

Evolution of the use of TikTok in Spanish football. Comparative study 2021-2023

Evolución del uso de TikTok en el fútbol español. Estudio comparativo 2021-2023

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ARTICLE



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RECEIVED: 2023-05-31 / ACCEPTED: 2023-09-13

Abstract

This paper studies in a comparative and longitudinal way the use of TikTok as a communication channel of FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, Atlético de Madrid, Sevilla CF and Valencia CF, with the aim of categorising and understanding their messages. The methodological design consists of a content analysis of the five profiles during March 2021 and March 2023, analysing a total of 312 videos. The findings are contrasted with four in-depth interviews with sports professionals. The results show a 135% increase in the number of publications, as well as the stylistic use of humour and entertainment as the main content.

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KEYWORDS

TikTok, football, sports communication, social media.

Resumen

Este trabajo estudia de forma comparativa y longitudinal el uso de TikTok como canal de comunicación del FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, Atlético de Madrid, Sevilla CF y Valencia CF, con el objetivo de categorizar y comprender sus mensajes. El diseño metodológico consiste en un análisis de contenido de los cinco perfiles durante marzo de 2021 y marzo de 2023, donde se analizan un total de 312 vídeos. Los hallazgos se contrastan con cuatro entrevistas en profundidad a profesionales del deporte. Los resultados muestran el incremento de un 135% en el número de publicaciones, así como el recurso estilístico del humor y el entretenimiento como contenido principal.

PALABRAS CLAVE

TikTok, fútbol, comunicación deportiva, redes sociales.

1. INTRODUCTION AND STATE OF THE ART

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the 20th century, we have witnessed the transformation of large global sports organizations into truly multinational entertainment companies (Andrews & Jackson, 2004). The irruption of digital technology and Web 1.0 triggered a reconsideration of the communicative function of sports clubs. Thus, they went from informative relations, such as promoting their activity and supporting the demand for news, to the first version of content-producing entities.

The next evolutionary leap came with the expansion of social networks during the first decade of this century. With Facebook and Twitter at the forefront, the opening of new channels brought about transformations in the entire communication process: the typology of the message, the diversity of audiences, the evolution of tone, and the obligatory bidirectionality, understood as the conversation between fan and club. Moreover, content generation transcended the classic system of own media to a transmedia digital ecosystem within each sports organization (Kuzma et al., 2014).

In the case of the big European football clubs, this transmedia ecosystem, which incorporated instantaneous and public metrics, represented a new playing field to compete for an audience whose limit was set in the last village with a network connection. Thus, the Big Five clubs expanded the staffs of their digital communication areas (Sanahuja, 2012) to offer the best

content. They were subject to an effervescent panorama of new tools (Borges, 2019), apps, and, fundamentally, modes of entertainment consumption by the fans.

In this context, the social network TikTok burst onto the scene as the latest success story of an interactive and relational application on the social web (Fernandez-Peña et al., 2014). It became a complementary network to the already consolidated ones such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram; moreover, it had the singularity of being created outside Silicon Valley. In 2016, the Chinese company ByteDance launched a mobile application of short music clips and trivial content called Douyin. In 2017, after becoming popular in Asia, it jumped to other continents, merging with Musica.ly.

Since its international debut, TikTok's growth has been exponential. ByteDance revealed that by July 2020, it had over 689 million active users worldwide (Sherman, 2020; Curry, 2022). This figure increased to 1 billion by September 2021 (Bursztynsky, 2021; Curry, 2022; TikTok, 2021). The latest public data states that TikTok had 1.092 billion users aged 18 and over in April 2023 (Datareportal, 2023). This nuance is essential, as TikTok allows users aged 13 to register.

However, one figure that confirms TikTok's penetration is the percentage of active users, defined as those who access the platform on a daily basis. According to SensorTower (2023), TikTok has 29% of active users; this puts it in second place behind Instagram, which had 39% of active users in the second quarter of 2022. However, users spent more time on By-

teDance's app than on Mark Zuckerberg's app: 95 minutes compared to Instagram's 51 minutes.

