

Social media impact on international sports events related to the brand Spain: a comparison between inner versus outside events

Social media
impact on
sports events

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Received 5 June 2023
Revised 1 September 2023
2 October 2023
4 December 2023
14 December 2023
22 December 2023
Accepted 28 December 2023

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Abstract

Purpose – This study analyzes the impact of sports social media on a country regarding three international events connected to the brand Spain. It examines (1) the use and importance of various social media platforms in sports events and (2) identifies the countries generating the most social media content.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 1,711,084 posts were collected for analysis, focusing on FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022 and Davis Cup 2022, with a particular emphasis on the Spain brand. Through Atribus, diverse social media data were recovered and analyzed. Later, we recommended employing various metrics and ANOVAs to address the research questions. Additionally, we conducted a sentiment analysis.

Findings – The results show differences between (1) the use and relevance of social network platforms and events and (2) the content generated by different countries. The practical implications offer valuable insights for sports event organizers, destination managers and other stakeholders. The research implications suggest potential avenues for future research based on the observed patterns and behaviors in social media posts related to sports events and Brand Spain.

Originality/value – (1) Some papers have studied the role of sports events' social media, ignoring the comparison among different social media platforms; (2) usually, previous literature has focused on a single event or sport and (3) although there is considerable research related to the strategic and operational Inés Küster Boluda Inés Küster Boluda role of social media, there is less systematic analysis related to the extent

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Funding: This paper has been funded by the Regional Ministry of Innovation, Universities, Science and the Digital Society (Conselleria d'Innovació, Universitats, Ciència i Societat Digital) – (No: AICO 2022 CIAICO/2021/062): “El deporte en la construcción de marca país: el turista y el residente”.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests in this research.



European Journal of Management
and Business Economics
Vol. 34 No. 2, 2025
pp. 121-132
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2444-8494
p-ISSN: 2444-8451
DOI [10.1108/EJMBE-06-2023-0171](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJMBE-06-2023-0171)

1. Introduction

Online social networks (OSNs) are critical platforms for participation in social life because every day, users on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook, among others, publish numerous posts (Jansen *et al.*, 2021). These social media platforms have substantially impacted contemporary life (Xiang, 2013). As Highfield and Leaver (2016, p. 48) state, social media has the potential to mix “the political and the mundane, the extraordinary and every day,” and its research offers a better understanding of actions and strategies from the relevant actors themselves.

The sports industry has not been unaffected by using social media. Sports and social media connect people (Watkins, 2018). The growth and development of new media technologies are playing a relevant role in developing skills among athletes and participants and developing a sense of community among supporters and audiences in local and national or global contexts (Thorpe, 2017; López-Carril *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, the emergence of social media has impacted the delivery and consumption of sports (Filo *et al.*, 2015) and changed how sports teams, athletes, supporters and events interact with one another. Sports supporters can develop feelings of connection to the community (Watkins, 2018) because these fans do not think of the team, athlete or event and the community as independent identities but rather as identities intimately linked, which can improve civic pride (Heere and James, 2007). In this scenario, social media can enhance the link between sports and the community.

The Greenfly consultancy firm provides some figures showing the importance of social network use in the sports market (Greenfly, 2022). For example, fans of any age use social media platforms to access sports content (51% of fans get sports content on Facebook, 46% on YouTube, 31% on Instagram and 25% on Twitter). Some of the most followed accounts on social media are related to sports entities (Real Madrid has 114 million followers on Instagram, the NBA has 66.3 million followers, and Ronaldo, the most followed person, has 431 million followers). We can find that every day, a trending topic is related to sports. Additionally, 41% of global sports fans watch sports through digital platforms and 32% of sports fans — and 43% of Gen Z fans — use social media platforms while watching live sports. Companies know it and invest money in this channel while the amount of content published on these networks.

With this, sports researchers have found an exciting field of study in sports social media.

The literature review by Filo *et al.* (2015), focused on the knowledge of sports social media from a service-dominant logic perspective emphasizing relationship marketing, identifies three main categories of research in this field: strategic, operational and user-focused.

Together with this, the recent work of Zeren *et al.* (2022) found 37 papers in the Scopus database that reveal that (1) studies related to sports marketing and social media focus on sports fans and social media engagement, sports marketing practices of sports providers and athlete brand identity; (2) most of the studies use a quantitative approach and (3) sports marketing and social media research mainly focus on Facebook and Twitter.

