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# THE CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FANS AND FOOTBALL CLUBS: THE PORTUGUESE CONTEXT

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Title:** The contribution of social media to the relationship between fans and football clubs: The Portuguese Context

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This study aims to understand the impact that social networks have on the relationship between fans and football clubs in the Portuguese context. The way we communicate in the digital environment is rapidly changing, transforming not only people's daily lives, but also adding challenges to businesses on how to effectively reach their customers. And, at a time when football has long ceased to be just about the pitch, it's important to understand how clubs can benefit from this new and attractive communication channel to increase their revenues.

In that sense, we carried out a quantitative online survey with fans of professional football clubs in Portugal, as well as qualitative interviews with managers responsible for these clubs' social networks, trying to understand the influence that social networks have on the relationship with fans. We studied the main reasons why fans follow clubs on social media, and tested how they affect fans' attendance at the stadium and the purchase of club merchandise. The findings of our study allowed us to conclude that social networks are a determinant factor in the acquisition of information about the club by fans, with the sharing of content by the latter having a direct relationship with the sale of the club's products. On the other hand, we were unable to conclude if social networks influence fans going to the stadium to assist to football matches. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the Portuguese context and helps clubs to understand the needs of their fans.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Digital Marketing, Sports Marketing, Football

## **SUMÁRIO**

**Título:** The contribution of social media to the relationship between fans and football clubs: The Portuguese Context

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Este estudo tem como objetivo compreender o impacto que as redes sociais têm na relação entre adeptos e clubes de futebol no contexto português. A forma como comunicamos no ambiente digital está a mudar rapidamente, transformando não só o quotidiano das pessoas, mas também acrescentando desafios às empresas sobre como chegar eficazmente aos seus clientes. É assim importante perceber como é que os clubes podem beneficiar deste novo e atrativo canal de comunicação para aumentar as suas receitas.

Nesse sentido, realizámos um inquérito quantitativo online a adeptos de clubes de futebol profissional em Portugal, bem como entrevistas qualitativas a gestores responsáveis pelas redes sociais desses clubes, tentando perceber a influência que as redes sociais têm na relação com os adeptos. Estudámos as principais razões pelas quais os adeptos seguem os clubes nas redes sociais e testámos de que forma estas afectam a presença dos adeptos no estádio e a compra de produtos do clube. Os resultados do nosso estudo permitiram-nos concluir que as redes sociais são um fator determinante na aquisição de informação sobre o clube por parte dos adeptos, tendo a partilha de conteúdos por parte destes uma relação direta com a venda de produtos do clube. Por outro lado, não foi possível concluir se as redes sociais influenciam a ida dos adeptos ao estádio para assistir aos jogos de futebol. Este estudo contribui para um conhecimento mais aprofundado do contexto português e ajuda os clubes a compreender as necessidades dos seus adeptos.

**Palavras-Chave:** Redes Sociais, Marketing Digital, Marketing Desportivo, Futebol

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background and problem statement**

Created at the end of the 19th century in England, football is currently the most popular sport in the world, with millions of active participants. In Portugal, in 2023, the Portuguese Football Federation counted around 181,495 football and futsal players, spread across more than 250 clubs (FPF, 2022).

In line with the community of players of the king sport, there is an equally important community that underpins the business of football: the fans. In an era where clubs are truly treated as businesses, it is the clubs' fans who are the consumers of their product, so the sports clubs' strategy has long since moved outside the lines, creating a surrounding industry that benefits those who benefits the most to the sport's fans.

Accompanying the development of the sport has also been the development of the "digital world", that has transformed the way clubs communicate with their supporters, who until recently only used their websites to communicate digitally with their fans, which proved to be insufficient due to the few interactions between the two (McCarthy et al., 2022). Social Networks has considerably increased the number of digital interactions, allowing clubs to increase their revenue by promoting their products, but it has also brought the clubs higher exposure to the opinions of their fans, now stored on the Internet.

The main objective of football clubs in using social media is to create awareness among fans, both nationally and internationally, publicising themselves as a brand (Baena, 2017). Their strategic model is similar to that practised in various industries, and involves planning their content, implementing it and controlling it (McCann & Barlow, 2015).

On the other side, fans, especially the most fervent ones, look to social media for a proximity similar to the one they experience when they go to the stadium. So, it is natural that they are the main contributors to interactions in the digital world. However, according to Machado et. al (2020), one of the reasons fans go to the stadium is to satisfy their need for social influence, something that the arrival of clubs' social networks has reduced, reducing also the need to go to the stadium for this fringe of fans.

According to a survey carried out in Great Britain, more than 95 per cent of clubs had a presence on social networks such as Instagram, Twitter or Facebook (The Online Rule, 2023), with 43 per cent of these clubs competing at a non-professional level.

In Portugal it is no different, and the three biggest Portuguese clubs are following this trend. FC Porto has 9.7M followers spread across the 4 largest social networks (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram), which gives it the 50th place in the world ranking. SL Benfica is close behind with 9.6M, in the 52nd place, and Sporting is 73rd with 6.7M (CIES, 2023).

If these figures prove that the Portuguese fans (and clubs) have embraced this new means of communication, in a country with around 10.4 million inhabitants (Pordata, 2022), it remains to be seen what influence it has on club's commercial performance.

So, what we're trying to analyse with this study is the influence that social networks exert on football clubs' fans in terms of revenue generation for clubs, both by 1) increasing fans going to the stadium (increasing revenues by selling tickets to assist football matches) and 2) leading to increased sales of clubs' official products/merchandising.

