Research Article

# Spanish football clubs on social media: Use of social networking accounts in languages other than Spanish

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
|---|---|
| | The objective of this article is to examine the utilization of social media accounts in languages other than Spanish by Spanish football clubs, within the framework of a broader inquiry into the social media visibility of sports entities. The research employs a strictly quantitative methodology, centered on the content analysis of the social media accounts belonging to the 20 clubs participating in the 2023/24 season of LaLiga EA Sports. The findings reveal that virtually all clubs manage accounts in languages other than Spanish. Among these football clubs, X emerges as the predominant social network for managing multiple accounts in different languages. Notably, following Spanish, English stands out as the most prevalent language, although other languages such as French, Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese are increasingly gaining prominence. |

## INTRODUCTION

This article is part of the research project titled "Social networks and football in Spain", which analyses the online visibility of clubs participating in the First Division of the Spanish Football League during the 2023/24 season. Based on multiple analyses that are being simultaneously performed, the project aims to generate interest in the creation of an observatory of sports in social networks (Ye & Herrero-Gutiérrez, 2024), although this will be determined according to the funding that is raised. This part of the project focuses on the 20 clubs playing in the 2023/24 season of LaLiga EA Sports. Once this article has been published, the results of the study will be made publicly available on the website https://deporteyredes.com/ (**Figure 1**), which aspires to become a benchmark in the development of the observatory project. As for social media, the analysis will take into account the main networks in Spain (based on data collected by the www.iabspain.es website), since the study starts in this country, although comparative studies with other countries can be made in the future.

"Social media are having a profound impact on societal processes, from political debate to everyday communication" (Bruns, 2015, p. 1) – at the same "there is no question that many people rely on social media as a significant source for information, including news" (Eveleth et al., 2024), based on the importance of social networks worldwide and their growing importance in the day-to-day communication of sports organizations and its importance (Fernández et al., 2019), the main objective of this part of the study is to perform a cross-sectional analysis and open the possibility of longitudinal studies (Herrero-Gutiérrez, 2024). It is important to bear in mind that "currently there is no dimension of life that is excluded from the transformation generated
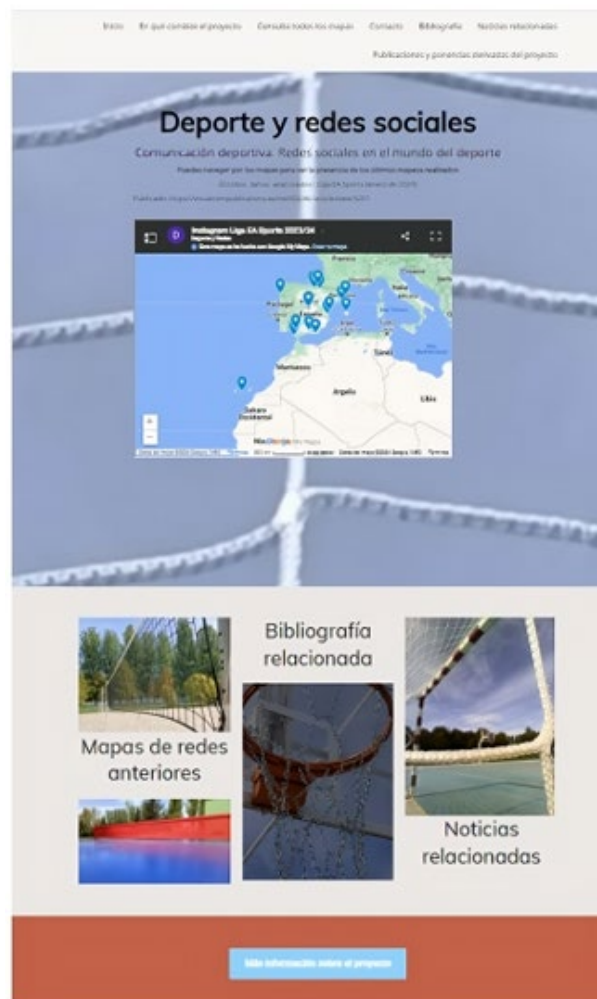
**Figure 1.** Screenshot of the main page of deporteyredes.com (Source: https://deporteyredes.com/)

by technological innovation and the possibilities of managing information" (Cornejo & Tapia, 2011, p. 220), which can also be applied to the world of sports. According to Izquierdo Expósito et al. (2017), social networks are now a worldwide phenomenon that is changing the ways people communicate and share information, which has led to the creation of specialized work accounts. In addition, the structure of many sectors has also changed, as have the relationships between the different participants (Túñez-López et al., 2011). Likewise, as Cornejo and Tapia (2011) point out, "social networks on the Internet are acquiring an unusual importance, are very diverse in terms of the public they target and the way they work" (p. 122).

