

**KEEPING FANS ENGAGED THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITIES
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC - A CASE OF PROFESSIONAL
FOOTBALL CLUBS**

Cláudia Isabel De Jesus Tavares

Dissertation submitted as partial requirement for the conferral of
Master in Marketing

Supervisor:

Prof. Sandra Maria Correia Loureiro, Associate Professor with
aggregation at ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, ISCTE Business
School, Department of Marketing, Operations and General Management

June 2022



BUSINESS
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Acknowledgements

As in sports, where one feels several emotions in a short time, this journey, which culminated with this work, was felt on several emotional levels: Fear, pride, despair, joy, confusion, satisfaction, anxiety, but finally a great sense of achievement.

This endeavor would not have been possible without Professor Sandra Maria Correia Loureiro and her guidance along the way. I am very grateful to her for her availability and guidance, her invaluable patience and finally her suggestions for improvement.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my family, especially my sister and my mother. I would like to thank them for their constant support and care. To my mother, I thank her for doing everything in her power to ensure that I lack nothing in my academic journey, which is now coming to an end.

I would be remiss if I did not mention my boyfriend and all my friends who have accompanied me along the way and helped me get this far. Their belief in me has kept my spirits and motivation high throughout this process.

To all of you, thank you!

Resumo

O coronavírus mudou o mundo inteiro, incluindo a indústria do futebol que viu todas as ligas suspensas em Março de 2020. Com todos os jogos adiados e a interação direta proibida, as redes sociais acabaram por ser a única forma de contacto entre organizações desportivas e adeptos. Este estudo visa explorar os efeitos da paralisia temporária da competição nas atividades de marketing das redes sociais dos clubes de futebol profissionais, bem como no envolvimento dos adeptos. O design, conteúdo e frequência das mensagens foram utilizados como enquadramento para investigar mudanças nas estratégias de *posts*, enquanto o impacto no envolvimento dos adeptos foi enquadrado com manifestações emocionais, cognitivas e comportamentais. Para explorar estas ações, o autor seguiu as diretrizes de Kozinets relativamente à Netnografia e analisou 433 *posts* publicados nos perfis de Instagram oficiais dos clubes Real Madrid CF e FC Porto, classificando o conteúdo dos *posts* como Informativo, Relacional, Divertido e Remunerativo. O período estudado decorre de 12 de Fevereiro a 9 de Abril de 2020. Os resultados mostram uma mudança de uma estratégia de posts pré-COVID com baixa interatividade, vividez moderada e principalmente baseada em conteúdos de entretenimento em torno da competição de futebol, para uma estratégia pós-COVID com *posts* altamente interativos e vívidos, e com conteúdos que se deslocam fortemente para conteúdos Relacionais. Quanto ao envolvimento dos fãs, os resultados mostram uma diminuição geral em relação aos *posts*. No entanto, verifica-se uma particularidade, uma vez que os fãs mostram mais tendência a comentar os *posts* altamente interativos do que anteriormente, tais como desafios e questões. Este estudo contribui para a investigação emergente sobre o marketing desportivo digital e o seu efeito no envolvimento dos adeptos e fornece diretrizes práticas para os clubes de futebol aumentarem a sua capacidade de se envolverem digitalmente com os adeptos durante tempos críticos.

Palavras-chave: Redes Sociais, COVID-19, Futebol, Envolvimento dos Adeptos, Estratégia de Marketing Digital, Instagram

JEL Sistema de Classificação: M30 (General); M31 (Marketing)

Abstract

The coronavirus has changed the whole world, including the football industry, which had to suspend all leagues in March 2020. With all games postponed and direct interaction prohibited, social media was the only form of contact between sports organisations and fans. This study aims to examine the impact of the temporary competitive paralysis on professional football clubs' social media marketing activities and fan engagement. The design, content, and frequency of posts were used as a framework to examine changes in posting strategies, while the impact on fan engagement was framed with emotional, cognitive, and behavioural manifestations. To investigate these actions, the author followed Kozinets' netnography guidelines and analysed 433 posts published on the official Instagram profiles of football clubs Real Madrid CF and FC Porto, classifying their content as informative, relational, entertaining and rewarding. The period studied is from February 12 to April 9, 2020, and the results show a shift from a social media posting strategy with absent to low interactivity, moderate vividness and mainly based on entertainment content around the football competition, to one with highly interactive and vivid posts and with a strong shift towards relational content in the post-suspension period. In terms of fan engagement on social media, findings show an overall decrease in engagement after the sport is frozen. However, a phenomenon can be observed in which fans are more inclined to comment on football clubs' posts, especially when it comes to interactive content such as challenges and questions. This study contributes to new research on digital sports marketing and fan engagement and offers practical guidelines for football clubs to improve their ability to digitally engage fans at critical times.

Keywords: Social media, COVID-19, Football, Fan Engagement, Digital Marketing Strategy, Instagram

JEL Classification System: M30 (General); M31 (Marketing)

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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition	Page
CSR	Corporate social responsibility	30
FCP	Futebol Clube do Porto	22
PFCs	Professional Football Clubs	2
RM	Relationship Marketing	2
RMA	Real Madrid Club de Fútbol	22
RQ	Research question	3
SM	Social media	1
SMM	Social media marketing	8
SNSs	Social networking sites	6
WOM	Word-of-mouth	6
WOMM	Word-of-mouth marketing	8

1. INTRODUCTION

With high levels of influence and emotional engagement (Machado, Martins, Ferreira, Silva, & Duarte, 2020), football is considered one of the most important sports in the world (Hammerschmidt, Durst, Kraus, & Puumalainen, 2021). However, during the turbulent times of the COVID-19 outbreak, it was observed that the football industry was hit hard (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021; Szczepkowski, 2021). Europe, considered "*the continent's largest professional sports ecosystem*" (Beiderbeck, Frevel, Von der Gracht, Schmidt, & Schweitzer, 2021, p. 1), was obviously hit hard by the consequences of the suspension of all competitions.

For football clubs, interactive online environments such as social networks proved to be even more important than ever, as direct interaction was prohibited and they were only allowed to stay in contact with their fans via the Internet (Szczepkowski, 2021). Before the pandemic outbreak, fans could feel connected to their favourite teams while watching their games and even beyond the 90 minutes via social media (SM). After the coronavirus outbreak, however, fans could only interact with professional football clubs on virtual platforms. In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no other way for sports enthusiasts to feel connected to their favourite team(s) than to "*consuming media, engaging in dialogue, and pursuing interaction on social media networks*" (Achen, 2017, p. 38).

Indeed, time spent on SM has been intensified and social platforms have gained popularity with the COVID-19 pandemic (Szczepkowski, 2021; Watson, 2020), with many fans shifting their primary attention to digital platforms (Stavros, Smith, & Lopez-Gonzalez, 2021) to fill the void created by the disruption of competition. Consequently, effective social media strategies during the pandemic provided new opportunities to gain competitive advantage (Mason, Narcum, Mason, & Awan, 2021), and according to Szczepkowski (2021), organisations that build and maintain relationships with their customers primarily based on feelings and bonds were particularly compelled to change the way they communicated with them during the coronavirus pandemic.

While previous literature has discussed issues related to sports during the pandemic period COVID-19 (see attachment A.1), few have addressed the impact of the pandemic on the football industry based on social media (see attachment A.2). To date, existing literature has mainly focused on social media practises of football clubs during the pandemic (Li, Hao, Kubiczek, & Pietrzyk, 2021; Lopez-Carril & Anagnostopoulos, 2020), while other authors have examined fan engagement in different leagues before and after COVID-19 (Weimar, Holthoff, & Biscaia, 2021). However, research has yet to address how social media marketing activities

have changed since the sports standstill and how these changes have affected fan engagement on SM.

Therefore, it has become necessary for brands to understand how to properly utilise SM platforms and interact with individuals (Loureiro & Lopes, 2019). Therefore, this research sheds light on how Professional Football Clubs' (PFCs) social media activities were used in terms of brand post design and content type, especially as a communication tool during the global football event. However, it is also relevant to examine fan engagement before and after the COVID-19 virus outbreak, as fan engagement has emerged as a major obstacle for the industry, posing an even greater challenge than before the break in sports leagues (Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020).

1.1. Relevance of the topic

This study proves relevant from a marketer's perspective as it aims to gain a deeper understanding of how marketers of world-renowned football organisations have responded to the various challenges of the 2020 health crisis through social media. It is also important to understand how social media has been used as a framework for relationship marketing (RM). Furthermore, as we are increasingly in an "*engagement-based market*" (Itani, Kassar & Loureiro, 2019, p. 78), this study will allow us to expand our knowledge of the effectiveness of these communication changes on fan engagement. This is important for gaining insights into how marketing strategies and policies can be designed and adapted by sports organisations and ultimately ensure their significant presence and how they can successfully emerge from a pandemic with the help of digital websites.

1.2. Research problematic

At a time when one can speak of an "*unrecognisable world of sports consumption*" (Stavros et al., 2021, p. 73) and when some of the fundamental beliefs of sports are being challenged, sports organisations face the challenge of maintaining the loyalty of their fans in these difficult times.

Indeed, in the face of social isolation and disrupted sport patterns, football clubs faced the challenge of suddenly and quickly finding new communication strategies and ways to meaningfully engage sport spectators (Maurice, Devonport, & Knight, 2021). Consequently, football clubs' social media communications needed to be reevaluated as they adapted to the "new normal" and rethought their communication strategies (Szczepkowski, 2021) and fan experiences to (i) ensure they continued to be noticed regardless of the pandemic's aftermath,

(ii) ensure the sport survived and thrived during the pandemic, and (iii) effectively leverage their post-pandemic relationships and engage fans (Stavros et al., 2021).

1.3. Research question and research objectives

This paper examines the change in media-sports-consumer dynamics triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the strategic shift in social media communications of football clubs to maintain their relationship with fans and ultimately engage them during the freeze of the global sports industry in 2020. Therefore, this article conducts a case study of two professional football clubs to examine the means by which they have developed alternative SM activities to respond to the unfavourable effects of the pandemic. This results in the first research question (RQ) for this study:

RQ.1 : How did football clubs' social media activities change during the disruption of matches due to the pandemic COVID-19 to keep fans engaged?

This question uncovers patterns of behaviour in the football industry as restrictions prevented direct contact with fans, in other words, it uncovers how football clubs kept fans engaged via SM during social isolation. It examines the role social media played in their marketing strategy while their first activity - participation in competitions - was not allowed. Thus, the first objective of this paper is to understand the dynamics and decisions regarding frequency of posts, type of content, and design before and after the contests were suspended. This study refers specifically to two European clubs: the Spanish club Real Madrid CF and the Portuguese club FC Porto. Using these two examples, we will detail how football clubs responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and provide insight into the aforementioned posting characteristics.

However, the consequences of the pandemic did not only affect the clubs. Fans were also particularly affected as their daily routines suddenly changed and all on-field activities were disrupted (Weimar et al., 2021; Bandyopadhyay, 2021). Lyttleton (2020, p. n.d.) argues that a "world without sports is monochrome", as she continues explaining that sporting events are an "emotional escape from reality." With this in mind, this study aims to answer another interrelated and complementary sub-question:

RQ.2 : To what extent has fan engagement with football clubs' social media activities changed following the global sports freeze?

Despite the strong engagement and often even loyalty of fans, the measures taken to contain the pandemic may have changed fan engagement on social media. Although Stavros et al. (2021) suggest that the fan-team relationship has left indelible marks, Weimar et al. (2021) emphasise that the bond between fans and teams on SM has strengthened since the coronavirus outbreak. As such, this RQ allows us to gain further knowledge and insight into this phenomenon to better understand how the shock caused by health constraints affects football fans' engagement on social media. The goal is to understand the differential impact of social media content and design on fan engagement before and after COVID-19.

1.4. Dissertation structure

While research is sorely needed to understand the possible changes just mentioned before, this thesis is organised as follows: The first part is an introduction that contextualises the topic of this thesis and provides information about the relevance of this study, the research problem, the research questions, and the research objectives.

This chapter is followed by a review of the literature that addresses the following key elements: social media, relationship marketing, brand post strategy, consumer and fan engagement, and social media marketing as it relates to football clubs.

Next, the conceptual framework of this study and the hypotheses based on the literature review are presented, followed by a contextualization of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and its impact on the football industry.

The next section provides a detailed account of the research method used in this study, which is a netnographic research over two time periods.

Then, the analysis as well as the main findings of this study are presented and discussed based on two professional football clubs (Real Madrid CF and FC Porto). The analysis is divided into two phases.

Finally, the contributions of this study and suggestions for future research related to the elements of the study are discussed.

See Figure 1.1 for a visual explanation of the structure of this study.

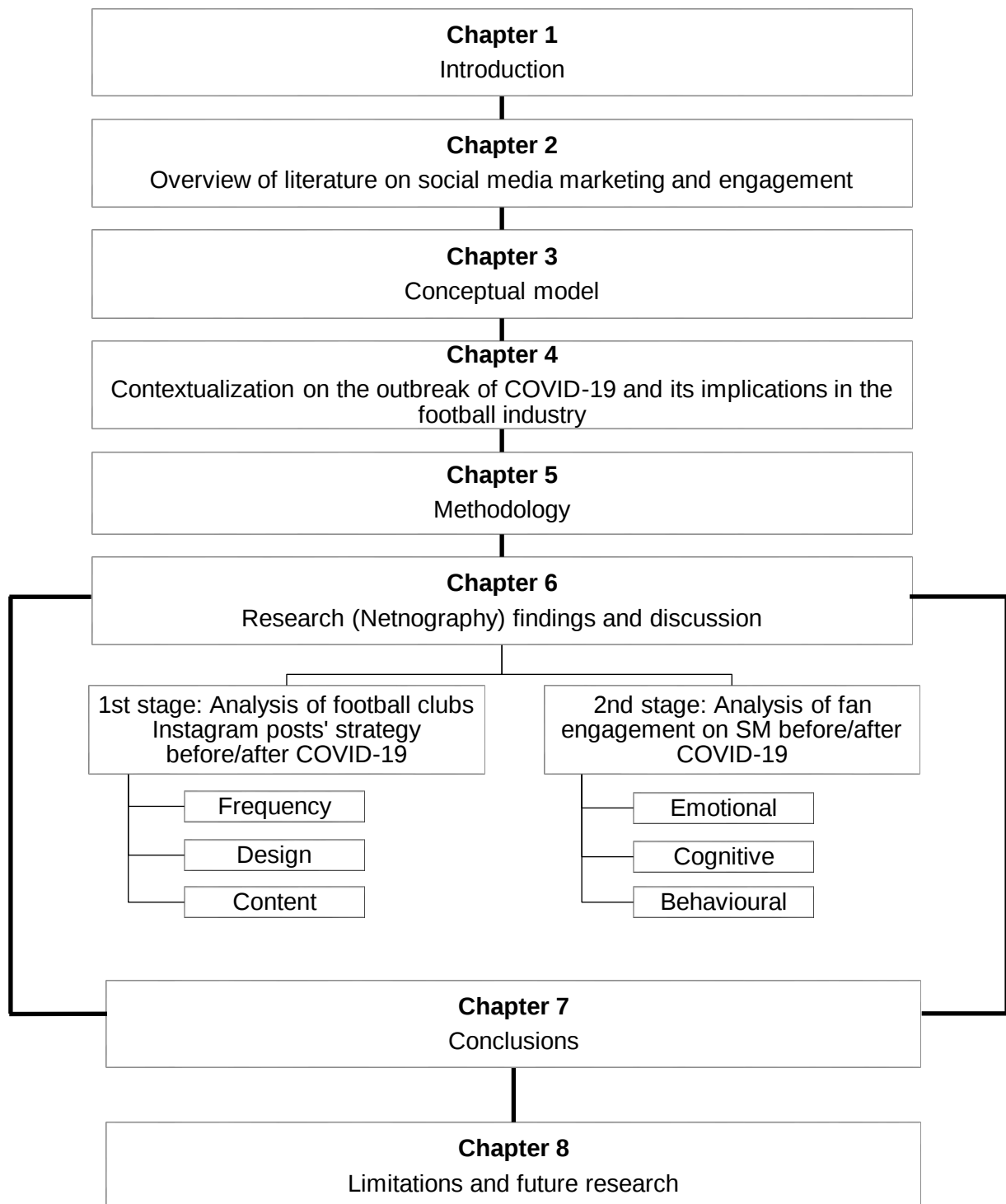


Figure 1.1. Schematic diagram of thesis structure

Source: Author's elaboration

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social media

According to Ferreira (2018), many authors have formulated their own definition of social media, resulting in a variety of definitions to date. However, one particular definition has been frequently mentioned in previous studies (Correia, 2018; Machado et al., 2020; Abeza, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2019; Balliauw, Onghena & Mulken, 2020), namely Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010, p. 61) definition of social media 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*". According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), blogs and microblogs, corporate-sponsored discussion forums, and social networking sites all fall under the umbrella of SM, which they describe as an online word-of-mouth (WOM) forum.