In order to do this, we have to look at what attracts fans to clubs' social networks. What kind of contents arouse the most interest? Which ones have a positive impact? And a negative one?

Next, we must look at what we consider to be the main consequences of the relationship between fans and clubs, and focus on two main topics: the fan's attendance to the stadium, and their purchase of club merchandise.

Hence, we defined three main Research Questions that we intend to provide an answer with our study:

**RQ1:** Why do fans follow football clubs on social media?

With the first research question, we aim to understand why Portuguese fans follow their clubs on social networks.

**RQ2:** Does the relationship between clubs and fans on social media affect whether fans go to the stadium?

With the second research question, we want to understand whether the relationship that exists between fans on social media has any kind of influence on whether fans go to the stadium.

**RQ3:** Does the relationship between clubs and fans on social media affect fans' purchases of club merchandise?

Similar to the second question, with this research question we want to understand whether this relationship affects the purchase of club products by fans.

## **1.2 Relevance**

Studying the impact of social networks on the relationship between fans and football clubs in Portugal contributes to research into two trends: the growth of social networks globally, used by more than 4.8 billion people (Smart Insights, 2023), and their use as an integral part of corporate strategy. On the other hand, the business environment that has been created around what is one of the most popular sports in the world, with clubs changing their commercial strategy and focusing more on the digital environment.

It is, therefore, important to assess the real impact of this digital environment on the lives of Portuguese professional clubs, based on two variables that are the object of our study: the number of fans going to the stadium and their purchase of clubs' products. Although there has been some previous research that studied this relationship, there is a notable lack of information regarding the reality of Portuguese clubs, particularly the differences between the so-called "Big 3" (Sporting Clube de Portugal, Sport Lisboa e Benfica and Futebol Clube do Porto) and the other medium-sized and small clubs on the Portuguese football professional scene.

## **1.3 Research methods**

To better understand the relationship between football fans and their clubs on digital platforms and answer the Research Questions, we used a mixed methods' approach as we believed it would be the Research Method to best fit our study.

We therefore set out to survey fans of professional clubs to understand the reasons that lead them to follow their clubs on social networks, as well as to test their influence on stadium attendance and the purchase of club products. In order to complement our primary data collection, we conducted personal interviews with the Social Media Managers of some clubs, to understand what strategies they use to captivate their fans, and whether those strategies have an impact on the two variables we are testing.

Based on previous studies, mostly from other countries, but also some examples from the Portuguese context, we collected secondary data, that allowed us to formulate the research questions and hypotheses of our study.

## **1.4 Dissertation outline**

The next chapter will focus on the Literature Review, as well as the development of the hypotheses that will guide our study. The Literature Review will briefly and concisely present the reality of the topics under discussion: social media and football and explain their synergies up to the present day. The third chapter, the methodology, attempts to explain the methods and techniques used to test the research hypotheses.

The fourth chapter consists on the analysis of the outcomes of the questionnaire and the interviews. By analysing these results, it provides insights into their practical implications. The chapter will also include considerations regarding the significance of the obtained results.

The final chapter encapsulates the conclusions drawn from this research, highlighting key findings and their implications. Additionally, the chapter acknowledges the limitations inherent to our study and proposes potential avenues for future research within the scope of this domain.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Social Media Universe**

The beginning of Social Media as we know it today derives from a digital adaptation of the famous Word of Mouth technique, consisting of a person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives the message as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product, or a service (Arndt, 1967), and which with the digital boom became increasingly effective, causing companies to start using it as a way of advertising their products (Sajithra K, 2013).

#### **2.1.1 Social Media History**

Social media, although very different from what we know today, emerged in the 1970s. Computer technologies such as the MUD or the BBS allowed users to communicate with each other, read news and even play video games, but they also faced many limitations, since they had no colours or graphics, were accessed via a telephone line and only by one person at a time (Edosomwan, S., Prakasan, S. K., Kouame, D., Watson, J., & Seymour, T., 2011).

At the end of the 1980s, however, IRC (Internet Relay Chat) improved the experience of its users. This chatting platform allowed its users to communicate in groups, through forums, as well as one-to-one communications. In May 2009, almost 20 years after the platform was created, the top 100 channels were home to more than half a million users, with nearly 1,500 operational servers around the world (Jones, 2012).

The first social network similar to the one we know today, Classmates, was founded in 1995 with the aim of connecting members with the friends they had made during their academic career (Sajithra K, 2013). In 2023, around 59.9% of the population used social media, totalling 4.8 billion, representing around 92.7% of Internet users (Nyst, 2023).

#### **2.1.2 From web 2.0 to 4.0**

In 2004, the Vice President of O'Reilly Media, Dale Dougherty, described web 2.0 as follows: "Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the Internet as a platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new

platform. Chief among those rules is this: Creating applications that take advantage of network effects to improve as people use them.

Compared to web 1.0, the first version of the platform, web 2.0 is characterised by being bi-directional, adding the concept of "digital community", where content is shared and commented on, rather than just displayed or read.

Web 3.0, known as the semantic web, is, according to Conrad Wolfram, about the computer generating new information instead of humans. In fact, according to John Markoff, "Web 3.0 tries to link, integrate, and analyse data from various data sets to obtain new information stream; It is able to improve data management, support accessibility of mobile Internet, simulate creativity and innovation, encourage factor of globalisation phenomena, enhance customers' satisfaction and help to organise collaboration in social web."

Finally, Web 4.0. Although there is no clear definition of this new tool, it has been described as the Symbiotic Web, since its aim is for humans and machines to interact in symbiosis. Through artificial intelligence, the aim is to create an intelligent web, "parallel to the human brain and implies a massive web of highly intelligent interactions" (Patil, H. J., & Surwade, Y. P., 2018).

