state of alarm in Spain (March 2020). In different geographical regions, as is the case of other continents and governmental/political and health factors are susceptible to differences in terms of epidemiological timeline, being able to reach similar pandemic scenarios in different time periods.

Future research could consider the analysis of the impact on social networks of the different messages (analysis of quantitative interactions through “Like,” “Share,” and “Comment” quantifications, in their respective nomenclatures according to the social media). This type of study would be of interest to determine the differences over time and in terms of the type of content posted, as well as the comparative analysis of the content generated on social networks between entities and athletes.

Finally, this study is an original step in the development of a tool that differs from other existing proposals in the literature, mainly due to the need to incorporate modifications in the data collection table in order to respond to the unprecedented situation of a global health crisis. In the future, the proposal could serve to broaden and deepen other global studies by including data from other territorial and temporal scopes, variables, organizations, or even perform an analysis that achieves the objective of amalgamating different quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the experts who contributed their excellent technical knowledge and valuable inputs to the development of this work.

The second author would like to acknowledge the support of the National Academic Excellence Scholarship Program “Carlos Antonio López” (BECAL), granted by the Government of Paraguay.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Anexo 5.

Estudio II: “The more we post, the better? A comparative analysis of fan engagement on social media profiles of football leagues”

The more we post, the better? A comparative analysis of fan engagement on social media profiles of football leagues

Social media
engagement in
football
leagues

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Received 23 December 2023

Revised 13 February 2024

Accepted 18 February 2024

Abstract

Purpose – In a dynamic, continuously evolving sports landscape, social media have become an indispensable tool for sports organizations to cultivate meaningful connections with fans. The rapid pace of technological advancements has elevated these digital platforms from a supplementary role to a pivotal position within strategic management frameworks. The existing literature explores how football clubs can utilize social media, but analyzing social media strategies within the context of football leagues is lacking. The absence of comparative studies benchmarking clubs across different geographical regions while simultaneously analyzing multiple social media platforms is especially noteworthy. In this study, a comprehensive analysis of social media engagement is undertaken within esteemed football leagues spanning Europe, South America and North America.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on relationship marketing and employing content analysis as a methodological tool, the study examined 10,772 posts from the official accounts of eight football leagues on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Findings – Across the leagues, the findings reveal that content quality drives engagement more than frequency. In addition, several format combinations were identified that facilitate engagement and Instagram emerged as the top social media platform for generating fan engagement.

Originality/value – This is one of the first empirical studies focusing on optimizing the use of social media to amplify fan engagement across various geographies and social media accounts and formats simultaneously.

Keywords Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Relationship marketing, Soccer

Paper type Research paper

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International Journal of Sports
Marketing and Sponsorship
Emerald Publishing Limited
1464-6668
DOI 10.1108/IJSM-12-2023-0252

Introduction

Social media have become an omnipresent force in both our society and the realm of sports (Hull and Abeza, 2021). It is now challenging to envision effective sports management without leveraging the extensive array of digital tools available (e.g. YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, LinkedIn). These tools are instrumental in aiding sports managers across various domains, such as fan engagement and sponsorship (Balliauw *et al.*, 2021), branding (Beissel *et al.*, 2022), stakeholder communication (Guzmán *et al.*, 2021), and even entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2023). Sport management scholars have extensively explored the utilization and potential applications of social media (Abeza, 2023; Filo *et al.*, 2015), underscoring the shift of digital tools from supplementary resources to integral and strategic components within these sport entities (Stegmann *et al.*, 2023).

The use and potential of social media has been most studied in football (e.g. Faria *et al.*, 2022; Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023). As such, sporting events like the FIFA World Cup and top-tier international leagues, including the Premier League in England, the Bundesliga in Germany, LaLiga in Spain, Serie A in Italy, and Ligue 1 in France, generate vast levels of audience engagement and exert substantial economic influence (Aguiar-Noury and García-del-Barrio, 2022). In addition, football superstars such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have millions of followers on their official accounts. The same applies to top football clubs such as Real Madrid CF, FC Barcelona, Manchester United FC, Paris St-Germain FC, and Juventus FC (the top five football clubs in terms of social media followers according to the CIES Football Observatory, 2023).

Among social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have emerged as primary channels adopted by football leagues to foster engagement over the past 2 decades (Machado *et al.*, 2020; Maderer *et al.*, 2018). Utilizing these platforms for establishing connections between fans and sports clubs, achieving brand positioning, commercial success, and effective communication strategies has garnered significant attention from researchers (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; Maderer *et al.*, 2018). This trend is unsurprising given the context of football, a sport that attracts large crowds, where managing emotions, sometimes irrational, is crucial for the industry (Koenigstorfer *et al.*, 2010). In this vein, social media can play a highly relevant emotional role in psychology, particularly in human behavior (You and Liu, 2022; Zyoud *et al.*, 2018). This pertinence stems not only from their integration into individuals' daily lives (Lin *et al.*, 2019) but also from their potential influence on the well-being of both individuals and sports fans (Su *et al.*, 2022). Hence, a compelling need exists for further investigation into these digital tools, particularly about their interplay with engagement and how social media serve to bridge the gap between sports leagues, clubs, athletes, and their fans more closely than ever before (Einsle *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, in a multifaceted and emotionally charged sports sector (Su *et al.*, 2022) with an increasingly globalized football market (such as extensive international pre-season tours, multi-site sporting events (e.g. 2026 FIFA World Cup), or competitions like the Spanish or Italian Super Cup that are held outside their own countries, social media platforms play an integral role in promptly reaching and connecting diverse audiences and fostering fan engagement (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022).

Given the pivotal role that football leagues play in shaping the success of tournament organization, fostering stakeholder relations, conducting marketing strategies, and nurturing connections with fans, football club organizations have undertaken the management of their social media accounts (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen, 2023). This strategic initiative aims to build and reinforce their brand in response to the dynamism of the increasingly digitized marketplace (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022; Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen, 2023). For instance, a football league's brand value influences its commercialization rights, such as match broadcast rights (Koenigstorfer *et al.*, 2010). These rights, in turn, directly impact the revenue obtained by football clubs competing in these leagues and, ultimately, the clubs' sporting success (Stenheim *et al.*, 2020). Since social media is a significant asset through which these leagues interact with stakeholders (e.g.

brands, political entities, clubs, players), it is crucial to understand how football leagues can optimize its use based on their interests, particularly concerning the engagement generated with their social media publications. While studies have concentrated on examining social media usage and fan engagement through the lens of football clubs (e.g. López-Carriil and Anagnostopoulos, 2020; Maderer *et al.*, 2018) or football players (e.g. Doyle *et al.*, 2022), there exists a notable gap in the literature concerning football leagues. Specifically, there is a lack of research employing a geographical, international comparative, and multi-platform approach. This involves analyzing social media usage and fan engagement derived from the content shared through football leagues' official social media profiles.

Analysis of leagues rather than individual clubs or athletes can provide new insights for research for two reasons. First, by nature and structure, football competitions encourage a holistic league analysis. While football clubs compete on the field against one another, they also cooperate to develop a league brand that benefits both parties (Kunkel *et al.*, 2014). Clubs, for example, may adopt different postures based on their communication and relationship with their core stakeholders. More specifically, social media communications by individual clubs can be intrinsically competitive (or subjective) and often rely on fan loyalty and fandom cues, such as uncertainty of outcome, drama, the emotionalism of big rivalries, hatred between opposing teams, the thrill of victory, or the agony of defeat. This drives fans to consume different club products (e.g. tickets, merchandising, social media content, etc.). However, analyzing league communications rather than club or athlete [or student-athletes, for that matter (see Kunkel *et al.*, 2021)] communications can eradicate this competition element and provide insight into how social media communications emerge less emotionally and how leagues (not teams) influence team fans (Kunkel, 2013). Although research has moved toward considering leagues' direct relationship with fans (Kunkel *et al.*, 2017), there is a lack of understanding of how league communications via social media can affect brand architecture, consumer involvement, or brand loyalty toward leagues.

Second, leagues communicate with all levels of football stakeholders, not only the fans of their teams. For example, official league social media is designed to reach various target audiences (a broader demographic, as well as a variety of stakeholders, including the media and the government). We anticipate that the language and messages will be more formal, emotionally detached, and polished from club idiosyncrasies. Considering that football clubs are stakeholder-embedded organizations with their own identities, locales, peculiarities, symbolisms, languages, and agendas, a league-level analysis of social media can reveal a more holistic and less stylized social media approach (as well as a less geographically restricted one). Since football clubs may convey different messages, images and postures through their own social media than through league media, the approach employed in this study adds a new level of analysis to the existing literature.

Additionally, there is a need to explore the type of content and format that generates the highest engagement so that sport organizations can optimize their social media management strategies. Addressing these research voids from the standpoint of sport marketing and sponsorship is paramount, serving as a crucial avenue for comprehending the inclinations and behaviors of football fans and laying the groundwork for prospective studies within this domain. Consequently, this work is framed by two primary objectives:

- (1) To undertake a descriptive and comparative analysis of the engagement elicited by social media posts across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, focusing on international football leagues;
- (2) To identify the key elements inherent in high-impact social media posts.

Drawing on relationship marketing, this study employs a categorization approach derived from Solanellas *et al.* (2022). Additionally, a new instrument is designed, validated, and

applied to analyze the use of social media as a marketing tool in sport. The results and conclusions derived from this study provide an understanding of what strategies should be used to increase engagement with fans through social media, highlighting the main practical and theoretical implications of using social media to increase engagement with fans.

Theoretical background and literature review

Social media and football: a growing symbiotic relationship

Social media, defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), have become deeply integrated into our lives (Kaplan, 2015) due to their capacity to rapidly convey information interactively (Flores-Vivar, 2009). The realm of sports has also embraced the proliferation of social media, establishing itself as an inseparable facet of sporting culture (Abeza and Sanderson, 2022). Social media and sports interaction has evolved into a mutually beneficial relationship, as sports entities foster and sustain robust consumer relationships via these platforms (Pegoraro *et al.*, 2017). Prior investigations, such as those by Abeza *et al.* (2015) and Filo *et al.* (2015), have delved into this theme, underscoring the significance of social media in the sports sector.

Amidst the extensive literature exploring the intersection of social media and sports, football is a standout sporting context that has garnered substantial attention from researchers. This preeminent status of social media in football, as argued by Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen (2023), is intertwined with the transformation in the production and consumption dynamics of football, reshaping the relationship between clubs, fans, and journalists. For instance, Faria *et al.* (2022) underline the potential of employing social media platforms such as Facebook to foster enhanced fan satisfaction and engagement. Furthermore, social media can empower fans to play a more participatory role in brand cultivation, exemplified by interactions on platforms like Instagram (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018) and via sponsors (Parganas *et al.*, 2017). Social media also opens avenues for friendly interactions, enabling stakeholders' engagement and promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (e.g. Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2017; López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos, 2020). However, sport managers must also navigate the challenges posed by social media-driven anti-brand communities (Popp *et al.*, 2016).

Another facet of the interplay between football and social media revolves around football players. Zakerian *et al.* (2022), delving into how three football players utilize Instagram to cultivate their personal brand, found that a blend of social, sporting, political, religious, economic, and personal/behavioral attributes comprise the content types that prompt individuals to follow these footballers' accounts. Doyle *et al.* (2022) investigated the posting patterns of 289 players in Major League Soccer (MLS) on Instagram. Their insights emphasized that content about athletic performance is a prime catalyst for heightened consumer engagement, evidenced by likes and comments. Posts featuring high-quality imagery and collaborations with fellow footballers showcased a positive impact on engagement metrics.

Notably, a comprehensive exploration of how major football leagues (e.g. Premier League in England, Bundesliga in Germany, LaLiga in Spain, MLS in the USA) handle their official social media profiles is conspicuously absent from the literature. Existing inquiries often compare social media profiles across different sports leagues (e.g. Achen *et al.*, 2020) or within football leagues (e.g. Aichner, 2019; Maderer *et al.*, 2018). However, these analyses focus on the social media practices of the constituent clubs, leaving aside the leagues' official profiles. Recognizing that official football league profiles engage with club profiles, athletes, fans, brands, journalists, and other components of the football ecosystem, it is relevant to gain

insights into the usage patterns of league profiles. Such insights can empower league managers to enact measures that amplify the brand image of these competitions, thereby augmenting their product value.