Social media, also referred to as social networking sites (SNSs), virtual, digital, and social platforms or networks, social websites, or Internet communities, among others, is a form of electronic communication in which users can easily interact with each other (Menon & Philip, 2018) by forming online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, experiences, interests, and other content (Winand, Belot, Merten, & Kolyperas, 2019). Today, billions of people share content through these platforms every day (Anagnostopoulos, Cook, & Gammelsaeter, 2015; Cardoso, Fleury, Feldmann, & De Araújo, 2017; Balliauw et al., 2020).

Balliauw et al. (2020) point out that since the first social network was launched more than two decades ago, many SNSs have emerged with a rapid increase in membership. In 2021, the number of social network users worldwide was over 3.6 million people, and this number is expected to increase to nearly 4.41 billion by 2025 (Statista Research Department, 2022).

The growing popularity of social digital platforms is partly due to the increasing number of mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones. As these devices have become more accessible to everyone, the use of social websites has increased, and people's means of communication have become increasingly dependent on social websites (Kowalski & Łazorko, 2020). Nowadays, it is undeniable that the daily routine and behavioural pattern of almost everyone includes social networks (Winand et al., 2019), especially young adults, as they are the most popular users of social networks, with the vast majority of them having at least one account and accessing it at least once a day (Balliauw et al., 2020).

The main motivations for people's use of social media are: (i) communication with friends and family, (ii) sharing and obtaining new information, (iii) entertainment, (iv) interaction with brands (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2015), and (v) social influence (Machado et al., 2020).

Large social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are recommended by most marketers to achieve these two goals of relationship marketing: Communication and Interaction (Obradović, Alčaković, Vyugina, & Tasevski, 2019).

2.1.1. Relationship Marketing on Social Media

Relationship marketing is about building customer loyalty, long-term mutual satisfaction and customer loyalty rather than short-term goals such as customer acquisition and individual sales. Thus, the main characteristics of RM are to build mutually beneficial, synergistic relationships through frequent communication and interaction between organisations and their stakeholders (Groenroos, 2004). According to Vieira and Sousa (2020), the closer the relationship between the customer and the company, the stronger the customer's commitment and attachment to the brand. Thus, the goal is to become a brand that is particularly valued by consumers (Velicia Martín, Dona Toledo, & Palos-Sanches, 2020). This leads to another and more recent marketing concept called "brand love" (Roy, Eshghi & Sarkar, 2013), which refers to consumers who feel an emotional attachment to a particular brand and are therefore extremely loyal. As claimed by Achen (2017), the level of consumer loyalty and the quality of relationships are indeed two key metrics used to evaluate RM.

The key benefits of RM are: (i) higher brand awareness, (ii) better understanding of consumer needs and expectations (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2015), (iii) improved financial performance, (iv) higher revenues, and (v) lower costs (Achen, 2017).

Groenroos (2004) expressed that in addition to the value a customer receives from a product or service, organisations can also provide additional value through a reciprocal relationship between customer and provider. In this case, the consumer is a co-producer of value and the added value benefits both parties, making this approach a win-win interaction. Today, in order to build and improve a long-term and cooperative relationship with customers, RM involves the creation of easy and continuous two-way communication between customers and companies (Balliau et al., 2020). Indeed, through an interactive and continuous dialog, companies can listen to and understand consumers' desires, produce a co-created product, foster long-term relationships, and ultimately secure a long-term profit (Abeza et al., 2019).

At this point, social media becomes indispensable as it provides all the important functions for implementing a strategy that involves two-way information sharing (Winand et al., 2019). With the advent of Web 2.0 and SNSs, communication tools have been expanded as it is now easier and faster to reach people, gain knowledge, and inspire others' attitudes toward specific brands (Itani et al., 2019).

2.1.2. Social Media Marketing Activities

Social media marketing (SMM) differs from traditional marketing essentially in the dialogue, which has shifted from one-way messages sent to consumers, making them passive recipients, to an active dialogue between two parties, allowing a higher level of interaction (Balliau et al., 2020; Machado et al., 2020; Winand et al., 2019; Correia, 2018). Indeed, SNSs users can generate interactivity with other members or with brands by "liking," commenting, or sharing content (Loureiro, Bilro, & Japutra, 2020). Companies can use SNSs to communicate with their customers in a timely and direct manner, at low cost and with high efficiency (Correia, 2018). This represents a great opportunity for companies to gain more information about customers (Abeza et al., 2019), and with technological advancements and the advent of Big Data, companies can now better understand consumer needs, increase customer satisfaction, and create relationship value for customers (Kowalski & Łazorko, 2020).

Because customers have the ability to express themselves, participate, and co-create (Kowalski & Łazorko, 2020), users of social websites are now able to actively develop shared brand meaning, not only with the company itself, but also with other users. Users can communicate and listen to each other, learn from each other, and get to know each other better (Abeza et al., 2019).

This is how the so-called word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) came into being, in which the awareness of a brand is spread based on the recommendations of others (Kowalski & Łazorko, 2020). In this regard, Internet communities represent excellent tools for building relationships to achieve the goals of RM (Achen, 2017; Balliau et al., 2020; Correia, 2018; Obradović et al., 2019; Kharmalki & Raizada, 2020).

The advent of modern technologies has changed consumer behaviour and purchasing habits (Balliau et al., 2020; Achen, 2017; Correia, 2018; Machado et al., 2020), and in light of this, social media should be given special consideration by companies around the world (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Correia, 2018; Machado et al., 2020). Indeed, companies across a wide range of industries have already successfully integrated social platforms into their communication strategies (Anagnostopoulos, Parganas, Chadwick, & Fenton, 2018), as Web 2.0 offers significant opportunities for personalised and direct interaction with customers, as well as for gathering feedback on customer needs and opinions (Balliau et al., 2020). In other words, the emergence of Internet-based social networks offers companies new advantages in relationship marketing (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2015).

2.1.3. Social Media Posting Strategy

Posts shared on social media can be characterized by the dimensions of (i) frequency, (ii) design, and (iii) content (Aydin, Uray & Silahatoglu, 2021; Annamalai, Yoshida, Varshney, Pathak, & Venugopal, 2021). Since all of these factors influence consumer brand engagement, it is critical for a brand to understand these factors and their influence on user engagement in order to develop consumer-centric SMM strategies (Sigurdsson, Larsen, Sigfusdottir, Fagerstrøm, Alemu, Folwarczny, & Foxall, 2019).

A brand's posting frequency is considered very important when talking about SM strategies, as many companies try to find the optimal posting frequency as it could mean more fan engagement for their content (Aydin et al., 2021; Salazar, 2017).

The design of a SM post is characterized by its vividness (Vazquez, 2020) and interactivity (Aydin et al., 2021), and according to the results of an article (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeftang, 2012), the characteristics of vivid and interactive posts increase the number of likes. The characteristic of vividness is defined as a post whose content stimulates a number of sensory dimensions. Important characteristics for the vividness of a post are colors, sounds, videos, and dynamic animations that make the content more appealing (Aydin et al., 2021). For example, SM posts that contain visual elements such as images and videos are believed to have a greater impact on users (Balliau et al., 2020), while a video is considered more vivid than an image and attracts more attention because it stimulates the visual and auditory senses simultaneously (Aydin et al., 2021). It is believed that the photographic feature is a very important factor for digital engagement (Vazquez, 2020). As for the interactivity of social media posts, it is described as the activity of consumers interacting with brands' posts by, for example, participating in contests, answering questions, or clicking on links. Posts from brands are considered more interactive when they ask users to comment or share published content. They are characterized by two-way communication between brand and consumer or even many-to-many communication between consumers themselves (De Vries et al., 2012).

Regarding the different types of post content, this study focuses on four different categories that are widely used in social media research (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy & Goodman, 2016 ; Annamalai et al., 2021 ; Chen & Chiu, 2021): informative, relational, entertaining, and remunerative. We now elaborate on the definition of these different categories. Informative content provides helpful information about external aspects. Relational content meets consumers' need for integration and social interaction, as well as their desire for social value (Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy, & Goodman, 2019). It gives users the opportunity to interact with the brand by responding to questions and statements (Lee, Hosanagar, & Nair, 2013 ; Chen & Chiu, 2018). In addition, entertaining content refers, for example, to humor, fun facts, puns, and historical images (Chen & Chiu, 2021) and to consumers' need to escape from

daily routines (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). This type of content appeals to consumers' emotions more than other categories of content (Dolan et al., 2016). Finally, the Remunerative content is the extent to which social media activities are associated with benefits and generate monetary rewards for brand image (Chen & Chiu, 2021).

2.2. Engagement

2.2.1. Customer Engagement

The concept of engagement has its roots in the 17th century and has since received considerable attention in various fields, leading to many different conceptualizations and definitions of the term. Certain words have been considered as antecedents of the concept of engagement, namely "*connection*," "*involvement*," and "*participation*" (Brodie, Hollebeek, Illic, & Juric, 2011).

However, the marketing literature on this concept has emerged relatively recently, and the importance of understanding and creating meaningful customer engagement has gained significant attention in recent years due to the involvement of the modern marketplace. Indeed, customers are increasingly powerful today as companies invest more and more in building an engaged customer base (Itani et al., 2019).

The process of engagement is based on two-way communication between the subject and the object. Hollebeek (2011, p. 789) describes the principle as follows: "*applications of the engagement concept in marketing appear to follow the [who subject, e.g. customer engages with what object, e.g. brand]' approach*". In essence, customer engagement is not limited to the purchase itself, but rather can be defined as a customer's active and interactive attitudes and behaviours toward a brand or product (Bilro & Loureiro, 2020; Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2020).

While the debate on the appropriateness of the dimensionality of engagement in the marketing literature, and in particular on the one-dimensional, two-dimensional, or multidimensional approach, is ongoing, one perspective seems to be gaining greater recognition in the literature: engagement as a three-dimensional phenomenon (Hollebeek, 2011).

As Brodie et al. (2011) and Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) state, customer engagement is a multidimensional concept with three engagement dimensions: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. The behavioural dimension consists of the level of conscious involvement, interaction, energy, and time spent interacting with a brand (Loureiro et al., 2020). It is most commonly measured by the number of likes, comments, and shares on social media. In

addition, the emotional aspect focuses on the feelings, affection, and passion that a consumer feels toward a particular brand or organisation (Hollebeek, 2011). This dimension is mainly composed of interest, pleasure, and sense of belonging to a brand (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). In social media, emotional customer engagement is mostly defined as positive comments on social media activities (Sigurdsson et al., 2019). As for the cognitive dimension, it reflects the level of attention and intake of specific brand-related information (Dessart et al., 2015), as well as thinking and thoughts (Brodie et al., 2011) in a given interaction. In social networks, it is measured by interest in social media activities. While the behavioural element refers to a customer's contact with a brand or product, the cognitive and emotional aspects are mainly about the customer's experiences and feelings (Bilro & Loureiro, 2020).

Thus, engaged customers provide opportunities for business development (Itani et al., 2019), as they are more likely to make recommendations and participate in co-creation than disengaged customers. Investing in customer interactions leads to a more enduring relationship between the consumer and the brand, as well as relational consequences such as engagement, trust, satisfaction, emotional brand commitment, and even loyalty (Loureiro et al., 2020). Another outcome of customer engagement is higher brand performance (Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2020).

2.2.2. Fan Engagement

Sports enthusiasts are usually referred to as fans, as the original word comes from "*fanatics*" (Machado et al., 2020). As Abeza et al. (2019, p. 4) stated, "*A sport fan is an enthusiastic consumer who is motivated to engage in behaviour related to sport*". Thus, as a sports fan, one feels a strong connection to one or more teams and has a high propensity to consume team-related content and feels a constant connection to their favourite sports or players (Abeza et al., 2019; Balliau et al., 2020; Achen, 2017; Correia, 2018).

As mentioned by Weimar et al. (2021) in relation to social identity theory, fans desire to engage and connect with other fans to feel part of a community or social group. The stronger these connections are in fan communities, the more strongly they feel identified with the team they support and are consequently loyal as they draw emotional energy from group solidarity. Conversely, affiliation with a team weakens when fans feel that their demands are not being met. Consumers' willingness to interact with others positively affects their engagement in their own brand community (Bilro & Loureiro, 2020).

All of these interactions encourage "*non-transactional behaviours such as positive word-of-mouth; displays of sport fandom; consumer-to-consumer interactions in fan communities;*

and reading information about the team" (Vale & Fernandes, 2018, p. 3), which is very important given the high level of competition in this industry (Balliau et al., 2020).

However, it is important to realise that the sports industry is different from other industries, as its customers tend to be lifelong fans (Machado et al., 2020; Correia, 2018) and consequently have higher levels of engagement and loyalty than the average consumer in any other sector (Balliau et al., 2020). In this regard, it is the emotional ties that traditionally distinguish fans from regular customers (Velicia Martín et al., 2020). For this reason, sports brands are uniquely positioned to cultivate long-term relationships with their customers (Machado et al., 2020), resulting in benefits such as increased loyalty and customer satisfaction, more robust relationship marketing, reduced marketing spend, increased profits, and improved stability and security (Abeza et al., 2019).