Considering the above, this study aims to investigate (1) the use and relevance of diverse social media in inner and outside international sports events and (2) the identification of the countries where higher social media content is generated. To achieve this objective, we analyzed diverse social media impacts related to Spain on three events: (1) FIFA World Cup

Qatar 2022, (2) XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022 and (3) Davis Cup 2022, two of which of them celebrated in Spain. 1,711,084 posts were retrieved.

Because of the growing interest in academia (Filo *et al.*, 2015; López-Carril *et al.*, 2020; Zeren *et al.*, 2022), this study aims to add value to previous studies in the following directions. First, although previous studies have analyzed the impact of sports on a country's image (i.e. Grix, 2012; White and Absher, 2013; Kim *et al.*, 2014), fewer have studied the role of sports social media. Second, most studies usually focused only on one event (i.e. Dubinsky, 2022) or sport (i.e. Aichner, 2019; AlKhalifa and Farello, 2021). Third, we examined three sports with varying popularity (more or less popular; more or less international) and scope (team and individual sports, inner versus outside sports events). Fourth, although there is considerable research on social media's strategic and operational role, there is less systematic analysis of the extent to which sports events use social media in general and concerning different platforms (Aichner, 2019).

In sum, as Abeza and Sanderson (2022) state, since a research focus emerged in 2008 along with the first publication of articles in *the International Journal of Sport Communication*, academics have called for the development of more sophisticated research questions and the application of innovative research methods related to sport and social media research.

2. Sports, social media and country image

As stated, the interest in studying sports' social media has grown recently. We can find diverse studies that focus on sports social media and others that try to analyze their impact on the country's image involved in sports activity (hosting a sports event, winning a competition, etc.). Not in vain, sports social media studies focus on how these platforms can help sportspersons, clubs and events improve their relationships with fans, players, coaches, organizations and consumers (Achen *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the interest in the study of sports social media, more research is needed to analyze the impact of social media on country branding. However, it represents a powerful field of research. Sports companies and organizations recognize that sports supporters watch events and expand word-of-mouth to share their beliefs, attitudes and experiences through social media (Wakefield and Bennett, 2018).

The studies in this field focus mainly on sports events, as these events impact the country's image the most. In this sense, for example, AlKhalifa and Farello (2021) conducted a content analysis based on Instagram to investigate social media as an instrument for sports diplomacy in the Arab world. The authors study one year of the Instagram posts of three women's football committees and identify four main topics that can impact the country's image: associations with international campaigns and social media challenges, community engagement, technical displays and event hosting.

However, most studies on sports social media overlook the impact of branding, focusing instead on club or event engagement (Joanna and Zuzanna, 2020). Many studies focus on just one sport or event. In this sense, we can find Aichner's study (2019). The author performed an investigation on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter from 78 European football clubs to analyze: (1) the level of social media usage, (2) the football fans' engagement with content posted by football clubs and (3) the differences in user engagement with commercial social media advertisements targeting football fans.

Also, in football, Dubinsky (2022) studies the role of sports in national branding and public diplomacy during the pandemic. The author focuses on the projected image of the USA in 13 countries through nine days of international online media covering Super Bowl LV, celebrated in Tampa, Florida, in 2021. Here, the author identifies five themes that contribute to developing the affective-sympathetic dimension of the image of America: (1) shared culture and values, (2) socio-political climate, (3) the pandemic, (4) the event and (5) positionality.

But beyond football, the relevance of social media in nation branding can also be seen in other sports. For example, [Schubert and Seyffert \(2017\)](#) focus their study on table tennis, a sport with a small marketing budget and little media coverage. Their research suggests that sports organizations can utilize social media to accomplish various goals, including sustaining public interest and reinforcing brand awareness ([Schubert and Seyffert, 2017](#)). Also, the study by [Park et al. \(2021\)](#) examines the impact of the post content on Facebook pages for the Boston, Chicago and New York City marathons. The authors conclude that content generated by marketers is more effective than content generated by users to get more engagement among users.

Sports organizations and events have used social media with different aims ([Abeza and Sanderson, 2022](#)). Most of the studies have just focused on the analysis of the use of these platforms for their organizational goals ([Achen et al., 2020](#)), and to a lesser extent, studies have assessed their relationship with country branding ([AlKhalifa and Farello, 2021](#); [Dubinsky, 2022](#)).

Considering previous lines, we propose the following research question to analyze social media in three international sports events with different scopes:

RQ1. How are the social media of three international sports events used when talking about the event and Spain?