In Spain, TikTok is the fastest-growing social media platform. According to IAB (2023), its suggested awareness has increased from 75% to 78%, and its usage has risen from 30% to 36% this year.

1.2. STATE OF THE ART

Football's importance and social impact lead to a confluence of media, political, economic, and cultural interests, as Meneses and Ávalos (2013) stated. Consequently, football clubs maintain a continuous presence in the communication ecosystem, which implies a permanent and active management of the communication and public image of the club.

The communication management of football clubs has been extensively studied (Fernández *et al.*, 2019; Olabe, 2009; Sanahuja, 2012). According to Castillo *et al.* (2015), there are various actors involved in such communication: the club itself (Ginesta, 2010), the players, the media (Olabe, 2011), the fans themselves, and the political institutions, when there is an association between national identity and sport, as in the case of national football teams (González, 2014; Ginesta and San Eugenio, 2013; Xifra, 2008).

Regarding the communication issued by the football club, Sotelo (2012) refers to the presence of *La Liga* teams on social networks. He states that it is one of the most active in Europe, in terms of followers, ahead of the British Premier League. However, the author concluded

that there was a glaring lack of online strategy, overshadowed by the fanaticism in Spain for football. Cano (2017) points to the prolific publication of club content on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which goes beyond the sporting aspect.

Lobillo and Muñoz (2016), in their study on the presence of Barcelona FC and Real Madrid on Twitter in Arabic, point out that, at that time, no personalized, stable, and long-lasting strategic planning was in sight.

This line of thought is supported by Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí (2020) in their analysis of Spanish footballers on Instagram, stating that "there is no professionalized planned management" and that this digital presence on Instagram is "improvised." (p.51)

Concerning TikTok, Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.* (2022) analyze the use of this social network by Spanish First Division football clubs. There, it is also revealed that the clubs do not have a specific strategy for this network, as they recycle clips published on other platforms.

For their part, Cano and Galiano (2022), in their study of the Egyptian club Ah-Ahly Sporting Club's TikTok communication, carried out a content analysis that concluded that publications related to the club's players, post-match reports and training sessions were the most used in their publications.

Based on this introductory tour and the conceptual framework drawing, the purpose revolves around this question: How has the content on TikTok issued by the five major Spanish football clubs with the most significant number

of followers evolved between 2021 and 2023? The answer to this question will contribute to the debate on corporate communication trends of sports organizations within the digital ecosystem and social networks.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. OBJECTIVES

1. To find out the evolution of the use of TikTok in Spanish professional football between 2021 and 2023.
2. To observe the periodicity of the publications.
3. To examine the type of content used on TikTok by the clubs analyzed.
4. To analyze the tone and style of the publications made on TikTok by professional football clubs about their identity and positioning.
5. To assess the importance of this social network in football clubs as a tool for engagement and loyalty among the public.

2.2. RESEARCH DESIGN

To achieve the objectives, a methodological combination has been used with a first phase based on a content analysis with a longitudinal approach and a second phase in which the results obtained are contrasted with four in-depth interviews. These interviews were

Table 1

Methodology outline.

Stages of the study			
Docu- mentary study	Content analysis	In-depth in- terviews	Conclusions
Review of research on sport, social me- dia, and TikTok	Sample selection	Design of semistruc- tured ques- tionnaires	Comparison of the find- ings of the phases
	Determi- nation of the analy- sis table	Selection and contact of interview- ees	Review of objectives and hypoth- eses
	Fieldwork	Conducting interviews	Compar- ison with previous research

Source: Own elaboration

conducted with four professionals in the field of sports communication.