Despite their unusual level of engagement, football fans' expectations are rising as they are no longer satisfied with sporting performance alone (Machado et al., 2020; Winand et al., 2019; Correia, 2018). Compared to a few decades ago, consumers are much more demanding and aware of their needs (Loureiro et al., 2020), as they demand more interactive encounters (Loureiro et al., 2019). This is no different for sports fans, as their needs and demands have also changed dramatically. Today, fans are looking for more accessible behind-the-scenes content and a faster and continuous relationship with their favourite football teams to continue being loyal followers (Machado et al., 2020; Correia, 2018).

2.3. The role of social media in the football world

The sports industry is primarily driven by the emotional engagement of sports enthusiasts. From a business perspective, the importance of cultivating relationships with fans has long been recognised (William & Chinn, 2010). Therefore, from a marketing perspective, the primary goals of today's sports organisations are to (i) increase the number of fans, (ii) improve fan engagement (Li et al., 2021), and (iii) undeniably increase their revenue (Velicia Martín et al., 2020).

Kloc, Tomanek, and Cieśliński (2020) and Tenorio (2019) state that football is the most popular sport in the world, and Vieira and Sousa (2020, p. 2) refer to football as "*A phenomenon that has great importance all over the world*". Machado et al. (2020) emphasise that football is a sector with unique characteristics that generates exceptional fan engagement and participation. Bandyopadhyay (2021, p. 2) goes beyond this statement and suggests that "*fans are the lifeblood of soccer*". As football evolves both on and off the pitch (Tenorio, 2019), it has social, cultural, and economic implications for some nations (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021), with the fact that football clubs are increasingly treated like businesses (Vieira & Sousa,

2020). Indeed, football is a sport of great importance in Europe and fans are highly engaged (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021), which, according to Tenorio (2019), is mainly due to the continuous, varied programming and entertainment it provides.

As a result of the aforementioned increase in fan expectations, relationship building is even more necessary to encourage repeat visits and sales, as well as fan loyalty (Achen, 2017). As Velicia Martín et al. (2020) noted, football clubs need to adopt marketing approaches based on long-term emotional bonds that will later lead to higher profits. However, it is important to emphasise how complex it is to build a close relationship with each individual sports fan in an industry of this scale (Obradović et al., 2019).

This is where SNSs play an essential role. Nowadays, each PFC has the opportunity to reach a wide range of people on these digital platforms, be it an internal or external audience (Tenorio, 2019), and actively engage with them (Obradović et al., 2019). In essence, social platforms allow the football community to maintain a close relationship between fans and team (Winand et al., 2019) and participate in communication with all supporters, regardless of location and in a timely and direct manner, creating a mutually beneficial relationship (Abeza et al., 2019; Machado et al., 2020). Indeed, it has been observed that interactions between football teams and fans have increased with the advent of digital social platforms (Menon & Philip, 2018), with sports enthusiasts increasingly using various social platforms to discuss sports-related topics (Kharmalki & Raizada, 2020). Accordingly, studies focusing on the analysis of communication, sports, and especially football have increased at an incredible rate in recent years (Tenorio, 2019).

In addition, social networks have become one of the main connection methods used by PFC, as they offer unique opportunities to gather a larger fan base, gain more public attention, and strengthen the loyalty of fans and customers, which is indeed one of the most important marketing objectives in the football industry (Tenorio, 2019).

Regarding the management of official accounts in social networks, continuous and daily efforts are required from the marketing department of PFC to maintain media presence (Tenorio, 2019) and to identify the needs of the audience, since, as Machado et al. (2020) point out, the consumption of sports and team-related products by sports enthusiasts is different from that of so-called ordinary consumers. Therefore, it is important to remember that the relationship with spectators is different (Tenorio, 2019), as sports fans have different reasons and motivations to follow a sport and identify with a specific team (Vieira & Sousa, 2020). As Lyttleton (2020) points out, sports provide a variety of purposes for different people. Consequently, some audiences are more involved than others.

However, SNSs are used for more than simple communication, as they have become an important tool for implementing marketing elements such as sponsorship and brand management, which have received much attention in recent decades due to the tremendous

commercial growth of the professional sports industry (Manoli & Hodgkinson, 2020; Balliauw et al., 2020). Endorsements, promotions, public relations, and up-to-the-minute updates are other such marketing elements commonly used on SNSs (Abeza, et al., 2019).

Nowadays, it is possible for any person or organisation to have multiple personal pages on different social networking sites, and the effectiveness of these virtual platforms should not be overlooked (Kowalski & Łazorko, 2020). Each social network is important in its own way, and each has specific characteristics (Menon & Philip, 2018). Instagram and Facebook are the two social platforms that are particularly regarded for their marketing capabilities in Europe and are crucial for sports companies today to look for innovative methods to increase fan engagement (Machado et al., 2020).

However, this study focuses only on Instagram because its *"popularity, along with its ability to share media content, makes it a particularly effective tool for sport teams"* (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018, p. 418). Instagram was launched in 2010 and acquired by Facebook in 2012. Communication on the platform is primarily through visual media (videos and images), and as Kozinets (2019, p. 90) explains, *"Instagram's interface is highly photographic and provides the users with a lot of visual choice."* He goes on to state that Instagram users are often tempted to interact with the posted content, as the platform offers a very strong social experience.

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

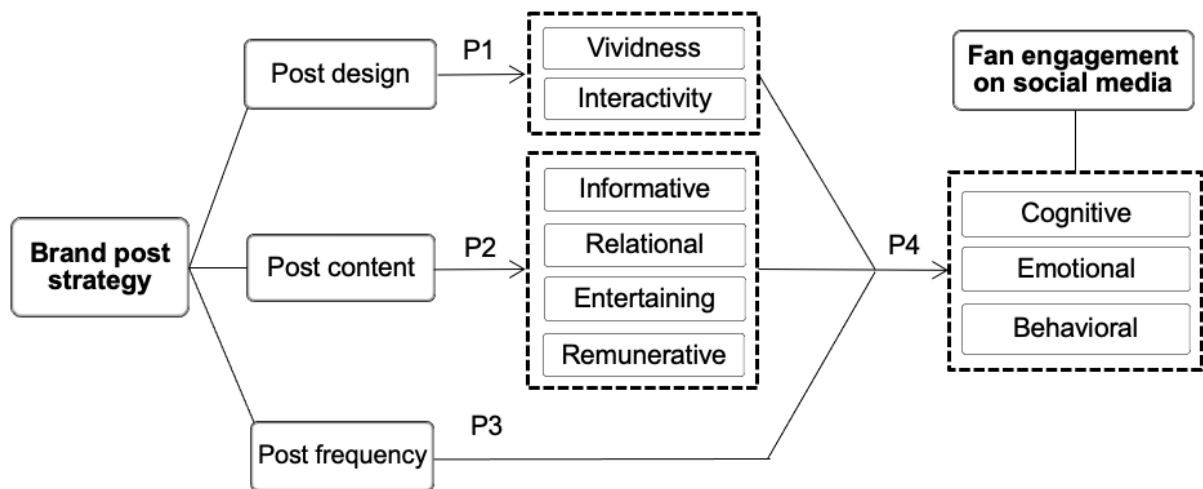


Figure 3.1. Conceptual framework of this study

Source: Author's elaboration

The research method used for this study is netnography. In netnography, research hypotheses are not formulated, but rather propositions derived from the literature review. These propositions will then be analyzed and finally confirmed or rejected as the conclusion of this study.

In the conceptual model presented (see Figure 3.1) and based on the literature review, a brand's posting strategy on social media in this study is defined by its design, content, and frequency. The dimensions of post design are vividness and interactivity, while post content was divided by the four content dimensions mentioned earlier (informative, relational, entertaining and remunerative). Moreover, in this model, fan engagement (behavioural, emotional and cognitive) in social media depends on these three scopes: Post design, content and frequency. Based on the conceptual model presented, the following propositions can be made:

Proposition 1: In post design, interactivity and vividness have increased since the declaration of the suspension of football leagues due to COVID-19.

As Annamalai et al. (2021, p. 4) noted, "A greater degree of sensory stimulation has a positive influence on social media engagement" and "a greater degree of content vividness positively affects sport fan engagement". The richer the experiences on social media, the more likely fans are to actively engage with the content, especially at a time when in-person

experiences are unlikely in the foreseeable future (Deloitte, 2021). With this in mind, and given that football clubs' relationship marketing goals in such a period of upheaval are primarily to prevent fans from turning away from their favourite teams, we suggest that interactivity and vividness have increased in football teams' social media strategies.

Proposition 2: In post content, the entertainment and relational dimensions in particular have increased, while the informative and remunerative have decreased since the declaration of the suspension of football leagues due to COVID-19.

Szczepkowski (2021), Hoekstra and Leeflang (2020) emphasise that the content of communication of football clubs had to be particularly changed after the spread of the coronavirus. As sports teams are always looking for content on virtual platforms that appeal to users' common interests and generate likes, comments, and shares (Machado et al., 2020), football clubs were faced with adapting their post content to fans' needs and expectations in order to strengthen their relationships. According to Kharmalki and Raizada (2020), connecting on a more personal level can be achieved mainly by entertaining fans (e.g., by showing them historical pictures of victories) and asking for their opinions on certain topics, which makes fans feel part of the team. Consequently, both facts just mentioned fall under entertainment and relational content.

Proposition 3: PFCs' posting frequency has increased since the suspension of the football leagues was declared due to COVID-19.

Stavros et al. (2020) emphasise that fans' main attention has shifted to social networks after the football leagues were suspended. Therefore, to meet the new demands of fans (Machado et al., 2020), football clubs have no choice but to develop an effective communication strategy on virtual platforms (Tenorio, 2019; Kowalski & Łazorko, 2020) based on more frequent communication.

Proposition 4: Both cognitive, emotional and behavioural fan engagement dimensions, in relation to football clubs' SM posts, have increased since the declaration of the suspension of football leagues due to COVID-19.

This proposition is based on the aforementioned statement by Weimar et al. (2021) that since the outbreak of the coronavirus, the bond between football club and fan has become stronger. Thus, in the absence of any other form of interaction than social media, fan engagement in social networks may have increased overall.

4. CONTEXUALISATION

4.1. The football industry in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic

4.1.1. The Outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The virus COVID-19 was first discovered in China in 2019 (Ludvigsen, 2021) and then spread worldwide (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) declared COVID-19 a pandemic (Correia-Oliveira & Andrade-Souza, 2021; Maurice et al., 2021; Ludvigsen, 2021). With the emergence of the so-called SARS-CoV-2, the entire human civilization was threatened, and millions of people lost their lives. As this frightening global health crisis disrupted everyday life (Weimar et al., 2021; Morbi, Kopanakis, Mateu, Graeff & Marques, 2021) and rapid responses were needed (Ludvigsen, 2021), public health actions and measures characterized by extreme uncertainty were taken by several governments around the world to prevent further spread of the virus (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021; Maurice et al., 2021; Ludvigsen, 2021; Giulianotti & Collison, 2020).

The regulations primarily aimed at slowing the spread of the COVID-19 virus were mainly the following: (i) lockdowns, (ii) social isolation, (iii) social distancing, and (iv) restrictions on population movements such as travel bans, suspension of public gatherings to slow contagion, suspension of public gatherings (Weimar et al. 2021; Ludvigsen, 2021; Morbi et al., 2021). Although countries have responded to the pandemic in different ways, almost all countries have implemented these restrictions.

The coronavirus pandemic had an impact on many areas of society, including health, education, and sports (Morbi et al., 2021). As the consequences of the pandemic COVID-19 disrupted collective life, many activities and public events, including sporting events of all kinds, had to be suspended and facilities closed (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021).

4.1.2. The Impact of COVID-19 on Football Leagues

From a health perspective, and as mentioned earlier, the cessation of mass events such as sports competitions was inevitable in line with government decisions to implement lockdowns and social distancing (Szczepkowski, 2021; Ludvigsen, 2021). This decision has fundamentally disrupted the global sports sector (Stavros et al., 2021; Giulianotti & Collison, 2020), which had a particularly severe impact on the football industry during the 2019/20 season (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021), as professional football was suspended worldwide (Weimar et al., 2021; Beiderbeck et al., 2021).

Faced with this unexpected public health concern, European sports federations and professional football stakeholders faced many uncertain implications (Beiderbeck et al., 2021) as they immediately began to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. As news and updated information about professional football events and leagues were shared daily (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021), leagues across Europe were postponed and even cancelled in March 2020 as an important response to COVID-19 (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021; Correia-Oliveira & Andrade-Souza, 2021; Ludvigsen, 2021; Morbi et al., 2021 ; Li et al., 2021), resulting in a "*dramatic sporting standstill between February and May 2020*" (Ludvigsen, 2021, p. 2) that extended for months, as we can see in Figure 4.1. Similarly, in the Portuguese league *Liga Portugal Bwin*, all football matches were suspended from March 12 to June 3, 2020.

Country	League	Suspension*	Planned Restart*	Actual Restart
EUROPE				
Austria	Bundesliga	18 March 2020	2 June 2020	02 June 2020
England	Premier League	12 March 2020	12 June 2020	17 June 2020
France	Ligue 1	13 March 2020	Cancelled	-
Germany	Bundesliga	13 March 2020	16 May 2020	16 May 2020
Italy	Serie A	09 March 2020	End of June	22 June 2020
Netherlands	Eredivisie	12 March 2020	Cancelled	-
Spain	La Liga	12 March 2020	11 June 2020	11 June 2020
Sweden	Allsvenskan**	19 March 2020	14 June 2020	14 June 2020
Switzerland	Super League	02 March 2020	08 June 2020	19 June 2020

* = Status as of 15 May 2020; ** = Season start

Figure 4.1. Situation overview of international leagues during the COVID-19 outbreak

Source: Adapted from Hammerschmidt et al., 2021, p. 3

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, most leagues had already completed at least two-thirds of the season (Correia-Oliveira & Andrade-Souza, 2021), but in the first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak (spring 2020), matches in the most highly regarded European leagues (Premier League, Bundesliga, Ligue 1, Série A, LaLiga) were postponed (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021), leading to unprecedented confusion. As for international championships such as the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship, the Union of

European Football Associations (UEFA) decided on March 17 to postpone all matches until 2021 (Beiderbeck et al., 2021; Bandyopadhyay, 2021). This decision was taken mainly to avoid a conglomeration of people, as Euro 2020 was to be played in many different European countries to mark the 60th anniversary of the tournament, unlike previous editions.

4.1.3. The impact of COVID-19 on Sports Media

While digital technologies have previously enabled "*an integrated, content-rich experience that lives beyond the execution of an event or the playing of a game*" (Stavros et al., 2021, p. 74), COVID-19 has accelerated numerous opportunities for sports consumption in the media. Indeed, the pandemic has led to new digital habits and innovations, forcing the media to rethink their habits.

Therefore, football clubs had to react quickly and learn how to deal with the pandemic without live sports and how to develop alternative and creative digital content strategies to fill the gap and stay relevant and connected to their fan base (Szczepkowski, 2021). Accordingly, football clubs were forced to innovate and transform their interactions with fans on a fully digital basis and reinvent themselves to be valuable to their fan base. The challenge was to turn the threat of the global health crisis and the likelihood of fan disengagement and disloyalty into new opportunities (Stavros et al., 2021).

5. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, we will focus on explaining the methods and tools used to achieve the objectives of the study.

