

Spanish football and the social network X. A case study of clubs playing in the 2023/24 season of LaLiga EA Sports

Francisco-Javier Herrero-Gutiérrez*, Rafael Galán-Arribas** Haokeqian Ye***

*  University of Salamanca (javiherrero82@usal.es)

**  University of Salamanca (rgalan@usal.es)

***  University of Salamanca (du005801@usal.es)

Abstract

This article is part of a wider research project whose main general objective is to catalyze the creation of an observatory dedicated to the systematic exploration and continuous monitoring of sports discourse within the realm of social media. The present study undertakes an examination of the online presence of all 20 clubs participating in the 2023/24 season of the Spanish League EA Sports, specifically on the social networking platform X. Employing a quantitative methodology, the research relies on the Fanpage Karma tool and a purpose-designed table to scrutinize the X accounts of these clubs over a span of three months. As expected, the findings show a huge disparity in follower count between Real Madrid and Barcelona as compared to the rest of the clubs. Notably, the trajectory of followers is not consistently upward and the frequency of posts per day exhibits marked variability. It is concluded that the volume of posts does not exhibit a direct proportionality to the level of engagement generated.

Keywords: social network X, LaLiga EA Sports, soccer, football.

Introduction

This article is part of the research project titled "Social networks and football in Spain", which analyses the online visibility of clubs playing in the First Division of the Spanish Football League during the 2023/24 season. Developed at the University of Salamanca, the general objective of this project is to inspire the creation of an observatory of sports in social networks. The need for the creation of this observatory is justified by the importance that social networks have in a myriad of areas, including the world of sports. Social media visibility is practically mandatory in many areas of the current world, and therefore, social media tools must be used properly to reach audiences and achieve greater visibility, among many other objectives.

For football clubs and athletes, having a presence on social networking platforms is essential and fundamental in achieving many of their objectives in the areas of promotion, sales, and branding, and this is precisely our object of study. This new and novel research is based on a three-month analysis of the social media visibility of all 20 clubs playing in the 2023/24 season of LaLiga EA Sports (with data collection starting in January 2024 and considering the previous three months). The analysis focuses on the social network X.

After the publication of this article, results will be made available on the deporteyredes.com website. The main result this study expects to yield is a cross-sectional analysis that opens the possibility for future longitudinal studies..

Theoretical framework

Social Media

This study aims to highlight the importance of social networks for sports organizations, as essential tools in day-to-day communication for very diverse and complementary purposes, like marketing and branding (Bustos, Martínez, Martín y Nicolás, 2023), which are essential today (Boehmer & Rojas, 2017; Cárdenas, 2021). As Lobillo, Ginesta & de San Eugenio (2021, p. 357) point out, “social networks have constituted a major advance in the communication between organizations and stakeholders”, which “is a principle that cannot be ignored” in any field. Lobillo also observes that social networks play a very relevant role (Lobillo, 2022) in the establishment of relationships between football clubs and their audiences:

“As part of the Internet phenomenon, social networks are, since their emergence, a real alternative to any other promotional, advertising, and marketing space. Virtual social networks, which substitute their analog counterparts in many terms, are virtual communication spaces that, among other things, can put brands and companies in touch with their users without the need for a physical presence” (Rodríguez-Fidalgo, Paíno-Ambrosio & Herrero-Gutiérrez, 2023, p. 1).

Social networks have also become a primary source of first-hand information and opinions for the media (Varona & Sánchez, 2016), and, therefore, organizations want to increase their visibility on them. In this regard, a social network account’s social and economic value depends on the number of followers it attracts and the views, shares and likes its posts generate, as they reflect its visibility (Kuzma, Bell & Logue, 2014). For this reason, the social media visibility of organizations is commonly ranked (Ballesteros, 2021). Therefore, to reach all types of audiences and fans, football clubs – our object of study – try to be visible on most social networks, which have multiplied over the years (McLean & Wainwright, 2009), although with varying degrees of success.

Beyond People

Gone are social networks such as Six Degrees, one of the first social platforms on the Internet, focused on connecting people, old friends, and even strangers, based on the six degrees of separation theory. In other words, this social network had a clear target: people; and its objectives revolved around it. Later, other social networks that also focused on the “person” began to emerge: Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Hi5, and Tuenti, although with differentiating characteristics. The success of personal social networks gave way to a new trend in this virtual world: the arrival of non-personal agents, companies, and organizations, both public and private. This also occurred in the world of sports: clubs, federations and athletes.