2.3. CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content analysis is based on previous studies on the use of content published on TikTok and Instagram (Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.*, 2022; Cano & Galiano, 2022; Su *et al.*, 2020b; and Geurin, 2017) and combines the extraction of quantitative and qualitative findings. The research approach is exploratory, given that this is an emerging object of study, with little academic literature on TikTok and where it is hoped to lay the foundations for future studies. Likewise, the number of profiles analyzed (five) is similar to that of the research by Su *et al.*

(2020b) and with a sport-communicative context that coincides with that of Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.* (2022).

The content analyzed corresponds to the posts made on the profile feeds of the five clubs selected as a sample during two study periods. Thus, this study has a longitudinal approach (Arnau &ono, 2008). The chosen dates were 1-30 March 2021 and 1-30 March 2023. This range corresponds to March, where sporting activity is constant. In this period, clubs play *La Liga* matches on weekends and European competitions during the week. It is, therefore, one of the months with the most regular sporting activity.

Data collection took place in the weeks following the publication of the messages in each of the two years. The analysis variables in a recent domain, such as the social network TikTok, are described and justified in more detail in sections 2.3.2. and 2.3.3.

Table 2

Teams and followers on TikTok.

Team	Position	Start in TikTok	Followers in March 2021	Followers in March 2023
Real Madrid CF	1º	August 2019	5,000,000	30,000,000
FC Barcelona	2º	July 2019	8,300,000	27,800,000
Atlético de Madrid	3º	August 2019	2,200,000	7,800,000
Sevilla FC	4º	April 2020	355,000	3,200,000
Valencia FC	5º	August 2019	150,000	2,600,000

Source: Own elaboration

2.3.1. DELIMITATION OF THE SAMPLE

The five Spanish professional La Liga Santander clubs with the most followers have been selected. In descending order of the number of followers on TikTok, these are:

2.3.2. STUDY OF THE CATEGORISATION OF CONTENT

Given the recent interest in studying TikTok, content categorization is based on previous research by several authors who have addressed content categorization on this platform. The most recent categorization, and the one that most influences this study, is the one proposed by Sidorenko-Bautista *et al.* (2022).

In the analysis, the research has focused on quantitative aspects such as the virality indices defined by Congosto (2015) and engagement, described by Rojas and Redondo (2013).

To quantify these indices, the following metrics have been measured: the total number of “Likes” on a video, the total number of comments, the total number of times it was shared, and the number of views. These metrics are public and are considered the most common engagement and reach metrics in social networks, according to Mejía Llano (2017) and González Fernández-Villavicencio *et al.* (2013).

The level of engagement of each video analyzed has been obtained by using the following formula:

$$(Total\ Likes + Total\ Comments + Total\ Shares) \times 100 / Number\ of\ Views$$

To calculate the global engagement index, the total metrics of the content broadcasted were added up, following the methodology proposed by Núñez (2017).

2.3.3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED CATEGORISATION

Based on the comparative analysis of the preceding analysis tables and on the proposal of original analysis criteria to achieve the objectives of the research, the following analysis variables are proposed for the sample:

• A) Subject matter

1. Sport: includes training, competitions and matches.
2. Community: The protagonists are the fans.
3. Social causes: social causes to which the organizations are committed (equality, sustainability, etc.).
4. Merchandising: They include products related to the club and aim to sell.
5. Sponsorship: advertising a brand or product related, or not, to the club.
6. Entertainment created by the club.
7. Entertainment created by sources outside the club and replicated by the club on its account.
8. Challenges by the club: The club creates challenges for its fandom and TikTok users to participate in and create more interaction.

• B) Tone, text, and sound

1. Tone

1. Humorous: when the purpose of the publications is to make people laugh.

2. Energetic: a dynamic tone to show sports publications, training, championships, or matches.

3. Emotional: appeals to the feelings of users and fans through memories and good or bad moments of clubs, sportsmen, and sportswomen.

2. Text

All sports organizations contain a description in every post they make. Most often, they also use hashtags in their descriptions to try to reach more users.