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Relationship marketing and fan engagement in football

Social media have become indispensable to football teams' communication and marketing strategies (Guzmán *et al.*, 2021; McCarthy *et al.*, 2022). This significance is further magnified as consumers assume more active roles (Kolyperas *et al.*, 2019). This active co-creation or co-production element is key for relationship marketing (Barreto, 2015), serving as a framework to comprehend the dynamics of interaction between sport entities, athletes, and other stakeholders in the sporting landscape (e.g. Abeza *et al.*, 2019; Doyle *et al.*, 2022; Hambrick and Kang, 2015). Relationship marketing is one of the most extensively employed theoretical frameworks in understanding the relationship between social media and sport (Abeza and Sanderson, 2022; Achen, 2023). According to Abeza and Sanderson (2022), this centers on establishing, maintaining, and enhancing mutually rewarding associations.

Within the context of consumer behavior in the digital realm of social media, a burgeoning area under exploration in football pertains to social media engagement (Geurin, 2023). Trunfio and Rossi (2021) underscore the multifaceted and nuanced nature of engagement, which can be approached through affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Among these dimensions, the behavioral aspect is the one most frequently discussed in the literature, often evaluated using metrics encompassing elements like likes, comments, or shares.

In football, Nisar *et al.* (2018) found that increased interaction among consumers on the Facebook profiles of 32 football clubs participating in the 2014–2015 European Champions Cup correlated with heightened levels of spectator interest. Additionally, Girsang (2021) identified engagement as the aspect of football teams' social media posts that most significantly impact fan loyalty. For instance, Aichner (2019) analyzed Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter posts from 78 European football clubs, categorizing content into groups: 1-News/facts, 2-Results/goals/saves, 3-private, 4-emotional, and 5-advertisements. Conversely, Krzyżowski and Strzelecki (2023) delved into the factors influencing Polish football fans in establishing stronger bonds with clubs through social media, revealing the importance of fan-to-fan interactions, information, and entertainment. This awareness of fan preferences facilitates the promotion of targeted social media campaigns, enables personalized relationships with fans, and creates opportunities for effective advertising (Sussman *et al.*, 2023).

Solanelas *et al.* (2022) and Romero-Jara *et al.* (2023) present a comprehensive approach to content categorization that spans various social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) across multiple sports competitions. Content that pertains to "sports" (i.e. players, coaches, results, etc.), "brand/marketing" (i.e. fan experiences, fan engagement, sponsorship activations, etc.), "institutional" (i.e. history, announcements, opening hours, etc.), "commercial" (i.e. ticket sales, merchandising, etc.) and "ESG" (i.e. environment, social, governance). Building upon this model and guided by the relationship marketing framework, this study delves into using social media accounts by football leagues across diverse geographical regions worldwide to foster engagement with fans. The focus is on the nature of the content published and the format of posts, among other facets. Thus, the insights garnered from this study are anticipated to lay a foundation for the application of social media by football leagues, empowering football leagues to make informed decisions and optimize their digital engagement endeavors, thereby refining their social media strategies and cultivating stronger connections with their target audiences.

In a context where football is increasingly globalized and internationalized, coupled with the greater digitization of sport, it is crucial to understand how various football stakeholders utilize

their official social media accounts to interact with the sports ecosystem. While the existing literature is prolific regarding the use of social media by sports clubs or athletes (e.g. [Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018](#); [McCarthy et al., 2022](#); [Zakerian et al., 2022](#)), there exists a gap specific to how football leagues employ these digital channels. This study addresses this gap by adding an international perspective, analyzing the social media accounts of leagues from different geographic areas (Europe, North America, and South America). Moreover, it does so by simultaneously examining three different social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and various types of formats (e.g. text, images, video). This approach introduces a new perspective to the literature, enhancing our understanding of the different dynamics linked to the use of social media in promoting fan engagement. The insights gained from this study are anticipated to establish a foundation for applying social media by football leagues, contributing to the knowledge base for practitioners and scholars. Ultimately, this study empowers football leagues to make informed decisions, optimize their digital engagement endeavors, and refine their social media strategies to cultivate stronger connections with their target audiences.

Method

This research employs a descriptive and comparative research design ([Andrew et al., 2011](#)) to explore engagement levels across football leagues' official social media accounts spanning diverse geographical regions worldwide. In pursuit of this objective, it adopts content analysis techniques. Content analysis has found extensive successful application within the realm of sport communication studies ([Schäfer and Vögele, 2021](#)), including studies considering the utilization of social media within sports in general ([de Guzman et al., 2021](#); [Hambrick and Kang, 2015](#); [Wang and Zhou, 2015](#)), and football ([Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018](#); [Doyle et al., 2022](#); [Maderer et al., 2018](#); [Winand et al., 2019](#)). This technique facilitates the meticulous classification, coding, and identification of recurring themes or patterns inherent within textual data ([Hsieh and Shannon, 2005](#)).

Sampling procedure

A non-probability sampling design guided by Battaglia's guidelines (2008) was established to select the football leagues under examination in this study. This process encompassed three key determinations, addressing the following aspects: (1) the selection of football leagues for inclusion, (2) the choice of relevant social media platforms, and (3) the specific temporal scope of the investigation.

The geographical regions of Europe, North America, and South America were specifically chosen to delineate the football leagues examined in this study. The selection of these regions was grounded in historical significance and football tradition. Europe, as the birthplace of football, and South America, boasting the second-highest number of World Cups, were deemed pertinent. Additionally, emerging markets like North America, propelled by events such as the arrival of football players stars from David Beckham at LA Galaxy to the recently Lionel Messi at Inter Miami and the forthcoming hosting of the 2026 FIFA World Cup in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, have imparted a notable media and economic impetus, particularly to endeavors such as MSL in the United States ([Kobylinska and Medina, 2023](#)). Subsequently, from the array of existing international professional leagues within these geographical areas, the selection of football leagues was undertaken by evaluating the significance of the teams they comprised. This process closely adhered to the methodology established in similar studies (e.g. [Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018](#); [Maderer et al., 2018](#)). To this end, the rankings offered by four prominent football organizations or websites were conscientiously considered: (1) the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS) club ranking, (2) the Football World Rankings website club ranking, (3) the FIFA club and league ranking, and (4)

the Transfermarkt website player ranking. The joint application of these four criteria, along with an alignment with the study's objectives, methodological design, and consensus among authors (Andrew *et al.*, 2011; Battaglia, 2008; Hernández-Sampieri *et al.*, 2014), led to the formation of an initial cohort comprising twelve football leagues (four from Europe, four from South America, and four from North America). Subsequently, a systematic application of the random draw methodology was executed to pursue optimal representation and the establishment of equilibrium across the chosen regions. This process derived from the refined selection of three football leagues from Europe, three from South America, and two from North America, culminating in a purposive cohort of eight football leagues (as depicted in Table 1) whose content on their official social media accounts was analyzed. This sampling strategy considers potential cultural and institutional differences, encompassing major football leagues from diverse countries in three football-passionate regions (Europe, South America, and North America). These factors may influence patterns of social media use in football, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon under study.

Secondly, the selection of social media platforms for analysis was determined. We adopt a multi-platform approach, as most studies investigating social media in football tend to focus on a single platform (e.g. Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; Guzmán *et al.*, 2021; Faria *et al.*, 2022). Simultaneously analyzing multiple social media platforms offers a broader perspective (e.g. Aichner, 2019), which can prove valuable for sport managers seeking insights into the types of content and formats that elicit higher engagement across each platform. Therefore, this study analyses three key social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Including the first two platforms is motivated by their longstanding presence and utilization within the sports industry, as well as previous research within football-related contexts (e.g. Parganas *et al.*, 2015; Maderer *et al.*, 2018; Winand *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the prominence of Instagram has escalated in recent years in studies intersecting social media and sports (Abeza, 2023).

The third procedural step involved determining the timeframe for data extraction. Following Ashley and Tuten's (2015) framework, a period of 45 days for each club on various

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Region	Country	League	Facebook		Twitter		Instagram	
			Posts analyzed (n)	%	Posts analyzed (n)	%	Posts analyzed (n)	%
Europe	Germany	Bundesliga	233	8%	328	6%	484	20%
	Spain	LaLiga	460	15%	793	15%	372	16%
	UK	Premier League	325	11%	1,033	19%	283	12%
South America	Brazil	Brasileirão	260	9%	126	2%	518	22%
	Argentina	Superliga (AFA)	212	7%	593	11%	87	4%
	Paraguay	Copa de Primera	151	5%	107	2%	55	2%
North America	Mexico	Liga MX	810	27%	1,217	23%	425	18%
	USA	Major League Soccer	575	19%	1,150	22%	175	7%
			3,026	100%	5,347	100%	2,399 10,772	100%

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 1.
Number of posts
analyzed extracted
from Facebook,
Twitter and Instagram
official accounts of the
football leagues
selected

social media platforms was deemed appropriate. This timeframe, covering the beginning, middle, and end of the 2019 season (15 days each), ensures a comprehensive understanding of social media activity while mitigating the impact of transient or exceptional occurrences. The exclusion of out-of-range engagement posts aims to minimize potential biases caused by external factors or anomalies, aligning with the study's objective to provide an overall and accurate depiction of social media performance throughout the league season.

To procure data from the eight focal leagues' official Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, we employed the Fanpage Karma software due to its efficacy and reliability in collecting and mining social media data (e.g. [Lozano-Blasco et al., 2023](#)). Encompassing the entire sequence delineated in this sub-section, a cumulative total of 10,772 social media publications were collected (as delineated in [Table 1](#)).

A pilot test was undertaken to validate both the efficacy and reliability of the formulated coding instrument and the coders' coding proficiency. A random selection of 75 posts (25 from Facebook, 25 from Twitter, and 25 from Instagram) was drawn from the social media accounts of three distinct football leagues, spanning the three geographical scopes studied (one from Europe, one from North America, and one from South America), culminating in an aggregate sample of 225 publications. The two coders (first two authors) independently analyzed these posts. Any discrepancies encountered in assigning each publication to the dimensions outlined in the study's codebook were addressed through discussion, culminating in classification based on the prevailing content type. To evaluate the instrument's reliability and accuracy ([Andrew et al., 2011](#)), the intra-observer reliability methodology was employed, incorporating scheduled 10–12-min breaks after every 40–45 min of observation. Following a 15-day interval, the same set of publications underwent re-coding following the established protocol. The resultant outcomes manifested in a Kappa coefficient of 0.962, signifying an exceedingly elevated level of agreement and reliability following Landis and Koch's scale ([1977](#)).

The final data collection procedure was formulated as follows:

- (1) Social media posts from the official profiles of the chosen football leagues on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were automatically retrieved via the Fanpage Karma license and integrated into the.xlsx observation instrument sheet.
- (2) Manual compilation of data took place within the.xlsx observation instrument sheet, wherein each post was individually scrutinized and coded in line with the study's codebook.
- (3) The establishment of a dedicated database ensued, wherein the compiled data was systematically coded with the essential variables to facilitate subsequent statistical analyses.

Data analysis

A comprehensive analysis examined the engagement stemming from posts across the three social media platforms alongside their associated content dimensions and formats. The data formed the foundation for calculating the engagement variable. The engagement calculations were derived from established formulas utilized by researchers and practitioners in the digital marketing field. These formulas draw inspiration from prior works, including [Herrera-Torres et al. \(2017\)](#), [Benito-Colio et al. \(2022\)](#), and [Romero-Jara et al. \(2023\)](#). Special attention has been given to the unique characteristics of each social media, ensuring the incorporation of crucial interaction elements specific to each platform. The calculations were adapted using [Fanpage Karma \(2023\)](#) and [Rival IQ \(Feehan, 2023\)](#) platforms, providing a homogeneous and comparative approach to data analysis:

a) Facebook : $Engagement (Fb) = \left(\frac{Reactions + Shares + Comments}{Followers} \right) * 100$;

b) Twitter : $Engagement (Tw) = \left(\frac{Likes + Shares}{Followers} \right) * 100$; and

c) Instagram : $Engagement (Ig) = \left(\frac{Likes + Comments}{Followers} \right) * 100$

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Statistical analyses were applied to evaluate the variances in engagement resulting from posts on individual social media platforms. Precisely, the independent samples *t*-test and one-factor ANOVA were employed for this purpose. The established significance threshold was <0.05. Furthermore, a chi-square test and correspondence analysis were executed to discern and illustrate connections between pivotal variables. Data analysis was conducted utilizing the SPSS statistical software version 27.0.