This constituted a quantitative and qualitative leap in the objectives of social networks, which no longer just wanted to connect people. These new agents began to gain visibility on social networks as promotional showcases that could be used for multiple objectives, already outlined above. Social networks were also expanding due to their multiple forms of use and possibilities: horizontality/verticality, immediacy, short and long-term use, and sedentary and nomadic lifestyles. Each one with different characteristics, pros and cons. In short, “people ceased to be the only target of social networks and other possibilities entered the scene” (Rodríguez-Fidalgo, Paíno-Ambrosio & Herrero-Gutiérrez, 2023, p. 1). Virtually all social networks have a marked social component, but this is no longer the only component since they are now used by other agents. Paragraph subtitle if necessary

Social network X

As Bastero (2022) has indicated:

“The inception of Twitter represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of social networks, commencing in 2004 within the residence of Noah Glass, an American programmer credited with conceiving the Odeo project, whose fundamental idea was the possibility of recording phone calls in MP3 format in the Cloud. This project would later be joined by Evan Williams, the founder of Pyra Labs and the architect behind the Blogger.com creation software. Soon after, Odeo became a podcasting platform with 14 employees, including CEO Biz Stone — Williams’ former co-worker at Google — and designer Jack Dorsey.”

This is the beginning of the history of Twitter, which was eventually launched as an Odeo service in 2006 (Bastero, 2022) in the form of a text-based social network that did not include other important content, such as images, and limited the number of characters allowed per message, although this number changed over time. Its popularity among users increased exponentially and the number of tweets posted multiplied by 350% in just one year. Throughout Twitter’s life, there have been many twists and turns in terms of ownership as well as its shareholding, but this long and complex journey is out of the scope of this article. It suffices to mention that Twitter was finally bought in October 2022 by Elon Musk, who in July 2023, rebranded the platform as X.

Social media and football in Spain

To find studies on social networks and football in Spain, the literature review must go back more than 10 years. Olabe-Sánchez (2012) analyzed the digital communication of FC Barcelona and Real Madrid in 2012 based on the perception of Spanish journalists. Sotelo (2012), in the same year, published a content analysis of the websites of the Spanish First Division clubs in the 2011/2012 season focused on “analysis categories for the systematization of the manifest contents on these websites” (Sotelo, 2012). In retrospect, Sotelo (2012) obtained very interesting results:

"75% of the teams (15 of the 20 analyzed) use video formats to convey information, while the rest use text formats. Another element common to 75% of the websites under study is the presence of an online store for the marketing of club products, a percentage that drops to 60% (12 clubs out of 20) when it comes to online ticket sales (either through their own platforms or through links to external platforms, such as www.entradas.com). Promotional campaigns to attract new members (adaptations from those used in other media or through banners created specifically for their websites) are another resource generally used in 70% of the 20 websites. In terms of mobile marketing actions, 8 of the 20 clubs offer mobile phone applications on their websites. Practically all but 3 of the clubs' websites offer some type of multimedia material of potential interest for newsletters. Leaving aside the polls and cheers proposed by various clubs on their websites, only 8 of them include a fan club on their official online sites to promote real (and not just symbolic, decorative, or circumstantial) participation of fans and supporters (not just members). The homepages of all clubs' websites include links to other social sites, mainly Facebook and Twitter" (Sotelo, 2012, pp. 221-222).

With regards to social networks, Sotelo indicates that:

- 17 football clubs had an account on Twitter while it was impossible to determine whether 3 of the 20 clubs had an official account.
- 20% of the football clubs did not have an account on Facebook, the leading platform at that time.
- 35% of the football clubs used other platforms aimed at younger audiences (e.g. Tuenti).
- Only 3 out of 20 football clubs were present on Google+

Just a decade later, it is possible to verify, without making an exhaustive analysis, that this situation has changed, and it is unthinkable that there are teams without a presence on social networks. Since then, many other studies have been carried out, introducing new variables, such as the interaction of clubs (Ballesteros, 2021) and the use of other languages to reach new audiences (Lobillo & Muñoz, 2016). Lobillo (2022) is one of the authors who has delved most deeply into football and social media studies, establishing the need to continue analyzing these new paradigms within this very recent reality. More recent studies have also delved into the newest social networks, such as TikTok (Sidorenko, Alonso, & Terol, 2022; Tenorio, Dueñas & Carmona, 2022).

Sport in Spain

The importance of sport in Spain has been confirmed by many authors (Cagigal, 1981). In this country, two moments have greatly influenced the informative and social importance of sports: the World Cup celebrated in 1982, and the Olympic Games of 1992 (Barcelona). These events transformed a society that was already

socially immersed in sports, especially football, and put the production strength of the media to the test, especially television.