### **2.1.3 Social Media vs Social Network**

Although they are often used as identical expressions, the truth is that their meaning may be considered different. While, by definition, social media should be used as a way of sharing or transmitting some kind of content from the interlocutor to the recipient, the Social Network is seen as a platform for users to connect with each other (Nations, 2010; Cohen, 2009).

As a result, the form of communication becomes different. Whereas social media is just a one-way communication channel, the main feature of social networks is conversations, which allow users to create a more personal relationship with each other.

## **2.2 Football Universe**

### **2.2.1 Football Brief History**

Football, also known as "Association Football" or "Soccer", was born in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century and games were played between public universities, some with their own rules, different from the format we know today.

In 1871, the Football Association, created eight years earlier, invited 15 clubs to the first cup competition in the sport. The sport quickly began to gain attention and by 1905, the average attendance at a football match was already around 23,000 spectators, which triggered the professionalisation of the sport, a controversial issue at first, as the FA (Football Association) was run by the elitist part of the population, who wanted to keep the sport amateur (Britannica, 2023).

In 1900, at the Olympic Games in Paris, football was introduced as the first team sport to be part of the event (Olympics, 2021). FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) emerged four years later, in 1904, initially made up of Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland, and was the great catalyst for the development of the sport worldwide. According to the research (The First Football World Cup - Uruguay 1930, 2013), its first major competition, the World Cup, took place in 1930 in Uruguay and was attended by 13 countries (only 3 Europeans, due to the huge economic crisis in Europe, which limited the costs that could be borne by the federations of these countries), in which the organising country won.

FIFA currently has 211 members (FIFA, 2022), spread across 6 different confederations: UEFA (European), CONMEBOL (South American), AFC (Asian), CONCACAF (Central and North American), CAF (African) and OFC (Oceanic), each of which regulates and organises international competitions. Football has become the most played sport in the world, with around 240 million players worldwide, generating billions every year and making a significant contribution to the global economy.

### **2.2.2 Portuguese Football Context**

The way in which "football" emerged in Portugal is no different from the rest of the world. Inspired by the British, the first organised reports of the sport date back to the end of the 19th century. In 1884, there was a match between the Foot-ball Club Lisbonenses and

the Foot-ball Club do Porto, for the D. Carlos I Cup, which ended with victory for the Lisbon club, and which is considered to be the first national football event. It wasn't until 1934 that the first national championship was organised, won by Futebol Clube do Porto. The Portuguese Cup, the second under the remit of the Portuguese Football Federation, was won by Académica in 1938 (FPF, 2022).

Nowadays, and due to the country's geographical dispersion, the vast majority of federated players are to be found on the coast (Neves, 2013). Consequently, there is also a tri-polarisation in the location of clubs in the 2023/2024 Primeira Liga: the Districts of Braga, Porto and Lisbon, with 6, 5 and 3 respectively, occupy fourteen of the eighteen clubs represented in the division. In the Second Division, in 2023/2024, the Districts of Braga, Porto and Lisbon are represented by 5, 1 and 4 teams, making a total of 10 teams out of a total of 18 in the league, thus achieving five more districts being represented in this division (Liga Portugal, 2023).

As in any other country, over the years there are clubs that stand out and create a hegemony that sets them apart from the rest. In Portugal, they are Sporting Clube de Portugal, Sport Lisboa e Benfica and Futebol Clube do Porto, clubs that, since the creation of the national championship in 1934, have always remained in Portugal's top division (RTP, 2022). Out of the 89 championships won so far, 87 have been won by these three clubs: SL Benfica, with 38, FC Porto, with 30, and Sporting CP, with 19. The first, SL Benfica, is even the second club in the world with the highest number of active members, with 290,000 active members in 2021. Sporting CP also appears in the top 10, in 6th place, with 177,000 active members (Statista, 2023). Portugal is also, along with Argentina and only behind Germany, the country with the most clubs represented in this top 10 (Germany has 3), despite having a reasonably smaller absolute population.

### **2.3 Social Media presence in Football Clubs**

In the football context, this social media trend has emerged in response to the poor ability of websites to engage with their fans (McCarthy et al., 2022). Social networks have given clubs the chance to keep in touch with their fans between matches (Kuzma et al., 2014). Clubs, in return, have taken advantage of this tool to inform and publicise their content, increasing fan satisfaction and contributing to an increase in revenue.

According to an article posted in Football Benchmark, in 2023 clubs are currently present on multiple social media networks. Analysing the top 10 most followed clubs, Instagram (34 per cent) and Facebook (33 per cent) are the two with the highest percentage of followers. The former Twitter (now called "X") has around 19 per cent and TikTok, the fastest growing of the four social media (Iskiev, 2023), has 10 per cent. Clubs such as Barcelona and Real Madrid share the top spot in terms of engagement on Instagram in the first two months of 2023, both with 226 million interactions. This record is linked to the sporting success of these clubs, which has a positive impact on their figures. Another factor that should be emphasised is the presence of top world footballers at certain clubs. The influence of a player like Cristiano Ronaldo, who between 1 January and 28 February 2023 had around 289 million interactions on his Instagram account, is directly related (Filo et al., 2015) to the fact that Al-Nassr, the club in which he plays, was the leader, in the same period, of the biggest increase in the number of followers on several social networks combined (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Weibo).