Findings

The global descriptive results (Table 2) reveal that Twitter, boasting a total of *n* = 5,347 posts, stands out as the platform with the highest post frequency, constituting 50% of the analyzed sample. Following Twitter, Facebook exhibits *n* = 3,026 posts (28% of the sample), while Instagram encompasses *n* = 2,399 posts (22% of the sample). However, a notable contrast emerges when evaluating the level of engagement generated in that Instagram exhibits the highest engagement mean (0.661), surpassing both Facebook (0.048) and Twitter (0.015).

Quality vs. quantity: post frequency and engagement per leagues
European football leagues. In more detail, the research findings reveal intricate patterns across leagues, geographical regions, and social media platforms (see Figure 1). Among the European leagues on Facebook, post frequency ranges from *n* = 233 in the case of the Bundesliga to *n* = 460 in LaLiga. In the meantime, the Premier League documents a post frequency of *n* = 325. In terms of engagement ratios, the three leagues exhibit comparable levels, with engagement generation values of 0.033, 0.043, and 0.047, respectively. Turning to Twitter, the Premier League records a post frequency of *n* = 1,033 and an engagement mean of 0.017. Conversely, LaLiga showcases a post frequency of *n* = 793, resulting in an engagement mean of 0.028. Lastly, the Bundesliga presents *n* = 328 posts, yielding an engagement mean of 0.007. Regarding Instagram, the investigation uncovers the following observations: the Bundesliga exhibits a higher frequency of posts compared to the other two leagues (*n* = 484), with an engagement mean of 0.062, while LaLiga (*n* = 372) registers a

	<i>n</i>	%	Means	Engagement SD	Min	Max
Facebook	3,026	28%	0.048	0.132	0.000	2.471
Twitter	5,347	50%	0.015	0.031	0.000	0.429
Instagram	2,399	22%	0.661	0.645	0.008	5.395
	10,772	100%				

Source(s): Authors own creation

Table 2.
Frequency,
engagement means
and SD of Facebook,
Twitter and Instagram

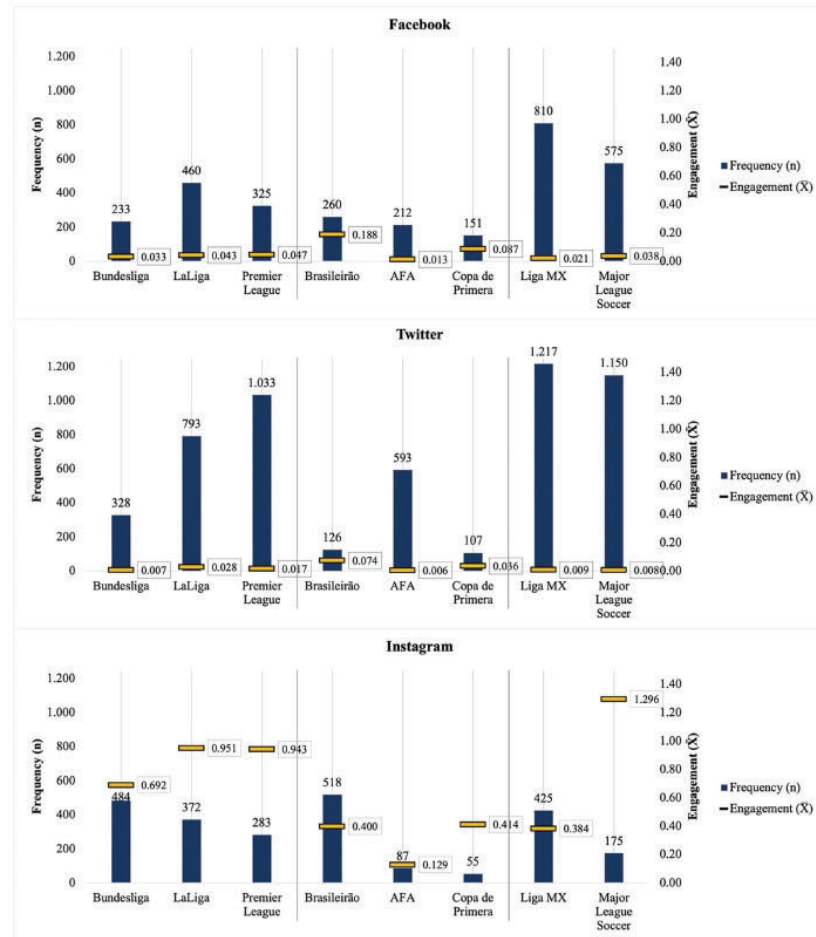


Figure 1.
Patterns across
leagues, geographical
regions, and social
media platforms

Source(s): Authors own creation

higher engagement mean (0.951). Lastly, the Premier League, with the least number of posts ($n = 283$), records an engagement means higher than the Bundesliga and similar to LaLiga (0.043).

South American football leagues. Shifting the focus to the South American leagues on Facebook, the Brasileirão league records a post frequency of $n = 260$, with an engagement mean of 0.188. This is followed by the Argentinean Superliga AFA ($n = 212$), with an engagement mean of 0.013, and the Paraguayan Copa de Primera League, with $n = 151$, resulting in an engagement mean of 0.087.

On Twitter, the Argentine Superliga displays a high post frequency compared to the other two leagues ($n = 593$), yet it reports the lowest level of engagement (0.006). The Brasileirão

posts $n = 126$ times, yielding an engagement mean of 0.074, while the Copa de Primera league posts $n = 107$ times, resulting in an engagement mean of 0.036.

Regarding Instagram, a significant disparity emerges, with the Brasileiro league showcasing a notably higher post frequency ($n = 518$) and an engagement mean of 0.400. Following closely is the Argentine AFA Superliga ($n = 87$), with an engagement mean of 0.129. The Copa de Primera league posts less frequently ($n = 55$) yet records a slightly higher engagement ratio than the other two leagues in the same region (0.414).

North American football leagues. Concluding the examination across the diverse geographical regions studied, the analysis of the North American leagues reveals a notable post frequency on Facebook for both Liga MX ($n = 810$) and MLS ($n = 575$), resulting in similar engagement mean returns of 0.021 and 0.038, respectively. On Twitter, both leagues exhibit the highest activity level, yet their engagement ratios are comparatively lower compared to other leagues analyzed in this study. Specifically, Liga MX posts $n = 1,217$ times and achieves an engagement mean of 0.009, while MLS posts $n = 1,150$ times, resulting in an engagement mean of 0.008. Concerning Instagram, the evidence highlights a contrasting engagement behavior. Liga MX posts 425 times and achieves an engagement ratio of 0.384. At the same time, MLS, with a frequency of only $n = 175$, attains the highest engagement return among all analyzed leagues on this platform (1.296).

Content dimensions strategies adopted on social media by football leagues

In Figure 2, the research findings unveil the social media content strategies adopted by the analyzed leagues, based on the dimensions proposed in this study, alongside their corresponding engagement returns. On Facebook, the most frequently posted content dimensions encompass "Sports" (44%) and "Brand/Marketing" (42%), with observed engagement ratios of 0.042 and 0.058, respectively. Additionally, "Institutional" messages comprise 10% of the total posts on this platform, yielding an engagement mean ratio of 0.023. Conversely, the least utilized message types on Facebook pertain to the dimensions "Commercial" (4% of total posts) and "Environmental, Social, and Governance" (ESG) (1% of total posts), generating engagements of 0.023 and 0.043, respectively.

On Twitter, a comparable pattern emerges, with "Sports" (46%) and "Brand/Marketing" (42%) also being the most frequent message dimensions, accompanied by engagement ratios of 0.011 and 0.019, respectively. Similarly, "Institutional" messages rank third in terms of frequency (8% of posts), displaying an engagement ratio of 0.021, while "Commercial" messages occupy the fourth place (3% of posts) with an engagement return of 0.008. Lastly, "ESG" dimension-type messages are observed in 1% of the total number of posts on this platform, achieving an engagement mean of 0.017, consistent with the patterns seen on Facebook.

Turning to Instagram, the findings indicate that over half of the posts revolve around the "Brand/Marketing" dimension, accounting for 51% of the total and displaying a notably high engagement ratio of 0.765. Posts concerning the "Sports" dimension-type constitute 34% of the total, with an engagement mean return of 0.521. This is followed by "Institutional" dimension-type posts, representing 12% of the total and demonstrating an engagement mean of 0.626. While "Commercial" dimension-type strategies make up only 2% of the posts, they are the content type that has garnered the highest engagement on this platform, with a ratio of 0.780. Finally, in alignment with patterns seen on Facebook and Twitter, the "ESG" dimension content comprises 1% of the total number of posts on this social media, achieving an engagement mean of 0.442.

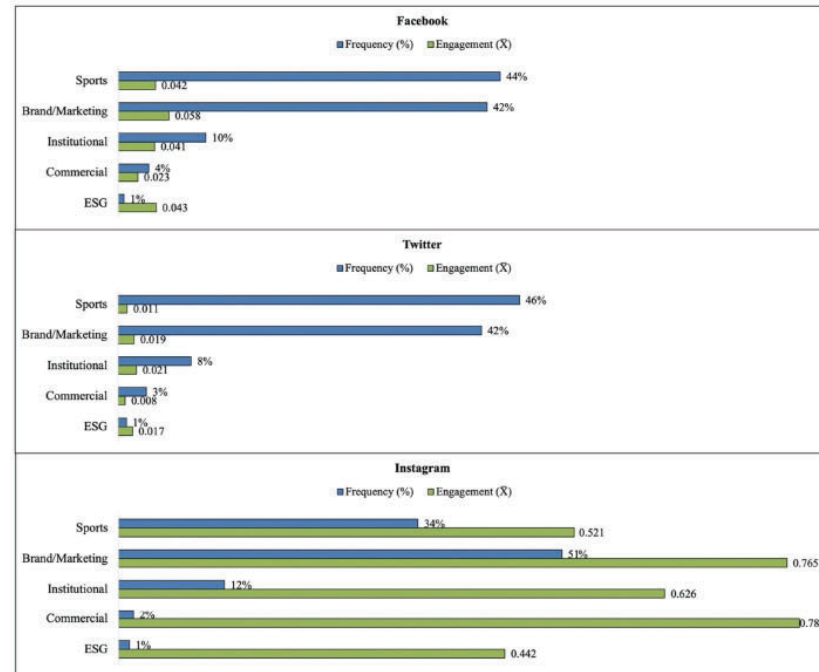


Figure 2.
Frequency and
engagement of posts
by according of the
dimensions

Source(s): Authors own creation

The “how” matters: varieties of social media post formats

The research has yielded findings concerning the post formats employed by sports leagues on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as presented in Table 3. The analysis identified three primary formats: “Text,” “Image,” and “Video,” and further revealed six prominent format combinations most frequently employed across these social media platforms. The format combination “Text/Image” emerges as the most prevalent choice across all three platforms, constituting 38.43% on Facebook, 38.71% on Twitter, and a dominant 64.43% on Instagram. However, results also highlighted noteworthy distinctions in terms of engagement generated by specific formats on each platform. Notably, the “Image” format garners the highest engagement on Facebook and Twitter, with an engagement mean of 0.21 and 0.03, respectively. In contrast, on Instagram, a different trend emerges, where the format combination “Text/Video/Link” achieves the highest engagement mean of 1.13.

The correspondence analysis (see Figure 3) illustrates the level of association between the variables and the proposed categorization dimensions in this study, as represented in a relative position map. The chi-squared test yielded a result of 917.25, indicating a statistically significant relationship among the variables under investigation. Specifically, the “Branding/Marketing” dimension exhibits a stronger association with resources in the “video” formats. Conversely, the “Sports,” “ESG” and “Institutional” content dimension types demonstrate an affinity with the “Image” and “Text” formats. Furthermore, the “Commercial” dimension, which is constructed based on categorization attributes, displays a connection with the “Link” format, identified as ideal points of association.

