



Spanish football clubs and social media visibility: The case of LaLiga EA Sports (2023/24 season)

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ABSTRACT

This article quantitatively analyzes the social media visibility of the football clubs playing in the First Division of the Spanish Football League, known as LaLiga EA Sports, for sponsorship purposes. The study is based on the analysis of the presence of the 20 teams playing in the 2023/24 season of LaLiga EA Sports, on the social networks Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube. The “language used” in the Spanish social media accounts of these clubs is also studied as a variable on a sub-sample. The results indicate that 100% of the clubs analyzed have official accounts on Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube. While some clubs are only present in these four social networks, some are present in up to eight. The article ranks the clubs according to number of followers on their social networks. In this regard, two clubs stand out above the rest: Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. On the other hand, in global terms, Instagram is the social network with the largest quantitative following. It was also found that all clubs follow a low number of accounts, although with very different proportions. Finally, with regards to the analysis of the “language” used in their Spanish social media accounts, the clubs use, as expected, Spanish, but also English and even the language of their autonomous community.

Keywords: Spanish football clubs, social media, La Liga EA Sports, social networks, sport

INTRODUCTION

This article is part of the research project titled “Social networks and football in Spain”, which analyzes the social media visibility of the 20 clubs playing in the 2023/24 season of the First Division of the Spanish Football League, known as LaLiga EA Sports, for sponsorship purposes. The analysis of social media visibility of these football clubs aims to collect data to build a “virtual map”. Regarding the social networks under analysis, this first part of the study focuses on the main platforms, according to the latest study carried out by the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) in Spain (<https://iabspain.es/>), although other platforms may be included in the analysis, depending on the priorities of the clubs. The scope of the study extends when the “language” variable is included, since many clubs create parallel accounts in different languages on some social networks.

The main objective is to carry out the first of two evaluation stages, and to offer a first comparison of the social network visibility of the sample of clubs in two relatively close moments. The aim is to highlight the importance of social networks within this sport ecosystem. This article presents the results of the analysis of the first set of data available (September 2023). The study is mainly developed from a quantitative approach, although some specific variables (like “language”) are also examined from a more qualitative perspective.

IMPORTANCE OF SPORT IN SPAIN: PRACTICE AND SPECTACLE

The importance of sport communication in the framework of social networks derives from the very relevance of sport in Spanish society, as it has been frequently and unequivocally demonstrated (Cagigal, 1981), both as practice and spectacle (Cagigal, 1981). As a practice-sport, football is understood as the greatest

phenomenon in Spain, both from professional and non-professional points of view (Alcoba, 2005). In its professional dimension, football is currently the most practiced sport in Spain, as reflected by more than one million sport federation licenses, which is almost 70% more licenses than the second most important sport: basketball (Spain's National Sports Council, 2022): Football: 1,137,000; basketball: 377,000; hunting: 333,000; golf: 293,000.

On the other hand, the great relevance of sport communication in Spain derives from the importance given to sport in both traditional media (sport as spectacle) and new media (from the printed press to the Internet and social networks) and the management of the sport itself (Ballesteros-Herencia, 2014). With regards to traditional media, in television, the most watched programs each year correspond to sporting events, many of which are football matches. The popularity of football in Spanish television can be observed in the list of most watched events of each month during 2022 (Barlovento Comunicación, 2022) in which eight events correspond to football matches:

- January: Copa del Rey: Athletic – Barcelona (Telecinco)
- February: Copa del Rey: Athletic – Real Madrid (Telecinco)
- March: Antena 3 Noticias
- April: Penalties Betis – Valencia (Telecinco)
- May: Eurovision (La 1)
- June: UEFA Nations League (Spain – Czech Republic) (La 1)
- July: Women's EURO extra time (England – Spain) (La 1)
- August: Antena 3 News 1
- September: Football – UEFA Nations League (Portugal – Spain) (La 1)
- October #Elnovato Dabiz Muñoz (Antena 3)
- November: Football – World Cup – Qatar 2022 – Spain-Germany (preview) (La 1)
- December: Football – World Cup – Qatar 2022 – Penalties Morocco-Spain 1/8 final (La 1)

This list demonstrates the importance of football in Spanish media. The situation is no different on radio stations, whose annual list of most popular shows always include sport programs. According to the 2023 General Media Survey (Estudio General de Medios), carried out by AIMC (2023), the Spanish Media Research Association, three of the 10 most listened to programs are about sports: in third place (with 1,870,000 listeners), the Saturday edition of *Tiempo de Juego*, broadcast by the COPE network; in fourth place (with 1,856,000 listeners), the Sunday edition of *Carousel Deportivo*, broadcast by Cadena SER; and, in tenth place (with 767,000 listeners), *El Partidazo*, also broadcast by COPE. Finally, with regards to the press, according to AIMC (2023), three of the 10 most read newspapers specialize in sports: *As*, *Mundo Deportivo* and *Marca*, which is the most-read newspaper, above *El País* and *El Mundo*.