## The Importance of Sport: Sport-Practice and Sport-Spectacle

The importance of sports communication has been evident for decades. Already in 1981, Cagigal (1981) distinguished between two ways of understanding sport: as a practice and as a spectacle. Sport as a practice would be understood as the sport that is socially welcomed by a society for its practice, which may or may not coincide with sport as a spectacle, which would focus on what is socially welcomed from a spectacle and recreational point of view. A clear example of this, in the case of Spain, can be found in the number of licenses granted for the main four sports, according to the Higher Sports Council (Consejo Superior de Deportes, 2023).

- Football: 1,248,511
- Basketball: 411,885
- Hunting: 330,423
- Golf: 297,015

While football and basketball can be understood as both practice and spectacle sports, the same cannot be said for hunting or golf, which despite being the third and fourth most practiced sports, respectively, according to the number of federation licenses, do not constitute a spectacle sport from the point of view of media reception. Thus, to become a spectacle, sports need media support, i.e., to occupy a certain number of hours on radio or television, or pages in a printed newspaper or digital spaces. In this case, hunting and golf do not enjoy media relevance or coverage. The importance of football in the media is illustrated by its dominance in the list of the most-watched events of 2023 and 2024 in Spain:

- January 2023: Football. Copa del Rey: Real Madrid – Atlético de Madrid (La 1)
- February 2023: Football. Club World Cup: Real Madrid – Al Hilal (Telecinco)
- March 2023: Football. Copa del Rey: Real Madrid – Barcelona (La 1)
- April 2023: Football. Copa del Rey: Barcelona – Real Madrid (La 1)
- May 2023: Football. Copa del Rey: Real Madrid – Osasuna (La 1)
- June 2023: Football. UEFA Nations League: Croatia – Spain (La 1)
- July 2023: 23J Final Debate (La 1)
- August 2023: Post-football. Women's World Championship: Spain – England (La 1)
- September 2023: Football. European Championship Qualifiers: Spain – Cyprus (La 1)
- October 2023: Football. European Championship Qualifiers: Norway – Spain (La 1)
- November 2023: Football. Euro Qualifiers: Spain – Georgia (La 1)
- December 2023: Campanadas 2023 (Antena 3)
- January 2024: Football. Copa del Rey: Atlético de Madrid – Real Madrid (La 1)
- February 2024: Football. Copa del Rey: Athletic de Bilbao – Atlético de Madrid (La 1)
- March 2024: Football. Copa del Rey: España – Brasil (La 1)
- April 2024: Football. Copa del Rey: Athletic de Bilbao – Mallorca (La 1)
- May 2024: Eurovisión (La 1)
- June 2024: Football. Euro 2024: España – Georgia (La 1)
- July 2024: Football. Euro 2024. Final. España – Inglaterra (La 1)

This list clearly shows the importance of sport in Spain. In more than 90% of cases, a sporting event has been the most watched event of the month and 100% of those sporting events are men's football. The analysis of radio also illustrates the importance of sports in Spanish media: according to the latest media survey (Estudio General de Medios) carried out by the Spanish Association of Media Research (AIMC, 2023), the list of the 10 most popular programs in 2023 includes 3 sports programs: the Saturday edition of Tiempo de Juego, broadcast by the COPE network, occupies the third place, with 1,870,000 listeners; the Sunday edition of Carousel Deportivo, broadcast by the SER network, occupies the fourth place, with 1,856,000 listeners; and El Partidazo, also broadcast by COPE, occupies the tenth place, with 767,000 listeners. With regards to the press, according to the AIMC (2023), three of the ten most-read newspapers are specialized 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 illustrate the importance of sport in the media in Spain, a phenomenon that goes much further:

> "… because opinions about sport are not exclusively about spectacle sport, coaches and sports leaders. Sport has invaded all areas of society, arousing around it a multitude of judgments for all tastes and flavors. Sport, therefore, has become the most democratic activity of all those carried out by human beings" (Alcoba, 2005, p. 11).