Organizations publish their videos in different languages, depending on the publication or organization, but generally use English. In addition, they post videos that contain text in the video itself. The texts share common elements across all organizations, such as emoticons, informal tones, and hashtags.

3. Sound

In the posts of sports organizations, there are many types of sound.

1. Ambient sound

2. Instrumental music

3. Music with lyrics

4. Narration of the clip

5. Interviews and press conferences

• c) Interaction

Table 3*Type of TikTok content.*

Subject	Tone	Sound	Interaction
Sports	Humoristic	Ambient sound	Reproductions/views
Community	Energetic	Instrumental music	Likes
Social causes	Emotional	Music with lyrics	Comments
Merchandizing	Text	Narration of clip	Shared
Sponsorship	Languages	Interviews and press conferences	
Entertainment (internal)	Hashtags		
Entertainment (external)	Emoticons		
Challenges			

Source: Own elaboration

The impact and engagement of club publications are analyzed and measured through views, likes, comments, shares, and downloads of the video.

- **d) Frequency of publication**

The frequency with which sports clubs publish content on TikTok is analyzed.

2.3. IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Once the results of the quantitative phase have been obtained, they are subjected to confrontation with qualitative fieldwork (Álvarez-Gayou, 2003).

This technique was chosen because qualitative interviews are flexible and dynamic; moreover, they allow the findings of the previous phase to be discussed and contextualized (Taylor & Bogdan, 2008). For the present research, a semi-structured interview system was developed, where the questions discuss the results obtained from the quantitative part, as well as issues affecting the work of the different profiles associated with athlete communication. Between three and five open questions are asked. The interviews took place between 10 April and 23 May 2023.

Name and Surname	Job Title/Profession
Guillem Graell	Director of D2F Partners and Chief Marketing Officer of FC Barcelona between 2017 and 2021.
Marcos García	General Manager - GoSharing-Dreams
Puri Vicente	Director of Argot Comunicación, an agency specializing in Social Networks.
Laura Palanques	Account Manager Twelfthundred

Source: Own elaboration

To conduct the interviews, we have selected four professional profiles with direct or indirect involvement in sports communication management.

3. RESULTS

3.1 FC BARCELONA

FC Barcelona experienced a notable growth in followers and number of posts between 2021 and 2023. Content has diversified, with a decrease in sporting focus and an increase in entertainment content. Content related to sports

Table 5

Comparison of the primary data obtained from FC Barcelona.

Metrics	Year 2021	Year 2023
Followers	8.3 million	27.8 million
Publications	30	88
Media publication	0.96	2.8
Content		
- Sports	50%	38%
- Entertainment	37%	13%
Style		
- Epic and dynamic tone	63%	31%
- Humorous tone	23.00%	52%
- English speaking	100%	65%
- Instrumental music	36.70%	34%
- Ambient sound	6%	21%
Engagement*		
- Views	20 million	3.6 million

**Publication with more engagement*

Source: Own elaboration.

sponsorship, as well as content of a social nature, increases.

In terms of style, the epic/dynamic tone declined, while the humorous tone became the main one. The text was mainly in English in 2021, but in 2023, descriptions in Catalan and, to a lesser extent, in Spanish were included.

3.2 REAL MADRID

Real Madrid shows an exponential growth (+300%) in followers compared to 2021. Topics have been shifting towards entertainment and humor, characteristic of the TikTok social network. This implies a greater adaptation of communications.

Stylistically, 2023 used descriptions in English and Spanish with short, informal, and modern

Table 6

Comparison of the main data obtained from Real Madrid.