These are just a few examples that highlight the importance of sport in Spanish media. This phenomenon goes much further because, as Alcoba (2005) points out, "opinions about sport are not exclusive directed at sport spectacles, coaches and leaders" (p. 11). In fact, as the author indicates, "Sport has permeated all areas of society, and a multitude of all kinds of opinions have emerged around it. Sport, therefore, has become the most democratic activity of all those carried out by human beings" (Alcoba, 2005, p. 11). In the words of Alcoba, "not even politics generates such a number of diverse comments and concepts, expressed by people whose cultural education ranges from illiterates to intellectuals" (2005, p. 11). The importance of sport and sport communication in Spain is undeniable: "Sports journalism, despite the difficulties faced during its establishment, is currently the most sought-after specific genre of journalism. And it is full of vitality" (Alcoba, 2005, p. 74).

FOOTBALL ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE NEED OF BECOME THE NUMBER ONE

The aim of this article is to examine the use of social networks as a tool of external communication for football clubs. Despite this line of research has been approached from several perspectives (Boehmer & Rojas, 2017; Cárdenas, 2021), it has not been sufficiently explored although these types of studies are becoming

more common (Arias et al., 2023; Marín et al., 2024). Thus, the aim of this study is to develop a map of social media visibility to allow the longitudinal study of social networks, for as long as funding allows it.

In the world of media and communications, there have always been different quantitative rankings that have made it possible for media organizations to observe evolutions and trends, compare themselves, and compete to become the number one. For example, in the case of traditional media (the press, the digital press, television and radio), there is an eternal fight to reach the largest number of viewers, listeners or readers. These comparisons can be extrapolated to other areas (such as politics and economics, to mention a couple of other examples).

In the field of sport, and football in particular, these comparisons have been based on very different indicators (such as club members and masses of fans) and, for some years now, on social media visibility. Sometimes, these comparisons do not include all football clubs and, some other times, only include data available to their associates. This is the case of LaLiga Santander teams: Trends of the 2021-2022 season, developed by Blinkfire Analytics (2022) and other research works focused on the analysis of a particular season (Ballesteros-Herencia, 2021). These types of studies do not show fluctuations or evolution of followers or following (people or accounts one account follows on the platform), and leave out certain variables of interest, such as "language". Thus, given the importance of social networks for sport, especially for football in Spain, it becomes relevant to rank and map the social media visibility of the Spanish football clubs to observe their evolution over a certain period. As Alonso and Sidorenko (2022, p. 118) point out, social networks, *per se*, "function as both information producers and channels."

As Lobillo (2021) indicates, "social networks have enabled a major advance in terms of communication between organizations and their stakeholders. As in any field, the relationship of any type of organization with its different stakeholders is a crucial need that cannot be ignored. In the field of sport, this process has been no different" (p. 357). Therefore, football clubs must be aware of this need and consequently manage social networks professionally to make a coherent and appropriate use for the benefit of their public, knowing that, in one way or another, it can also be profitable in economic and social terms (Kuzma et al., 2014). Football clubs must also be aware that "the use of social networks also increases their commercial activity" (De Frutos et al., 2021, p. 2), and that these platforms act as links with the media (Varona & Sánchez, 2016). Thus, football clubs must undertake a deliberate and strategic management within the digital ecosystem, fostering a continual presence within the communicative landscape and such a presence demands a permanent and active management of their communication strategies and public image (Zamora et al., 2023, p. 76), whilst also navigating the challenges posed by disinformation (Abuín et al., 2023).