The relevance of sport is such that "not even politics generates such a volume of diverse comments and concepts, expressed by people whose cultural education ranges from the illiterate to the intellectual" (Alcoba, 2005, p. 11). The importance of sports and sports communication in Spain is undeniable: "Sports journalism,

despite the difficulties it faced during its establishment, is currently the most sought-after specific genre of journalism. And there it is, full of vitality" (Alcoba, 2005, p. 74).

### Social Media in Football: The Need to Be the Number One

This work aims to set a starting point for the creation of an observatory of social networks in the world of sports (Herrero-Gutiérrez, 2024). Since social networks have acquired this indisputable importance in which all kinds of agents are immersed (Arias et al., 2023), it is normal for organizations, within each area, to want to be number one in terms of social media followers, likes, shares and comments, to gain visibility in such an important showcase (Abuín et al., 2020). The same thing happens with sports organizations, whose use of social media has already been studied (Boehmer & Rojas, 2017; Cárdenas, 2021). These new works aim to create and promote a work tool that allows the establishment of work routines and continuity and gives visibility to such a current reality.

In the field of communication, there has always been competition to be number one. In the case of Spain, television channels and radio stations compete to reach the largest audience share, while newspapers compete to have the highest sales and circulation. Since the emergence of the Internet, websites started to be ranked, according to the number of visits, and since social networks exist, they also compete for users. Several research works have already been developed in this regard (Ballesteros, 2021). For instance, Lobillo (2021, p. 357) indicates that "social networks have offered major advances in the communication between organizations and stakeholders. As in any field, the relationship of any type of organization with its different audiences is a principle that cannot be ignored. In the field of sports, this process has been no different."

It is important to note that social networks are used by football clubs for social and economic profitability (Kuzma et al., 2014), i.e., for their impact on society (Alonso et al., 2021), given their indisputable relevance, and for their resulting economic component, since "the use of social networks increases their commercial activity" (De Frutos et al., 2021, p. 2) and serves as a link with the media (Varona & Sánchez, 2016). Based on the previous, it is increasingly important for organizations to gain visibility on social networks to generate social and economic benefits and, ultimately, reach all kinds of audiences and fans (McLean & Wainwright, 2009).

### Ranking of Spanish football clubs

The pioneering studies on the impact of football clubs on social networks date back to 2012 (Olabe-Sánchez, 2012; Sotelo, 2012, p. 222), while subsequent studies have tried to establish rankings of the interaction of clubs (Ballesteros, 2021). From these approaches, we can highlight the work of Lobillo (2012), who delved into communication departments, then introduced the variable of social networks (Lobillo & Muñoz, 2016) and, finally, focused on football and social media studies (Lobillo, 2022). These approaches to social networks also include theses (Figuera Godoy, 2021). More recent studies have also examined the most recent social networks, such as TikTok (Sidorenko et al., 2022; Tenorio et al., 2022). Outside the scope of football clubs but within sports communication, authors like Rojas and Panal (2017) have analyzed the use of Instagram in three sports media outlets: Bleacher Report, Marca and L'Equipe.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

The study is guided by the following general objectives:
- To evaluate the use of social media accounts in languages other than Spanish among Spanish First Division football clubs.
- To produce a cross-sectional ranking of the use of social media accounts in languages other than Spanish among Spanish First Division football clubs.
- To create a representative visual map to share the results freely after the publication of the article.

The study is based on the following hypotheses:

**H1:** At least 50% of the clubs in the EA Sports League use social networks to communicate in languages other than Spanish.

**H2:** Facebook is the social network that clubs use the most to communicate in languages other than Spanish.

**H3:** X is the second social network that clubs use the most to communicate in languages other than Spanish.

**H4:** Clubs use other social networks to communicate in languages other than Spanish, but there is a disparity of criteria in their use.