Metrics	2021	2023
Followers	5 million	30 million
Publications	26	40
Media publication	0.84	1.2
Content		
- Sports	84%	32.50%
- Entertainment	0% social external and internal	50% social, external, and internal
Style		
- Epic and dynamic tone	84%	42.50%
- Humorous tone	15.40%	47.50%
- English speaking	100%	60%
- Instrumental music	53.80%	25%
- Ambient sound	23.50%	35%
Engagement*		
- Views	6 millio	3.5 million

**Publication with more engagement*

Source: Own elaboration.

texts. There was also a change in the music used, with an increase in the use of instrumental music (55%).

Regarding engagement, the most successful post in 2021 generated almost 6 million views and more than 450,000 likes, while in 2023, the top video garnered 3.5 million views and 64,000 "likes".

3.3 ATLÉTICO DE MADRID

Like its predecessors, Atlético de Madrid has a significant increase in followers and publications. Regarding the typology of its publications, a large part of its content continues to be sport-

Table 7

Comparison of the main data obtained from Atlético de Madrid.

Metrics	Year 2021	Year 2023
Followers	2.2 millions	7.8 millions
Publications	13	48
Media publication	0.43	1.5
Content		
Sports	76.9%	60%
Entertainment	15.4%	27%
Style		
Epic and dynamic tone	61.5%	50%
Humorous tone	30.8%	41%
English speaking	76%	45%
Modern music	53.8%	33%
Ambient sound	30.8%	47%
Engagement*		
Views	3 millions	9 millions

**Publication with more engagement*

Source: Own elaboration.

ing, with an epic/dynamic tone. However, there is an increase in humorous content.

The football club is going for realism. In 2023, ambient sound predominates, compared to modern music in 2021. Regarding engagement, there is a substantial increase in views between the most viewed publications in 2021 and 2023. However, in 2021, there were more than 370,000 "likes," while in 2023, there were 60,000 "likes".

3.4 SEVILLA FC

The club has significantly increased its community of followers and its average daily publication from 2021 to 2023. In 2023, there will be

an increase in sports content and a reduction in humor content compared to 2021.

The predominant tone in 2021 was epic/dynamic in 85.7%, but in 2023, it decreased to

Table 8

Comparison of the main data obtained for Sevilla FC.

Metrics	Year 2021	Year 2023
Followers	355,000	3,2 million
Publications	7	20
Media publication	0.22	0.6
Content		
Sports	42.90%	85%
Entertainment	26%	15%
Style		
Epic and dynamic tone	85.70%	70%
Humorous tone	10%	20%
English speaking	60%	95%
Modern music	57.10%	50%
Ambient sound	15%	45%
Engagement*		
Views	280,000	37,000

**Publication with more engagement*

Source: Own elaboration.

70%, giving way to a humorous tone in 20% of the occasions. In terms of language, in 2021, English was used more in descriptions, while in 2023, Spanish was predominant.

Regarding music, in 2021, modern music with lyrics was the most used (57.1%), but in 2023 ambient sound stood out with 45%.

In terms of engagement, in 2021, the most successful post had more than 280,000 views and more than 35,000 likes, while in 2023, the most successful post had more than 37,000 views, 71,000 likes and 833 comments.

3.5 VALENCIA CF

Percentage-wise, the most significant increase in followers between 2021 and 2023 is for *Valencia CF*, which goes from 150,000 to 2.6 million in two years. The predominant content in 2021 and 2023 is entertainment, with sports

Table 9

Comparison of the main data obtained from Valencia CF.

Metrics	Year 2021	Year 2023
Followers	150,000	2.6 million
Publications	16	23
Media publication	0.57	0.7
Content		
Sports	46%	21%
Entertainment	50%	47%
Style		
Epic and dynamic tone	31.3%	50%
Humorous tone	62.5%	47%
English speaking	0.32%	0.13%
Modern music	43%	26%
Sonido ambiente	37%	60.8%
Engagement*		
Views	185,000	95,000

*Publication with more engagement

Source: Own elaboration.

content dropping considerably between these years.