Therefore, this paper argues that sports social media can impact a country's image. Furthermore, different social media platforms can work in different ways. For example, the study by [Achen et al. \(2020\)](#) compares Facebook and Twitter to study how professional sports organizations in the USA use these platforms and how interaction on these networks differs.

In this sense, sports marketing and social media research primarily focus on Facebook and Twitter, while less (almost no) attention has been paid to other social media websites such as Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok ([Zeren et al. \(2022\)](#), p. 126). Not in vain, social media includes other alternatives such as blogs, forums, photo sharing, online news, web, virtual worlds and video sharing ([Aichner and Jacob, 2015](#)). Thus, we consider the link between social media and the country through more than one sport and more than one social media ([AlKhalifa and Farello, 2021](#); [Dubinsky, 2022](#)).

In this sense, and based on previous lines, we investigate the use and importance of social media in diverse sports events related to the brand Spain. In this sense, we propose the following research question.

RQ2. Are different social networks equally relevant when discussing an international sports event linked to the brand Spain?

In addition, since this paper focuses on international sports events related to the brand Spain, it is essential to know the different uses in different countries. We propose a third research question according to previous works (i.e. [Van de Belt et al., 2012](#); [Aichner, 2019](#)).

RQ3. What is the impact of different social networks in diverse countries when discussing an international sports event linked to the brand Spain?

3. Methodology

This study followed a two-month (1 November 2022 to 31 December 2022) exploration of posts related to Spain, published on several social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, TikTok, News, Blog, Web and Forums) of three main sports events: FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022 and Davis Cup 2022. We have selected these three international mega-sports events because, according to [Kim et al. \(2014\)](#), these events are believed to impact the host country's image from an international marketing perspective.

In this sense, Atribus ad hoc software was used to monitor the diverse social media platforms and the three international events. This tool collects and analyses conversations in social networks and online (social listening). It is a proprietary software technology, which provides accurate and reliable data. Taking [Fan and Gordon's \(2014\)](#) social network analysis process as a reference, the analysis process is divided into 3 phases or stages: Capture, Understand and Present. Firstly, information is captured from different sources to process the big data and extract the relevant information. The second phase is Understand: optimize and eliminate the data that produces "noise" and proceed to the analysis through artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning techniques; the last phase is Present: summarize and analyze the findings obtained with the previous analysis phases.

3.1 Data collection (capture)

Using data from the following digital media: Twitter, Facebook (fanpages), Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, digital news, websites, forums and blogs, mentions were collected via API, accepting the terms and conditions of each digital media. The Atribus platform collected all the content and users who gave their opinions using at least one term related to the event and the Spain brand, both with the event's name and the indistinct use of its hashtags, through the construction of Boolean searches.

The method of non-participant observation (netnography) is used, where the behavior of users, the conversations they carry out and the way they relate to each other in digital media are analyzed ([Del Fresno García, 2011](#)). There is no interviewer for data collection in the fieldwork, but rather the behavior of users in the digital environment is analyzed passively.

A total of 1,711,084 posts were retrieved (1,694,264 posts from the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, 3,629 posts from XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022 and 13,191 posts from Davis Cup 2022). In addition to the original content published by users, profiles that have interacted with the original content have also been collected and analyzed.

3.2 Data processing (capture)

The data obtained through the different sources of information above are stored in the Atribus platform, in a joint database, where they are systematically structured for further processing and treatment.

Regarding the users' profiles from FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, 43% of the posts come from males, 22% from females and 35% from organizations. Most of the users are 18–24 years old (36%), followed by users between 25 and 34 years old (27%). Most posts are written in English (53%), followed by Japanese and Spanish (17% each).

Related to XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022, 46% of the posts come from males, 26% from females and 28% from organizations. These users are between 25 and 34 (12%) and 18 and 24 (11%). Here, almost all posts are in Spanish (83%).

And with Davis Cup 2022, 37% of the posts come from males, 23% from females and 40% from organizations. In addition, many users who post are between 18 and 24 years old (27.09%), followed by users between 25 and 34 years old (24.47%). Most posts are in Spanish (48%) and English (46%).