## METHODS AND SAMPLE

The study uses quantitative techniques, as they are considered the most appropriate to reach our research objectives, which together aim to offer a cross-sectional analysis of the situation of the First Division of Spanish football and set the conditions for a future longitudinal study. Content analysis is a quantitative "method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative way, to measure certain variables" (Wimmer & Dominick, 1996, p. 70). This study responds perfectly to the use described by Wimmer and Dominick (1996) to use quantification since we are dealing with unpublished works, which aim to create a much larger work tool. As Krippendorff (1980, p. 21) points out, content analysis "is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context". Quantitative studies allow for systematic and longitudinal studies like the one to be carried out as part of the project (Berelson, 1984; Riffe et al., 1998); as it has been validated in similar works applied to other fields of communication (Herrero-Gutiérrez et al., 2021).

**Table 1.** Initial items under analysis

| Club's name | Presence on Facebook in languages other than Spanish | Yes | (indicate languages) |
| | | No | |
| | Presence on X in languages other than Spanish | Yes | (indicate languages) |
| | | No | |
| | Presence on Instagram in languages other than Spanish | Yes | (indicate languages) |
| | | No | |
| | Presence on other social networks in languages other than Spanish | Yes | (subscribers) |
| | | No | |

Source: Authors' own creation

This part of the project starts with the analysis of the variables included in the following purpose-created table (**Table 1**).

It is important to note that this analysis only considers the exclusively non-Spanish language social networks that are promoted on the clubs' websites. The analysis excludes those accounts in Spanish that simultaneously use other languages, which has already been studied in other research works (Galán-Arribas et al., 2021).

The work has been done manually using Excel. Since Google Maps is being used on the https://deporteyredes.com/ website, this application allows you to create maps through CSV (excel) data.

### Sample

The sample is composed of the 20 clubs participating in the top division of Spanish football in the 2023/24 season, known as LaLiga EA Sports. Data collection has taken place between December 2023 and January 2024. This is a convenient sample.

## RESULTS

With regards to the social network Facebook, the analysis indicates that none of the clubs has an account in languages other than Spanish (**Table 2**), although some of them do publish in other languages within their generic accounts.

**Table 2.** Clubs' presence on Facebook in languages other than Spanish

|  | English | French | Regional language | Other languages |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alavés | No | No | No | No |
| Almería | No | No | No | No |
| Athletic Club de Bilbao | No | No | No | No |
| Atlético de Madrid | No | No | No | No |
| FC Barcelona | No | No | No | No |
| Real Betis | No | No | No | No |
| Cádiz | No | No | No | No |
| Celta de Vigo | No | No | No | No |
| Getafe | No | No | No | No |
| Girona | No | No | No | No |
| Granada | No | No | No | No |
| Mallorca | No | No | No | No |
| Osasuna | No | No | No | No |
| Real Sociedad | No | No | No | No |
| Rayo Vallecano | No | No | No | No |
| Real Madrid | No | No | No | No |
| Sevilla | No | No | No | No |
| UD Las Palmas | No | No | No | No |
| Valencia | No | No | No | No |
| Villarreal | No | No | No | No |

Source: Authors' own creation

As for the social network X, 90% of the sample of clubs do have accounts created in languages other than Spanish (**Table 3**).

**Table 3.** Clubs' presence on X in languages other than Spanish

|  | English | French | Regional language | Other languages |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alavés | No | No | No | No |
| Almería | Yes | Yes | No | Arabic, Japanese, Portuguese |
| Athletic Club de Bilbao | Yes | No | Yes | Arabic |
| Atlético de Madrid | Yes | Yes | No | Portuguese, Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Indonesian, Turkish |
| FC Barcelona | Yes | Yes | Yes | Portuguese, Indonesian, Japanese, Turkish, Arabic |
| Real Betis | Yes | No | No | Japanese, Arabic |
| Cádiz | Yes | No | No | Japanese, Arabic |
| Celta de Vigo | Yes | No | No | Arabic |
| Getafe | Yes | No | No | Arabic |
| Girona | Yes | No | Yes | Arabic |
| Granada | Yes | No | No | Arabic |
| Mallorca | Yes | No | No | Japanese, Korean, Arabic |
| Osasuna | Yes | No | Yes | Arabic |
| Real Sociedad | Yes | Yes | Yes | Japanese, Arabic |
| Rayo Vallecano | No | No | No | No |
| Real Madrid | Yes | Yes | No | Arabic, Japanese, Portuguese |
| Sevilla | Yes | No | No | Arabic, Japanese, Portuguese |
| UD Las Palmas | Yes | Yes | No | German, Arabic, Chinese (account not opened) |
| Valencia | Yes | No | Yes | Arabic |
| Villarreal | Yes | No | Yes | Japanese, Arabic |