If there is one sport that stands out above the rest in Spain, it is football, with more than 1.1 million federation licenses according to data from the Higher Sports Council (2022), and tripling the second specialty, basketball, in terms of licenses. In addition, there is a high percentage of non-federal football athletes, ranging from children (school football) to adults (non-federated football).

From a media point of view, football generates the greatest economic return for television, the press, radio, and the internet. Without going any further, in 2023, the monthly rankings of the most watched TV programs indicate that, in 10 of the 12 months, the most popular show was a sports program, and in all cases, this program was always football:

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

The fact that football is the most consumed content on television is no coincidence. This has been the case for some time, to the point that legislation was passed more than two decades ago, with the Law on the Broadcasting and Retransmission of Sports Competitions and Events (21/1997), which made it mandatory to broadcast free-to-air a match of the Spanish First Division. The subsequent Audiovisual Law of 2010, although with some limitations, maintained this obligation.

The importance of sports in other media should also be highlighted: in radio, sports content accounts for hours and hours of very successful programs in terms of audience (according to the General Media Survey EGM), while in the press, the popularity of sports is such that a sports newspaper, *Marca*, is the most-read in Spain, beating general-information newspapers. Thus, "sport has permeated all areas of society, provoking a multitude of judgments for all tastes and flavors around it" (Alcoba, 2005, p. 11).

When it comes to social networks in sports, other studies have already highlighted this importance. Based on the previous review, this work aims to highlight the importance of the social network X in the world of sports, focusing on football, and specifically, due to its relevance, on the top men's professional division: La Liga.

Objectives and hypotheses

The study is guided by the following general objectives:

- To evaluate the use of the social network X by the clubs playing in the 2023/24 season of the Spanish EA Sports League.
- To compare the clubs' X accounts based on the number of followers.
- To measure the Page Performance Index of the clubs' X accounts.
- To study a series of variables related to the posts' engagement.

The initial research hypotheses are as follows:

- The number of followers the clubs have on X is uneven, with Real Madrid and FC Barcelona markedly standing out above the other 18 clubs.
- The number of followers of all X accounts is always ascending in the studied time frame.
- The Performance Indexes of the 18 clubs (all except Real Madrid and FC Barcelona) exhibit similar trends.
- The average number of posts is similar across the 20 clubs' X accounts.
- The number of comments, reactions, and RTs generated is not directly proportional to the number of posts.

Methodology and sample

The research objectives of this study, which include the ranking of social media accounts, cannot be achieved without the use of quantitative techniques. To be precise, this study relies on the use of content analysis, which is "a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantifiable manner, to measure certain variables" (Wimmer & Dominick, 1996, p. 70). In addition, content analysis "is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 21), which will allow the replicability of this study. In addition, the study has a longitudinal component that requires quantification to make future retrospective analyses with a historical perspective. In other words, we are dealing with systematic analyses (Berelson, 1984; Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998); and as such, this system has been validated in similar works applied to other fields of communication (Herrero, Hernández, & Galán, 2021).

To carry out this analysis, the study relies on the use of the following purpose-created table of variables, based on the indicators of Fanpage Karma.

Table 1. Items to be analyzed in the social network X

Club	Presence on social network X: Yes / No	
	Number of followers	
	Page Performance	Fanpage Karma states that "Page Performance Index (PPI) is a metric used to measure the performance of a social media profile based on growth and engagement. The possible values are between 0 and 100%, with 100% being the maximum value."
	Follower growth in the period studied	
	Post engagement rate	
	Posts per day (average)	
	Number of comments, reactions, and shares	

Source: authors' creation.

Sample and period of study

The sample is composed of the 20 clubs playing in the 2023/24 season of Spain's top football division: LaLiga EA Sports. Data collection will be carried out in January 2024, taking as a reference one X account per club, the one with the largest number of followers in case of having more than one account. The period of study covers from 7 October 2023 to 4 January 2024.

Results

First, the results indicate that 100% of the clubs have a presence on social network X (Table 2):

Table 2. Presence, followers, and growth on X

Club	Presence	Followers	Growth
Athletic Club	Yes	1,005,215	0.37%
Atletico Madrid	Yes	5,508,857	- 0.13%
C. A. Osasuna	Yes	297,038	0.58%
Cadiz Football Club	Yes	249,677	1.07%
Deportivo Alaves	Yes	250,387	0.25%
FC Barcelona	Yes	48,492,830	0.9%
Getafe C.F.	Yes	219,450	0.97%
Girona FC	Yes	337,526	7.52%
Granada CF	Yes	434,088	0.47%
Rayo Vallecano	Yes	463,738	0.03%
RC Celta	Yes	525,107	0.25%
Real Betis Balompié	Yes	1,041,772	0.37%
Real Madrid C.F.	Yes	49,778,658	1.4%
Real Mallorca	Yes	361,408	0.1%
Real Sociedad Football	Yes	760,753	0.75%
Sevilla Football Club	Yes	1,179,059	0.32%
UD Almería	Yes	531,001	- 0.04%
UD Las Palmas	Yes	302,165	0.67%
Valencia CF	Yes	1,374,382	0.04%
Villarreal CF	Yes	647,760	0.07%

Source: authors' creation. Data collection: 7 October 2023 to 4 January 2024.