In this research, primary data is used, which is data that the researcher himself collected as part of the study. In addition, the data collected are both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The qualitative data mainly focus on the analysis of the message of the posts and therefore are divided into four different types of content categories. In addition, the fan comments on the posts of the PFCs are also analysed. On the other hand, for the quantitative data, the frequency of the different features of the PFCs' posts and the number of likes and comments on these posts are used to quantify the results.

Since this study aims, on the one hand, to show the changes in the social networks of PFCs before and after the temporary suspension of all football competitions, and, on the other hand, to investigate the online engagement of football fans in relation to these activities, netnography seems to be the most appropriate method.

5.1. Netnography

Netnography is a method of online research or network analysis founded by Robert V. Kozinets in 1995. Also referred to as online or virtual ethnography, this approach is very close to traditional ethnographic values and techniques of observation, identification, and interpretation. As such, netnography is used to study the behavior of groups as they interact on network sites. Kozinets (2012, p. 39) states that "*Netnography differs from methods such as focus groups, surveys, interviews, data mining, and content mining in that it is naturalistic, immersive, contextually-driven, and observational as well as participative*".

Kozinets (2010) first identified six stages of the netnographic research process: research planning, entrée, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and finally research representation (see Figure 5.1.). The first stage (research planning) involves researching the topic to be studied and formulating the research questions. The second step (entrée) involves selecting the appropriate sample size and study period. The third step (data collection) refers to obtaining the data to be studied. The fourth step (interpretation) refers to coding and classifying the data. In the fifth step (ensuring ethical standards), the researcher must ensure that ethical standards are met by ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of informants. Finally, in the sixth and last step (research presentation), the researcher observes and interprets the results obtained. See attachment B for a word cloud of netnography.

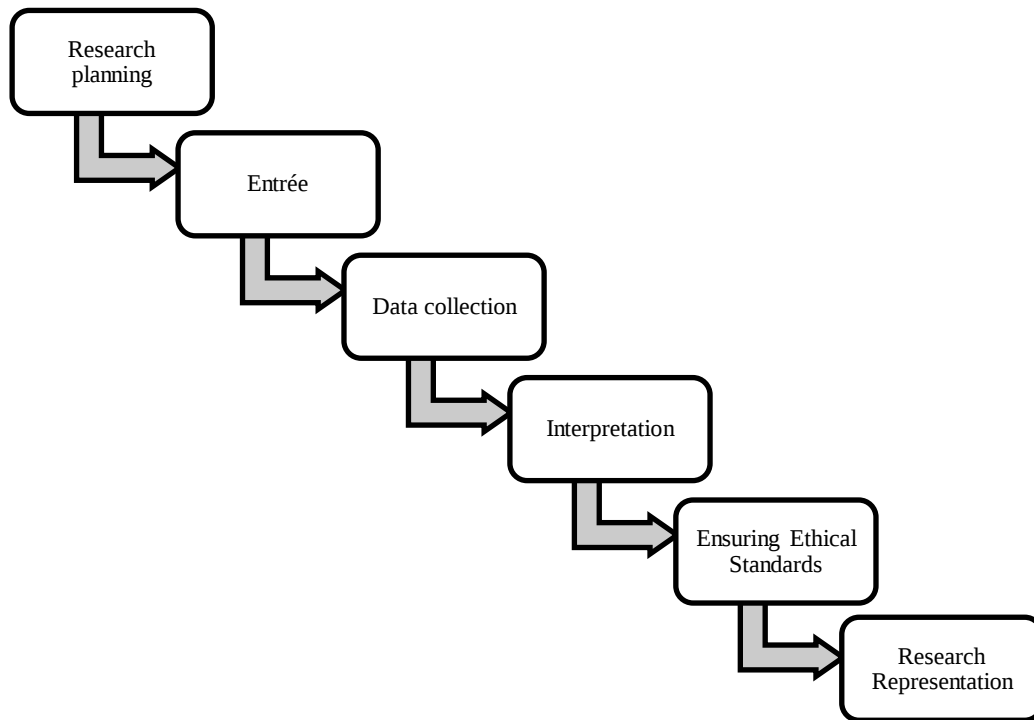


Figure 5.1. The six steps of a Netnographic research

Source: Author's elaboration

This marketing tool is therefore particularly important to study and understand online interactions between fans and clubs and their behavior. In the following section, the above steps are presented in detail, now adapted to the current study.

5.1.1. Step 1 : Research planning

The initial research on the topics under investigation was conducted extensively. After reading numerous articles on the topic of sports and the COVID-19, it was clear that the business of sports had been radically challenged by the pandemic, leading to a rapid reassessment of many practices, which included social media marketing activities.

Following Kozinets' (2010) guidelines for defining the research question, the aim of this study is to answer the main research question, for which we will analyze the activities of PFCs in SM before and after the temporary suspension of football leagues due to the pandemic. This analysis will be done according to several aspects: Frequency, design and content of the posts. In addition, this study aims to gain deeper insights on a sub-question related to fans' behavioral expressions in social media with the content before the pandemic outbreak and the "new" content after.

5.1.2. Step 2 : Entrée

In line with the research topic involving PFCs, the clubs to be analysed are the Spanish football club Real Madrid CF (original: *Real Madrid Club de Fútbol* - abbreviated RMA) and the Portuguese football club FC Porto (original: *Futebol Clube do Porto* - abbreviated FCP).

The reason for choosing Real Madrid CF is due to the fact that the club has the most followers on social media in the football world. In fact, this Spanish football team reached more than 100 million fans in 2021, becoming the first club to break this mark and set this record (Marca, 2021). In the 2020/21 pandemic season alone, they counted 12 million more fans. In total, they have over 100 million Instagram interactions on their branded content (Meta, 2021).

As for the choice of FC Porto, it is the football team with the most Instagram followers (1.9 million, as of April 4, 2020) in Portugal (home country), but a number much lower than Real Madrid CF. Nevertheless, this club has a very large presence in its social networks.

Since the number of followers is so different, it is interesting to compare the two and develop an understanding of both SMM strategies. In fact, Kuzma, Bell, and Logue (2014) found that world-famous clubs do not necessarily maximise their commercial potential, while lesser-known clubs may better leverage SM. Being in different leagues, it can be said that they are two communities made up of people with very different expectations and behaviours toward the club.

5.1.3. Step 3 : Data collection

Based on Kozinets' (2010) guidelines for the selection of channels for data collection (active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous and rich in data at the time of the research), the research conducted first analyzes the posts on the official online communication channel Instagram of Real Madrid CF and FC Porto in a comparative approach. The results of both clubs allow us to better understand what could be considered a general phenomenon in the industry.

The period studied extends from February to April 2020, and more specifically, the data collection starts one month before the interruption of the Portuguese and Spanish leagues, which took place on March 12, and extends until one month after that date. Thus, the period before the interruption extends from 12/02/2020 to 11/03/2020, while the period after the interruption extends from 12/03/2020 to 09/04/2020. This period is significant for the present study because it covers two important periods: the period immediately before and the period immediately after the occurrence of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the football industry. We also concluded that two months of brand posts (one month before and

one month after the pandemic outbreak) would provide a reasonably accurate picture, as a "*two-month window is long enough for a wide variety of brand posts to be observed*" (Tafesse, 2016, p. 428).

The first phase of the research examines the frequency, content, and design of posts from both teams. A total of 433 posts were collected, of which 123 were related to Real Madrid CF and the other 310 to FC Porto. The posts come from the official Instagram pages of both teams (www.instagram.com/realmadrid; www.instagram.com/fcporto). These posts total 140.592.067 likes and 709.319 comments. The second phase of the study will also collect data on fan engagement on SM.

The collected data will be divided into different groups according to the different dimensions to be studied:

- *Frequency of brand posts*

We begin this analysis by quantifying the frequency of postings by the two teams before and after the temporary suspension of football competitions to better understand the posting decisions regarding this aspect.

- *Content of brand posts : informative, relational, entertaining and remunerative*

In this study, we analyze individual brand posts. Therefore, the posts analyzed are examined and coded for the specific type of content they provide. We categorize the content of brand posts as informative, relational, entertaining and remunerative.

To further the analysis, each of the content dimensions was examined and divided into different sub-dimensions. These criteria were coded by the author based, first, on articles about social media content of sports teams (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Vale & Fernandes, 2018) and, second, on the specific content that the football industry mainly presents on social media.

The sub-dimensions of content, as well as all aspects to be analyzed on the topic of brand posts, correspond to the following in the attachment C. As this study explores the digital world, other criteria such as the hashtags used by PFCs were added to these analysis principles as they also provide insights into their social media content.

- *Design of brand post: vividness and interactivity*

Regarding the design of the brand posts, we analyze the data according to their vividness and interactivity. In this study, we define vividness as absent (no picture or video), low (posting

a picture without text), moderate (posting a picture and descriptive text), and high (posting a video). Regarding interactivity, for this study we define it as absent (descriptive text only), low (when asked to click on a link), moderate (when asked questions about club/players/games/nutrition/health), and high (when fans are asked to participate in a football challenge/workout or share pictures/videos). A more detailed description of the different interactive levels analyzed in this study can be found in attachment D.

- *Fan engagement in social media: emotional, cognitive and behavioural*

Based on the importance of the emotional and cognitive engagement dimensions presented in the literature review, the author developed corresponding items for both dimensions to serve as analysis criteria for this study and for the football industry on SNS (see attachment E). As for behavioural manifestations of engagement on social media, this is measured by fans' reaction to posts based on the number of likes and comments.

5.1.4. Step 4 : Interpretation

In the first phase of the research, Instagram posts related to the analyzed period are manually extracted for both football clubs. The database is then explored on the Excel software. For further analysis, the data is first analyzed according to the frequency of the posts through descriptive analysis on SPSS software, version 27. Secondly, it is coded according to the design of the posts. Thirdly, it is coded into the previously mentioned content dimensions. Finally, a textual analysis is also performed to investigate the use of hashtags by both associations using XLSTAT, a data analysis and statistics solution for Microsoft Excel.

In the second phase, the number of likes and comments on the analyzed posts will be extracted and a quantitative analysis will be performed to investigate the relationship between the fans' behavior and the content and design of the posts. To investigate fans' cognitive and emotional engagement, we select the posts with the most likes and comments per team (RMA and FCP) and per time period (before and after suspension). A total of 8 posts are analyzed by taking a random sample of 200 comments per post. The final sample consists of 1,600 comments covering both teams and both time periods. These comments are subjected to a content analysis, again performed in XLSTAT.

5.1.5. Step 5 : Ensuring ethical standards

This study is based on publicly shared social data collected from Instagram's official websites, which means that no specific participant was required for the material studied. In this sense, no personal information is presented in this study, since all names or nicknames of any form that could emerge from the analysed likes or comments have been hidden, guaranteeing anonymity and ethical action.

5.1.6. Step 6 : Research representation

After the extraction and coding of the studied data, the last step is the analysis, which is presented in the next chapter. The presentation of the data analysis is followed by a discussion of the results, which show that the presence of PFCs on SM decreases, while the interactivity and vividness of the posts increase, as well as the dimension of relational content, especially the sub-dimension of active interaction. Regarding fan engagement, despite the general lack of engagement, something surprising can be observed. Finally, we finish with the conclusions we draw from these findings.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1. General information

Table 6.1 shows that during the studied period 433 posts were shared, resulting in a number of about 140 million likes and 701 thousand comments. Moreover, this table shows that the Spanish team Real Madrid CF has a much higher number of followers than the Portuguese team FC Porto. Nevertheless, FCP has posted twice as much as RMA in the same period, but has not achieved as much engagement from fans in the form of Likes and comments.

Table 6.1. Quantitative summary of both clubs' official Instagram page

Club	Followers on Instagram	Total of posts	Analyzed posts	Likes on analyzed posts	Comments on analyzed posts
Real Madrid CF	113 million	5.938	123	131.878.841	654.594
FC Porto	2 million	13.243	310	8.713.226	54.725

Source: Author's elaboration

6.2. Phase 1: PFCs' social media activities and strategy

6.2.1. Frequency of Posting

Figure 6.1 and Table 6.2 show that both clubs were less active on social media after the suspension of competitions due to the pandemic.

In the case of Real Madrid CF, Figure 4 shows us that in the month before the postponement of all the leagues, the highest number of posts per day was 5 and the lowest was 1. In the month after, 4 is the highest number of posts per day, while the lowest is still 1. FC Porto posted a maximum of 15 posts per day in the pre-suspension period, while in the post-suspension period it was only 8. Oddly enough, however, the minimum posts per day after the suspension was higher than before (2 versus 1). This decrease in posts on SM could mean that PFCs did not want to overwhelm their fans with non-sports content in a time of a lot of information and uncertainty, as too many posts could cause a backlash and thus overwhelm users.

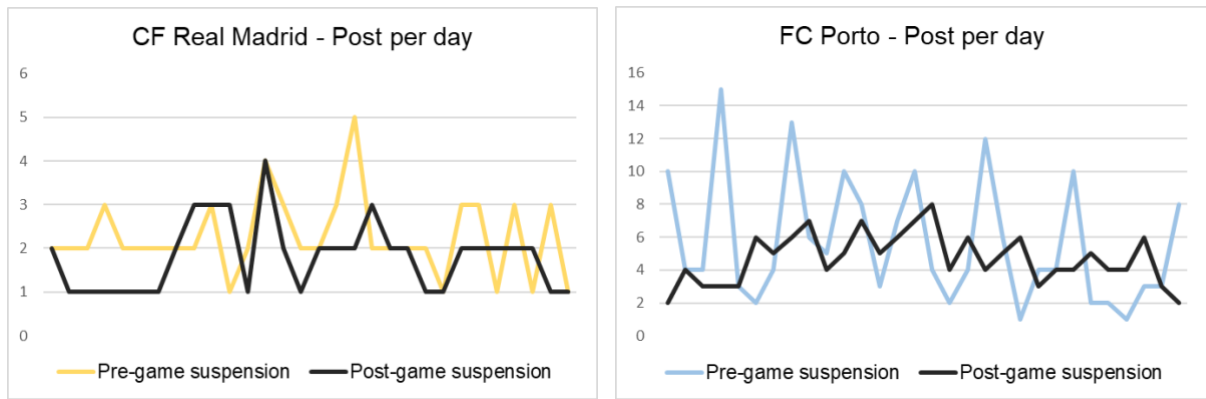


Figure 6.1. Quantity of posts per day

Source: Author's elaboration

Table 6.2 shows that before the match suspension, the Real Madrid club CF published an average of at least two posts per day, while FC Porto published at least five posts per day. After the match suspension, the average number of posts per day decreased by 24% for Real Madrid CF and by 18% for the Portuguese club FC Porto.

Table 6.2. Average post per day

	Real Madrid CF	FC Porto
PRE-SUSPENSION	2,33	5,67
POST-SUSPENSION	1,77	4,67
Evolution in %	-24%	-18%

Source: Author's elaboration

Regarding the frequency of posts as a function of the days of the week, looking up to attachment F we can see that both clubs published more posts on certain days before the suspension of competitions due to the health crisis.