## **2.4 Clubs Social Media Strategy**

Unlike other industries, the social media strategies used by football clubs are still relatively limited. In 2011, O'Shea, after analysing the communication of three professional clubs and how they mixed traditional marketing strategies with social media marketing, felt that it was imperative to use this new technology, as it would be easier to reach their consumers (O'Shea et al., 2011). In 2014, McCarthy carried out a study of eighty English football clubs with the aim of analysing the Emergent Key Themes in the social media of English clubs. The main challenges for the clubs were controlling conversations on their website and social media, as it is impossible for the clubs to control what their fans say, sometimes resulting in negative comments that affect the club's image. Fan engagement was also mentioned as a challenge, with clubs competing for the attention of their fans with other unofficial media created by supporters. Finally, McCarthy mentioned commercialisation, due to the risks of excessive monetisation of their social networks and the consequences this could have on fans' perceptions.

The same study also found some perceived benefits for clubs: creating content and interacting with their fans on social media increased traffic to the club's website. The use of social media to encourage a sense of Community and increase Revenue Generation were two other benefits discussed in the study, although both should be managed with caution: the club should try to increase its revenue generation, by promoting products, without this being

perceived negatively by the community, under the consequence of losing Fan Engagement to the unofficial media mentioned above.

From the available literature, the vast majority of Social Media Strategies consist of planning, implementation and control (McCann & Barlow, 2015). In case studies carried out on football clubs, Baena (2017) proved that the use of Social Media Strategies at Bayern Munich enhanced their brand both nationally and internationally, which increased revenue from ticket sales and attracted new sponsors. Parganos and Anagnostopoulos (2015) conducted a study with two Social Media Marketing Managers from Liverpool FC. Again, the use of strategies at this level served to increase the club's awareness. As a club with a fervent fan base, there was great receptivity to the content passed on by the club to its supporters, which indirectly translated into an increase in revenue for the club in the long term. However, the author warned against the excessive use of commercial content in the club's social media communication, in order to avoid a possible loss of trust on the part of its fans.

## **2.5 Fans Behaviour**

As in any other type of business, there are different types of consumers in the football business. For example, studies indicate that fans who go to the stadium more often are generally those who have a greater connection with the club (Machado et al., 2020). In fact, (Tapp, 2004) concluded that the fans who go to the stadium most often are also the ones who spend the most money on tickets and merchandise. In a study of a Portuguese club, Futebol Clube do Porto, Machado et al. (2020) discovered that fans preferred to consume content published on social media rather than contribute to it. Finally, the study indicates that fans who seek Social Influence, especially on the social network Facebook, tend to go to the stadium less. The author explains this phenomenon by saying that fans who go to the stadium fulfil this sense of social interaction, while fans who watch the game in another way use the social network Facebook to satisfy this need.

On the other hand, Filip Krzyżowski and Artur Strzelecki (2023) studied the relationship between fans and football clubs on social media in Poland. In this study, it was concluded that the most important thing for these fans was interacting with other fans (meaning the exchange of information and opinions), and that the speed with which the club's information was sent to its fans was considered very relevant. Financial content (meaning financial reports and data), on the other hand, has a negative impact on fans, who don't appreciate this type of publication.

Fan loyalty is a clear advantage for companies in this sector (which, in this case, are football clubs), as it usually has a long lifespan (Abosag et al., 2012): while in other sectors loyalty to a product is quite volatile, in football clubs it rarely changes, so the main focus is on nurturing this relationship.

And since sporting success is naturally important for the consumer engagement with clubs, there is some volatility associated with it, so the strategies to be used should be as little dependent as possible on sporting success, in order to efficiently keep consumers engaged (Pronschinske et al., 2012). It is in line with this line of thought that we intend to base our research, seeking to understand the impact of social networks on consumer engagement with clubs, externalising it to the sporting success/insuccess of clubs.

Therefore, based on the theoretical background set out above and in trying to address the three research questions previously defined, we defined a set of hypotheses that could describe the impact that social networks have on the relationship between fans and football clubs. In order to better assess and understand the significance of the influence that social networks have on this relationship, we deconstructed the concept into groups of four motivations for social media use, based on the work of Filip Krzyżowski and Artur Strzelecki (2023), thus creating two different groups of hypotheses, according to two different independent variables.

The first, which aims to understand the impact that the clubs' social networks have on stadium attendance, is made up of the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Information Acquisition on the clubs' social media influences the number of fans going to the stadium to attend football matches.

**H2:** Entertainment on the clubs' social media influences the number of fans going to the stadium to attend football matches.

**H3:** Social Interaction on the clubs' social media influences the number of fans going to the stadium to attend football matches.

**H4:** Fanship on the clubs' social media influences the number of fans going to the stadium to attend football matches.

In the second group of hypotheses, we try to understand the impact that the clubs' social networks have on the purchase of clubs' products, which is made up of the following hypotheses:

**H5:** Information Acquisition on the clubs' social media influences the purchase of clubs' products.

**H6:** Entertainment on the clubs' social media influences the purchase of clubs' products.

**H7:** Social Interaction on the clubs' social media influences the purchase of clubs' products.

**H8:** Fanship on the clubs' social media influences the purchase of clubs' products.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

In this section, we describe our research approach to test the hypotheses formulated, namely the types of data we intended to work with, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the problem under study, answer the research questions and assess the interactions between the variables in question.

### **3.1 Research Design**

As previously mentioned, the aim of this study is to find out what is the contribution of social networks to the relationship between fans and the club. Through the content published on these networks we wanted to understand why football fans follow their clubs on social media, and which contents trigger the following two actions, main focus of this study: 1) fans going to the stadium to watch matches and 2) buying official club products.