Here, it is important to mention that digital social networks are not very old although now "we have integrated a world dominated by networks and we are starting to understand how they affect us (Pinto & Cardoso, 2021, p. 3). They took their first steps in the 1990s (Herrero-Gutiérrez, 2019) and reached their splendor well into the 21st century. In other words, social media only have 20 years of history, but in such a short time social networks have already made many achievements and their popularity has skyrocketed. In fact, more than a decade ago, some authors had already indicated that:

Social networks and the philosophy 2.0 have been integrated into all kinds of organizations (be they for-profit, non-for-profit, public or private) to such an extent that the Web 2.0 also refers to business 2.0, politics 2.0 and government 2.0. These networks are spaces for interaction, business and debate (Túñez & Sixto, 2011, p. 212).

At its core, this underlying philosophy has not only persisted but also expanded exponentially over the years. Social networks serve multiple functions, including the ability to engage with specific audiences, for the promotion of products and services, dissemination of information and news, and notably, in the case of football clubs, for the purposes of branding (Cano, 2017), given the importance of brand visibility and awareness (Allagui & Breslow, 2016). Consequently, it is imperative for football clubs to achieve prominent followings on social media platforms. Such visibility in the digital domain is essential for fostering rapid engagement and cultivating a sense of connection (Romero et al., 2023) with all demographics of fans (McLean & Wainwright, 2009), particularly the younger generation, who represent the future sustenance of these clubs. In short, "the field of sports, as many others, distinctly recognizes the growing trend of using social networks

for promotional, informational and relational purposes" (Abuín et al., 2020, p. 95) and for one's own social responsibility (Abuín et al., 2021).

Approximations to the Rankings of Football Clubs in Spain

As outlined in previous sections, several studies have already addressed the use of social networks by Spanish football clubs. Almost all of them offer a transversal analysis and are valuable research works as they serve as a point of reference to subsequent studies. For example, in 2012, Olabe-Sánchez (2012) examined the digital communication of FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, focusing on new communication platforms, including social networks (p. 279). Then, in 2012, Sotelo investigated the presence of football clubs on social networks in the 2011/12 season and highlighted that some clubs still did not have official accounts on any social network (Sotelo, 2012, p. 222).

For his part, Ballesteros-Herencia (2021) studied the interaction of Spanish football clubs with social networks in the 2019/20 season, focusing on Facebook, Twitter (now X) and Instagram. The following year, Ballesteros-Herencia (2021), together with Herrero-Izquierdo, published a second work. Lobillo (2022) carried another important work in 2012, to analyze the structure of Spanish football clubs' communication departments. In 2016, Lobillo and Muñoz examined the role of social networks in the market expansion strategies of Spanish football clubs, carrying out a case study of the use of X in the Arabic language by Real Madrid CF and FC Barcelona. In 2022, Lobillo published a news study of Spanish football clubs and social media (Lobillo, 2022).

Some doctoral theses have also addressed sport and social networks. For example, Figuera Godoy (2021) studied social networks (Facebook and X) and football (during the 2017/18 season) and focused on the "violence" variable. It is also common to find more specific studies, like the ones developed by Sidorenko et al. (2022), which focused on the use of TikTok by Spanish clubs in the 2020/21 season; and the work of Tenorio et al. (2022), which examines the broadcasting of content by LaLiga clubs via TikTok as part of their marketing and communication strategies.

There are other research works within sports communication, but outside the scope of football clubs, like the study carried out by Rojas and Panal (2017) on the use of Instagram in three sports media: Bleacher Report, Marca and L'Equipe.

This work, which is based on these previous studies, and others that may arise, has the advantage of offering the same data through an open-access website that makes the information available to everyone once it has been published. This website also aims to become a reference in the search for bibliographic references related to social networks and football in Spain.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, HYPOTHESES, METHODS AND WORK PLAN

The main objective of this work is to present and disseminate the results corresponding to the 2023/24 season of the research project "Social networks and football in Spain". The four general objectives that guide the study are as follows:

- To evaluate the social media visibility of the football clubs playing in the First Division of the Spanish Football League, known as LaLiga EA Sports.
- To perform a transversal analysis and produce a ranking that allows for subsequent longitudinal analyses.
- To create a representative visual map to provide open-access data after the publication of results.
- To develop an open-access website to transfer and disseminate results.

These objectives are justified by the fact that:

"In recent years, research efforts have been made to bridge the gap created by the increasing influence of the Internet on sports, with a particular focus on football. This scholarly attention to the use of social networks by football organizations stems from the rapid incorporation of new technologies as pivotal communicative tools" (Ballesteros-Herencia & Herrero-Izquierdo, 2021, p. 59).