In both cases, we can see a similarity, as both Real Madrid CF and FC Porto published a lot of content on Thursdays and the least content on Tuesdays. Real Madrid CF also published a majority of its content on weekends, while FC Porto published a high number of content on Sundays. This variation in publishing frequency could be related to more important days related to competitions (most matches of Portuguese and Spanish teams are on Sundays). However, after the suspension of the football matches, a greater stability in the posts by days of the week can be observed. This could be due to the desire of clubs to orient their strategy towards a more daily presence, since there are no more match days, i.e., no key days to promote fan engagement. According to Salazar (2017), it is important for a company to identify and adjust the optimal level of posting frequency to improve user engagement and positive brand mentions.

6.2.2. Post design – Vividness

Instagram is an online platform whose main focus is on visual content and less on textual information and therefore, it is not possible to post a message without adding an image (Machado et al., 2020). As a result, and as shown in Table 6.3, none of the clubs have an absent neither a low vividness, as both clubs always post at least a picture with a description on their official Instagram page.

In addition, it was found that in the period before the impact of the pandemic on the football leagues, most of the brand posts were moderately vivid with a high percentage of 67,2% for Real Madrid CF and 88,8% for FC Porto. The rest of the posts were classified as highly vivid.

After the suspension of the leagues and matches, the vividness of the posts has increased, as videos account for more than half of the content of RMA (64,3%) and almost half of the posts of FCP (45%). This means that both clubs have gone from having rather moderate post vividness to implementing very vivid elements in their SMM strategies.

At a time when football clubs were trying to prevent fans from disconnecting from the football world, this finding of greater descriptiveness in the posting strategies may be directly related to the findings of Annamalai et al. (2021) study showing that sports clubs' posts with higher levels of vividness encourage fans to express themselves. Thus, football clubs relied on more vivid elements to appeal to fans.

Table 6.3. Summary statistics of posts by design (vividness)

Real Madrid CF		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Post Design	Level	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Vividness	0 = Absent (Only text)	0	-	0	-
	1 = Low (Picture)	0	-	0	-
	2 = Moderate (Picture + text)	45	67,2%	20	35,7%
	3 = High (Video)	22	32,8%	36	64,3%
Total:		67	100%	56	100%
FC Porto		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Post Design	Level	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Vividness	0 = Absent (Only text)	0	-	0	-
	1 = Low (Picture)	0	-	0	-
	2 = Moderate (Picture + text)	151	88,8%	77	55,0%
	3 = High (Video)	19	11,2%	63	45,0%
Total:		170	100%	140	100%

Source: Author's elaboration

6.2.3. Post design – Interactivity

Regarding the level of posting interactivity, we can conclude from the results presented in Table 6.4 that both clubs had an absence to low post interactivity before the suspension of all matches. In fact, a very high percentage of posts contained no interactive elements (RMA: 89,6%; FCP: 78,8%). Similarly, the Spanish team Real Madrid CF did not have a single highly interactive post during the same period, while high interactivity accounted for only 1,2% of the posts of the Portuguese team FC Porto.

However, when looking at the results of the post-suspension period, a positive change in interactivity can clearly be seen. Real Madrid's non-interactive contributions decreased by almost three times, while interactive elements increased from low to high. Thus, high interactivity in this case increased from 0% to 12,5%. In the case of FC Porto, the lack of interactive posts also decreased, with the largest positive change in medium interactivity. Although the characteristics of highly interactive posts increased, they still represent only 5% of the strategy. These results are consistent with Szczepkowski's (2021) article on football fan engagement during COVID-19, which shows that PFC made several efforts to engage fans on social media by offering many interactive initiatives such as quizzes, so that fans felt encouraged to act by being challenged in their knowledge.

Table 6.4. Summary statistics of posts by design (interactivity)

Real Madrid CF		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Post Design	Level	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Interactivity	0 = Absent	60	89,6%	22	39,3%
	1 = Low (Link)	6	9,0%	19	33,9%
	2 = Moderate (Question)	1	1,5%	8	14,3%
	3 = High (Challenge)	0	-	7	12,5%
Total:		67	100%	56	100%
FC Porto		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Post Design	Level	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Interactivity	0 = Absent	134	78,8%	83	59,3%
	1 = Low (Link)	18	10,6%	9	6,4%
	2 = Moderate (Question)	16	9,4%	41	29,3%
	3 = High (Challenge)	2	1,2%	7	5,0%
Total:		170	100%	140	100%

Source: Author's elaboration

6.2.4. Post Content

- **General results**

In terms of post content dimensions, Table 6.5 shows that before leagues were suspended, entertaining content was most prevalent in both teams' social media strategy (RMA: 89,6%; FCP: 90%). However, once both national leagues were suspended, both football clubs decreased their entertainment content (RMA: 57,1%; FCP: 58,6%).

As shown in Table 6.6, the entertainment sub-dimension that is most prominent in the strategy of both football clubs before the outbreak of COVID-19 is the one related to the competition (=gameday). Content related to matches represents the highest percentage in their dimensions (38,3% for Real Madrid CF and 79,1% for FC Porto). In the case of Real Madrid CF, the second highest entertaining sub-dimension refers to statistics about records or trophies and reviews of past victories or goals scored, while in the case of FC Porto, the second most entertaining sub-dimension is focused on players (e.g.posts about players' birthdays or player appreciation).

Following the entertaining content, in both cases the relationship dimension is the most frequently posted, although in the case of Real Madrid CF the most popular sub-dimensions are firstly dedicated to fans and secondly to social actions (= Corporate Social Responsibility – abbreviated CSR) and interactive posts with fans. The focus of FC Porto is mainly on socially responsible practises, followed by posts addressed to fans.

Regarding the other dimensions, informative content is posted very little to almost not at all by both teams, while remunerative content is not one of the football clubs' SMM strategies in terms of branded content during the analysed period.

However, the results from the post-suspension period show a change in the distribution of branded post content. While the entertaining and relational dimensions continue to be the two most frequently posted content for both football clubs, some interesting changes were found in the sub-dimensions.

- **Entertaining dimension**

As regard to entertainment content, Szczepkowski (2021, p. 1270) noted that "*football has a leading role in large part of the entertainment industry, above any other sport*". Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, professional football clubs used social media primarily to share ongoing news and information with their community about matches, player injuries, transfers and the death of club members (Menon & Philip, 2018). After all matches were suspended due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, the entertaining sub-dimension related to gamedays decreased significantly. However, this was mainly replaced by historical events to strengthen the relationship between fans and the club. Real Madrid CF created the hashtag #RMFansEnCasa (EN: RMFansAtHome), under which they look back every day at great moments in their history (see attachment G for a full list of hashtags).

A hashtag, usually known as a "#" symbol, allows digital users to create but also follow a specific topic by prefixing the symbol with a keyword (Szczepkowski, 2021). Using the hashtag created by the Spanish team, fans could easily follow historical posts about various important events of the club, players, and even fans celebrating past victories. FC Porto shared a variety of similar posts using the hashtags #OnThisDay and #OTD.

In addition, content about players' training decreased, although many posts still showed players completing their training programme at home. Although no physical contact was possible, the competition on the pitch was replaced by an action of the Portuguese Government Health Authority and FIFA20: an e-sports tournament around Portuguese football clubs. Each club was represented by one or more fans, and when it was "game day" for FC Porto, fun messages were shared on the topic, encouraging fans to stay tuned and watch the game live on their Facebook page. In addition, the Portuguese club used the time during the Coronavirus to launch a new communication channel, TikTok, to respond to the needs and expectations of fans, strengthening their connection.

- **Relational dimension**

Relational content recorded the largest increase of all dimensions after the suspension (RMA: 7,5% to 28,6%; FCP: 10% to 37,9%), mainly due to active interaction and CSR efforts. As mentioned above, football clubs have invested in interactivity through social networks, with the main objective of maintaining relationships with fans. These efforts are most evident in the number of challenges and quizzes posted, in which fans could participate and test their knowledge about the club, the players or the games.

- *Active interaction sub-dimension*

Real Madrid's active interaction activities were mainly related to the #HomeTeam tagline, with the aim of (i) showing how players spent their time at home during the pandemic, and (ii) sharing with fans daily sporting challenges posed by Real Madrid players. Because players have an even greater impact on sports fans (Szczepkowski, 2021), many players subsequently created their own hashtag (e.g. #TonisHomeChallenge).

In the case of FC Porto, just two days after the Portuguese league suspension (March 12, 2020), the club carried out the same initiative with the hashtags #DFHomeChallenge and #FCPortoSportsChallenge, for which players prepared videos while no activities were allowed in the present. Consequently, they asked fans to make a video of themselves trying out the challenge using the same hashtags and following their social networks, as they explained that the best videos would be published on their official pages.

However, not all of the highly interactive activities (=challenges) were training-related. For example, on March 25, 2020, Real Madrid CF launched a painting contest and shared a very descriptive post (video) with the following caption: *"#RMFansEnCasa, show us your artistic side! Recreate one of our best moments in a video, a drawing, as a song, however you like... and upload it to the LINK in our BIO before each Sunday. You could win a prize and remember.... #StayHome."*

On April 1, 2020, FC Porto prepared a very similar challenge, sharing an image of a drawing made by a fan and asking fans to participate in the contest: *"Daniel answered @dracofcporto's challenge with this beautiful drawing. Challenge: send his drawings to the email draco@fcporto.pt or post with #dracofcporto."* Another example of challenges to fans was on March 29, 2020, when Portuguese club FC Porto shared the following challenge: *"How do you unite to go to the stadium? Share your photos at the stadium with #myfcporto"* The club also posted pictures of players in their childhood several times, asking fans to figure out who they were.

- *Social activities sub-dimension*

Apart from the relational activities already mentioned, where people use social networks in search of social support (Santos, Coelho, & Rita., 2021), both clubs also carried out a series of social initiatives.

This concept goes beyond the main activity of a company by incorporating social and environmental concerns into business operations (Li et al., 2021). Daddi, Todaro, Iraldo, and Frey (2021), in their study of the institutional pressure European football clubs are under to adopt environmentally friendly practices, found an actual positive influence, i.e., that football clubs in Europe are pressured to act as role models for others due to increasing environmental concerns. In the absence of the main activity of football (competition) for a period of time, other capabilities of football clubs, such as ethical gestures and solidarity efforts, have taken on a different importance (Lopez-Carril & Anagnostopoulos, 2020; Bandyopadhyay, 2021).

As a health promotion measure, Real Madrid CF launched an initiative with the slogan #YoMEQuedoEnCasa (EN version: #StayHome) to encourage fans to stay at home. This hashtag was used 36 times in the 30 days following the interruption of the games, making it

the most used hashtag in this period (see attachment G). Regarding the hashtags, we can clearly see a drastic change from the most used hashtags related to the club motto (#HalaMadrid) and the match-related hashtags (#ElClásico; #RMCity) to two new main hashtags: #YoMeQuedoEnCasa/#StayHome and #RMFansEnCasa (EN: RM fans at home). Subsequently, news about the new project was published on the official pages SM and on the official website of the club. In this project, the stadium will be transformed into a large medical care center in the fight against the pandemic COVID-19.

Also FC Porto has organized a special campaign with the hashtag #StayHome (original: #FicaEmCasa), similar to the Spanish team. However, the biggest part of this campaign was about the players, who shot videos of themselves leaving a message for different countries to draw attention to the importance and responsibility that every action of a fan has for the world. Examples include the videos of player Zé Luis sending a message to the people of Cape Verde, players Loum and Mbaye to Senegal, and athlete Aboubakar to fans in Cameroon. Because fans have a strong emotional attachment to sports clubs (Li et al., 2021) and very often a greater appreciation for specific players, football clubs can achieve a sense of belonging in this way by sending the message that fans are not alone in this health crisis.

- *Fan-directed sub-dimension*

In the sub-dimension that mainly refers to the fans themselves, both teams, but especially FC Porto, have integrated more appreciative posts in their SMM activities, expressing their appreciation for the fans' efforts during the health crisis, as well as for their continuous support. On April 7, 2020, Real Madrid CF shared the following on its Instagram page, "*The @Mahou_es Five Star Player award for March goes to a very special player indeed, to someone who never lets us down. It goes to you, our fans, for staying at home*". On March 29, 2020, FC Porto shared a variety of images of fans in the stands and players interacting with fans. The caption read "*Dragons Together*" followed by a blue heart emoji (the main colour of the club).

- **Remunerative dimension**

The results on the content of the posts show that there were no posts of a paid nature for the Spanish team RMA in either period. However, for the Portuguese team FCP, there is a positive change of 2,1% in remunerative content after the suspension of the leagues (from 0 remunerative posts to 3 in the period after the leagues' suspension). Since the coronavirus outbreak, many of the world's prominent PFCs are still at risk as they currently struggle to respond to the financial consequences of the pandemic (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021;

Beiderbeck et al., 2021; Bandyopadhyay, 2021). Much of the profit of European PCFs is generated by match days, which include ticket sales (Herold, Boronczyk, & Breuer, 2021). However, after all leagues were suspended, revenues felt the most unfavourable impact of the pandemic aftermath.

Sponsorships also could not be provided as originally agreed. In order to avoid paying fees for not fulfilling the obligations agreed upon when the contract was signed, many PFCs attempted to compensate their stakeholders by increasing advertising on social media (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021). It is also important to emphasise that CSR measures can ultimately lead to financial gains, as they improve the club's image and strengthen its relationship with fans (Li et al., 2021).

- **Informative dimension**

Following the previous statement that the public's focus has shifted to SM, virtual platforms have quickly become a primary source of information for many. As a result, the informational content of sports organisations has increased, nevertheless only slightly (RMA: 3% to 14,3; FCP: 0% to 1,4%). This increase was mainly due to information related to COVID-19 football updates, as information on the topic of the pandemic tended to be most popular when there were no football matches (Li et al., 2021).

Table 6.5. Summary statistics of posts by categories of content

Real Madrid CF		<i>PRE-SUSPENSION</i>		<i>POST-SUSPENSION</i>	
Dimensions		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Informative		2	3%	8	14,3%
Relational		5	7,5%	16	28,6%
Entertaining		60	89,6%	32	57,1%
Remunerative		0	-	0	-
Total		67	100%	56	100%

FC Porto		<i>PRE-SUSPENSION</i>		<i>POST-SUSPENSION</i>	
Dimensions		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Informative		0	0%	2	1,4%
Relational		17	10%	53	37,9%
Entertaining		153	90%	82	58,6%
Remunerative		0	-	3	2,1%
Total		170	100%	140	100%

Source: Author's elaboration

Table 6.6. Summary statistics of posts by sub-categories of content

Real Madrid CF		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Dimensions	Sub-dimensions	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Informative	General	0	-	4	50%
	COVID-19	2	100%	4	50%
	Total	2	100%	8	100%
Relational	CSR	1	20%	5	31,3%
	Fan-directed	3	60%	2	12,5%
	Active interaction	1	20%	9	56,3%
	Health/training advices	0	-	0	-
	International days	0	-	0	-
	Total	5	100%	16	100%
Entertaining	Training	13	21,7%	10	31,3%
	Gameday	23	38,3%	0	-
	Statistics/Flashback	15	25%	22	68,8%
	Player-directed	9	15%	0	-
	Total	60	100%	32	100%
Remunerative	Sponsorships/Partnerships	0	-	0	-
	Total	0	-	0	-
		67		56	

FC Porto		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Dimensions	Sub-dimensions	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Informative	General	0	-	0	-
	COVID-19	0	-	2	100%
	Total	0	-	2	100%
Relational	CSR	2	11,8%	16	30,2%
	Fan-directed	5	29,4%	9	17,0%
	Active interaction	8	47,1%	22	41,5%
	Health/training advices	0	-	5	9,4%
	International days	2	11,8%	1	1,9%
	Total	17	100%	53	100%
Entertaining	Training	9	5,9%	17	20,7%
	Gameday	121	79,1%	4	4,9%
	Statistics/Flashback	10	6,5%	35	42,7%
	Player-directed	13	8,5%	26	31,7%
	Total	153	100%	82	100%
Remunerative	Sponsorships/Partnerships	0	-	3	100%
	Total	0	-	3	100%
		170		140	

Source: Author's elaboration

6.3. Phase 2: Fan engagement on social media

6.3.1. Behavioural Engagement

- **Post content**

As shown in Table 6.7, the total number of likes for the analyzed sample decreased on average in the post-game suspension period for both teams (RMA: from 1.296.298 to 804.051; FCP: from 31.045 to 24.540).