We analysed two different types of data: Primary Data and Secondary Data. The first one, through an online survey aimed at fans of professional clubs in Portugal, seeks to understand their relationship with football, the level of involvement with the club and its social networks, and finally, how they feel the content they consume influences their relationship with the club. In addition to this survey, we used a qualitative research method, having conducted four personal interviews with social media managers of football clubs, which allowed us to validate the answers obtained by fans in the online survey, as well as to better understand the strategies used by football clubs on social networks.

Secondary Data was an important theoretical resource, which was the basis for the formulation of our research hypotheses and definition of the methodology and, theoretically underpinned this study, to which the Literature Review contributed greatly. Based on studies carried out in other countries, analyses of the online side of clubs, fan behaviour and the influence of social networks in this industry, we were able to enrich our research, and it now allows us to compare the reality of Portuguese clubs and fans to other realities in different countries.

### **3.2 Primary Data**

As mentioned above, this research used a mixed methods approach, through two studies, starting with the Online Survey to the fans, and then, with the interviews to the Social Media

Managers of 4 football clubs, which, in a complementary perspective, allowed us to see both sides of this relationship between fans and clubs, according to a Sequential Explanatory Design, where the qualitative data helps to understand the quantitative data (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015).

Using this research approach allowed us to dig deeper into the topic by getting different perspectives (the fan's and the club's), interpreting the two results together, rather than drawing conclusions by analysing only one side (Kervin, 2000).

### **3.2.1 Online Survey**

We started by sending out an online questionnaire to fans of Portuguese professional football clubs, which allowed us to answer the last 2 research questions proposed and test the hypotheses defined.

We were able to get a significant sample (to which contributed the fact that the target audience is a very large slice of the Portuguese population) to express their opinion and we collected relevant data to analyze the relationship between fans and football clubs in the context of social networks.

#### **3.2.1.1 Data Collection**

An online questionnaire was created using the Qualtrics platform and distributed via social networks between the 3rd and 17th December 2023, which we believed was the most efficient method for obtaining a large number of responses. Since we wanted to focus on the context of Portuguese clubs and fans, the questionnaire was written entirely in Portuguese.

We excluded fans of non-professional clubs from the study (professional clubs being clubs whose senior men's team plays in the 1st or 2nd Portuguese football division), in order to try to reduce possible deviations or irregular patterns with smaller clubs, where the contexts are sometimes very specific.

The main purpose of this questionnaire was to find out what kind content on club's social networks are preferred by fans, and if they make them go to the stadium and buy club merchandise. To do this, we used and adapted previously tested measures from two different studies: "Creating a fan bond with a football club on social media: a case of Polish fans", by Filip Krzyżowski and Artur Strzeleck (2023), which sought to understand what type of content published by Polish clubs most fostered a bond with the club. We

also adapted measures from another study, "Impact of Social Media on Intention to Purchase Pay-Per-View and Event Attendance: The Case of the Ultimate Fighting Championship", by Andrew Kim, Minhong Kim, Steven Salaga and James J. Zhang (2022), which, partially identical to the aforementioned study, sought to understand what kind of interactions trigger a social motivation for event attendance, or purchasing Pay-Per-View items (in the context of our study, we didn't equate purchasing Pay-Per-View, but we considered it could be adapted to club's products/merchandise).

The main objective of the first section of the questionnaire was to filter the participants. In addition to demographic issues, as well as the requirement to be Portuguese, the 36 clubs participating in competitions run by LIGA PORTUGAL (1st and 2nd Portuguese soccer leagues) were listed, so any participant answering "other" was not considered. It was also mandatory for the participant to follow the club in question on at least one social network, so in situations where this was not the case, the respondent was again disregarded. Although the organic content of social networks allows their audience to watch the clubs' content without following/subscribing, we think it would be a control measure to prevent very sporadic views from being counted, negatively affecting the clubs' performance in terms of the results we wanted to measure.

Once the participants had been filtered, the next sections served to ascertain which type of publications/content captivates fans the most, whose categories were: "Information Acquisition", "Entertainment", "Social Interaction" and "Fanship". Using a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), the participants were able to answer a series of questions about each of the content categories, a process that was repeated in the following section, where they linked the categories to their motivation to go to the stadium and buy club merchandise.

During a period of 15 days in which the questionnaire was open for responses, we received a total of 330 responses, of which 157 were considered valid for our study (the extant 173 were invalid because they did not pass the filter questions of being fans of a professional football club and, at the same time, following their club on social networks).

### **3.2.1.2 Measurement**

The following table shows the constructs used for the questionnaire, as well as their bibliographical reference and the Cronbach's Alpha of the respective study.

**Table 1 - Constructs**

Constructs	Items	References	Alpha Chronbach
<b>Information Acquisition</b>	<p><b>IA1:</b> I follow football clubs in social media because they provide information about them quickly.</p> <p><b>IA2:</b> I follow football clubs in social media to get information about events related to them.</p> <p><b>IA3:</b> I follow my favourite football club on social media to get information from ‘inside’ the club.</p> <p><b>IA4:</b> I follow football clubs on social media to get information about players and coaches.</p> <p><b>IA5:</b> I follow football clubs on social media to get information about sponsors.</p> <p><b>IA6:</b> I follow football clubs on social media to get information about transfers.</p>	Filip Krzyżowski & Artur Strzelecki (2022)	0,79
<b>Entertainment</b>	<p><b>ENT1:</b> I follow football clubs on social media because it is exciting.</p> <p><b>ENT2:</b> I follow football clubs on social media because it’s funny.</p> <p><b>ENT3:</b> I follow football clubs on social media because I enjoy it.</p> <p><b>ENT4:</b> I follow football clubs on social media to take part in competitions.</p> <p><b>ENT5:</b> I follow football clubs on social media to solve quizzes.</p>	Filip Krzyżowski & Artur Strzelecki (2022)	0,727
<b>Social Interaction</b>	<p><b>SI1:</b> I follow football clubs on social media to meet other supporters.</p> <p><b>SI2:</b> I follow football clubs on social media to express my opinions on club topics.</p> <p><b>SI3:</b> I follow football clubs on social media to share insights with other supporters.</p> <p><b>SI4:</b> I follow football clubs on social media to participate in actions organized by other supporters.</p>	Filip Krzyżowski & Artur Strzelecki (2022)	0,839