In terms of language, the content is mainly in Spanish in both years. The use of English in publications is minimal, only 12.5% in 2021 and 0.23% in 2023. In terms of music, there is an increase in the use of ambient sound, which represents 60.8% in 2023, while modern and instrumental music decreases to 26%.

Regarding engagement, the most successful post in 2023 got over 95,000 views, 83,200

Table 10

Comparison of number of publications and average number of publications during March 2021 and 2023.

Club	Year 2021	Year 2023	Average publication rate (per day) 2021	Average publication rate (per day) 2023
FC Barcelona	30	88	0.96	2.8
Real Madrid	26	40	0.84	1.2
Atlético de Madrid	13	48	0.43	1.5
Valencia CF	16	23	0.57	0.7
Sevilla CF	7	20	0.22	0.6

Source: Own elaboration.

likes, and 1,045 comments. In comparison, the most successful post in 2021 has more than 185,000 views and less than 5,000 likes.

3.6 COMPARISON OF TIKTOK USE IN FOOTBALL CLUBS

Table 11

Most used content types per year and club.

Club	Year 2021	Year 2023
FC Barcelona	50% sports	37.5% sports
	37% entertainment	13% entertainment
Real Madrid	84% sports	32.5% sports
	0% social external and internal	50% social external and internal
Atlético de Madrid	76.9% sports	60% sports
	15.4% entertainment	27% entertainment
Valencia CF	46% sports	21% sports
	50% entertainment	47% entertainment
Sevilla CF	42.9% sports	85% sports
	26% entertainment	15% entertainment

Source: Own elaboration

Having analyzed each football club's TikTok postings individually, a more general comparison between the different clubs is necessary.

As noted in Table 1, all five clubs experienced significant growth in the number of followers on TikTok between 2021 and 2023. These results reflect the ongoing popularity of football on the platform and the close competition between big clubs such as Barcelona and Madrid.

Table 12

Most used style types per year and club.

Club	Year 2021	Year 2023
FC Barcelona	63% epic and dynamic tone	31% epic and dynamic tone
	23% tone of humor	52% tone of humor
	36.7% instrumental music	34% instrumental music
	100% English language	65% English language
Real Madrid	84% epic and dynamic tone	42.5% epic and dynamic tone
	15.4% tone of humor	47.5% tone of humor
	53.8% modern music	25% modern music
	100% English language	60% English language

Atlético de Madrid	61.5% epic and dynamic tone	50% epic and dynamic tone
	30.8% tone of humor	41% tone of humor
	53.8% modern music	33% modern music
	76% English language	45% English language
Valencia CF	31.3% epic and dynamic tone	50% epic and dynamic tone
	62.5% tone of humor	47% tone of humor
	43% modern music	26% modern music
	25% English language	1% English language
Sevilla CF	85.7% epic and dynamic tone	70% epic and dynamic tone
	10% tone of humor	20% tone of humor
	57.1% modern music	50% modern music
	60% English language	95% English language

Source: Own elaboration.

All five clubs have increased their activity on TikTok, posting more content and more frequently between 2021 and 2023. FC Barcelona leads in the total number of posts, as well as the average number of posts per day.

3.6.1. TYPE OF CONTENT BROADCASTED

Sports content is predominant in both periods. This indicates that sports-related content is a priority for clubs when posting content on this social network. However, there is a decrease in the percentage of sports content and a trend towards more diversification, including more entertainment-related content. This may be a strategy to attract a wider audience and keep fans interested in the platform.

The use of the tone of humor has increased sig-

Table 13

Publications with the most engagement per year and club.

Club	Year 2021	Year 2023
FC Barcelona	20 million	3.6 million
Real Madrid	6 million	3.5 million
Atlético de Madrid	3 million	9 million
Valencia CF	185,000	95,000
Sevilla CF	280,000	37,000

Source: Own elaboration.

nificantly in the majority of clubs in 2023. This suggests that clubs use this resource to connect with and engage their audience.