When examining the number of likes for specific posting content, a similar phenomenon is observed for both clubs: Likes for entertainment and relational content decreased. However, it can be seen that the entertainment category is still the category with the most likes even after the outbreak of COVID-19. As can be seen in attachment J.1, of all the posts analyzed during the sports timeout, the most liked post from Real Madrid CF falls into the entertaining dimension, more specifically the Statistics/Flashback sub-dimension. However, this is not the case with FC Porto, whose most popular post falls into the relational content dimension (attachment J.2).

Table 6.7. The effects of post content on behavioural engagement (likes)

	Football club	Dimensions	Period	Mean	N
Likes	FC Porto	Entertaining	Pre ^a	30.412	153
			Post ^b	25.948	82
		Relational	Pre ^a	36.737	17
			Post ^b	22.479	53
		Informative	Post ^b	22.949	2
		Remunerative	Post ^b	23.523	3
	Real Madrid CF	Total	Pre ^a	31.045	170
			Post ^b	24.540	140
		Entertaining	Pre ^a	1.327.319	60
			Post ^b	882.155	32
		Relational	Pre ^a	911.392	5
			Post ^b	659.222	16
		Informative	Pre ^a	1.327.958	2
			Post ^b	781.295	8
		Total	Pre ^a	1.296.298	67
			Post ^b	804.051	56

a. Pre- suspension period

b. Post- suspension period

Source: Author's elaboration

In contrast to the decrease in the number of likes, we can observe a very interesting and intriguing result in the number of comments. Table 6.8 shows that the number of comments on the Instagram page of both clubs has slightly increased (RMA: from 5.264 to 5.534; FCP: from 172 to 182). This result can be attributed to the fact that, as mentioned in the literature review, time spent on SNSs has increased with social distance and isolation regulations (Szczepkowski, 2021; Watson, 2020), with many fans focusing mainly on social media (Stavros, Smith, & Lopez-Gonzalez, 2021). This means that people have more time to invest energy in more intense participation in the activities of SM and therefore comment on posts.

Regarding the number of comments in the different content categories, Real Madrid CF received almost three times as many comments on its relational posts. However, this was not the case for FC Porto. Also, after the coronavirus outbreak, the relational content recorded the most comments in both cases. In fact, the most commented post after the coronavirus outbreak in both Real Madrid CF and FC Porto falls under the Relational dimension and in particular under the Active Interaction sub-dimension (see attachments J.1 & J.2).

Table 6.8. The effects of post content on behavioural engagement (comments)

	Football club	Dimensions	Period	Mean	N
Comments	FC Porto	Entertaining	Pre ^a	157	153
			Post ^b	123	82
		Relational	Pre ^a	306	17
			Post ^b	277	53
		Informative	Post ^b	68	2
		Remunerative	Post ^b	182	3
		Total	Pre ^a	172	170
			Post ^b	182	140
	Real Madrid CF	Entertaining	Pre ^a	5.442	60
			Post ^b	4.721	32
		Relational	Pre ^a	2.978	5
			Post ^b	8.541	16
		Informative	Pre ^a	5.627	2
			Post ^b	2.771	8
		Total	Pre ^a	5.264	67
			Post ^b	5.534	56

a. Pre- suspension period

b. Post- suspension period

Source: Author's elaboration

- **Post design – Vividness**

Results in Table 6.9 show that although the evolution of likes by vividness is not the same for both clubs, we see a similar evolution in comments.

Regarding the case of Real Madrid CF, although moderate vividness (image + text) is more important in the period before the pandemic, in the first month after the suspension of football leagues, high vividness (video) almost doubled its previous mean value.

As can be seen in attachment J.1, the most popular image in likes before the pandemic outbreak corresponds to an image with a text (moderate interactivity), while after the outbreak it is a video with high interactivity. This is not the case for the Portuguese team FC Porto, whose results from Table 6.9 and attachment J.2 show the opposite. However, the average of comments with high vividness (video) decreased in both cases, with an increase in the number of comments on posts with moderate vividness (image + text). In both cases and in both periods, the most commented posts correspond to moderate vividness.

Table 6.9. The effect of post vividness on behavioural engagement (likes & comments)

Real Madrid CF		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Post Design	Level	Likes (M)	Comments (M)	Likes (M)	Comments (M)
Vividness	0 = Absent (Only text)	/	/	/	/
	1 = Low (Picture)	/	/	/	/
	2 = Moderate (Picture + text)	1.425.878	19.747	1.145.577	34.395
	3 = High (Video)	568.469	10.424	1.073.758	7.947
Total:		1.994.347	30.171	2.219.335	42.342
FC Porto		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Post Design	Level	Likes (M)	Comments (M)	Likes (M)	Comments (M)
Vividness	0 = Absent (Only text)	/	/	/	/
	1 = Low (Picture)	/	/	/	/
	2 = Moderate (Picture + text)	37.933	565	32.046	1.328
	3 = High (Video)	40.876	616	23.433	267
Total:		78.809	1.181	55.479	1.595

Source: Author's elaboration

- **Post design – Interactivity**

Regarding the average number of likes (Table 6.10), we note that Real Madrid CF did not have high interactive posts before the pandemic-related interruption, while after the interruption we observed a quite high average number of likes for challenges. In fact, we observe a decrease in likes in posts lacking in interactivity and an increasing number in the other interaction levels.

This result shows the increasing desire of fans to actively interact with football clubs after the COVID-19 outbreak.

However, there is one level of interactivity that stands out the most, that of posts with links. In attachment J.1, we can see that the most popular post of the Spanish team contains a link available on their Instagram bio page. In the case of FC Porto, we cannot notice any change that stands out in terms of average number of likes. However, in attachment J.2, we can observe that the post with the most likes is associated with a high level of interactivity.

Moreover, a general phenomenon is observed in both cases, namely a strong shift in comments on posts with high interactivity (challenges). As a result of the increasing publication of challenges by football teams, as mentioned in the previous results, fans seemed to interact with these posts much more than before. Regarding the most commented post in the analysed sample, the interactivity of the posts in both clubs changed from absent to high from one period to another.

Thus, these results show that after suspension, comments are strongly influenced by the interaction level, while likes are less important

Table 6.10. Average likes and comments by post interactivity

Real Madrid CF		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Post Design	Level	Likes (M)	Comments (M)	Likes (M)	Comments (M)
Interactivity	0 = Absent	1.206.961	18.175	987.963	5.344
	1 = Low (Link)	1.315.976	6.177	9.003.033	5.956
	2 = Moderate (Question)	646.932	3.483	1.117.409	6.272
	3 = High (Challenge)	/	/	1.289.719	41.235
Total:		3.169.869	27.835	12.398.124	58.807
FC Porto		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Post Design	Level	Likes (M)	Comments (M)	Likes (M)	Comments (M)
Interactivity	0 = Absent	40.517	642	35.776	190
	1 = Low (Link)	28.177	327	23.696	257
	2 = Moderate (Question)	29.886	260	28.817	946
	3 = High (Challenge)	47.335	109	23.477	2.568
Total:		145.915	1.338	111.766	3.961

Source: Author's elaboration

6.3.2. Emotional Engagement

When reading Table 6.11, we can verify which of the analysis criteria regarding emotional engagement are verified (YES) and not verified (NO) in the period before and after the suspension of the football leagues due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The item that stands out the most in the pre-suspension period in the case of the Spanish team Real Madrid CF is "fans expressing a set of positive emotions towards the club", while in the case of FC Porto it is the item "passionate elements in the comments appealing to their love for the club/players". This is not surprising, considering that the fan base has a high level of affectivity, so sports consumers are willing to express their emotions towards the club or players.

As for the changes in the dimension of emotional engagement after the interruption of all European football matches, it can be noted that in the case of Real Madrid CF all emotional aspects decreased. These results may be explained by the fact that much of the emotional involvement and comments (positive and negative) are mainly due to opinions about match performances. Thus, without competition, fans' emotions may be less triggered. On the other hand, the results of FC Porto show a slight increase in comments related to the pride that fans feel for the club, while all other emotional aspects decreased, as in the case of Real Madrid. This result could be justified by two facts: (i) when there are no matches, fans are less interested in expressing a certain set of emotions, but since many are very attached to the club itself (regardless of the competition results), they still want to express their loyalty and support for the team, and (ii) this could also be a positive result of the clubs' CSR efforts in a time of health crisis, which make fans proud to support this club.

Table 6.11. Frequency of emotional engagement dimension and sub-dimensions

Real Madrid CF			PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Dimension	Sub-dimension		Criteria	TOTAL	Criteria	TOTAL
Emotional	Fans expressing a set of positive emotions towards the club (joy, happiness)		YES	306	YES	224
			NO	95	NO	177
	Passionate elements in the comments (hearts or sentences related to loyalty and trust) appealing to their love for the club/players		YES	259	YES	215
			NO	141	NO	186
	Viewers expressing their pride on following club		YES	110	YES	83
			NO	290	NO	317
FC Porto			PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Dimension	Sub-dimension		Criteria	TOTAL	Criteria	TOTAL
Emotional	Fans expressing a set of positive emotions towards the club (joy, happiness)		YES	237	YES	174
			NO	163	NO	226
	Passionate elements in the comments (hearts or sentences related to loyalty and trust) appealing to their love for the club/players		YES	248	YES	176
			NO	152	NO	224
	Viewers expressing their pride on following club		YES	85	YES	72
			NO	315	NO	328

Source: Author's elaboration

As we can see in attachment H, 56,2% of the analyzed criteria for emotional involvement of Real Madrid fans were confirmed before the suspension. After the suspension, the "YES"

balance is 43,4%. In the case of FC Porto, the value of emotional involvement of fans before the outbreak of the coronavirus was 50,8%, while after the suspension of competitions, the sample analyzed was confirmed positive in 39.1% of cases. Thus, we found a decrease in the emotional involvement of fans in both cases studied.

6.3.3. Cognitive Engagement

Regarding the dimension of cognitive engagement, the sample analyzed in Table 6.12 shows that football content mainly encourages fans to spend their energy on expressing their willingness and enthusiasm to learn more about the club, the players, and the competition, as well as to express their opinions on various topics regarding the club or the players. However, during the period when the games were suspended, there was less excitement and arguments.

A possible explanation for this is the lack of interesting sports news about performances and results of competitions, player transfers, etc. during the period when sports competitions were suspended. It can also be observed that the percentage of people who liked the post and also followed the club's Instagram page increased in both cases. This could be justified since the attachment of fans to their favorite club(s) goes beyond a match or a performance, while the comments of non-fans are mostly related only to the competition. In other words, fans are much more interested in all news related to their favorite club(s) than non-fans, who are more interested in "important" news.

In both cases, we found a decline in fans' cognitive engagement in the post-suspension period (see attachment I). In the case of Real Madrid CF, the percentage of "YES" decreased from 43,1% before the suspension to 30,2% after the suspension. In the case of FC Porto, it decreased from 32,6% to 26,3%.

Table 6.12. Frequency of cognitive engagement dimension and sub-dimensions

Real Madrid CF		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Dimension	Sub-dimension	Criteria	TOTAL	Criteria	TOTAL
Cognitive	Comments that show willingness/excitement to know more about the club or its players	YES	151	YES	108
		NO	249	NO	293
	Argumentation (asking/stating/elaborating/providing evidence to support or refuse claims) about the club or players	YES	194	YES	134
		NO	206	NO	266
	Percentage of people that like the post and follow the club's page	%	70	%	79

Table 6.13. Frequency of cognitive engagement dimension and sub-dimensions (continued)

FC Porto		PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
Dimension	Sub-dimension	Criteria	TOTAL	Criteria	TOTAL
Cognitive	Comments that show willingness/excitement to know more about the club or its players	YES	143	YES	116
		NO	257	NO	284
	Argumentation (asking/stating/elaborating/providing evidence to support or refuse claims) about the club or players	YES	118	YES	94
		NO	282	NO	306
	Percentage of people that like the post and follow the club's page	%	62	%	81

Source: Author's elaboration

6.4. Theoretical implications

As the use of social media has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, this channel has become even more important in the sports industry as it brings many people together. Therefore, this study is original because it examines the impact of the 2020 health crisis on the football industry, especially from the perspective of social media marketing and fan engagement on social networks.

This study also distinguishes between the different levels of brand posts, namely informative, relational, entertaining and remunerative. In addition, different measures of fan engagement are used, namely behavioural, emotional, and cognitive, which are expressed in the comments captured through content analysis. From an academic perspective, this study contributes to the understanding of the tremendous importance of social media in sports and how it can be used to promote engagement during difficult times. In essence, this study provides new insights into how various sports activities may or may not influence fan engagement on SM during a health crisis.

6.5. Practical implications

Beyond the theoretical implications and on a more practical level, the findings will help sports marketers understand the key relationships between brand post strategy on SM and different fan engagement at moments of sports fan disengagement.

Our results show the differential influence of content types, as football clubs, in order to achieve high engagement from their fans, may use more relational content than other types. In terms of content published by football clubs, marketers should be aware that clubs need to increasingly focus on generating social content to engage fans at times when social interaction is most in demand, while not forgetting to entertain fans with more practical, sports-related content. CSR initiatives also help strengthen the relationship, especially during troubled times.

Most importantly, football clubs should constantly provide genuine, engaging experiences and show compassion for their fan community.

Marketers will also benefit from recognising the importance of post design and paying special attention to interactivity, as interaction is a key point of engagement for fans at a time when they are spending more time than usual on SNSs. According to our findings, videos are also very useful and more engaging, and in a time when clubs want to increase engagement, this is a very good point, so less important than interactivity.

Another relevant aspect is that football clubs should try to create more favourable cognitive engagement, for example, by developing tools on club or player topics to stimulate their interest in brand-related topics. Therefore, PFCs should also consider fans' loyalty to clubs/players to create more beneficial emotional engagement. Marketers should try to stir fans' passion and enthusiasm at a time when they are increasingly turning away from sports by publishing content specifically for fans (thanking them for their support, asking them about their daily sports life, etc.) and publishing important memories from their club or player career, such as trophies or goals. If PFCs are looking for more interaction in terms of behavioural engagement to get a high number of likes on their posts, they can, for example, use highly animated content (videos) and opt for highly interactive content (challenges) to get more comments.