The general hypothesis is based on the idea that social networks play a fundamental role for football clubs in Spain, which take advantage of the high projection of social media just like many other personal and business agents. Based on this first assumption, five specific hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Real Madrid and Barcelona are the clubs with the highest number of followers in social networks (especially Facebook, X and Instagram), followed by Atlético de Madrid. There is certain homogeneity among the rest of the clubs, but no pattern can be established.

Justification: Due to their social significance, the Real Madrid and Barcelona football clubs have an undeniable social impact. Atletico Madrid is relevant to a lesser extent. The use of social media among the rest of the clubs is more homogeneous, although there could be significant differences. The justification lies in the fact that the clubs' social support is transferred to social networks, from a quantitative point of view.

H2: The social networks that are generally used by the 20 football clubs are Facebook and X, so the presence of all the clubs on these platforms is expected.

Justification: The most established social networks in Spain are Facebook and X, among other things, because they are the oldest. Football clubs as well as most companies (if we speak from a business point of view) began to seek social media visibility in these platforms, which were the most popular.

H3: Apart from Facebook and X, there is no other social network where 100% of the sample has an official account.

Justification: This hypothesis is based on the fact that, although in Spain there are other popular networks apart from Facebook and X, the use of the diversity of social platforms is so disparate that, to gain visibility, football clubs generally only choose one or two platforms, not all of them.

H4: In terms of the following (the users/accounts that are followed), it is very low among the sample of accounts.

Justification: This hypothesis is based on the premise that football clubs use social networks with a one-way perspective.

H5: In terms of the language used in social networks, there is no specific pattern since some clubs only use Spanish, while others use the language of their autonomous community and others employ foreign languages to make a greater international impact.

Justification: This hypothesis derives from the linguistic diversity existing in Spain which, in some way, also affects the clubs' use of different languages.

METHOD AND SAMPLE

This study uses predominantly quantitative methods and techniques. The analysis of social media accounts is carried out manually and with the use Fanpage, Karma and Twitonomy, which are online tools for social media analytics and monitoring. Quantitative techniques are the most appropriate because they allow us "to study and analyze communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative way, in order to measure certain variables" (Wimmer & Dominick, 1996, p. 70). This study responds perfectly to the use of quantification described by Wimmer and Dominick (1996), among other things, because it aims to establish periodic and systematic replications and because quantitative techniques emphasize the possibility that this type of study can be replicated: "it is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21).

In addition, quantitative techniques are also considered objective techniques that allow for systematic descriptions (Berelson, 1984; Riffe et al., 1998); and as such, this system has been validated in similar works applied to other fields of communication (Herrero-Gutiérrez et al., 2021). There are multiple variables that can be analyzed now, and in the future, based on the indicators offered by the selected social media analytical platforms, having as the main objective the creation of a virtual map, which is a visual presentation tool that is frequently employed in research (e.g., Pan & Yang, 2023; Pérez et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2023).

Moreover, quantitative techniques have been used in other types of studies on social networks in the realm of sports, such as Abuín et al. (2020, p. 94), who analyzed "Spanish elite athletes' use of Instagram as a public relations tool", Ballesteros-Herencia (2021, p. 18-19) (own translation), who examined "Spanish football

Table 1. Initial content analysis table

| | | | | |
|------|---|-----|-------------|---------|
| Club | Presence on Facebook | Yes | Likes | |
| | | No | Followers | |
| | Presence on X | Yes | Followers | |
| | | No | Following | |
| | Presence on Instagram | Yes | Followers | |
| | | No | Following | |
| | Presence on YouTube | Yes | Subscribers | |
| | | No | | |
| | About the 5 clubs followed the most on the previous 4 social networks | | Language | Spanish |
| | | | | Other |

Source: Author's own creation

clubs' interaction with social networks" (own translation); and Sidorenko et al. (2021), who focused on the Spanish premiere league' use of TikTok.

Likewise, other research works have also advocated the use of quantitative methods in this type of exploratory studies, such as Tejedor et al. (2020), who measured the presence of the main European football teams on Facebook.

A content analysis sheet was created (**Table 1**) to analyze those indicators related to the social media presence and followers of the selected football clubs, which is needed to test the research hypotheses.