3.3 Data analysis (understand)

Four stages were followed to answer the three research questions. First, we calculate the posts for each event and social media platform. Second, and following [Aichner and Jacob's \(2015\)](#) and [Aichner's \(2019\)](#) proposals, we calculate the social media impact factor (SMIF), and third, we estimate the social media use (SMU) for each social media, as shown in the following equations. Following [Aichner and Jacob \(2015\)](#), with SMIF, AU platform is the sum of the

active users of each platform and $\sum AU$ platform is the sum of the active users of all media included in the study. With SMU, first, we calculate the equation without the constant k. After this, k is calculated by dividing 1 by the previous result. Finally, SMU is estimated.

$$SMIF_{platform} = \frac{AU_{platform}}{\sum AU_{platforms}}$$

AU platform = monthly active users of each social media platform

$\sum AU_{platforms}$ = sum of monthly active users of all the social media platforms

$$SMU_{Facebook} = postings \times \frac{likes + comments \times 5 + shares \times 10}{fans} \times k1$$

$$SMU_{Twitter} = postings \times \frac{likes + replies \times 5 + retweets \times 10}{followers} \times k2$$

$$SMU_{Instagram} = postings \times \frac{likes + comments \times 5}{followers} \times k3$$

$$SMU_{Youtube} = videos \times \frac{views + likes \times 100 + comments \times 500}{subscribers} \times k4$$

Finally, we analyze the use of social media in different countries to know which countries have generated more social media content related to the three international events together with the word Spain. In addition, we performed a sentiment analysis using Natural Language Processing (NLP). Based on Bayes' theorem, we calculated the probability of a given post having a positive, negative or neutral sentiment using Atribus software (Gamallo, 2014). Different weights and scores were then assigned.

4. Results

To answer RQ1, Table 1 offers the posts for each event and social media platform. As the data shows, all the social media platforms are present at the three international sports events, all of which consider Spain. In the three events, Twitter is the most used platform. The second is Instagram with FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022 and online news in Davis Cup 2022. The ANOVA test shows significant differences in the

Social media platform	FIFA world cup Qatar 2022	Davis cup 2022	XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022	Total
Twitter	1,533,781	2,508	1,456	1,537,745
Facebook	19,081	299	115	19,495
Instagram	117,597	430	268	118,295
YouTube	358	119	30	507
Reddit	149	0	0	149
TikTok	51	26	26	103
News	15,739	7,636	1,178	24,553
Blog	469	175	19	663
Web	7,039	1,673	302	9,014
Forums	925	325	235	1,485
Total	1,694,264	13,191	3,629	1,711,084

Table 1. Posts for each sports event and social media platform

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

number of posts on almost all the social media sites among the three events, except for the forums ($t = 1.22, p > 0.1$).

It is relevant to determine which social network will be most relevant for each event (RQ2). In this sense, the next step measures and compares the social media impact on the three international sports events, following the proposals of Aichner and Jacob (2015) and Aichner (2019). Table 2 shows the social media impact (SMIF) of all the platforms in the three sports events. Twitter is the social media with the highest social impact factor in Total (SMIF_Twitter Total = 0.9) and in two of the sports events analyzed: FIFA and Marathon (SMIF_Twitter FIFA = 0.91; SMIF_Twitter Marathon = 0.40). The second one is Instagram (SMIF_Instagram Total = 0.07; SMIF_Instagram FIFA = 0.07; SMIF_Instagram Marathon = 0.07). And the third one is Facebook (SMIF_Facebook Total = 0.01; SMIF_Facebook FIFA = 0.01; SMIF_Facebook Marathon = 0.03). The impact factor of online news must be noted, especially for the Davis Cup 2022 (SMIF_News Davis = 0.58). For this competition, the social media with a higher impact factor are online news, Twitter and Instagram. In sum, depending on the sports event, the impact of the diverse social media platforms differs.

The ANOVA analysis shows that there are significant differences in using Facebook ($t = 3.57, p < 0.05$), Instagram ($t = 6.00, p < 0.05$), YouTube ($t = 1.83, p < 0.1$), Reddit ($t = 1.73, p < 0.1$), online news ($t = 1.67, p < 0.1$) and web ($t = 1.86, p < 0.1$).