Format	Facebook		Engagement X-		Twitter		Engagement X-		Instagram		Engagement X-	
	<i>n</i>	%		%	<i>n</i>	%		%	<i>n</i>	%		%
Text	11	0.36%	0.04	6.71%	358	0.01	0.00%	0	0.00%	0.00	0.00	0.00
Image	98	3.24%	0.21	0.24%	13	0.03	6.10%	147	6.10%	0.65	0.65	0.65
Text/Link	160	5.28%	0.02	3.09%	165	0.00	19.18%	462	19.18%	0.63	0.63	0.63
Text/Video	903	29.81%	0.04	23.92%	1,276	0.02	0.00%	0	0.00%	0.00	0.00	0.00
Text/Video/Link	16	0.53%	0.00	3.73%	199	0.01	0.17%	4	0.17%	1.13	1.13	1.13
Text/Image	1,164	38.43%	0.06	38.71%	2,065	0.02	64.43%	1,552	64.43%	0.64	0.64	0.64
Text/Image/Link	411	13.57%	0.01	16.33%	871	0.00	1.00%	24	1.00%	0.35	0.35	0.35
Video	6	0.20%	0.04	0.15%	8	0.00	1.29%	31	1.29%	0.42	0.42	0.42
Text/Image/Surveys	44	1.45%	0.04	1.72%	92	0.01	1.91%	46	1.91%	0.98	0.98	0.98
Others	216	7.13%	0.03	5.38%	287	0.01	5.94%	143	5.94%	1.05	1.05	1.05
<i>Total</i>	3,029				5,334			2,409				
Source(s): Authors own creation												

Social media
engagement in
football
leagues

Table 3.
Post format
combinations and
corresponding
engagement means



Figure 3.
Correspondence
analysis (dimensions
and format)

Source(s): Authors own creation

Discussion

While the relationship between social media and football has previously been studied, primarily from the perspective of clubs or footballers (e.g. [Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018](#); [Doyle et al., 2022](#); [Krzyżowski and Strzelecki, 2023](#); [Zakerian et al., 2022](#)), there is a gap in understanding of how football leagues utilize their social media profiles for communication, branding, commercial purposes, and fan engagement, among other activities. This study bridges this research gap by employing the relationship marketing framework to examine eight professional football leagues' Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram profiles from three geographical regions (Europe, South America, and North America).

Does posting frequency matter?

Our findings show that Twitter is the most utilized digital platform in terms of the number of posts published by the examined football leagues, followed by Facebook and Instagram. This pattern is not unexpected, considering that Twitter and Facebook were introduced and integrated earlier into sport management operations. The prominence of Twitter as the social media platform with the highest post count among the studied leagues could probably also be attributed to its character limit, which may require multiple tweets to convey content that can be communicated in a single post on Facebook and Instagram. This discrepancy in post volume across social media aligns with findings from similar research (e.g. [Achen et al., 2020](#); [Maderer et al., 2018](#)).

Notably, Twitter stands out as having the lowest engagement per post compared to Facebook (in line with [Achen et al., 2020](#); [Maderer et al., 2018](#)). Despite previous studies (e.g. [Maderer et al., 2018](#); [Parganas et al., 2015](#)) highlighting Twitter's advantages in enhancing club branding and fan engagement, its engagement rate remains notably lower than that of Instagram. Given this contrast, greater attention should be directed toward understanding Instagram's potential. This social media platform, as acknowledged by [Abeza \(2023\)](#) and

Anagnostopoulos *et al.* (2018), continues to gain traction both in terms of academic interest and user adoption, especially among the younger demographic.

When focusing on the comparison of posting frequency and engagement across leagues, both Facebook and Twitter exhibit similar levels of engagement. These results align with Aichner (2019) (albeit with a focus on clubs rather than leagues), who indicated that no significant differences existed in the utilization of social media accounts across different countries and cultures. Notably, amid these findings, a noteworthy exception arises: emerging leagues in North America, such as Liga MX and MLS, tend to publish a higher number of posts on Facebook and Twitter compared to European football leagues with more established traditions and wider media coverage, such as the Bundesliga, LaLiga, and the Premier League. In contrast, Instagram stands out as the social media platform with the highest engagement in relation to the number of posts published. This distinction highlights the significant engagement observed in the publications of MLS, followed by the major European football leagues included in this study. For this reason, it is worth considering studying the case of MLS as a future success story with Instagram. Notably, this is especially pertinent considering that during the data collection period, footballer Lionel Messi had yet to join the league as a player. As Kobyłńska and Medina (2023) noted, the “Messi effect” is expected to catalyze a media surge within the league.

Deriving from the observations above, the findings in this study unveil a nuanced pattern that challenges conventional assumptions about the relationship between post-frequency and engagement across different leagues. Contrary to the notion that higher post-frequency directly equates to heightened engagement, our research, in line with Aichner (2019), indicates that the contemporary audience places a premium on content quality over quantity.

Does content type in posts matter?

Focusing on the content types shared by football leagues across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, a consistent pattern emerges where “Sports” and “Brand/Marketing” messages hold a predominant presence. This observation reflects the leagues’ concerted endeavors to establish emotional bonds with their audience, employing social media to enhance branding efforts (Maderer *et al.*, 2018). The prevalence of “Sports” content aligns logically with its high frequency, as Machado *et al.* (2020) noted, indicating that fans are inherently seeking entertaining and enjoyable content related to the sporting events they follow. In the context of “Brand/Marketing” content, the pivotal role of social media has become increasingly evident in recent years (e.g. McCarthy *et al.*, 2022; Zakerian *et al.*, 2022), proving instrumental in positioning football competitions and attracting potential sponsors (Balliauw *et al.*, 2021). Leagues as organizers leverage diverse players, venues, and cultural nuances to elicit robust emotional reactions from their audience (Su *et al.*, 2022).

Our investigation also accentuates the substantial role of “Institutional” content, a direct consequence of the leagues’ organizational responsibilities and the augmented necessity for institutional communication. Notably, we observed restrained efforts in the “Commercial” and “ESG” dimensions. These disparities potentially signify differing priorities among individual football entities, such as clubs. While commercial objectives remain crucial for football leagues, their execution might diverge from traditional clubs, leading to a diversity of messaging strategies.

Remarkably, the “ESG” dimension surfaces as a significant driver of engagement across Facebook and Twitter, catering to an audience that values transparency, social responsibility, and broader societal impact beyond the realm of sports. This finding aligns with López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos (2020), who view social media as a distinct avenue for sport entities to communicate their CSR initiatives. Conversely, Instagram manifests distinctive user behavior, where “Commercial” messages provoke the highest engagement.

This phenomenon could be attributed to the platform's audio-visual nature, which fosters stronger emotional connections with users. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Instagram generates high engagement across all content dimensions analyzed. Contrary to Aichner's (2019) study, where post topics did not significantly impact user engagement, our findings reveal that, in addition to the aforementioned "Commercial" dimension, the "Brand/Marketing" and "Institutional" dimensions also stand out significantly on Instagram.

Does the format of posts matter?

Regarding the publication formats, an interesting observation emerges. On platforms like Facebook and Twitter, where images are not the predominant element, it is noteworthy that posts consisting solely of images garner higher engagement. This aligns with the popular saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words," suggesting that social media account managers should consider favoring this format. In the context of Instagram, in addition to the image format, format combinations have demonstrated high engagement rates, such as Text/Video/Link. Various other formats, such as text/image and text/link, have also proven effective. Therefore, it is advisable for sports managers to embrace a diverse array of formats to enhance fan engagement on this platform effectively.

Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications of this paper are significant across sport marketing, sport management, and fan engagement domains. First, this study contributes to the existing literature by adopting a strategic perspective rooted in relationship marketing, which fills a gap in the literature regarding the use of social media by football leagues, as opposed to previous studies that focused on clubs or athletes (e.g. Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2018; McCarthy *et al.*, 2022; Zakerian *et al.*, 2022). In contrast to previous research, which has demonstrated the use of social media to facilitate direct communication between fans, athletes and clubs, our research points towards a different dimension. We like to refer to it as "institutional" social media communication, where content on social media results from constant negotiations between managers, athletes, fans, club demands, and league priorities. Often, such overarching communications are accompanied by disparities that represent differing priorities among individual football entities but also foster direct communication between fans and leagues (instead of clubs). For instance, our results indicate that commercial objectives remain crucial for football leagues but are not always the priority. Therefore, their execution might differ from football clubs, resulting in diverse messaging strategies.

Second, it establishes a connection between studied dimensions and overarching strategies implemented by football leagues, advancing our understanding of how these leagues leverage social media for fan engagement and brand presence. Third, it introduces a novel frequency-engagement approach that challenges conventional wisdom by demonstrating that post-frequency alone does not dictate user engagement. Identifying critical factors beyond post-frequency aligns with Web 2.0 principles, emphasizing meaningful interactions and connections with fans rather than mere content dissemination. Finally, by focusing on international football leagues, this study provides valuable insights that transcend geographic boundaries, contributing to a more complete understanding of social media dynamics in the increasingly globalized football domain.

Practical implications

Our research findings point to a critical practical dimension. This indicates that league social media communications may differ from relative club and/or athlete communications. Since clubs formulate leagues but are not always adequately managed by them (in that leagues may

develop different agendas and priorities), our research calls for better cooperation across football club social media managers and league managers. Such managers need to ensure collaboration with each other and, where possible, utilize both platforms better to avoid replication of content, mixed messages, or boomerang effects from untargeted communications. Our findings indicate that such collaboration emerges at different levels, especially if we look at MLS (given its governance structure) compared to the other leagues examined.

Limitations and future research directions

Despite the contributions of this study to the realm of social media management by sports organizations, certain limitations should be acknowledged. While these limitations restrict the generalizability of the results, they also provide potential avenues for future research. Firstly, the sample is confined to a single sport (football) and specific league profiles from various regions worldwide. Exploring engagement dynamics across different geographical regions, a more comprehensive array of football leagues, and various sports would be beneficial to ascertain the broader applicability of the findings.

Secondly, while this study concentrates on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, emerging social media platforms like TikTok and Twitch, as well as less explored platforms such as YouTube, warrant investigation in the future, as indicated by several authors (e.g. Abeza, 2023; Su *et al.*, 2022). This exploration is crucial to acquiring a diversified understanding of the potential that different social media platforms hold for sports marketing and fan engagement, and perhaps the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) could pave the way forward.

Finally, this study presents an analysis of the use of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram by the leagues under study over three periods of 15 days each. We recommend conducting analyses over more extended periods for future studies to gain a comprehensive, longer-term perspective. For instance, similar time windows could be analyzed in successive seasons. Additionally, it is worth noting that the analysis windows studied in this work may align with different time frames for each league due to their distinct geographical locations and individual season schedules.

Conclusions

This study is pioneering in exploring how eight professional football leagues from diverse geographical regions utilize their official Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, with a specific emphasis on post engagement and relationship marketing. The findings further solidify both practical and scholarly understanding, pinpointing the most efficient content types and formats for engagement. In summary, this study yields several noteworthy conclusions:

- (1) Instagram's dominance over Facebook and Twitter in terms of engagement is unequivocal. Sport managers should prioritize enhancing their presence on this social media platform.
- (2) A higher frequency of posts does not inherently result in increased audience engagement. Therefore, the quality of content must take precedence over quantity to ensure its appeal to football fans.
- (3) Achieving optimal engagement hinges on aligning message content strategy and format. Football leagues are more likely to achieve higher engagement rates when they meticulously blend suitable message content with the appropriate format. Understanding the preferences and interests of the target audience is crucial in this regard.
- (4) The balanced relationship between "Brand/Marketing" and "Sports" dimensions in terms of content strategy frequency and subsequent audience engagement should be

emphasized. These two content types resonate well with the audience and maintain a harmonious frequency-to-engagement ratio.

- (5) The emerging significance of the “ESG” content aspect cannot be overlooked. This content theme garners notably higher engagement on Facebook and Twitter, signifying the audience’s growing interest in sustainability and social responsibility matters.
- (6) “Commercial” content exhibits more significant impact and audience interaction on Instagram than Facebook and Twitter. This underscores the multifaceted nature of social media engagement and emphasizes the importance of tailoring content strategies and formats to specific platforms and target audiences.