It is important to bear in mind that this first approach only takes into account the social media accounts that are linked in the Spanish-language websites of the football clubs. This does not mean that the language of the social media accounts can only be Spanish since, sometimes, these accounts – initially in Spanish – are also used to post content in other languages (foreign or co-official in Spain). However, those accounts aimed exclusively at audiences with a language other than Spanish will not be analyzed. For example, if a club has three accounts in X (Spanish, English and Chinese), only the Spanish-language account will be analyzed, although said account, occasionally, makes posts in languages other than Spanish. The systematic method used in this study guarantees its replication to confirm the results are reliable.

Sample

The sample is composed of the 20 football clubs playing in the 2023/24 season of the First Division of the Spanish Football League, known as LaLiga EA Sports. Data collection took place in September 2023. The study of the language in which clubs communicate in social media platforms, will be based on a sub-sample composed of the five clubs with the highest number of followers in any of the four main social networks. The analysis of the additional language variable will be applied on them. The sub-sample is only for the analysis of Spanish language account: those in the top 5 positions of any of the four main social network; totally they are 7 clubs.

RESULTS

Regarding social media presence (**Table 2**), it has been found that all clubs are present on four social networks: Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube. However, some clubs, as it has already been shown in another study (Herrero-Gutiérrez & Ye, 2023, unpublished), have a presence on more social networks, but this presence is not homogeneous.

A ranking of the football clubs according to the number of followers in each of the four main social networks has also been established (**Table 3**). In the case of Facebook, the ranking is based on the number of "likes" and when this indicator was not available (as in the cases of Alavés, Real Sociedad and Rayo Vallecano), the number of followers was considered instead.

Table 2. Social media presence of clubs in LaLiga 2023/24 season

| Club | Facebook | | X | | Instagram | | YouTube | Other networks |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|----------------|
| | Likes | Followers | Followers | Following | Followers | Following | Subscribers | |
| Alavés | Not Found | 789,000 | 249,641 | 372 | 132,678 | 123 | 20,600 | 2 |
| Almería | 2,900,000 | 2,900,000 | 530,923 | 10 | 2,141,864 | 1 | 250,000 | 1 |
| Athletic Club de Bilbao | 2,200,000 | 2,300,000 | 1,000,657 | 127 | 728,099 | 102 | 120,000 | 2 |
| Atlético Madrid | 15,000,000 | 16,000,000 | 5,515,784 | 106 | 16,210,867 | 143 | 348,000 | 2 |
| FC Barcelona | 103,000,000 | 113,000,000 | 21,603,946 | 109 | 123,865,507 | 85 | 15,800,000 | 3 |
| Real Betis | 3,100,000 | 3,400,000 | 1,037,423 | 70 | 1,681,420 | 53 | 497,000 | 2 |
| Cádiz | 1,700,000 | 2,000,000 | 245,955 | 204 | 299,625 | 105 | 40,000 | 4 |
| Celta de Vigo | 2,100,000 | 2,200,000 | 523,682 | 69 | 423,890 | 57 | 58,000 | 4 |
| Getafe | 1,200,000 | 1,300,000 | 217,336 | 71 | 398,139 | 46 | 19,500 | 1 |
| Girona | 1,300,000 | 1,300,000 | 310,558 | 218 | 337,963 | 117 | 14,300 | 1 |
| Granada | 618,000 | 650,000 | 431,968 | 75 | 346,369 | 77 | 24,300 | 2 |
| Mallorca | 1,400,000 | 1,400,000 | 360,794 | 275 | 231,801 | 255 | 58,300 | 1 |
| Osasuna | 1,500,000 | 1,600,000 | 294,879 | 176 | 303,155 | 108 | 30,600 | 1 |
| Real Sociedad | Not Found | 1,400,000 | 754,141 | 79 | 692,801 | 76 | 131,000 | 3 |
| Rayo Vallecano | Not Found | 370,000 | 463,594 | 108 | 191,631 | 59 | 22,900 | 0 |
| Real Madrid | 114,000,000 | 119,000,000 | 49,010,756 | 63 | 147,235,674 | 50 | 11,100,000 | 4 |
| Sevilla | 4,300,000 | Not Found | 1,174,583 | 112 | 3,073,188 | 136 | 220,000 | 2 |
| UD Las Palmas | 932,000 | 949,000 | 299,638 | 154 | 232,556 | 60 | 23,600 | 2 |
| Valencia | 4,100,000 | Not Found | 1,373,654 | 175 | 1,223,547 | 99 | 129,000 | 5 |
| Villarreal | 2,100,000 | 2,300,000 | 647,062 | 195 | 1,670,449 | 169 | 66,800 | 1 |