In addition, Table 3 presents the SMU during the three sports events analyzed. To calculate this indicator, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter were chosen as the leading social media platforms for this analysis. Although Aichner (2019) states that when

	FIFA world cup Qatar 2022	Davis cup 2022	Xli Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022	Total
SMIF_Twitter	0.91	0.19	0.40	0.90
SMIF_Facebook	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.01
SMIF_Instagram	0.07	0.03	0.07	0.07
SMIF_YouTube	0.0002	0.009	0.008	0.0003
SMIF_Reddit	0.0001	0.0000	0.000	0.0001
SMIF_TikTok	0.0000	0.002	0.007	0.0001
SMIF_News	0.0093	0.58	0.32	0.01
SMIF_Blog	0.0003	0.01	0.005	0.00
SMIF_Web	0.0042	0.13	0.08	0.01
SMIF_Forums	0.0005	0.025	0.06	0.001

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Table 2. Social media impact (SMIF)

	FIFA world cup Qatar 2022	Davis cup 2022	XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022
SMU_Facebook	0.99	0.99	0.99
SMU_YouTube	0.98	1.04 = 1	0.99
SMU_Twitter	0.87	1	1
SMU_Instagram	0.99	1	1.03 = 1

Note(s): 0 = no use of social media platform; 1 = full use of social media platform

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Table 3. Social media use (SMU)

the SMU exceeds the optimal value of one, the SMU is equal to one, we can leave the exact value to know more precisely the relevance of each indicator.

Although the three sports events used all social media, specific nuances can be made. Regarding FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, Facebook and Instagram are more used than YouTube and Twitter. With Davis Cup 2022, the most relevant social media platforms are YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. And with XLI Marathon Valencia, the most relevant social media are, first, Instagram, followed by Twitter, and, in third place, Facebook and YouTube. The ANOVA shows that there are significant differences between events and social media.

Finally, and to answer RQ3, Figure 1 shows the eight countries where the most social media content about the international sports event linked to the brand Spain was generated. Spain and the USA have the highest traffic at the three sports events. With Spain, this may be

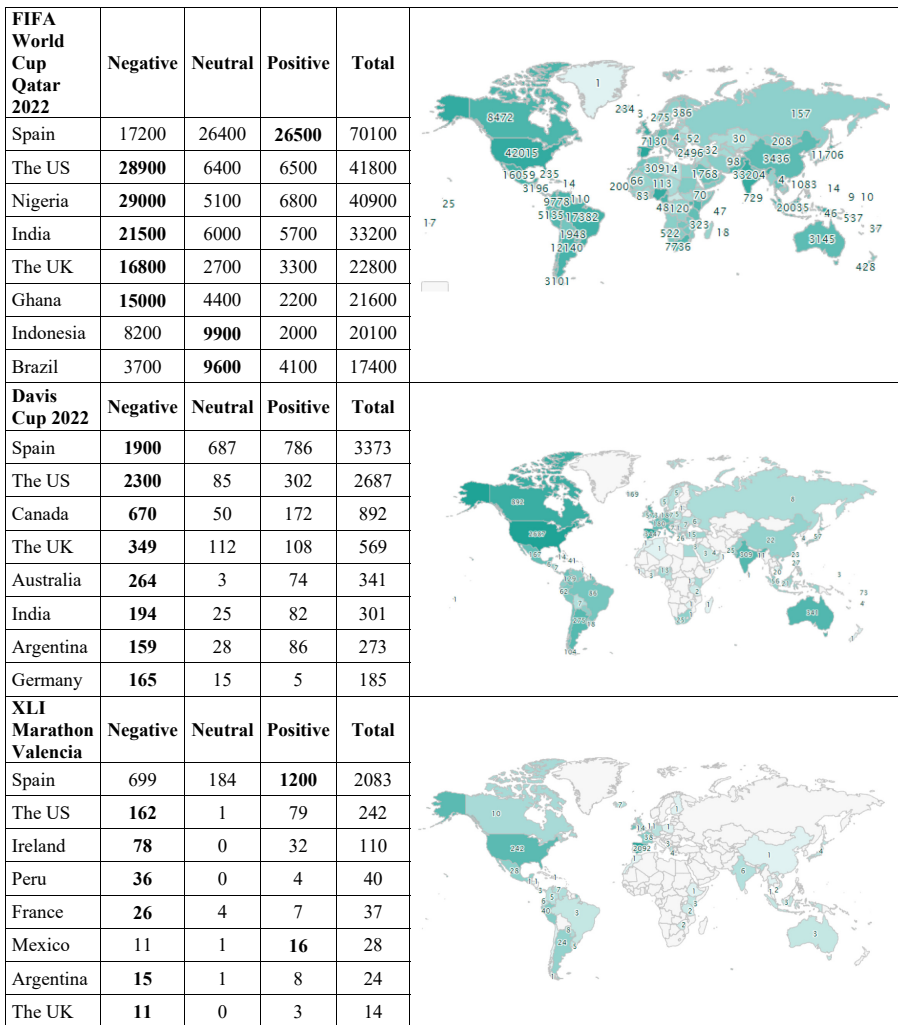


Figure 1.
Geolocation of the posts

Source(s): Adapted from Atribus outputs

because Spaniards follow their athletes and teams, and two of the three events were held in Spain (Davis Cup and Marathon Valencia). The size of the country can explain the relevance of the USA.