Source: Authors' own creation

Given that X is the social network where most clubs use accounts in other languages, **Table 4** and **Figure 2** offer more details about the languages that are used.

As for the social network Instagram, as **Table 5** shows, only one club manages an account in a language other than Spanish. **Table 6** shows the results of the analysis of the clubs' websites.

**Table 4.** Clubs' use of languages on X

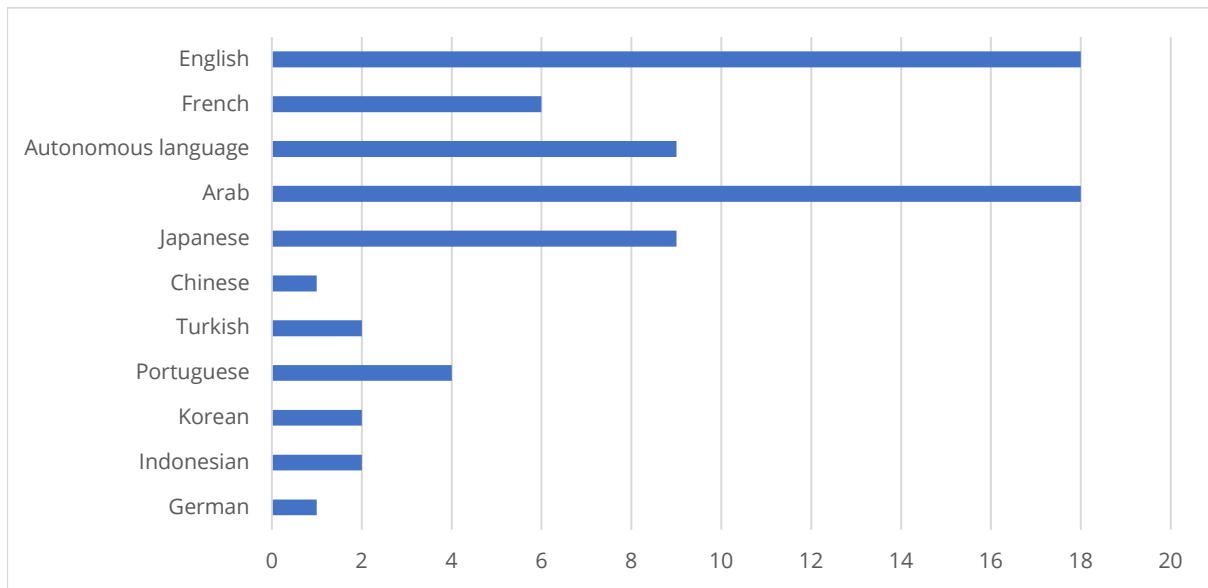| | English | French | Regional language | Arabic | Japanese | Portuguese | Chinese | Turkish | Portuguese | Thai | Korean | Indonesian | German |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alavés | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Almería | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Athletic Club de Bilbao | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Atlético de Madrid | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| FC Barcelona | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Real Betis | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | | |
| Cádiz | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Celta de Vigo | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Getafe | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Girona | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Granada | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Mallorca | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Osasuna | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Real Sociedad | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Rayo Vallecano | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Real Madrid | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Sevilla | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| UD Las Palmas | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Valencia | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | | | | 0 | 0 |
| Villarreal | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Source: Authors' own creation