Source: Author's own creation

Table 3. Ranking of football clubs according to followers in the 4 main social networks (highest to lowest)

| Facebook | X | Instagram | YouTube |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Real Madrid | Real Madrid | Real Madrid | FC Barcelona |
| FC Barcelona | FC Barcelona | FC Barcelona | Real Madrid |
| Atlético Madrid | Atlético Madrid | Atlético Madrid | Real Betis |
| Sevilla | Valencia | Sevilla | Atlético Madrid |
| Valencia | Sevilla | Almería | Almería |
| Real Betis | Real Betis | Real Betis | Sevilla |
| Almería | Athletic Club de Bilbao | Villarreal | Real Sociedad |
| Athletic Club de Bilbao | Real Sociedad | Valencia | Valencia |
| Celta de Vigo | Villarreal | Athletic Club de Bilbao | Athletic Club de Bilbao |
| Villarreal | Almería | Real Sociedad | Villarreal |
| Cádiz | Celta de Vigo | Celta de Vigo | Mallorca |
| Osasuna | Rayo Vallecano | Getafe | Celta de Vigo |
| Mallorca | Grenada | Granada | Cádiz |
| Real Sociedad | Mallorca | Girona | Osasuna |
| Girona | Girona | Osasuna | Grenada |
| Getafe | UD Las Palmas | Cádiz | UD Las Palmas |
| UD Las Palmas | Osasuna | UD Las Palmas | Rayo Vallecano |
| Alavés | Alavés | Mallorca | Alavés |
| Granada | Cádiz | Rayo Vallecano | Getafe |
| Rayo Vallecano | Getafe | Alavés | Girona |

Source: Author's own creation

As it can be seen, the results show that all of the 20 clubs also have a presence on YouTube, in addition to the aforementioned social networks (Facebook, X and Instagram). On the other hand, together, the 20 clubs have a combined total of more than 300 million followers on Instagram (1st position), more than 264 million on Facebook (2nd position), 86 million on X (3rd position) and more than 28 million subscribers on YouTube (4th position). As for the clubs' number of followed accounts on X and Instagram (Table 4), which are the only social networks that provide this information, the results show that it is not very high in proportion to the number of followers.

Table 4. Clubs' following on X and Instagram

| Club | X | Instagram |
|-------------------------|-----|-----------|
| FC Barcelona | 109 | 85 |
| Real Madrid | 63 | 50 |
| Real Betis | 70 | 53 |
| Atlético Madrid | 106 | 143 |
| Almería | 10 | 1 |
| Sevilla | 112 | 136 |
| Real Sociedad | 79 | 76 |
| Valencia | 175 | 99 |
| Athletic Club de Bilbao | 127 | 102 |
| Villarreal | 195 | 169 |
| Mallorca | 275 | 255 |
| Celta de Vigo | 69 | 57 |
| Cádiz | 204 | 105 |
| Osasuna | 176 | 108 |
| Granada | 75 | 77 |
| UD Las Palmas | 154 | 60 |
| Rayo Vallecano | 108 | 59 |
| Alavés | 372 | 123 |
| Getafe | 71 | 46 |
| Girona | 218 | 117 |

Source: Author's own creation

Table 5. Languages used in clubs' Spanish social media accounts

| Club | Facebook | X | Instagram | YouTube |
|-----------------|---------------------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Real Madrid | Spanish/English | Spanish | Spanish/English | Spanish |
| FC Barcelona | Spanish, English, Catalan | Spanish | English | Spanish/Catalan |
| Atlético Madrid | Spanish & English | Spanish | Spanish | Spanish |
| Betis | Spanish | Spanish | Spanish | Spanish |
| Valencia | Spanish | Spanish | Spanish | Spanish |
| Sevilla | Spanish | Spanish | Spanish | Spanish |
| Almería | Spanish, English, Arabic | Spanish | Spanish/Arabic | Spanish |

Source: Author's own creation

For the study of the "language" variable, it is necessary to consider previous studies, such as that of Galán et al. (2021), who examined the language in which Spanish football clubs communicated in the social networks Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, in the 2020/21 season. This study concluded that:

- 100% of the clubs used Spanish on Facebook, although some clubs gave priority to the regional language or English.
- Not all clubs belonging to an autonomous community that has a co-official language used such language on their social networks.
- Some clubs only use one language, while others use two or three. However, none of the clubs only used the language of their autonomous community.
- Not all clubs used English even when they were participating in European competitions.
- 95% of the clubs had another Twitter account (now X) to inform in another language.
- Spanish prevails on YouTube and Instagram.