While many sports marketers have already measured fan engagement on social media using specific performance indicators, this literature review will help them develop a set of best practises for applying different brand characteristics and tactics on social media in terms of brand design and content to achieve different levels of fan engagement. In the age of digitalization, if a football club enters a pandemic with such marketing strategies to maintain and deepen relationships, it could not only help create a stronger bond with fans, but also restore economic viability more quickly. At the same time, this study opens up directions to help process of understanding fan engagement in marketing. Moreover, it can also serve as a basis for marketers to replicate these practises in other areas.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In a digital era, where interactive and personalised marketing offers more and more opportunities provided by online platforms, social media is considered an important strategic tool for building and maintaining a competitive advantage (Loureiro & Lopes, 2019). Moreover, at a time when the world is experiencing difficult times and many companies see their business unstable, social media can be useful for any brand, as it is increasingly seen as a promising predictor of future business success (Loureiro & Lopes, 2019). With this study, we contribute to the knowledge of sports marketing literature, as we intend to investigate the changes in the social media marketing activities of PFCs in terms of post content and design, at a time when the football industry has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, in today's new marketing era where social media and technology play a fundamental role (Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2020) and engagement is critical to marketing success (Itani et al., 2019), we also wanted to explore the impact of the pandemic on fan dynamics in a digital context. As many are aware, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the first international crisis faced by football clubs. Weimar et al. (2021) point to several historical examples (the Great Depression in the 1930s, the Thatcher recession in the 1980s, and the global financial crisis of 2008) where football clubs were able to overcome these crises largely due to the strong emotional engagement of fans. Therefore, fan engagement in social media is crucial to overcome similar critical situations

In order to confirm or refute the propositions established in the conceptual model chapter and answer the two research questions proposed in the introductory chapter, this study was conducted based on two research steps: (i) we examined the activities of football clubs on social media before and after the temporary interruption of sporting competition, and (ii) fan engagement was examined based on the concept of the multidimensionality (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012) and in relation to the digital age.

To answer the first research question, the first objective of this study was to understand the dynamics and choices related to the frequency of posting, the type of content, and the type of design of posts before and after the suspension of football competitions. To this end, we collected data from the official Instagram page of the two football clubs.

The results of the first part of the study suggest that PFCs initially focused more on high levels of vividness (videos) and moderate to high levels of interactive elements such as questions (e.g., *"Can you define this goal in one word?"* or *"How do you train at home?"*) and challenges (e.g., *"Recreate one of our best moments in any format and send it to us. The best ones will be published."*)

Thus, it is possible to confirm proposition 1, as it is verified: *In post design, interactivity and vividness have increased since the declaration of the suspension of football leagues due to COVID-19.*

Other results on the content of the posts showed that the SMM activities of the clubs have changed a lot due to the pandemic consequences. In fact, PFCs invested much more in relational content than before. The results also show an increase, although less important, in informative content, mainly related to COVID-19 updates. Another small increase in content category was remunerative, though this was only in one of the two cases studied. However, the largest, although negative, change was seen in entertaining content. This result was mainly due to the absence of games and training content, but these were mainly replaced by historical flashbacks. Although the SMM strategies of the PFCs after the suspension competitions included less entertaining content and much more relational content, the entertaining one still ranks first among all dimensions in terms of frequency of publication.

Thus, it is possible to partially confirm proposition 2, as it is not fully verified: *In post content, the entertainment and relational dimensions in particular have increased, while the informative and remunerative have decreased since the declaration of the suspension of football leagues due to COVID-19.*

When examining changes in posting frequency frequency before and after leagues' suspension, results showed that PFCs were less active and published less content per day during the sports suspension between March and April 2020.

Thus, it is possible to deny proposition 3 as it is not verified: *PFCs' posting frequency has increased since the suspension of the football leagues was declared due to COVID-19.*

The second objective of this study was to understand the differential impact of brand post content and design on fan engagement before and after the induced competition halt. We first found that although each content category had fewer likes, fans commented more, especially when it came to the sub-dimension of active interaction, meaning that interactivity influenced comments the most. Regarding the emotional aspect of the engagement dimension, although the results of one of the criteria to be analysed showed a slight increase in one of the clubs studied, an overall decrease in emotional engagement was found in both cases studied. Furthermore, cognitive engagement also decreased in both cases.

Thus, it is possible to deny proposition 4 as it is not verified: *Both cognitive, emotional and behavioural fan engagement dimensions, in relation to football clubs' SM posts, have increased since the declaration of the suspension of football leagues due to COVID-19.*

Having analysed the research objectives and confirmed or rejected the previously formulated propositions, we can now answer the first research question of this study:

RQ.1: How did football clubs' social media activities change during the disruption of matches due to the pandemic COVID-19 to keep fans engaged

The basis of a relationship between fans and football clubs is mainly competition. To overcome the temporary match disruption and the complexity of maintaining their close relationship, football clubs tried to find a more optimal posting frequency considering the critical time of the pandemic, as it could mean more fan engagement with their content. As a result, they opted for a more regular presence than before, with more posts every day of the week rather than just on match days

They also changed their post design strategy from mainly moderately vivid posts (photos+text) and little to no interactivity to very vivid posts (videos) and moderate to high interactivity. These changes are related to the fact that high interactivity and vividness produce a greater change in attitude scores than low interactivity and vividness. Consequently, content is perceived as more engaging when it prompts users to comment or share the post.

In terms of their brand content strategy, although football provides a continuous, diverse show and entertainment programme on and off the field (including social media), PFCs invested less in entertainment-related content and more in relational content, with the main goal of seeking more interaction with and from fans. As part of the brand content strategy, PFC continued to invest in entertaining content by sharing many retrospectives of victories and goals to share passion through history and not let fans forget what connects them to each other. In addition, PFCs made more efforts in corporate social activities at a time when it was important to show social support.

As for the second research question of this dissertation, the following conclusions can be drawn.

RQ.2: To what extent has fan engagement with football clubs' social media activities changed following the global sports freeze?

Although clubs have made several efforts in terms of interactivity and content as part of their SMM strategy to better meet fans' needs (e.g., replacing news about matches and training with archived content such as historical retrospectives to entertain fans and remind them of good memories), this has not been enough to engage and retain fans as they did before the pandemic. Without actual games, fans are much less committed to expressing a particular set of emotional states. However, fans responded more than before in the form of comments to specific content that stimulated their interaction, such as questions and challenges. This result shows that fans still want to interact with football clubs, even when leagues in temporary shutdown.

In conclusion, the results from the two clubs studied confirm a shrinking presence of football clubs on social media and a decline in fan engagement on digital platforms. However, it can be noted that PFCs are striving to find new methods and ways to stay relevant and connected with their fans through social media. Football clubs have used social media to overcome certain obstacles, including the obstacle of connecting with fans. In such an uncertain time when people lack social interaction, this study confirms the growth of sports clubs' investment in various and diverse brand posts, with the main goal of increasing interaction with fans and making the most of these strong relationships between sports clubs and fans. With this study, we hope to provide answers for further empirical studies investigating the strategy of social media posts in the sports industry, especially in football, and help marketers to provide strategic guidance for sports organisations to maintain the quality of relationships with their fans in case of general economic disruption.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this chapter, we address the main limitations that this study faces.

First, while the data collected for each club, which covered two months, was useful in providing preliminary insights into the early impact of COVID-19 on the social media activity and fan engagement of football clubs, further research could deepen our understanding of the long-term impact by analysing a longer period of time

In addition, this study primarily focuses on two specific football clubs, so we advise others to examine a broader range of clubs to extend the findings to provide evidence to support or refute the occurrence of our findings as a general phenomenon in the football industry. In addition, we examined only the social media network Instagram, whereas football clubs use a variety of social media platforms in their marketing communications. We acknowledge that this is a limitation because (i) different marketing activities are possible on different digital platforms and (ii) fan engagement may vary across platforms. Further research should seek to investigate marketing activities and fan behaviour on more digital channels used to communicate with football clubs.

In addition, this study focuses exclusively on one marketing activity: posts. Future research on a broader range of marketing activities on social media, such as stories and reels, could provide interesting insights into the strategy of football clubs in the COVID-19 era, as well as user engagement in these mediums

Moreover, this study pays much attention to the positive elements of engagement. However, since one can also have negative emotional states towards a brand, future research should address non-engaged customers in order to contribute to tools and frameworks that marketers can use to avoid this.

Finally, we also acknowledge some limitations to the study of fans' emotional and cognitive engagement because (i) the number of comments was limited, as there were only 1.600 random comments, (ii) this sample was drawn from the most liked and commented posts in the periods before and after the postponement of the sweepstakes, so these posts do not truly represent the overall sample of posts analysed in this study, and (iii) the sample was only reviewed generally in terms of the time periods analysed in this study and not by content category, design, or interactivity (as opposed to behavioural engagement).

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ANNEX

Attachment A. Tables of previous researches undergone as regard to analyzed subjects

1. COVID-19-related studies that grounded their research in sports

Authors	Research Purpose	Focus/ Source of Evidence	Sport Context	Findings
Bandyopadhyay (2021)	Document the early impressions and initial responses of various stakeholders of the soccer world to the challenges of the COVID Regime.	7 commentaries of authors' impressions on the impact of the pandemic on the football world; 9 articles on the initial responses of football industry to these challenges.	Professional Football Clubs	There were radical changes in the football industry in regard to rules, spectatorship and telecast of the game, thereby affecting its cultural dimensions, commercial prospects and political implications.
Beiderbeck, Frevel, Von der Gracht, Schmidt & Schweitzer (2021)	Examine how COVID-19 will impact the future of the European football ecosystem in the short, medium and long term.	Delphi survey	Professional Football Clubs	A salary cap for players would have the highest impact on the ecosystem, but it is unlikely to be implemented, while an increased awareness for social responsibility would be the most desirable effect of the crisis.
Correia-Oliveira & Andrade-Souza (2021)	Investigate the impact on home advantage with the return of different European leagues and their divisions after the break due to the COVID-19 pandemic without the crowd support.	Data collection of results from 4 European leagues	Professional Football Clubs	Home advantage was affected in the 2019/2020 season, especially after the break due to the COVID-19 pandemic without crowd support.
Hammerschmidt, Durst, Kraus & Puumalainen (2021)	Investigate the responses of 5 European Football Clubs to the COVID-19 pandemic.	Interviews with CEOs of PFCs	Professional Football Clubs	Solidarity with certain stakeholders during the pandemic is crucial and PFCs are in a fragile position due to their financial structure and underdeveloped managerial and entrepreneurial strategies to cope with the crisis.
Herold, Boronczyk & Breuer (2021)	Examine the influence of missing in-stadium spectators for professional clubs.	Controlled lab study - Arousal, visual attention & game outcome measured in real-time while live fame of German football Bundesliga	Professional Football Clubs	Significant differences in viewers' arousal and attention to sponsors, contingent on the presence of in-stadium spectators and game outcome uncertainty.
Maguire (2021)	Look at the financial performance and position of English professional football before Covid-19 and the impact that the pandemic has had on the industry.	Data collection of football industry's revenue streams and key costs	Professional Football Clubs	The industry of football is in a precarious position and desperate for a successful vaccination programme to allow a return of spectators to reduce the financial losses incurred to date.
Stavros, Smith & Lopez-Gonzalez (2021)	Outline a pathway to superior fan activation and engagement, noting the accelerated transformation of sport arising in consequence of the pandemic.	Multi-dimensional typology	Sports Industry in general	The pandemic brought an acceleration and nature of change to the media-sport-consumer.
Su, Baker Doyle and Yan (2020)	Determine (1) how TikTok is being used by athletes to engage fans during the pandemic, (2) which elements are crucial tools in this context and (3) the role of TikTok in athlete's branding efforts.	SM content analysis of 10 selected athletes' TikTok account	Diverse sports	TikTok presents opportunities to foster existing fan relationships, promote branded content, and appeal to new fan segments.

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Szczepkowski (2021)	Analyze the posts published on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic.	SM content analysis of football clubs of PKO Ekstraklasa official Facebook accounts	Professional Football Clubs	In times where the face-to-face contact with the customers is prohibited, SM presents a good solution for PFCs.
Wunderlich, Weigelt, Rein & Memmert (2021)	Investigate factors contributing to football clubs' home advantage in the absence of spectators due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.	Data collection from results and statistics from 40,000 matches before and during the pandemic of main European football leagues	Professional Football Clubs	Supporting the concept of a crowd-induced referee influence, home teams dominance decreases and away teams get less cards without in-stadium fans. In terms of the home advantage itself, only a non-significant decrease is found.

2. Football-related and COVID-19-related studies that grounded their research in social media

Authors	Research Purpose	Focus/ Source of Evidence	SM Platform	Sport Context	Findings
Li, Hao, Kubiczek & Pietrzyk (2021)	Identify and present the Corporate Social Responsibility practices implemented by football clubs in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic and its media coverage.	Exploratory review of Polish second division football club Zagłębie Sosnowiec SM activities during the suspension of games (data obtained from the club itself).	Facebook	Professional Football Clubs	Zagłębie Sosnowiec undertook a number of pro-social activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and published them on the club's official fan page. The posts about the results of the matches tend to achieve the greatest reach, on the contrary, posts presenting the ongoing CSR initiatives for the local community come tend to take a backseat, and are considered to be secondary. However, at a time when the matches were not being held in physical form, the information posted on CSR activities tended to be the most popular.
Lopez-Carril & Anagnostopoulou (2020)	Determine how and to what extent do professional team sports organizations (PTSOs) use Instagram as a communication tool to disclose their CSR-COVID-19 actions.	SM content analysis of PFCs from the Spanish first football division league "La Liga" from March 11 to May 11, 2020.	Instagram	Professional Football Clubs	Only 85 out of 3,906 posts (2%) have been devoted to CSR-related initiatives by teams in one of the most popular soccer leagues in the world (La Liga). Although these 85 mostly health-oriented initiatives may have had a great impact on the targeted beneficiaries, authors argue that PTSOs have missed the opportunity to showcase their societal role. In fact, PTSOs' focus has been largely on their economic responsibilities rather than exercising their ethical and discretionary responsibilities.
Weimar, Holthoff & Biscaia (2021)	Test whether the fan interest towards smaller leagues suffers from the presence of bigger leagues.	SM content analysis of Belarus clubs' official accounts 3 months before, during, and 3 months after the	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram & Youtube	Professional Football Clubs	SM attention increased for Belarus clubs after the worldwide lockdown and decreased after the revitalization of worldwide professional football leagues.
Szczepkowski (2021)	Analyze the posts published on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic.	SM content analysis of football clubs of PKO Ekstraklasa official Facebook accounts	Facebook	Professional Football Clubs	In times where the face-to-face contact with the customers is prohibited, SM presents a good solution for professional football clubs.