Regarding the page performance of the accounts, the following Table (3) presents the results provided by Fanpage Karma, based on its measurement parameters.

Table 3. Last Quarter Page Performance

Club	Performance
Athletic Club	31.0%
Atletico Madrid	6.0%
C. A. Osasuna	17.0%

Cadiz Football Club	30.0%
Deportivo Alaves	13.0%
FC Barcelona	20.0%
Getafe C.F.	35.0%
Girona FC	85.0%
Granada CF	29.0%
Rayo Vallecano	4.0%
RC Celta	22.0%
Real Betis Balompié	28.0%
Real Madrid C.F.	30.0%
Real Mallorca	7.0%
Real Sociedad Football	33.0%
Sevilla Football Club	22.0%
UD Almería	3.0%
UD Las Palmas	24.0%
Valencia CF	7.0%
Villarreal CF	10.0%

Source: authors' creation with data from Fanpage Karma. Data collection: 7 October 2023 to 4 January 2024.

Finally, Table 4 summarizes the results regarding post engagement rate, average number of posts per day, as well as the generation of comments, reactions, and shares:

Table 4. Engagement: posts & reactions, comments and shares

Club	Average number of posts	Total posts last 3 months	Comments Generated	Reactions, comments % shares
Athletic Club	16.87	1,519	22,933	486,422
Atletico Madrid	14.16	1,275	34,791	1,637,522
C. A. Osasuna	24.3	2,187	4,345	132,509
Cadiz Football Club	30.82	2,774	19,982	397,473
Deportivo Alaves	16.38	1,475	4,649	82,939
FC Barcelona	23.55	2,120	266,172	18,360,363
Getafe C.F.	21.83	1,965	14,283	513,947
Girona FC	20.48	1,844	17,183	1,063,336
Granada CF	10.23	921	13,954	257,127
Rayo Vallecano	12.68	1,142	3,791	113,666
RC Celta	14.97	1,348	17,345	283,691
Real Betis Balompié	13.32	1,199	37,596	1,216,259
Real Madrid C.F.	19.47	1,753	265,564	21,668,058
Real Mallorca	10.11	910	14,377	182,194
Real Sociedad Football	26.22	2,360	16,931	601,839
Sevilla Football Club	17.25	1,553	51,957	723,178

UD Almería	8.7	783	7,246	54,337
UD Las Palmas	20.13	1,812	8,432	236,411
Valencia CF	14.48	1,304	39,760	414,006
Villarreal CF	15.96	1,437	10,512	226,464

Source: authors' creation with data from Fanpage Karma. Data collection: 7 October 2023 to 4 January 2024.

Conclusions

Based on the previous results, it can be concluded, that the clubs' number of followers on X is uneven, with Real Madrid and FC Barcelona standing out above the other 18 clubs, which confirms the first hypothesis. Second, hypothesis 2 is rejected as not all clubs have an upward trend in their accounts, although the decrease in followers in both cases is less than 0.15%. In this regard, it is also worth highlighting that of all the clubs, Girona exhibited a notable growth in followers thanks to the excellent performance of the Catalan team in the 2023/24 season, at the time of data collection.

Moving on to the third hypothesis, which expects the Page Performance Index of all clubs (except for Real Madrid and FC Barcelona) to exhibit similar trends, it is rejected, since, according to the parameters used by Fanpage Karma, there is a remarkable disparity in the clubs' Performance Indexes, ranging from 3% to 85%. Regarding the average number of posts per day during the period studied, there is also a disparity, so hypothesis 4 is rejected. Finally, the results reject hypothesis 5, which expected the number of comments, reactions, and shares generated by the accounts to be directly proportional to the number of posts. The case that confirms this hypothesis is the comparison between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, the two most powerful clubs in this sense. Real Madrid's average number of posts is lower than Barcelona's (19.47 vs 23.55, respectively), but its number of reactions is higher than Barcelona's. As shown in the results section, this is just one example of the many cases that can be found in this regard.

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