<b>Fanship</b>	<b>FAN1:</b> I follow football clubs on social media because I am a fan of them. <b>FAN2:</b> I follow football clubs on social media because I am a soccer fan. <b>FAN3:</b> I follow football clubs on social media because I am a fan of the players in them.	Filip Krzyżowski & Artur Strzelecki (2022)	-
<b>Going to the stadium intention</b>	<b>GS1:</b> I am likely to go to my club's stadium watch a game. <b>GS2:</b> I will go to my club's stadium watch a game. <b>GS3:</b> I plan to go to my club's stadium watch a game.	Kim et al. (2022)	0,93
<b>Purchasing club products intention</b>	<b>PCP1:</b> I am likely to purchase my club's products <b>PCP2:</b> I will purchase my club's products <b>PCP3:</b> I plan to purchase my club's products	Kim et al. (2022)	0,93

### 3.2.2. Interviews

After having carried out the survey, we conducted in-depth personal interviews with social media managers from professional clubs, who told us about their communication strategies on their clubs' social networks, which allowed us to gain deeper insights regarding which strategy they use to trigger responses from fans.

#### 3.2.2.1 Data Collection

Using the LinkedIn social network to find the profiles of the clubs' social media managers we were looking for, we conducted 4 interviews with Social Media Managers from Portuguese 1st and 2nd division clubs, as well as other positions related to the area of study.

During the interview, which lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, the interviewees answered a series of questions related to the topic, starting by explaining how they categorise the different types of content published on their social networks, and then measuring the impact it has on fans, both online and offline. Next, the aim was to cross-

reference various categories of content and analyse the interviewees' perceptions of the impact this content had on fans' attendance at the stadium or purchases of club products.

The interviews we conducted revealed a different perspective on the reality of clubs in the digital sector. Through a semi-structured interview, whose script can be found in Appendix 1, we were able to understand the rationale behind all the content we see on social media every day and understand its influence on thousands of supporters and fans across the country.

## CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### 4.1 Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis involved descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequencies, means and respective standard deviations) and inferential statistics. The latter used Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient, Pearson's correlation coefficient, Student's one-sample t-test and the multiple linear regression model to test the hypothesis. The assumptions of this model, namely the linearity of the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable (graphical analysis), independence of residuals (Durbin-Watson test), normality of residuals (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test), multicollinearity (VIF and Tolerance) and homogeneity of variances (graphical analysis) were analysed and were generally satisfied. The significance level for rejecting the null hypothesis was set at  $\alpha \leq .05$ .

The statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 28 for Windows.

#### 4.1.1 Sample characterisation

The sample consisted of 157 respondents, predominantly from the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region (69.7%). The majority were male (59.9%), aged 18-24 (75.8%), university graduates (56.1%) and had an annual household income of between €10,000 and €25,000 (31.8%).

**Table 2 - Sample characterisation (N =157)**

	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	94	59,9
Female	63	40,1
<b>Age Groups</b>		
Under 18	8	5,1
18-24	119	75,8
25-34	20	12,7
35-44	1	0,6
45-54	9	5,7
<b>Education</b>		
Basic Education	3	1,9
Secondary Education	43	27,4

Bachelor	88	56,1
Master	22	14,0
Doctorate	1	0,6
<b>Household Income</b>		
Under de 10,000€	19	12,1
10,000€ - 25,000€	50	31,8
25,000€ - 50,000€	49	31,2
50,000€ - 100,000€	29	18,5
Above 100,000€	8	5,1

#### 4.1.2 Statistic Results

The most followed social networks of the clubs mentioned were Instagram (94.3 per cent), Twitter (56.1 per cent) and Facebook (43.3 per cent). The clubs with the most fans were Sporting Clube de Portugal (43.3%), Sport Lisboa e Benfica (32.5%) and Futebol Clube do Porto (7%).

**Table 3 - Which club's social networks do fans follow?**

	N	%
Facebook	68	43,3
Twitter	88	56,1
Instagram	148	94,3
Youtube	65	41,4
Tiktok	42	26,8
Linkedin	31	19,7
Twitch	2	1,3
Whatsapp	13	8,3

The descriptive statistics for the values obtained for each of the statements in the questionnaire can be seen in Table 3. The means and standard deviations are shown. Thus, the statement that respondents agreed with the most was "I intend to go to my club's stadium to watch a match" (M = 6.35), while the statement they disagreed with the most was "I follow football clubs on social media to take part in quizzes" (M = 1.85).