Regarding speech, most clubs have reduced the percentage of English content in 2023. This could indicate an intention to reach out to a more diverse and multilingual audience on TikTok initially but then move closer to home.

There is a general trend towards a more humorous tone and a reduction in the use of instrumental music in favor of various musical styles. These changes reflect an adaptation of the clubs to the preferences and dynamics of the TikTok platform.

3.6.3. ENGAGEMENT

Regarding engagement, it can be concluded that some featured posts generated a high level of interaction from followers, with many views, likes, and comments. These posts tend to be related to relevant events, participation of prominent players or collaborations with other content creators, and content that is very focused on Generation Z.

The table shows the publication with the most engagement for each club. The difference between the two periods lies in two main axes;

the first is the explosion of TikTok in that period, which benefits the content more, and the second has to do with the context in which society was moving, caused by the pandemic.

3.7 CONTRAST STAGE

The results obtained in the quantitative stage are contrasted and contextualized with four in-depth interviews with professionals in the field of sport or specialized in TikTok. The convergent and divergent points, as well as the most relevant findings, are outlined below.

3.7.1 FACTORS INFLUENCING THE GROWTH OF CLUB FOLLOWERS

Each club has its characteristics, from its fan base to its level of media interest. These aspects, along with sporting performance, can impact, either positively or negatively, on the number of fans they attract.

Graell highlights how risk appetite can vary between clubs. He takes Real Madrid as an example, as it tends to avoid risks, especially in new media (Graell, personal communication, 15 April 2023).

However, Puri Vicente provides another perspective by identifying three key factors that have driven the accelerated growth in followers: the increase in TikTok users, the increase in the number of posts, and the proliferation of TikTok content on other platforms, such as Reels (P. Vicente, personal communication, 18 April 2023).

3.7.2 CHALLENGES IN GENERATING SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

Generating content on TikTok is not without its challenges. García stresses that the main challenge lies in balancing viral content with the club's branding (García, personal communication, 22 April 2023).

Added to this are other challenges mentioned by Vicente, such as the need for originality, the constant creation of content, and the importance of having an internal team dedicated to TikTok.

Palanques, on the other hand, insists on the importance of adapting content to the platform. He criticizes clubs such as Valencia and Sevilla because, in his opinion, they repeat content from other networks and do not achieve the desired engagement (L. Palanques, personal communication, 30 April 2023).

3.7.3 IMPORTANCE OF ENTERTAINMENT CONTENT IN CLUB STRATEGY

Entertainment content has played a central role in the clubs' strategy on TikTok. Graell argues that aspects such as the rivalry and history of the clubs offer them the opportunity to generate content that truly resonates with their fans (Graell, personal communication, 15 April 2023).

García complements this point by emphasizing that, while anyone can create entertaining content, clubs must offer something unique and distinctive (García, personal communication, 22 April 2023). Palanques closes this point by reiterating that TikTok is essentially an entertainment platform and that users are looking for content that entertains them rather than direct promotions.

3.7.4 STRATEGIES AND FORMULAS TO GENERATE ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is a vital metric in any social network. Although, as Palanques points out, there is no magic formula to guarantee it, it is crucial to use the metrics that TikTok provides to tune in to what the audience wants (L. Palanques, personal communication, April 30, 2023).

Vicente provides a more detailed view, stressing the importance of keeping up to date with trends, observing other creators, and adapting their strategies to the needs of a sports club (P. Vicente, personal communication, 18 April 2023).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1 DISCUSSION

Through the study, it was found that sports and entertainment content, with an epic and dynamic approach and following the codes imposed by TikTok, are the ones that generate the greatest attraction in the football clubs studied. This finding aligns with the thesis of Su *et al.* (2020b), which highlights the unique, casual, and authentic nature of TikTok compared to other social platforms.