As social media continues to evolve, the findings from this study will function as a guiding compass, directing football leagues toward informed decision-making and enhancing their social media strategies.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Fanpage Karma platform for providing the software licence to support this research.

Edgar Romero-Jara would like to acknowledge the funding support of the pre-doctoral scholarship “National Academic Excellence Scholarship Programme Carlos Antonio López (BECAL)”, granted by the Government of Paraguay.

Samuel López-Carril would like to acknowledge the funding support of the postdoctoral contract “Juan de la Cierva-formación 2021” (FJC2021-0477779-I), granted by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and by the European Union through the NextGenerationEU Funds (Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia).

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Anexo 6.

Estudio III: “Connecting with fans in the digital age: and exploratory and comparative analysis of social media engagement in top football clubs”



ARTICLE



<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02357-8>

OPEN

Connecting with fans in the digital age: an exploratory and comparative analysis of social media management in top football clubs

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In a globalised society, characterised by increasingly demanding markets and the accelerated growth of the digital approach, sports organisations face the challenge of connecting with fans, generating and maintaining audiences and communicating with stakeholders creatively and efficiently. Social media has become a fundamental tool, with engagement as a critical measurement element. However, despite its popularity and use, many questions about its application, measurement and real potential in the sports sector still need to be answered. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to carry out a descriptive and comparative analysis of the engagement generated through social media posts by elite football clubs in Europe, South America and North America. To this purpose, 19,745 Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts were analysed, through the design, validation and application of an observation instrument, using content analysis techniques. The findings show evidence of a priority focus on “Marketing” and “Sports” type messages in terms of frequency, with high engagement rates. They were also showing a growing stream of “ESG” type messages, with a low posting frequency but engagement rates similar to “Marketing” and “Sport”. “Institutional” messages remain constant in all football clubs. “Commercial” messages still have growth potential in both regards, frequency and engaging fans, representing an opportunity for digital assets. Also, specific format combinations that generate greater engagement were identified: “text/image” and “text/videos” are the format combinations more used by football clubs on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; however, resulting in different engagement rates. This study showed evidence of different social media management strategies adopted according to region, obtaining similar engagement rates. This research concludes with theoretical and practical applications that will be of interest to both academics and practitioners to maximise the potential of social media for fan engagement, social initiatives and as a marketing tool.

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Introduction

In a context of booming technology and high organisational competitiveness (Ratten, 2020), digital tools have evolved from an essential add-on to crucial strategic and operational elements in sports organisations (Stegmann et al., 2021). Fans increasingly demand a connection with their favourite athletes and teams (Su et al., 2020) through digital channels such as social media, podcasts (Rohden et al., 2023), Esports (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022), among others. Today's digitised world presents therefore, an opportunity for brands, sponsors, sports properties, and other stakeholders to interact in a complex and emotionally charged sector (Su et al., 2022) for fans from different age generations (Sheldon et al., 2021). Understanding and getting to know fans are at the forefront of every sports organisation's objective.

Social media plays a fundamental role due to their ability to reach multiple audiences faster and generate a sense of connection with fans through a key measurement element: engagement (Doyle et al., 2022). Sports organisations, specifically football clubs, invest time, people and resources in managing social media to achieve their brand positioning and commercial and communication objectives (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018), with Facebook, Twitter and more recently, Instagram, being the most widely used (Abeza et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2020). However, the real potential of social media and its optimal use still poses many questions to be answered.

Although there are previous studies that have explored some aspects of social media in a sports context (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Mastromartino and Naraine, 2022; Su et al., 2020), the potential impact and efficiency of content posted by football clubs on their social media channels remains unclear. For example, several studies point to various factors that contribute to fan engagement on social media depending on elements such as the type of content, the format used (e.g. photo, text or a combination of both) or the social media platform (see Einsle et al., 2023; Maderer et al., 2018; Su et al., 2020). This gap in the literature prompts a call to action from across the domains of sports marketing and sports management. Identifying the elements generated by football clubs on their official social media profiles can help them improve their marketing strategies and better support their fans. Based on this need and opportunity for management improvement, this study addresses the following research question:

RQ. What are the main characteristics of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts from elite football clubs to understand the content type, format and social media platform that generate the highest engagement among social media consumers?

Grounded on the theoretical framework of relationship marketing, the main objective of this study is to carry out a descriptive and comparative analysis of the engagement generated through social media posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram by elite football clubs in Europe, South America and North America, using a categorisation approach developed from an existing model in the literature (see Solanellas et al., 2022), as well as the identification of key elements of high-impact social media posts. For this purpose, a new instrument was designed, validated and applied to analyse the use of social media as a marketing tool in sports management. By conducting this exploration, this paper contributes to the literature on sports marketing by identifying which social media and which types of content provoke the most interaction among fans. As a result, football team managers can gain a better understanding of how to target and personalise potential commercial and branding actions, thereby reinforcing the loyalty and commitment of fans to football clubs, and opening or consolidating new lines of action aligned with the strategic objectives of sport entities. Furthermore, the findings and

conclusions presented in this study can assist sports managers in the decision-making process, as well as in planning, organising, directing, and effectively controlling social media platforms, thus enhancing engagement with fans in a digital environment.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, the literature review presents the main theoretical and conceptual elements, focusing on social media and their relationship with marketing theory in sports and football. Secondly, the methodological aspects guiding the study's process are detailed, including sample, instrument, research procedure, and data analysis. Thirdly, the study's main results are presented. Fourth, the discussion section critically examines the findings in the context of existing literature, offering practical and theoretical implications for both academics and practitioners. Finally, the study concludes with the main conclusions and limitations.

Literature review

Social media and sports, a combination of great potential.

Social media is a collective term for media tools, platforms, and applications allowing consumers to connect, communicate, and collaborate (Williams and Chinn, 2010). They encourage interaction between users and the organisation and provide information from customers and the organisation faster than through conventional media (Kümpel et al., 2015; Shilbury et al., 2014). Furthermore, social media is considered a mass phenomenon due to its ability to transmit information in an agile and interactive way (Vivar, 2009), as well as a unique form of communication that transcends geographical and social boundaries through the instantaneous communication of information (Filo et al., 2015). Social Media is used in different sectors for marketing activities (Chen, 2023), brand equity and loyalty (Malarvizhi et al., 2022) to understand consumer's behaviour, brand positioning, business revenue opportunities and social communication (Ramos et al., 2019). However, although the first studies about this phenomenon have been explored in the sports industry field, there is still a need for more evidence about its real potential, essential elements, and efficiency measurement in the sector.

Due to the high graphic, interactive and visual content of social media, their use in the sports industry, a sector of strong emotional influence, has become more relevant and pervasive in the last decade (Hull and Abeza, 2021), where the interest of the viewer has become crucial and increasingly demanding (Nisar et al., 2018). The differences that make the sports industry unique and particular are, among others: immediate results and changes (Davis and Hilbert, 2013) in addition to the fact that every decision is "in the spotlight" of the public (alluding to the complexity of fans, athletes, coaches, media and other stakeholders). Thus, athletes, teams and sports organisations have been using social media as part of their public relations and communication efforts (Filo et al., 2015; Pegoraro, 2010; Yan et al., 2019) to engage with their partners and fans (Zakerian et al., 2022), promoting interactions and increasing engagement with the sport product, as well as with the team in general (Abeza et al., 2019; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015).

The linking of social media within the integrated marketing communication process has changed communication strategies and consumer outreach, where marketing managers must include these tools when developing and executing their customer-focused promotional strategies (Lee and Kahle, 2016; Rehman et al., 2022). On the other hand, social media, directly and indirectly, impacts revenue generation and favours negotiation with sponsors due to their notoriety, visibility, and reach (Mastromartino and Naraine, 2022; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). They are therefore considered a key

tool for building and enhancing a brand's reputation (Maderer et al., 2018) and an ideal platform to advertise and increase the visibility of a brand or company, as well as to interact with and analyse the actions of their fans and followers (Abeza et al., 2017; García-Fernández et al., 2015; Herrera-Torres et al., 2017).

Social media has also been used in sports education in recent years (Sanz-Labrador et al., 2021). Moreover, their application is increasingly common in construction and dissemination related to social responsibility (López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos, 2020; Sharpe et al., 2020). In this way, they have also become a key tool for interacting with fans, addressing a strengthened social approach, and gaining engagement from athletes, sponsors, and authorities (Einsle et al., 2023; Oviedo et al., 2014; Su et al., 2020). Beyond the digital environment, Cuesta-Valiño et al. (2021) pointed out the relevance of considering the emerging sustainable management approach to measure sports organisations' goals. One of the most relevant challenges for this industry is to issue social media posts efficiently, using the proper formatting resources and at the right time, to generate the most significant possible impact and engagement.

Relationship marketing theory applied to social media in sports. The sports industry is a fast-growing and increasingly diverse market worldwide (Kim and Andrew, 2016). Football (soccer in North America) is one of the most popular sports worldwide as well as a cultural manifestation, characterised by its high emotional level and economic, political and social relevance (Bucher and Eckl, 2022; Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen, 2022). Only in Spain, the sports sector generates 3.3% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), of which 1.37% is produced through football (PWC, 2020).

Globalisation has demanded an adaptation at all levels due to the endless search for immediacy and access to information, where the business of sports is becoming more and more relationship-based and the importance of generating engagement (Einsle et al., 2023; Fried and Mumcu, 2017; García-Fernández et al., 2017) is one of the most relevant variables in generating loyalty in sports organisations (Loranca-Valle et al., 2021; Núñez-Barriopedro et al., 2021). Sports consumers are seen as "channels" through which sports products can be promoted (O'Shea and Alonso, 2011), and sports fans have become both the consumer and the advocates of the product. This is where relationship marketing theory helps us to better understand this phenomenon. As Abeza and Sanderson (2022, p. 287) point out, relationship marketing theory "is based on the idea that a relationship between two parties creates additional value for those involved". This theory is one of the most widely used to understand the phenomenon of social media in sports (Abeza and Sanderson, 2022) as highlighted by numerous authors who have used it in their studies (e.g., Abeza et al., 2017, 2019, 2020; Su et al., 2020; Williams and Chinn, 2010).

Merging the roots of relationship marketing theory (Möller and Halinen, 2000) and the particular characteristics of the sports sector, and taking into account the perspective of short-term transactions and immediate economic benefits (Abeza et al., 2017), social media represents opportunities for better knowledge about fans, more advanced consumer-organisation interaction, efficient fan engagement, efficient use of resources and agile evaluation of the relationship between fans and organisation (Abeza et al., 2019, 2020). In view of this, and in line with Abeza and Sanderson (2022), social media thus becomes a channel through which to establish, maintain and cultivate long-term relationships beneficial to both parties (in our study, football clubs and fans).

Previous studies have addressed the use of specific social media in the context of sports, such as Facebook (Achen, 2019; Meng et al., 2015; Pegoraro et al., 2017; Waters et al., 2009), Twitter (Blaszka et al., 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010; Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012; Winand et al., 2019; Witkemper et al., 2012) and Instagram (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Machado et al., 2020; Zakerian et al., 2022), because of the relevance in the use of these platforms in the sports sector. From another broader perspective, Solanellas et al. (2022) propose a practical analysis of multiple social media in sports organisations from a content categorisation point of view.

The results and contributions of the studies mentioned above, reveal the importance of further exploring the social media fan engagement phenomenon as a strategic perspective (Tafesse and Wien, 2018) and the added value that social media can generate in sports. In this sense, it is relevant for sports managers to know which techniques, methodologies and perspectives to use. Furthermore, as stated by Abeza and Sanderson (2022), it is necessary to go deeper into the theories behind its use. Taking these aspects into account, this work presents a new instrument of observation and measurement of social media posts by football organisations, as a basis for understanding and deepening the knowledge about the digital audience and its impact on the different objectives of the organisation. Thus, the study draws on relationship marketing theory to better understand how sports managers can make the most of the possibilities offered by social media to generate added value from the interaction between fans and football clubs. Particularly, the developed instrument focuses on the analysis of the type of content published by football clubs, categorising it into dimensions, as well as the engagement of the different publications according to the type of dimension to which they belong.