**Table 4 - Survey responses**

	<b>Average</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
<b>Information acquisition</b>		
I follow my club on social media because it provides me with information about it quickly.	6,09	1,28
I follow my club on social media to get information about club-related events.	5,68	1,56
I follow my football club on social media to get "inside" information about the club.	4,59	1,86
I follow football clubs on social media to get information about players and coaches.	5,17	1,77
I follow football clubs on social media to get information about investors.	2,00	1,46
I follow football clubs on social media to get information about transfers.	4,75	2,07
<b>Entertainment</b>		
I follow football clubs on social media because it's exciting.	4,72	1,97
I follow football clubs on social media because it's funny.	3,97	1,84
I follow football clubs on social media because it gives me pleasure.	4,75	1,99
I follow football clubs on social media to take part in challenges.	2,29	1,54
I follow football clubs on social media to take part in quizzes.	1,85	1,22
<b>Social interaction</b>		
I follow football clubs on social media to meet other fans.	1,97	1,58
I follow football clubs on social media to express my opinions on club-related matters.	2,55	1,99
I follow football clubs on social media to share ideas with other fans.	2,44	1,89
I follow football clubs on social media to take part in actions organised by other supporters.	2,25	1,61
<b>Fanship</b>		
I follow football clubs on social media because I'm a fan of a club.	6,31	1,28
I follow football clubs on social media because I'm a football fan.	6,04	1,41
I follow football clubs on social media because I'm a fan of the players.	4,95	1,94
<b>Stadium attendance</b>		
I'm likely to go to my club's stadium to watch a game.	5,90	1,68
I will go to my club's stadium to watch a match.	5,99	1,67
I intend to go to my club's stadium to watch a match.	6,35	1,38
<b>Club's products acquisition</b>		
I'm likely to buy products from my club.	5,16	1,81
I will buy products from my club.	4,82	2,01
I intend to buy my club's products.	5,01	2,05

*Label: 1 - Totally disagree 7 - Totally agree*

The internal consistency of the constructs used in this study was analysed using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. It ranged from a minimum of .606 (weak but still acceptable) to a maximum of .927 (excellent). The categorisation of the Alpha values is based on Taber (2018).

**Table 5 - Internal consistency**

	<b>Alpha Cronbach</b>	<b>N° of items</b>
Information Acquisition	0,755	6
Entertainment	0,776	5
Social Interaction	0,884	4
Fanship	0,606	3
Stadium Attendance	0,868	3
Club's products acquisition	0,927	3

The descriptive statistics for the values obtained for the constructs can be seen in Table 5. It shows the minimum and maximum values, the mean and the respective standard deviations. The values for the variables Information acquisition, Fanship. Stadium Attendance and Club's products acquisition are significantly higher than the mid-point of the scale (4), while the values for Entertainment and Social interaction are significantly lower than the mid-point.

**Table 6 - Descriptive statistics**

	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Information Acquisition	1,00	7,00	4,71	1,13
Entertainment	1,50	7,00	3,51	1,26
Social Interaction	1,00	7,00	2,30	1,53
Fanship	2,00	7,00	5,76	1,17
Stadium Attendance	1,00	7,00	6,08	1,41
Club's products acquisition	1,00	7,00	4,99	1,83

The correlation coefficients between the constructs are all statistically significant, positive and moderate or weak. The highest correlation is between Club's products acquisition and Stadium Attendance ( $r = .545$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 7 - Correlations**

	<b>InAq</b>	<b>Ent</b>	<b>Soc</b>	<b>Fan</b>	<b>Sta</b>
<b>Information Acquisition</b>	--				
<b>Entertainment</b>	0,485 <sup>***</sup>				
<b>Social Interaction</b>	0,480 <sup>***</sup>	0,373 <sup>***</sup>			
<b>Fanship</b>	0,376 <sup>***</sup>	0,511 <sup>***</sup>	0,302 <sup>**</sup>		
<b>Stadium Attendance</b>	0,212 <sup>**</sup>	0,344 <sup>***</sup>	0,190 <sup>*</sup>	0,255 <sup>***</sup>	
<b>Club's products acquisition</b>	0,376 <sup>***</sup>	0,470 <sup>***</sup>	0,373 <sup>***</sup>	0,296 <sup>***</sup>	0,545 <sup>***</sup>

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

#### 4.1.2.1 Hypotheses testing for Stadium Attendance

To test the hypotheses and assess if Clubs communication on social media influences the number of fans going to the stadium, a multiple linear regression was used for the four variables that we defined as being the components of “Clubs’ communication on social media”: Entertainment (through Club’s Social Networks), Information acquisition (through Club’s Social Networks), Social interaction (through Club’s Social Networks) and Fanship (through Club’s Social Networks). These were considered as the independent variables in our regression and “stadium attendance” as the dependent variable. The model explained 10.7 per cent of stadium attendance and was statistically significant,  $F(4, 152) = 5.695$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The variable Information acquisition (through Club’s Social Networks) ( $B = .330$ ,  $p = .006$ ) proved to be a significant influencer of stadium attendance. As the regression coefficient is positive, this means that the higher the Information Acquisition (through Club’s Social Networks), the higher the stadium attendance.

**Table 8 - Linear Regression Coefficients for Stadium Attendance**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3,665	0,577		6,346	0,000
Entertainment	0,026	0,105	0,023	0,247	0,805
Information Acquisition	0,330	0,119	0,265	2,775	0,006**
Social Interaction	0,047	0,081	0,051	,583	0,561
Fanship	0,115	0,107	0,096	1,066	0,288

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

According to the first group of hypotheses, which aimed to understand the influence of clubs' social media content on stadium attendance, we were able to assess their validity from a statistical perspective and the results are summarized next:

**H1:** Information Acquisition on the clubs' social media influences the number of fans going to the stadium to attend football matches.