TikTok synthesizes three growing trends in social media: one, the visual-televisual medium, which has always enjoyed great popularity; two, an algorithm that is structured to offer a better user experience according to tastes; and three, a platform designed for smartphone cameras (Guinaudeau *et al.*, 2022).

This attraction can be attributed to the fact that TikTok offers a more genuine and authentic means of interacting with fans compared to more traditional platforms that are often saturated with promotional and less personalized content. In this context, football clubs have a unique opportunity to present themselves from a different, more human, and closer perspective to their fans, which can strengthen their relationship and connection with them.

The decision by major football clubs to establish a presence on TikTok, as suggested by Sidorenko-Bautista et al. (2022), not only validates the growing importance of this platform but also reflects a strategic shift in how these institutions wish to project themselves in the digital world. The significant 135% growth in posts from 2021 to 2023 supports this claim. This signals a determined commitment by clubs to adapt and evolve in line with the changing preferences of their audience.

The clubs have been able to adapt to the network and the audience, modifying their communication strategy and their content towards sport and entertainment, dynamic and agile, allowing them to get closer to the new generations. A review of the content published reaffirms that they use TikTok's native formats and collaborations, with its codes in terms of graphics and sound, and produced specifically for this social network. This allows us to assess the communication management of the clubs on TikTok, as well as to establish similarities and differences with previous studies on other social platforms (Segarra-Saavedra & Hidalgo-Marí, 2020; Lobillo & Muñoz, 2016), where communication on Instagram or Twitter is described as improvised.

The contribution of Garcia *et al.* (2022) provides further context regarding the nature of TikTok posts. By focusing on day-to-day content, clubs

not only offer a behind-the-scenes look at club operations and the daily lives of their players and staff but also demonstrate a willingness to move away from traditional communication and marketing approaches. This strategic decision can be seen as an attempt by the clubs to humanize their brand and make it more relatable and more appealing to a younger, digitally native fan base.

While football clubs have always been highly visible and influential in popular culture, their adaptation and success in TikTok suggests recognizing the need to evolve in line with contemporary media and changing fan expectations.

4.2 CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of the use of TikTok in Spanish professional football between 2021 and 2023 has been remarkable. All the indicators analyzed point to the quantitative and qualitative leaps made by the clubs under study. Both the accumulated followers and the volume of publications (from 92 in total in 2021 to 219 in 2023), as well as the adaptation of the audiovisual pieces to the demands and trends of the social network, reveal the allocation of resources of these clubs in the production of content for TikTok. In other words, the management of this social network has been professionalized; it has gone from a management in which the profiles existed to test the channel and be present to a management that can be considered strategic and sophisticated just two years later.

In terms of the type of content used, entertainment has become a determining factor in the clubs' strategy on TikTok. Fans prefer en-

tainment content, heavily based on humor and sporting content, rather than promotional content. Clubs have leveraged their history and rivalry to generate targeted content that resonates with their supporters and football fans but have accepted the unwritten rules of the platform. This ability to offer content that is different from other media is what has attracted fans and kept them engaged on the platform.

Regarding the tone and style of the publications, it is worth noting that originality, fun, and spontaneity are crucial elements to stand out on TikTok. Clubs have managed to adapt their communication style to the preferences of this entertainment platform. Some clubs, such as Real Madrid, Barcelona, and Atlético, have adapted successfully, as the comparison shows, while others, such as Sevilla and Valencia, are building the most relevant narrative in this context.

Finally, assessing the importance of this social network for football clubs as a tool for engagement and loyalty among the public, it can be concluded that TikTok allows them to connect with their audience from a different perspective than that previously used in other media available to the club. Today, clubs face new challenges, such as creating viral content that, in addition to achieving visibility, transmits the club's identity. This is one of the focuses on which clubs are working and which, in the coming years, will be a great competition off the pitch, with TikTok as a backdrop.

Considering the exploratory nature of the research and the limited sample, this study provides an exciting starting point for future research that could further investigate the evolution of these challenges.

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