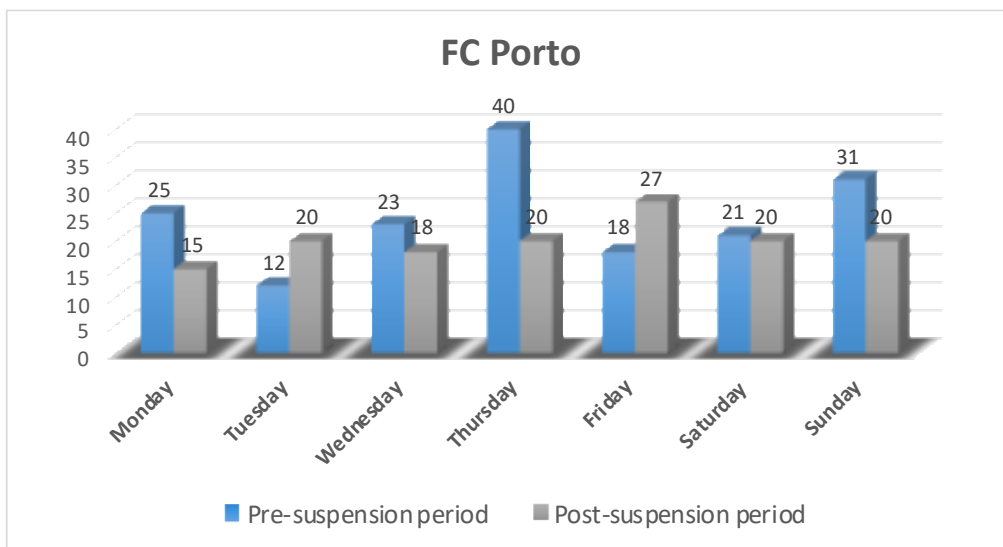
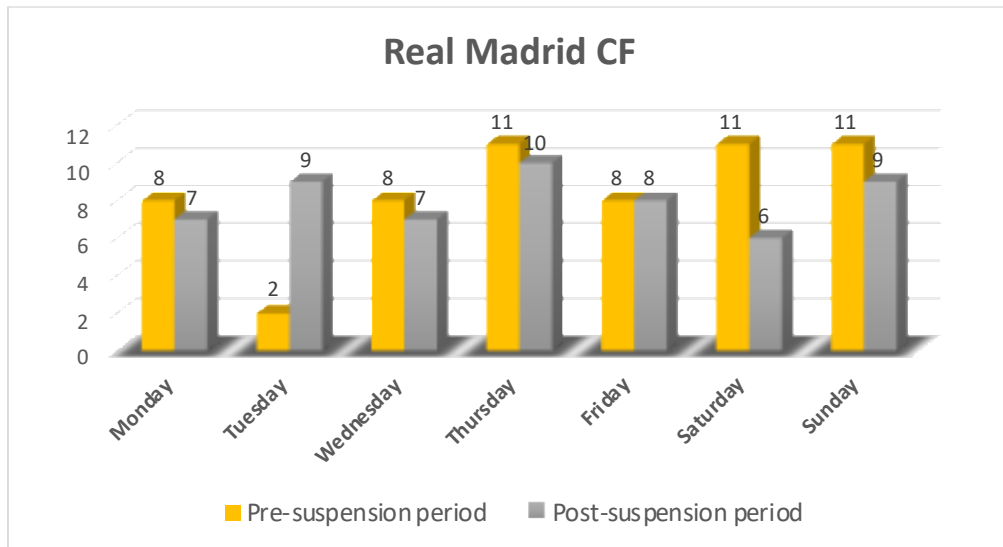
Attachment D. Criteria analysis for interactivity dimension levels (Posts text)

Absent	Simple text without any interaction in from of link, question or challenge.
Low	▪ Click on (link) to watch the whole game. ▪ Live on (link).
Moderate	▪ How do you prepare yourself for a game? ▪ Do you remember who scored this goal? ▪ Who am I in this picture (as a baby)? ▪ Who is with you during games? ▪ Leave here your message of support for the game. ▪ With whom do you celebrate your games? ▪ What are your best memories in our stadium? ▪ Do you have any favorite jersey? ▪ What do you think of this interview with (specific player)? ▪ Describe this goal in emojis. ▪ Leave your birthday message to (specific player) here ! ▪ What song for this celebration ? ▪ If you could go back in time, what game would you like to watch live? ▪ Which of (specific player's) goal is your favorite? ▪ Miss "Classico" games already? ▪ Can you guess the game? ▪ How do you describe this performance? ▪ We're now on TikTok. Identify your friend who will like this news. ▪ Who are your friends that play FIFA20? ▪ What is for you the best goal scored during (a specific time period)? ▪ Can you define this goal in one word? ▪ What precautions should we take when eating at this special time? How is FC Porto's diet programmed? ▪ On (specific date) was a Classico game. Do you remember which one? ▪ In what stadiums do you usually accompany us? ▪ Who is missing from the starting 11 (on a specific game day)? ▪ How are you training at home? ▪ Can you find the seven differences in their celebration?
High	▪ We prepared activities for the suspension period. Make a video and share it with #DFHomeinteraction. The best will be published. ▪ Share your images in the stadium with #myfcporto ▪ Share your jersey collection with us. ▪ Share your best painting of (a specific player) and send it to us or share it with the hashtag #dracofcporto. ▪ (specific player name) already did his #DFHomeinteraction of today. Participate too and stay tuned on our social media. ▪ Be part of the DF Home Cup to continue focused on your development. Good training! ▪ Bring out your artistic side! Recreate one of our best moments in any format: video, drawing, song... And send it in the LINK of the BIO before each Sunday. ▪ Pick two emojis for these two midfield maestros! ▪ In support of #HomeTeam, (player name) has daily challenges to help you stay active. Join now!

Attachment E. Engagement dimensions and sub-dimensions

Emotional	Fans expressing a set of positive emotions towards the club (joy, happiness)
	Fans expressing a set of negative emotions towards the club (anger, dissatisfaction, frustration, sadness)
	Passionate elements in the comments (hearts or sentences related to loyalty and trust) appealing to their love for the club/players
	Viewers expressing their pride on following club
Cognitive	Comments that show willingness/excitement to know more about the club or its players
	Argumentation (asking/stating/elaborating/providing evidence to support or refuse claims) about the club or players
	Percentage of people that like the post and follow the club's page
Behavioral	Number of likes on the post
	Number of comments on the post

Attachment F. Posting frequency by weekday



KEEPING FANS ENGAGED THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITIES DURING COVID-19

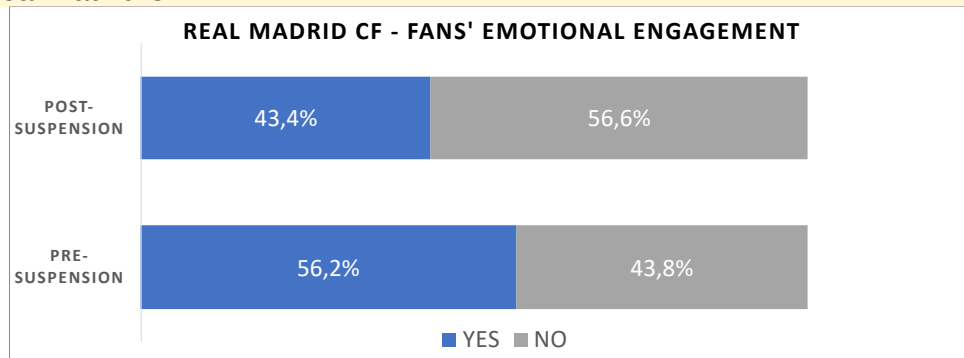
Attachment G. All Hashtags posted during the analyzed period

FC Porto				
TOP 5	PRE-SUSPENSION		POST-SUSPENSION	
	#FCPorto	169	#FCPorto	138
	#DragõesJuntos	43	#estamoson	24
	#UEL	36	#TodosPodemosSerHeróis	22
	#FCPPSC	24	#sejaumagentedesaudepublica	21
	#VSCFCP	24	#DragõesJuntos	12
	#FCPRAFC	22	#OTD	12
	#CDSFCFCP	22	#OnThisDay	12
	#FCPB04	16	#FCPortoEmCasa	11
	#FCPB04	16	#ficaemcasa	11
	#TaçadePortugal	13	#stayhome	11
	#FCPAVFC	13	#diadejogofcporto	9
	#exceedyourself	7	#MuseuFCPorto	4
	#prozis	4	#DragonForce	3
	#AlexTelles	3	#MyFCPorto	3
	#AlexTelles	3	#oJogo	3
	#fcportoallaround	3	#MuseuFCPorto	3
	#AtéaoFim	3	#PlacardPT	2
	#FCFFCP	2	#UCL	2
	#FCPortoVintage	2	#Marchesin	2
	#SérgioConceição	1	#KitsOutinteraction	2
	#FCPortoDiadaMulher	1	#Throwback	2
	#Nbfootball	1	#FCPortoSports	2
	#superbocksuperadeptos	1	#Marchesin	2
	#DiadosNamorados	1	#JN	2
#ValentinesDay2020	1	#FIFA20	1	
#LoveUnlimited	1	#stayandplay	1	
TOTAL	432	#Deco	1	
# per day	2,5	#contigoemtodolado	1	
		#Manafá	1	
		#UEL	1	
		#umconselhoDGS	1	
		#Loum	1	
		#TomásEsteves	1	
		#SergioOliveira	1	
		#drulovic	1	
		#NewBalance	1	
		#DragonForceHomeCup	1	
		#DiaMundialdaSaúde	1	
		#TikTok	1	
		#jardel	1	
		#FCPortoVintage	1	
		#EstádiodasAntas	1	
		#DarLetraàMúsica	1	
		#DLAM	1	
		#ExceedYourself	1	
		#LuisDíaz	1	
		#Aboubakar	1	
		#JorgeCosta	1	
		#FCPortoSofarma	1	
		#FCPortoAndebol	1	
		#Otavio	1	
		#FabioSilva	1	
		#DiogoLeite	1	
		#ASKVitorHugoTeixeira	1	
		#minutodahidratacao	1	
		#TecatitoCorona	1	
		TOTAL	347	
		# per day	2,5	

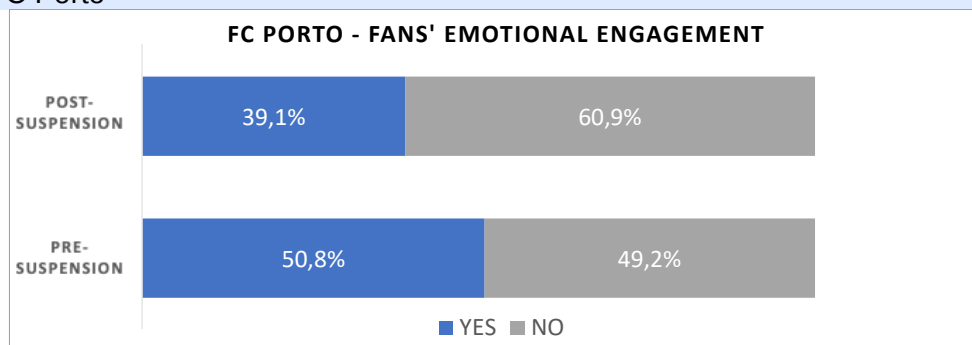
Real Madrid CF				
TOP 5	PRE-GAME SUSPENSION		POST-GAME SUSPENSION	
	#HalaMadrid	49	#YoMeQuedoEnCasa/#StayHome	36
	#ElClássico	13	#RMFansEnCasa	35
	#RMCity	12	#RealMadrid	6
	#RealMadrid	11	#StayAndPlay	1
	#RealFootball	11	#SaldremosJuntos	1
	#RMLiga	8	#HalaMadrid	1
	#RMUCL	7	#RMLiga	1
	#Emirates	5	#NiveaMen	1
	#RealMadridCelta	3	TOTAL	82
	#LevanteRealMadrid	3	# per day	1
	#RealBetisRealMadrid	3		
	#WelcomeReinier	2		
	#RMHistory	2		
	#LaFabrica	1		
	TOTAL	130		
	# per day	3,9		

Attachment H. Fans' emotional engagement in pre- and post-suspension period

A. Real Madrid CF

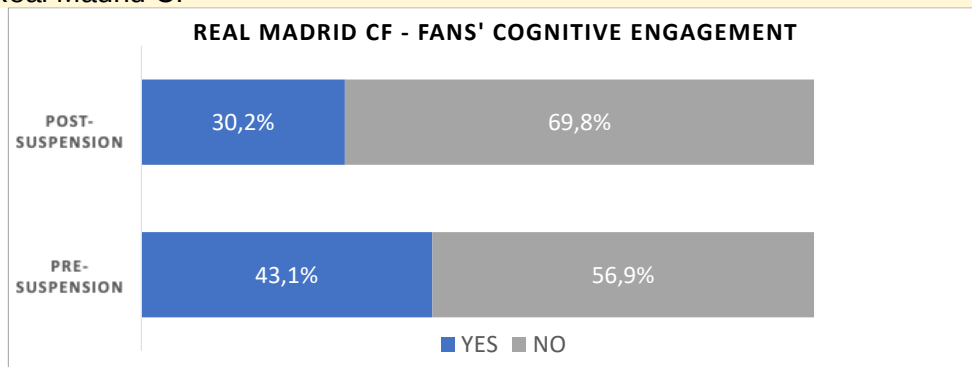


B. FC Porto

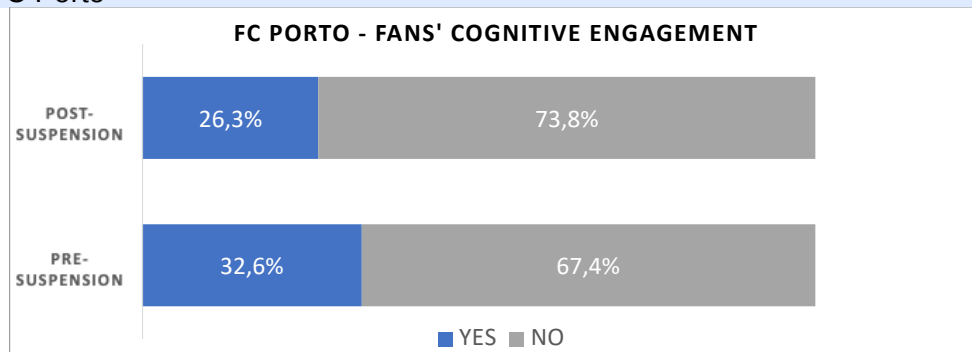


Attachment I. Fans' cognitive engagement in pre- and post-suspension period

A. Real Madrid CF



B. FC Porto



Attachment J. Most liked/commented post during pre- and post-suspension.

1. Real Madrid CF

Pre-suspension

Most liked post



Content category : Entertaining
Content sub-category : Flashback

Most commented post



Content category : Entertaining
Content sub-category : Gameday

Post-suspension

Most liked post



Content category : Entertaining
Content sub-category : Flashback

Most commented post



Content category : Relational
Content sub-category : Active interaction

2. FC Porto

Pre-suspension

Most liked post



Content category : Entertaining
Content sub-category : Gameday

Most commented post



Content category : Relational
Content sub-category : Fan-directed

Post-suspension

Most liked post



Content category : Relational
Content sub-category : Active interaction

Most commented post



Content category : Relational
Content sub-category : Active interaction