With a view to the implementation of the instrument, and to contribute to the literature related to the use of social media as a marketing tool in sports, this study analyses Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts issued by elite football clubs from Europe, South America and North America, using a practical approach to content categorisation and taking the engagement factor as a key element for comparison.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory, descriptive, and comparative research design (Andrew et al., 2011) using the observational method and content analysis techniques. Content analysis involves the recounting and comparison of content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context. It has been widely used in social media communication research, specifically in sports settings (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Wang and Zhou, 2015; Winand et al., 2019), to interpret textual data through systematic classification, coding, and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). First, exploratory studies are particularly useful when the phenomenon under investigation is in constant evolution (such as social media as a marketing tool), as well as when there are several factors and variables at play (Andrew et al., 2011). In this study, these are linked to the engagement that can be caused by the type of content or format used by elite football clubs on their social media accounts. Second, the descriptive aspect of the research design aims to describe and quantify the engagement levels in social media for the selected football clubs. By Collecting and analysing quantitative data on the interaction metrics, including likes, comments, shares, and follower counts, the study provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of engagement, and other variables, among the clubs, helping to build a foundation for further analysis and comparison. Lastly, the comparative aspect of the

research design (Andrew et al., 2011) is valuable in this study because it enables a cross-regional analysis of three of the most traditional social media platforms. The study compared the engagement practices, elements, and strategies across three key regions of the football industry worldwide. Understanding potential differences can be useful for sports managers to design more optimised social media marketing strategies.

Sample. Considering the study design and observational method applied in this research (Anguera-Argilaga et al., 2011), a non-probable sample design (see Battaglia, 2008) was established following several steps to make the following three decisions: (1) selection of football clubs, (2) social media platforms, and (3) period of time studied.

First, a geographical criterion was used to determine the origin of the football clubs under study. This criterion was based on a comprehensive and global perspective, considering factors such as historical significance, popularity, sporting achievements, and the modernisation of football worldwide. Based on these considerations, three regions were selected for analysis: Europe and South America, renowned for their broad global relevance and football tradition (e.g., the winning national teams of the 22 editions of the FIFA World Cup so far are from Europe and South America [Venkat, 2023]). Next, North America was chosen for its ascending market growth potential and global efforts to promote football. This is exemplified by upcoming milestones, such as the organisation of the FIFA World Cup 2026 in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, as well as the recent arrival of Lionel Messi into Major League Soccer (see Mizrahi, 2023). These three regions are governed by the three most influential regional football bodies of FIFA: Europe (UEFA), South America (CONMEBOL), and North America (CONCACAF). Second, to select the most relevant football clubs in these three regions, we followed some of the selection criteria set in similar studies (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018). Therefore, the rankings of four of the most influential football organisations or websites were considered: (1) the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS) club ranking, (2) the Football World Rankings website, (3) the FIFA club and league ranking, and (4) the Transfermarkt player ranking website (of great relevance in the player transfer market). As a result of this

process, 24 teams were pre-selected (9 from Europe, 9 from South America and 6 from North America) according to the objectives and the study design and the author's agreement (Andrew et al., 2011; Anguera-Argilaga et al., 2011; Battaglia, 2008; Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014). Finally, a random draw was made resulting in a selection of six teams from Europe, six from South America and four from North America (with a limit of two teams per league). This process resulted in the 16 teams whose use of social media is analysed in this study (see Table 1).

Following, social media to be analysed in the study were selected. It was noted in the literature that Facebook had been one of the first social media to be used by football clubs and other sports organisations, either to connect with fans or purely for informational purposes (Achen, 2019; Waters et al., 2009). Twitter and Instagram are also platforms that have become relevant, not only for marketers in sports but also in other sectors (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Wang and Zhou, 2015). Although the use of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as marketing tools for football clubs has been studied (e.g., Machado et al. 2020; Maderer et al. 2018; Nisar et al., 2018), there is a lack of literature comparing their potential engagement across a sample of teams from different geographic regions. Thus, it was deemed appropriate to select these three social media sources for our study.

Finally, the periods over which the publications were to be extracted were determined. Among other authors, Ashley and Tuten (2015) point out that, in a social media environment, two to four weeks are sufficient for a wide variety of posts to be made in a regular and cyclical context, excluding exceptional milestones or events that could have an extraordinary impact on engagement and that could bias regular reading. Therefore, 45 days for each club and each social media is set as an appropriate observation period.

Once the sample selection criteria had been defined, the links of all publications from the clubs selected in the study on the three social media were extracted through the Fanpage Karma software that allows data to be collected and interpreted (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2021). After prior data analysis, the final sample consisted of 19,745 publications, a very similar figure to that used in other related studies (e.g., Maderer et al., 2018; Yan et al., 2019).

Instrument and research procedure. Based on the review of the techniques and methodologies used to analyse the use of social

Table 1 Number of posts extracted for analysis from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram official accounts by region and football clubs selected.

Region	Country	Club	Social media posts analysed (Q)		
			Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
Europe	Germany	Borussia Dortmund	218	745	107
	Germany	FC Bayern Munich	242	680	76
	Spain	FC Barcelona	195	794	147
	Spain	Real Madrid CF	118	544	73
	UK	Manchester United FC	445	761	244
	UK	Liverpool FC	486	850	278
South America	Brazil	SE Palmeiras	289	1140	91
	Brazil	CR Flamengo	644	1606	515
	Argentina	CA River Plate	150	575	149
	Argentina	CA Boca Juniors	299	684	256
	Paraguay	Club Olimpia	199	356	165
	Paraguay	Club Cerro Porteño	230	13	220
North America	Mexico	CF América	241	774	154
	Mexico	CD Guadalajara	382	610	91
	USA	LA Galaxy	92	347	112
	USA	Atlanta United FC	142	2096	120
			4372	12,575	2798
			19,745		

media as a marketing tool for football clubs in previous studies, we proceeded to design and develop an observation and data collection instrument in a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet (.xlsx format), taking as a starting point the model of content analysis proposed by Solanellas et al. (2022). Due to the nature of the study, the .xlsx data collection format was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for manual data collection and the application of the categorisation tool post-by-post. This format has been successfully used as a data collection tool in previous social media content analysis studies in football (e.g., López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos, 2020).

To ensure its rigour, the codebook was subsequently submitted for review to nine field experts. The selection of these experts was undertaken via judgmental nonprobability sampling, a method commonly employed in the literature due to the specialised and ever-evolving nature of the subject (Andrew et al., 2011). These individuals were chosen based on specific criteria, encompassing their professional roles in specialised, coordinating, managerial, or directorial positions tied to the digital domain. Moreover, their academic background, particularly in marketing, methodology, or digital tools, was considered. To ensure an extensive grasp of the subject matter, the chosen experts were required to have a minimum of five years of experience in the area and to be actively participating in their respective roles. This approach aimed to incorporate diverse viewpoints, offering insights from a spectrum of angles relevant to this research. As a result, the panel of experts was comprised of the following professionals: the Head of Digital from a prominent European professional football league (1), a Marketing Manager and an International Communications Manager from leading professional football clubs (2), Directors of digital marketing and branding agencies (2), professors specialising in marketing and sports management at Spanish universities (2), and the Vice-President of Sales along with the Head of Digital from sports business intelligence consultancies (2).

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with these chosen experts to delve into pertinent aspects linked to the study. An interview guide was developed, following the methodological aspects indicated in specialised works in this field (see Andrew et al., 2011; Anguera-Argilaga et al., 2011). Furthermore, the interview guide encompassed critical aspects of social media management and relevant facets of football club management (e.g., post formats, observation timeframes, platforms for capturing and analysing social media posts), drawing upon the elements and variables derived from studies conducted by Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) as well as Solanellas et al. (2022). Additionally, these interviews comprised discussions

about the conception and execution of the observation tool, which was employed as a supplementary instrument for data collection. Further variables relevant to the research objectives were explored within these interviews.

The qualitative insights garnered from the experts' conclusive remarks offered valuable suggestions that contributed to refining the study's development and enhancing the observation tool. This iterative approach ensured the harmonisation of the tool with the research objectives and its effective alignment with the study's research questions. After incorporating the modifications suggested in the experts' evaluations, the study's codebook adhered to the variables and categories illustrated in Table 2.

The .xlsx instrument sheet was then pilot-tested. Seventy-five publications (25 from Facebook, 25 from Instagram and 25 from Twitter) from three different football clubs were randomly selected, conforming to a total sample of 225 publications. The data were collected in an observation sheet in .xlsx format for analysis purposes. During the analysis process, including the discussion of possible discrepancies in interpreting each publication as belonging to one or another of the dimensions of the study's codebook, the authors decided that each publication would be classified only in one dimension, depending on the type of content that predominates in each post.

To measure the level of reliability and accuracy of the instrument (Andrew et al., 2011), the intra-observer reliability method was applied, incorporating 10–12 minute breaks every 40–45 min of observation. After 15 days, the same publications were re-coded using the same established protocol. The results of the coding provided a Kappa coefficient of 0.949, demonstrating a very high level of agreement and reliability, following the scale of Landis and Koch (1977).

To measure the reliability and accuracy of the instrument (Andrew et al. 2011), the intra-observer reliability method was applied. In the first stage, the data was collected and coded post-by-post by applying the .xlsx. sheet, incorporating 10–12 minute breaks every 40–45 min of observation to ensure the quality of the data observed and collected. The same posts were re-coded using the same established protocol in the second stage. To ensure a more accurate application of the codebook and to avoid potential bias, a 15-day impasse was established between the two data collections. The coding results between the two stages provided a Kappa coefficient of 0.949, demonstrating a very high level of agreement and reliability, following the scale of Landis and Koch (1977).

Finally, based on the interaction data collected with the data collection instrument, the variable of engagement with the publications was calculated by adapting the formulas used by

Table 2 Study codebook.

Variable	Code	Description
Dimensions	Sports	Information on players or coaches, new signings, training sessions, training activities, and matches.
	Institutional	History and anniversaries of the club, announcements of assemblies, official communiqués, club opening hours, and congratulations addressed to institutions or athletes.
	Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)	Activities relating to social responsibility, community support, athlete development, education, good governance practices, sustainability, and environmental development.
	Commercial	Revenue-generating actions: membership, ticket sales, matchday, and merchandising.
Formats	Text-Image-Video-Link-Raffles/Trivia-Surveys	Club brand positioning, fan experiences, fan engagement, sponsorship activation, and content generation for emotional and fan engagement purposes.
Interaction metrics	Likes-Share-Comments	

Adapted from Solanellas et al. (2022).

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Facebook} &= \left\{ \frac{(N^{\circ} \text{ "reacciones"} + N^{\circ} \text{ "shares"} + N^{\circ} \text{ "comments"})}{N^{\circ} \text{ followers}} \right\} \times 100 \\ \text{Twitter} &= \left\{ \frac{(N^{\circ} \text{ "likes"} + N^{\circ} \text{ "retweets"})}{N^{\circ} \text{ followers}} \right\} \times 100 \\ \text{Instagram} &= \left\{ \frac{(N^{\circ} \text{ "likes"} + N^{\circ} \text{ "comments"})}{N^{\circ} \text{ followers}} \right\} \times 100 \end{aligned}$$

Fig. 1 Engagement formulas used on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.
Adapted from Fanpage Karma (2022) and Rival IQ (Feehan, 2023) platforms.

Table 3 Means, standard deviations, minimums and maximums of engagement generated by publications on the social media of the football clubs analysed.

	n	%	Engagement			
			Means	SD	Min	Max
Facebook	4372	22	0.112	0.180	0.000	2.406
Twitter	12,575	64	0.045	0.071	0.000	0.457
Instagram	2798	14	1.873	1.091	0.002	5.528
	19,745	100				

the Fanpage Karma (2022) and Rival IQ (Feehan, 2023) platforms (Fig. 1).

Therefore, after the protocol and the .xlsx observation instrument sheet were tested and validated, the final procedure was established as follows: (a) social media posts from Facebook, Twitter and Instagram of the selected football clubs were extracted automatically using the FanPage Karma license and added to the .xlsx observation instrument sheet; (b) according to the Study Codebook (see Table 2) the data was collected and registered manually into the .xlsx observation instrument sheet by clicking the posts one by one; c) we proceeded to set up a database coding the variables from the data collected to perform the statistical analyses.