**Figure 2.** Clubs' use of languages on X accounts (Source: Authors' own creation)

**Table 5.** Clubs' presence on Instagram in languages other than Spanish

|  | English | French | Regional language | Other languages |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alavés | No | No | No | No |
| Almería | No | No | No | No |
| Athletic Club de Bilbao | No | No | No | No |
| Atlético de Madrid | No | No | No | No |
| FC Barcelona | No | No | No | No |
| Real Betis | No | No | No | No |
| Cádiz | No | No | No | No |
| Celta de Vigo | No | No | No | No |
| Getafe | No | No | No | No |
| Girona | No | No | No | No |
| Granada | No | No | No | Arabic |
| Mallorca | No | No | No | No |
| Osasuna | No | No | No | No |
| Real Sociedad | No | No | No | No |
| Rayo Vallecano | No | No | No | No |
| Real Madrid | No | No | No | No |
| Sevilla | No | No | No | No |
| UD Las Palmas | No | No | No | No |
| Valencia | No | No | No | No |
| Villarreal | No | No | No | No |

Source: Authors' own creation

**Table 6.** Clubs' presence on other social networks in languages other than Spanish

|  | Social network | English | French | Regional language | Other languages | Other information |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alavés | Official website | No | No | Yes | No |  |
| Almería | Official website | Yes | No | No | No |  |
| Athletic Club de Bilbao | Official website | Yes | No | Yes |  |  |
| Atlético de Madrid | Official website | Yes | No | No | Chinese |  |
| FC Barcelona | Official website | Yes | Yes | Yes | Japanese, Chinese |  |
| Real Betis | Official website | Yes | No | No | Japanese |  |
| Cádiz | Official website | Yes | No | No | Japanese, Arabic |  |
| Celta de Vigo | Official website | Yes | No | Yes |  | Weibo (Chinese) |
| Getafe | Official website | Yes | No | No | No |  |
| Girona | Official website | Yes | No | Yes | No |  |
| Granada | No |  | No |  | No |  |
| Mallorca | Official website | Yes | No | Yes | No |  |
| Osasuna | Official website | Yes | No | Yes | No | Weibo (Chinese) |
| Real Sociedad | Official website | Yes | Yes | Yes | Chinese, Japanese |  |
| Rayo Vallecano | No | No | No | No | No |  |
| Real Madrid | Official website | Yes | Yes | No | German, Portuguese, Japanese, Arabic, Indonesian, Chinese | Twitch & Snapchat |
| Sevilla | Official website | Yes | No | No | No | Weibo (Chinese) + Chinese TikTok + Korean scheduled app (in process) |
| UD Las Palmas | Official website | Yes | Yes | No | German |  |
| Valencia | Official website | Yes | No | Yes |  | Weibo (Chinese) + Naver TV + Naver + Twitch |
| Villarreal | Official website | Yes | No | Yes | No |  |

Source: Authors' own creation

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study have confirmed hypothesis 1, as it has been corroborated that at least 50% of the clubs in the EA Sports League manage social network accounts in languages other than Spanish. Aware of the importance of making themselves visible beyond their borders, clubs have chosen to enter other non-Spanish-speaking markets. The clubs' official accounts in Spanish reach millions of people, both in Spain and a good number of other Spanish-speaking countries. However, although they do not follow a pattern in terms of social networks and/or languages, other clubs choose to create official accounts in other languages. As expected, these non-Spanish language accounts are created on social networks where text predominates, given that in photography-based social networks, like Instagram, it does not seem necessary to create several accounts.

On the other hand, hypothesis 2 has been rejected because Facebook is not the main social network in the use of languages other than Spanish among the sample of clubs. Some clubs use several languages on Facebook, but this is always done within a generic account, not on parallel accounts. In the same vein, the results also rejected the third hypothesis, which expected X to be the second social network in the use of languages other than Spanish, but it was the first. While the clubs do not tend to create different accounts on Facebook, they seem to be in favor of creating several official accounts in different languages on X.

English is the predominant second language, although other languages such as French, Japanese and Chinese are also frequently used. It is particularly striking that Arabic is at the same level as English. This fact may be justified by Saudi Arabia's bet on elite football (many footballers who have played for Spanish clubs now do so in this Arab country) or the bilateral agreements that Spain and Saudi Arabia have reached (for example, for several editions of the European Championship in Spain to be played in this country).

Finally, the fourth hypothesis is accepted since there are other social networks in which languages other than Spanish are used, although there is no pattern in their use. Many times, although it has not been confirmed, the clubs' use of other languages depends on the origin or first language of their players and the origin of their capital, among other factors.

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