We can also see that only three countries (Spain, the United States and the United Kingdom) appear in all three events. Curiously, the most contributions come from countries where one might not think Spain is such a relevant country, such as Nigeria or Peru.

As seen in [Figure 1](#), although this study is not intended to conduct a sentiment analysis, we would like to point out that posts are not always made in a positive direction. Thus, in the countries where most content has been generated, with the FIFA World Cup Qatar, only Spanish posts have been more positive than neutral or negative when commenting on the championship and the Spanish brand. In the case of the Davis Cup, negative posts predominate in all countries. For the XLI Marathon Valencia, there is also a predominance of negative posts in all countries except those from Spain and Mexico. These results may be due to the poor results achieved by Spanish teams and athletes, even though, for example, no Spanish team participated in the Davis Cup. In the case of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Spain did not do well, which may explain the negative sentiment. In the other two cases, it could be linked to the event venue. Either way, more research is needed to conclude.

5. Conclusions, implications and further research

Undoubtedly, social media has become a tool for connecting audiences, fans, teams and events. However, organizations and institutions need to know how individuals and organizations use them. The methodology used in this paper can also help them.

Therefore, this paper focused on social media's impact on three international sports events (FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022 and Davis Cup 2022) when individuals and organizations outside the organization of such events use the brand Spain in their posts.

The study results of the 1,711,084 posts allow us to draw the following main conclusions, which can be summarized in four main points.

First, our results have shown that not all social networks behave similarly, depending on the sports event analyzed. The nature of the event itself and its scope can determine them.

Second, not all countries are equally engaged with a sports event and a nation (Spain in our study). Unequal social networks are employed by individuals and organizations in the FIFA World Cup Qatar, the Davis Cup 2022 and the XLI Marathon Valencia Trinidad Alfonso 2022.

Third, as expected, Spanish posts were the most numerous at the various events for two main reasons. First, this paper has considered the posts related to three sports events and the brand Spain, and second, maybe because two sports events occurred in Spain.

Fourthly, the high number of negative posts and their country of origin are surprising. As stated, the poor results and the event venue could explain these negative posts.

For the business world, this paper offers four main practical implications. First, the study reveals that sports events and destination managers must pay attention to social media platforms and the audience's use. In advance, they must know how each social media behaves and where their audience is concentrated. Second, and more specifically, destination managers need to see the impact of social media on each sports event because the audience of each event has different behavior in their use of social media platforms. In this sense, following the sports classification proposed by [Durand \(1968\)](#), our results show that within collective sports with massive audiences, such as football, social networks such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube are preferred by users to post comments related to the sports events and the brand Spain. Other less popular sports events (i.e. the Davis Cup) or more individualistic sports events (i.e. marathons) have more impact on organizational media.

In particular, organizations post more comments related to these events. In these more minority sports events, Twitter and Instagram are the networks most used by the public to make posts.

Third, sports events organizers and destination managers must understand the nature (audience vs. business) of the posts published. It is essential to know how the reach of social media has particularly affected different aspects of the sports industry and the use of these platforms by other stakeholder groups, such as athletes, coaches, managers, teams, leagues, events, governing bodies and fans (Abeza and Sanderson, 2022). The information posted by these stakeholder groups might be helpful to institutions in understanding how to increase their relationships with fans by adopting a well-thought-out marketing strategy (Obaid and CK, 2022).

And fourth, these organizers and managers must identify and know the provenance of social media audiences. As results have shown, posts can come from anywhere worldwide because social networks have no borders. The results show that the countries that generate the most posts do not have the most teams or participants in sporting events, even if they are not the most prominent countries.

One of the main limitations is that this study only investigates three international sports events from three different disciplines (football, tennis and marathons). In addition, two of them were held in Spain. Future studies can analyze other events celebrated in other countries and their relationship with the brand Spain. It would also be interesting to conduct a content analysis, looking at the content of what is said on these networks in addition to the use of social networks.

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Further reading

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