Data analysis. A descriptive analysis of the engagement generated by publications on social media and their content (dimensions and formats) on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter was carried out. To analyse the differences in engagement generated by the posts on each social media according to their content, we used the t-test for independent samples and the one-factor ANOVA. The significance value established is <0.05. A chi-square test and correspondence analysis were applied to identify and visualise points of association between the key variables. Data analysis was performed using the SPSS statistical package, version 27.0.

Results

As shown in Table 3, of the 19,745 posts observed and analysed, Twitter accounted for 64%, followed by Facebook at 22% and Instagram at 14%. However, from the point of view of engagement, Instagram reflects an average of 1.873, well above the other social media. Facebook follows it with 0.112 and Twitter with 0.045, showing an inverse behaviour to the number of posts made.

Frequency and engagement. In Fig. 2, we can observe the strategy used by each club in terms of the frequency of posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as the levels of engagement obtained. On Facebook, the football clubs analysed posts at different frequencies. In Europe, we observe that the

clubs with the highest frequency of posts are Liverpool FC and Manchester United FC, with $n = 445$ and $n = 486$, respectively. In contrast, the Spanish clubs (Real Madrid FC and FC Barcelona) have the lowest frequency of posts ($n = 195$ and $n = 118$, respectively). On the other hand, beyond this difference in frequency, they have very similar engagement ratios.

The club with the highest frequency of publications is CR Flamengo from Brazil ($n = 644$); however, SE Palmeiras, the other Brazilian club studied, despite registering fewer publications in the same period ($n = 289$), shows much higher levels of engagement. SE Palmeiras (Brazil), Club Olimpia and Club Cerro Porteño (Paraguay), CF America (Mexico) and Atlanta United FC (USA) show the highest levels of engagement, with similar posting frequencies (between $n = 142$ and $n = 241$). On Twitter, the highest frequencies of posts were published compared to Facebook and Instagram, with CR Flamengo and Atlanta United FC being the clubs that posted the most ($n = 1606$ and $n = 2096$, respectively). However, the levels of engagement identified show similar and homogeneous levels in the period analysed, regardless of the frequency of publications. On the other hand, the highest engagement levels were observed on Instagram, with a lower frequency of publications in all cases. Football clubs SE Palmeiras, CA River Plate, CF America and Atlanta United FC have the highest engagement values (2.5 and 3), with posting frequencies ranging from $n = 91$ to $n = 154$. European football clubs have very similar engagement ratios (around 1.00), while North American football clubs have different engagement values despite having similar posting frequencies ($n = 91$ and $n = 154$).

Content dimensions of publications. As shown in Fig. 3, we observe the dimensions proposed in this study, comparing the social media analysed and the engagement generated by each category. From this point of view, in terms of frequency, the "Marketing" and "Sport" dimensions are observed as the most used publication approaches by football clubs, followed by the "Institutional" dimension, "Commercial" and, finally, "ESG". This order of frequency applies to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

In terms of engagement, the social media Instagram is the one that registers considerably higher values than the rest of the social media analysed, with the "Marketing" dimension generating the highest engagement (2.03). It is followed by the "Institutional" dimension (1.78) and the "Sports" dimension (1.74), closing with the "Commercial" and "ESG" dimensions, with values of 1.54 and 1.41, respectively. Facebook is the following social media that generates the highest engagement.

In the case of Facebook (see Supplementary Table S1), the findings show a significance of the engagement means between the "Commercial" and the "Sports" ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$), "Institutional" ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$) and "Marketing" type of the posts in Facebook.

On the other hand, Twitter (see Supplementary Table S2) is the one that generates the minor engagement, with very similar values between the different dimensions, despite being the one with the highest frequency of publications (Fig. 3). Unlike the previous dimensions, the "Institutional", "ESG", and "Commercial" dimensions are those with the highest engagement values (0.07), followed by the "Marketing" and "Sports" dimensions (both with 0.04). However, in this social media platform, the "Institutional" type of content is statistically significant with "Sports" ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$), "Commercial" ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$) and "Marketing" ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). Also, we can find significant engagement results between the "ESG" and the "Commercial" ($p = 0.033 < 0.05$) dimensions.

On Instagram (see Supplementary Table S3), the "Marketing" dimension has the highest engagement value, as does the

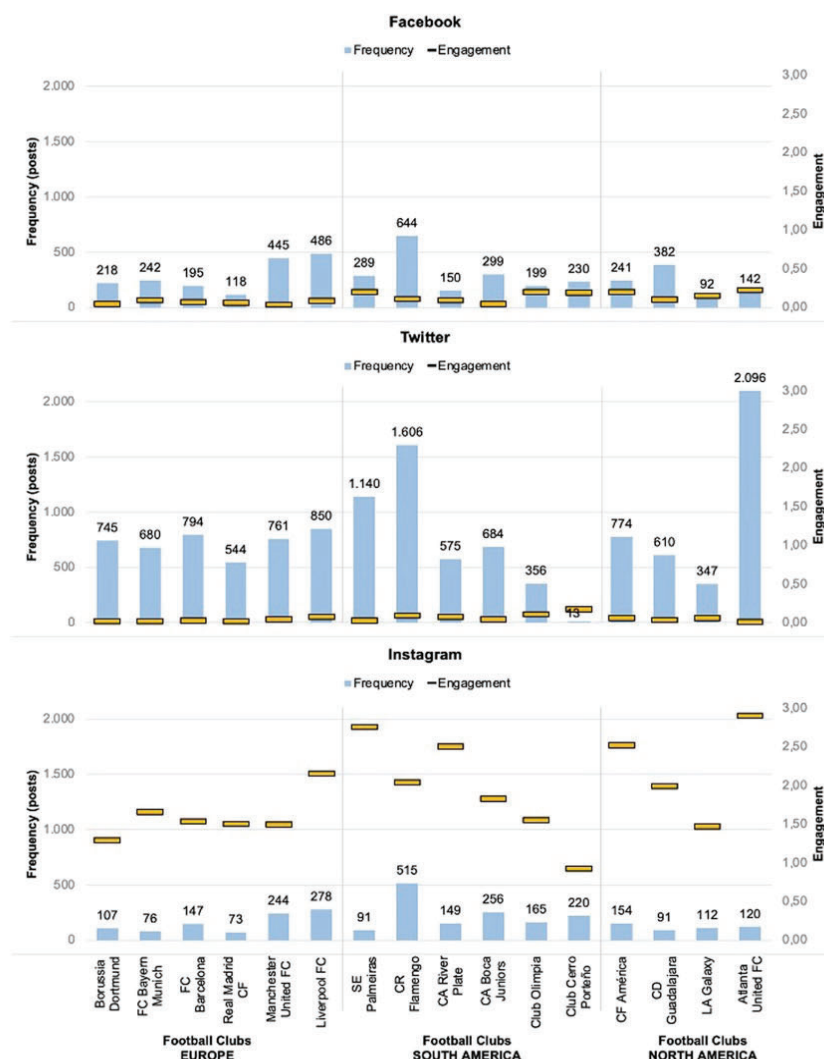


Fig. 2 Posts frequency and engagement. Frequency of posts and level of engagement generated on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram by the football clubs selected for this study (organised by regions).

“Institutional” dimension (both with 0.12). It is followed by the “Sports” dimension (0.11), “ESG” (0.10) and finally, “Commercial” (0.07) (Fig. 3). Nevertheless, as difference of Facebook and Twitter, the findings show a strong relevance of “Marketing” dimensions posts (Supplementary Table S3), linked significantly with “Sports” ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$), “Commercial” ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$) and “Institutional” ($p = 0.002 < 0.05$).

Types of formats in publications. Nine combinations of the most relevant formats have been identified in the publications analysed (Table 4), both in the frequency of use and engagement they generate.

On Facebook, the most frequent formats are “Text/Image” and “Text/Video” ($n = 2031$ and $n = 1265$, respectively). However, the format with the highest engagement is “Image” (0.23), followed by “Text/Image” (0.13), “Text/Video” (0.12) and “Text/Link” (0.07). On Twitter, on the other hand, the “Text/Image” format is the most used

($n = 4412$), “Text” ($n = 2499$), “Text/Video” ($n = 2239$) and “Image” ($n = 1534$), with the “Text/Video” and “Text/Image” format combinations (0.07) registering the highest engagement. On Instagram, due to the nature of social media, the most frequent format is “Text/Image” ($n = 1986$). In terms of engagement, the formats “Image” (2.20), “Text/Image” (1.95), “Text/Image/Polls” (1.93) and “Video” (1.84) have the highest values.

The correspondence analysis (Fig. 4) shows the degree of association between the variables and the categorisation dimensions proposed in this study in a relative position map. The chi-squared test yielded a result of 1027.65. The “Marketing” dimension shows a closer relationship with the “video” and “image” format resources. The “ESG” and “Institutional” content type shows an association with the “Image” and “Text” formats. The “Commercial” dimension, based on the characteristics of the categorisation, shows a relationship with the “Link” format as ideal points of association, considering the frequency and engagement analysed.

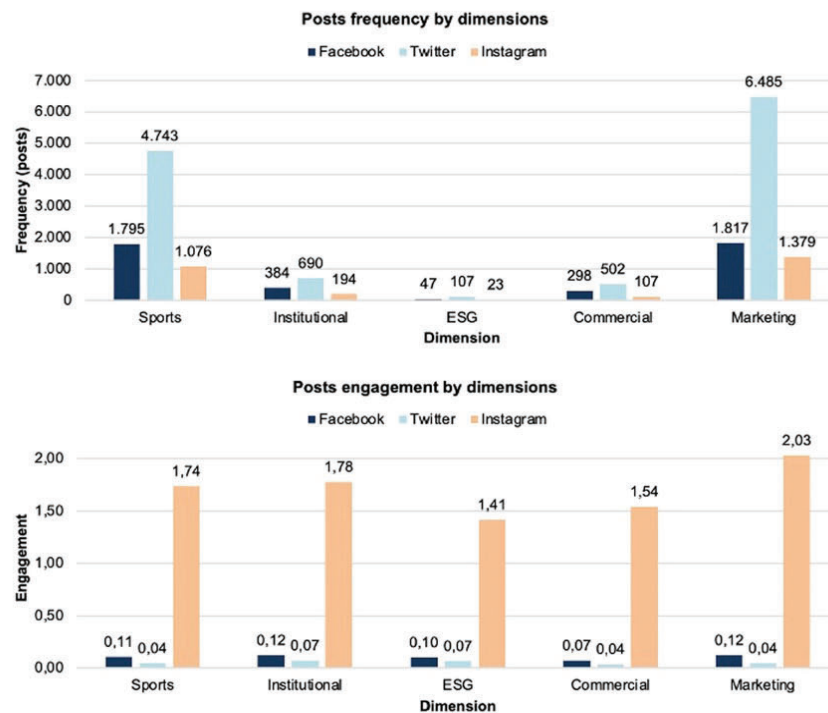


Fig. 3 Posts frequency and engagement by dimensions. Categorisation in the posts' dimensions and their relationship with the engagement generated by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram of the football clubs analysed.

Table 4 Types of formats and engagement.

Format	Facebook		Twitter		Instagram	
	n	Engagement means	n	Engagement means	n	Engagement means
Text	58	0.06	2499	0.02	0	0.00
Image	89	0.23	1534	0.00	147	2.20
Text/Link	136	0.07	470	0.03	7	1.72
Text/Video	1265	0.12	2239	0.07	550	1.59
Text/Video/Link	94	0.09	313	0.04	12	0.93
Text/Image	2031	0.13	4412	0.07	1986	1.95
Text/Image/Link	520	0.07	832	0.03	50	1.49
Video	72	0.10	47	0.03	13	1.84
Text/Image/Polls	19	0.03	29	0.04	8	1.93
Others	79	0.05	169	0.03	22	1.74

Combinations of formats used, and engagement means generated by Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts.

Discussion

Nowadays, sports organisations and athletes use social media for communication purposes, brand positioning, visibility (Maderer et al., 2018; Winand et al., 2019; Zakerian et al., 2022) and even for potential business (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015), dedicating effort and resources. Previous studies reinforce the need to categorise the message delivered to understand this phenomenon according to the objective (Filo et al., 2015) and content analysis for effect (Meng et al., 2015). However, its optimal use still leaves many questions. The complexity of the market is evolving towards the need to understand the fan as a premise in a sector characterised by its high emotional charge. In the past, strategies focused on attracting and retaining fans. However, the current trend shows increased relevance in generating engagement (Oviedo et al., 2014)

to generate links with fans. The sports industry, especially in the digital environment, is in an era where the goal is not just getting new followers and post social media content but interact and engage “to know the users better”.

