

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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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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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-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 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 competitiveness 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 [Solanelas 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.

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 ([Kobylińska 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

| 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% |

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

Source(s): Authors own creation

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

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).

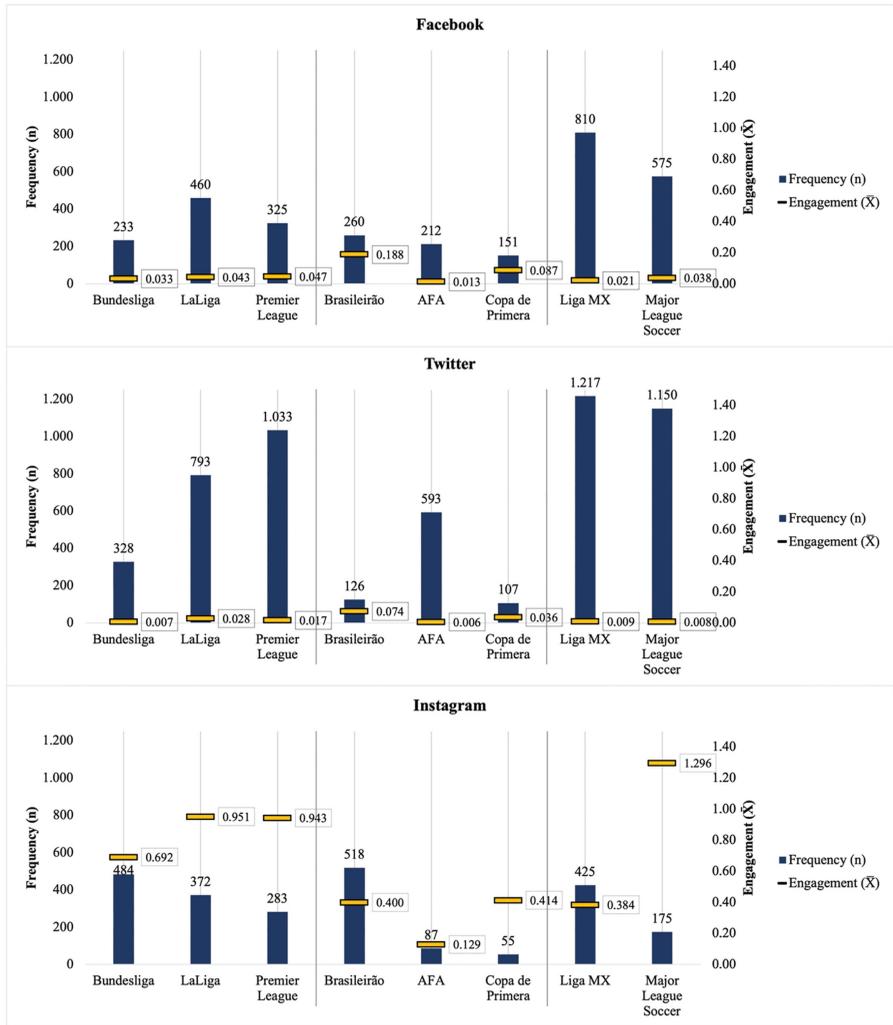
Quality vs. quantity: post frequency and engagement per leagues

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



Source(s): Authors own creation

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

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 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.

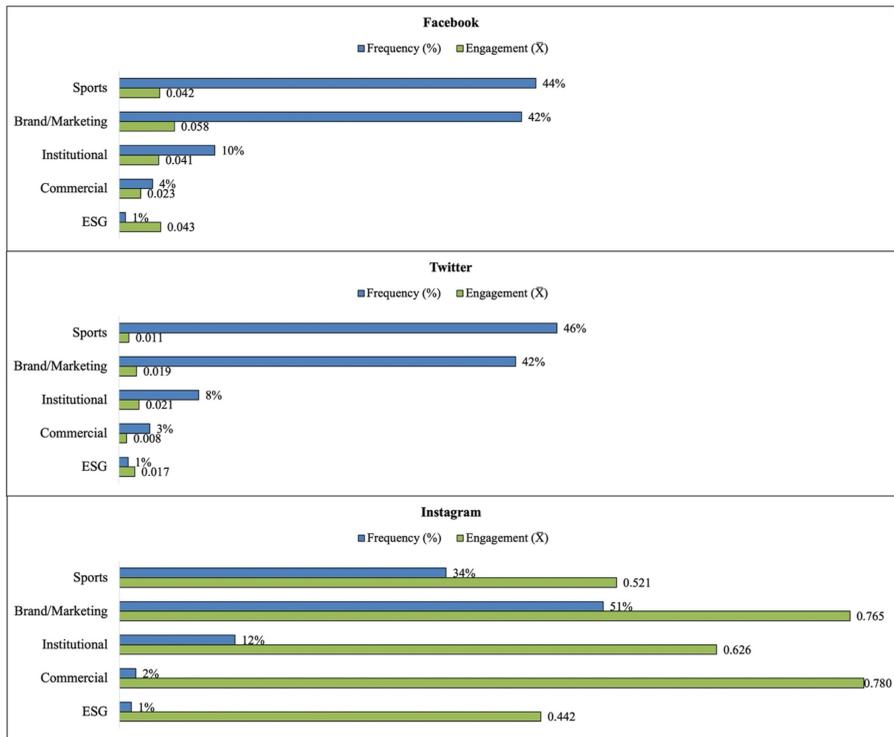


Figure 2. Frequency and engagement of posts by according of the dimensions

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

Table 3.
Post format
combinations and
corresponding
engagement means



Source(s): Authors own creation

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, 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 Kobylinska 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.

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