To complete the data obtained in this study of the 2023/24 season, an analysis has been performed on the Spanish-language account of a sub-sample of seven clubs: those in the top 5 positions of any of the four main social network (**Table 5**). The analysis focused on the last publications made in September 2023.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis has confirmed the first hypothesis. In this regard, it is concluded that Real Madrid, Barcelona and Atlético de Madrid have the most followers on social networks. On Facebook, X and Instagram, Real Madrid is the most followed, while on YouTube FC Barcelona occupies this position. Atlético de Madrid is the

third most followed on Facebook, X and Instagram and the fourth most followed on YouTube. Betis is the third most followed on YouTube. Other clubs that are among the top 5 most followed on at least one social network are Valencia, Betis, Sevilla and Almeria, although their positions across different social networks does not follow any pattern.

Almeria's large number of followers on social networks stands out because this club does not have a large fandom behind it. The possible cause is that the club's owner and president is from Saudi Arabia and many followers come from this country. It is important to note that this not the only case. There are certain clubs that, despite not being in the top positions, have a large number of followers from foreign countries (Saudi Arabia, China, Japan, etc.) because they have a manager or a player from that country.

On the other hand, the second hypothesis is rejected. Facebook and X are two of the most used social networks among the 20 football clubs, but Instagram is the most popular social network when one takes into consideration the total number of followers. Instagram, the social network that uses image as its main tool, has attracted, quantitatively speaking, the largest number of followers for the clubs, even though most clubs had older accounts in Facebook and X. In general terms, the great visibility reached through social networks stands out given that not so many years ago, just over a decade, a study (Sotelo, 2012) showed that three out of 20 clubs were not on Facebook or X and two of them were not even in a single social network.

On the other hand, the evidence rejects the third hypothesis, which expected Facebook and X to be the only social networks where 100% of the sample would have an official account". The results show that two other social networks are also used by all the clubs: Instagram and YouTube.

The fourth hypothesis is accepted because, based on the analysis of X and Instagram, the club's following of other accounts is low. The club with the largest following is Alavés, with 372 on X. The non-participant observation analysis of this account indicates that the followed accounts belong to: Coaches/managers, players, members of the Board of Directors, other official accounts of the club, sponsors, supporters/fans, institutions, public offices, associations, federations, media, other Clubs, partners/shareholders.

The clubs' following is uneven, since there are cases like Alavés, with the highest number of followed accounts (including those previously described) and totally opposite cases, such as Almeria, which only follows one person on Instagram: the owner of the club. The followers/following ratio is decisive to verify the hypothesis. In the case of X, the most extreme case is Real Madrid which, proportionally, follows 1 account for every 777,949 followers. Alavés would be on the opposite side, following 1 account for every 671 followers. As far as Instagram is concerned, Real Madrid is again the one with the highest proportion, 1 followed account for every 2,944,713 million followers, while Mallorca is on the opposite side, 1 followed account for every 909 followers.

Finally, in terms of the language used, there are diverse and disparate cases:

- On Facebook, the most used language is Spanish, although some clubs use English, the language of their autonomous community or, in some cases, other languages.
- On X, it is common for clubs to use Spanish in their Spanish account, because in this social network most clubs have alternative accounts to communicate in languages other than Spanish.
- On Instagram, the most common language is Spanish. It should be borne in mind that on this social network, which favors image over text, what clubs often write in their post is only one word or a hashtag.
- On YouTube, the language used the most in the title or description of videos is Spanish.

Once the research has been carried out, the goal of this project is to transfer and disseminate the results and data, freely and openly. Therefore, once the results are published, they will be made freely available through the website <https://deporteyredes.com/>.

Measurements in the form of rankings are common and various studies have focused on developing them. However, some of these studies do not evaluate the evolution of such rankings, which is an area of opportunity. For this reason, this study proposes the periodic monitoring of social media visibility and the open-access dissemination of the results. The main purpose of this research project is to lay the foundations for the permanent, systematic, and open-access analysis of an area of study of increasing interest.

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