First, this study provides evidence of relevant frequency-engagement relationships according to the dimensions of the study, depending on the type of social media used (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Regarding the dimensions of the content published, the posts related to “Marketing” and “Sport” are the most frequent due to the natural and traditional use of these tools as communicative, brand positioning and informative elements (Lee and Kahle, 2016; Rehman et al., 2022; Winand et al., 2019). This is attributable to the need for clubs to generate emotional content (such as videos or images of past iconic matches or

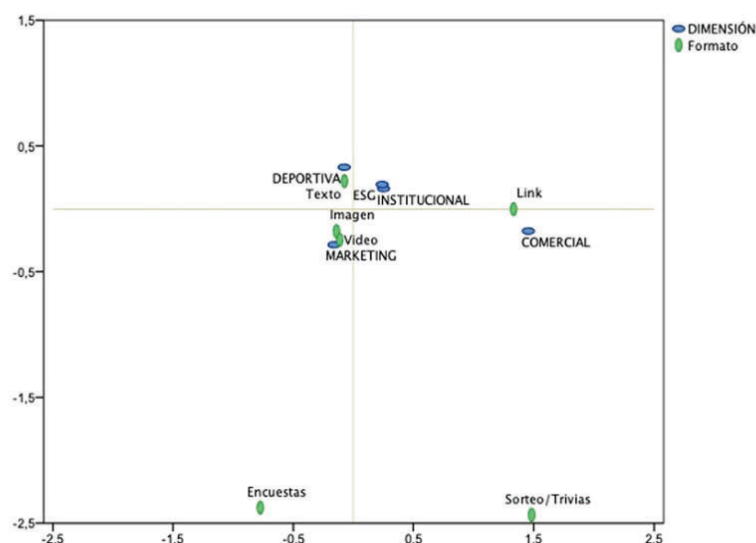


Fig. 4 Correspondence analysis (dimensions and formats).

campaigns involving athletes), on the one hand, and to broadcast messages alluding to sporting performance and results. Nevertheless, the findings show different engagement impacts not directly linked to the frequency of the posts but influenced by other elements, such as the social media platform, the dimension of the content and the format. The evidence shows there are specific content dimensions that statistically generate more engagement in each platform.

On Facebook, the most traditional platform football clubs use provides a more balanced frequency-engagement ratio, with a strong engagement with “commercial” content. This platform was one of the social media platforms that started monetising in other industries, characterised for its high brand impact, where the know-how and the platform interphase are more friendly to focus on this type of posts (and in some cases, to launch joint posts with brands). Even with the positive engagement impact of this platform, it is observed that efforts of this nature in the digital sphere are scarce in comparison to the rest, making this a relevant aspect in the spectrum of growth and an opportunity to explore, especially with the new assets that are appearing in the market and the growth of e-commerce.

On Twitter, on the other hand, the dimension that works best for engaging in “Institutional” is linked to “Sports”, “Marketing” and “Commercial” content, but not with “ESG”. However, the “ESG” linked with “Commercial” dimensions statically gets significantly more impact on this platform. The “ESG” dimension is emerging as this platform is used for promoting socio-political activities and promoting more altruistic purposes as previous authors as López-Carril and Anagnostopoulos (2020), and Sharpe et al. (2020) noted. This strategy shows a possible intention to use social media not only for marketing (communication) or sporting purposes but also as an element with socio-political aspects. The nature of Twitter as a microblogging site with the highest number of posts with the lower means of engagement, is more attractive for the audience looking for quick and summarised information because of its ability to increase the visibility and awareness of fans (Abeza et al., 2017). Sports managers can focus on this type of message for a potential higher engagement on Twitter.

In contrast, on Instagram, the focus is on “Marketing” content. This platform shows the lowest number of post frequency, with a high engagement means, attributable to the platform’s audio-visual formats and more interactive content, ratifying its growing popularity among users. As a fast-growing platform, there is a major link with “Sports”, “Institutional” and “Commercial” dimensions, which makes it an ideal platform for emotional content, easy to connect with brands, athletes, and sports properties, counting with a larger and more varied audience looking mainly, as the evidence suggests, for entertainment and club’s closeness perception. Therefore, like Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018), we recommend sports managers use Instagram for marketing purposes, considering the context as a relevant factor.

Finally, this study reveals the post format’s relevance as another key element. In this sense, on Facebook, the highest engagement values are generated by “Image” and “Text/Image” formats, as on Instagram and Twitter; however, in each social media platform, the frequencies generated by these records are different. In any case, the power of the image as valuable content in marketing stands out, as it has also been highlighted in previous studies (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2022; Machado et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the results obtained regarding the engagement triggered by video format posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are not as conclusive, as other studies have pointed out (e.g., Su et al., 2020). Probably because these social media are not focused on that format as other social media such as TikTok or YouTube may be. Regardless, based on the results obtained, it is necessary for sports managers and academics to continue to explore and make the appropriate combinations of the dimensions of content type categorised in this study, the publication format, as well as the social media used to channel them.

Theoretical implications. Built upon the framework of relationship marketing, this study brings theoretical value to the realms of sports marketing, sports management, and fan engagement, spanning across four distinct lines of action.

Firstly, the research introduces a novel theoretical approach to social media strategies by employing a 5-dimensional content categorisation system aligned with the strategic pillars of football organisations. Previous studies have predominantly approached

the role of social media in sports reactively, primarily focusing on communication and branding aspects. In contrast, this study contributes to the literature by adopting a strategic perspective towards social media, establishing a linkage between the study dimensions and football club strategies. This foundation paves the way for future research to delve deeper into each proposed dimension, potentially identifying sub-groups and exploring them in greater detail. The proposed dimensions serve to systematically organise the primary facets of football organisations for digital context analysis, a realm of increasing importance within the sports industry. As such, this work marks a pioneering step towards a novel approach in this area of study.

Secondly, this study establishes a fresh frequency-engagement approach for social network management, dispelling the notion that post frequency directly correlates with generated engagement. In doing so, this work highlights additional pivotal factors beyond post frequency that influence engagement among users of football-related social media. This perspective is aligned with the ethos of Web 2.0, underscoring the significance of engaging and connecting with fans.

Thirdly, from a theoretical perspective, this study introduces an innovative analytical proposition focusing on prominent international football clubs. This innovation is realised through the calculation and translation of engagement ratios, facilitating cross-entity comparisons independent of geographical location and follower count. The instrument developed and applied in this study acts as a tool to identify valuable digital practices within the industry.

Finally, this study stands out by conducting simultaneous analyses of posts across three prominent social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), adopting a distinctive multi-platform approach that is seldom observed in comparable studies which often focus on a single social media platform. Gaining insights into the effects of cross-platform and cross-format postings can empower sports managers to make strategic decisions with a comprehensive perspective.

Practical implications. This study introduces a novel practical tool designed for the computation of fan engagement across the Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts of football clubs globally. Consequently, sports managers can employ this instrument to gain a more realistic comprehension of the performance of social media accounts belonging to clubs. Furthermore, the developed tool facilitates the assessment of fan engagement in relation to the content type being published. This capability can aid sports managers in fortifying the bond between clubs and their followers by generating heightened value through strategic social media initiatives.

It is important to note that sports managers should consider both internal factors (club tradition, organisational culture) and external factors (competition, fan behaviour, sports results) within the context of clubs. This consideration is essential for developing and planning optimal digital strategies and for generating the best possible engagement with the audience. This research furnishes empirical evidence for understanding, in a practical and actionable manner, the pivotal components of a social media post. This understanding permits the visualisation of optimal combinations of these elements, thereby increasing the likelihood of sports managers guiding the club toward success and fostering substantial user engagement. Therefore, football team managers can apply the findings of this study to plan, monitor, and evaluate the club's social media content for increased engagement and "closeness" with digital fans. They can combine various formats based on individual post requirements to achieve the desired results. Additionally, football team managers can analyse club identity and overall strategies more practically and coherently, facilitating the planning and execution

of more effective commercial, brand positioning, institutional, and other relevant digital goals, with engagement serving as a key metric.

Conclusions

Social media plays a key role in today's sports management, especially in football clubs, due to its global reach and ability to interact and connect with fans in an industry of great popularity, emotional charge, and economic, political and social impact. This exploratory research grounded in relationship marketing theory provided a comparison of the engagement generated by elite football clubs under a unique categorisation proposal, derived and adapted from existing literature, which addresses dimensions linked to strategic areas of football organisations and takes into consideration key elements such as frequency and format combinations used to analyse the efficiency of posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Based on the results obtained, three lines of action stand out. First, concerning the type of content of the post, the "Marketing" and "Sports" dimensions are the preferred categories for football clubs in terms of post frequency. Regarding the engagement rates, on Facebook, the "Commercial" dimension shows an opportunity for growth and development due to the good engagement impact and due to the technological boom and the emergence of new digital assets. On Twitter, the emerging "ESG" linked to "Commercial" perspective and the "Institutional" dimension gets a significant impact on Twitter. On Instagram, the "Marketing" dimension linked to "Sports", "Institutional" and "Commercial", makes this platform ideal for emotional and marketing purposes. Second, concerning social media sources, this study provides evidence that Instagram is the social media that generates the most engagement using the lowest frequency of posts, followed by Facebook and Twitter. There is no direct evidence that links the post's frequency with the engagement generated. Finally, concerning the type of format of the post, the combination of formats that generates the most engagement in all cases is "Image", "Text/Image", and "Text/Video".

In short, this research stimulates a practical reflection for professionals and academics on the exploration, analysis, and evaluation of the management of social media in football clubs, using the observation method and content analysis techniques, applying elements of reliability and scientific rigour. The results obtained in this study offer practical and managerial implications in sports management, fan engagement, digital marketing, and social media, among others, through a proposal for categorisation and unique variables, taking engagement and its influence within the context of analysis as the axis.

The above conclusions should be taken into consideration viewing a series of limitations of the study. Firstly, the sample is limited to one sport (football) and not a large number of football clubs from different regions of the world. Secondly, despite the high number of posts analysed, these are located over a short period of time, and it may be relevant to analyse the engagement of posts at different times of the season, as these can influence the type of content and the engagement of fans with the posts. Thirdly, the study is limited to analysing engagement on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, leaving aside the analysis of the possibilities that other booming social media, such as TikTok or Twitch, are having in the field of marketing. Nevertheless, these limitations can be a starting point for future research lines including, among others: (a) to assess the application and feasibility of the technique for measuring social media engagement included in this work in other football organisations (e.g. leagues) or social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Twitch); (b) to incorporate new variables of study (e.g., size of the social mass of sports

clubs, financial budget, trophies won); (c) to conduct the study considering different phases of the sports season (e.g.; preseason, season, playoffs; postseason); (d) to analyse fan engagement relation of geographical regions to understand the digital user's behaviours; (e) to conduct the study adding engagement prediction models in social media; and (f) to incorporate this model on an AI language to suggest and predict digital user engagement in a simulated context.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Received: 18 April 2023; Accepted: 6 November 2023;

Published online: 21 November 2023

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the experts who contributed their excellent technical knowledge and valuable inputs to the development of this work and the Fanpage Karma platform for providing the software licence to support this research. Edgar Romero-Jara would like to acknowledge the funding support of the pre-doctoral scholarship "National Academic Excellence Scholarship Programme Carlos Antonio López (BECAL)", granted by the Government of Paraguay. Samuel López-Carril would like to acknowledge the funding support of the postdoctoral contract "Juan de la Cierva-formación 2021" (FJC2021-047779-I), granted by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and by the European Union through the NextGenerationEU Funds (Plan de Recuperación, Transformación y Resiliencia).

Author contributions

ER-J (corresponding author) and FS: conception and design of the work. ER-J and JM: analysis and methodology. ER-J and SL-C: literature review, interpretation of data, drafting of the work. FS: supervised this work. All authors made substantial contributions, discussed the results, revised critically for important intellectual content, and approved the final version of the work.

Ethical statement

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02357-8>.

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