As previously mentioned, Information Acquisition proved to influence significantly ( $p = 0.006$ ) the intention to go to the stadium. H1 is validated.

**H2:** Entertainment on the clubs' social media influences the number of fans going to the stadium to attend football matches.

With  $p = 0.885$ , Entertainment did not prove to be a significant influencer of stadium attendance. We therefore reject H2.

**H3:** Social Interaction on the clubs' social media influences the number of fans going to the stadium to attend football matches.

With  $p = 0.561$ , Social Interaction did not prove to influence the intention of going to the stadium. We therefore reject H3.

**H4:** Fanship on the clubs' social media influences the number of fans going to the stadium to attend football matches.

With  $p = 0.288$ , Fanship did not prove to influence the number of fans going to the stadium. We therefore reject H4.

#### 4.1.2.2 Hypotheses testing for Club's products acquisition

To test the extant hypotheses related to the influence of “Clubs communication on social media” on the intention to buy clubs’ products, another multiple linear regression model was used for the same four variables that we defined as being the components of “Clubs’ communication on social media”: Entertainment (through Club’s Social Networks), Information acquisition (through Club’s Social Networks), Social interaction (through Club’s Social Networks) and Fanship (through Club’s Social Networks). These were considered the independent variables in our regression while “Club’s products acquisition” was the dependent variable. The model explained 25.7 per cent of the latter variable and was statistically significant,  $F(4, 152) = 14.494, p < .001$ .

The variables Information acquisition ( $B = .535, p < .001$ ) and Social interaction ( $B = .221, p = .023$ ) proved to be significant influencers of the intention to buy club products. As the regression coefficients are positive, this means that the higher the Information acquisition and Social interaction through Club’s Social Networks, the higher the intention to buy club’s products.

**Table 9 - Linear regression coefficients for Club's products acquisition**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1,129	0,684		1,651	0,101
Entertainment	0,168	0,124	0,116	1,352	0,178
Information Acquisition	0,535	0,141	0,331	3,795	0,000***
Social Interaction	0,221	0,096	0,185	2,304	0,023*
Fanship	0,043	0,127	0,028	0,340	0,734

\*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Similarly to the previous group of hypotheses, on the basis of the statistical results we can now summarize the validation of the hypotheses aimed at analysing the influence of clubs social media communication on the purchase of clubs’ products:

**H5:** Information Acquisition on the clubs' social media influences the purchase of clubs' products.

Information Acquisition, with  $p = 0.000$ , proved to be a significant influencer of the intention to buy clubs' products. H5 is validated.

**H6:** Entertainment on the clubs' social media influences the purchase of clubs' products.

With  $p = 0.178$ , Entertainment did not prove to be a significant influencer of the intention to buy clubs' products. We therefore reject H6.

**H7:** Social Interaction on the clubs' social media influences the purchase of clubs' products.

Social Interaction, with a  $p = 0.023$ , proved to influence the intention to buy clubs' products. H7 is validated.

**H8:** Fanship on the clubs' social media influences the purchase of clubs' products.

With a  $p = 0.734$ , Fanship did not prove to be a significant predictor of the intention to buy club products. We therefore reject H8.

## **4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis- Interviews**

As previously mentioned, interviews were conducted with the social media managers of four professional league clubs in Portugal, and analysed using thematic analysis, which is often used in semi-structured interviews (Jarrett 2013). Although there were many points of agreement amongst them, the differences in the size of some clubs (some with a more regional impact, others with a national impact) contributed to some variation in the answers.

When asked about the categories of posts they publish on their social networks, the sports category was unanimous (a logical conclusion, given that sport, predominantly football, is their core), with routine and informative posts being used.

Another unanimously mentioned category was commercial publications. Here the objectives are divided: some clubs mainly seek to promote partners and products from their physical shop, others aim to get fans to the stadium or to promote sporadic campaigns. This is mainly seasonal or opportunity content, as their planning is not always regular.

Finally, some Social Media Managers mentioned entertainment content as one of the categories of posts on their social networks. Here, they mentioned generating traffic and, above all, creating a relationship with fans as their main objectives.

When asked about the uptake of the various types of content they publish, the vast majority responded that content related to entertainment and the commercial side, such as promotional videos and content using opportunity marketing, was the content of most interest to fans. One of the interviewees even replied that the content with the most followers/interaction on social media was actually publications associated with the club's sporting achievements. In fact, this same pattern is confirmed by the majority of Social Media Managers, who say that, as a general rule, informative posts have the least engagement, but that it grows exponentially when the team gets bad results.

Finally, when asked about the offline impact their content has on fans, and whether they could find a direct relationship with fans going to the stadium, as well as the purchase of club products, only one Social Media Manager considered that the online content published had a relevant influence on fans going to the stadium, and that there was a direct relationship between the success of promotional campaigns and the number of fans present. Despite admitting that the reminder about the sporting event is important, the rest of the interviewees said that digital content is not a determining factor, and that turnout is largely due to the club's short-term sporting success.

As for the influence on the purchase of products online, the majority say there is a direct relationship, mainly due to the fact that most purchases are made online (one interviewee even mentioned that the club's shirt with the highest sales in the 2023/2024 season so far has been promoted exclusively online). The Word of Mouth effect was also mentioned as one of the catalysts for increased sales of products in the online shop. However, two of the four interviewees said that the main reason for their purchase was the product itself, rather than the way it was promoted.

### 4.3 Discussion

#### **RQ1: "Why do fans follow football clubs on social media?"**

In the answer to the first research question, the prominence of Fanship in the opinion of fans is visible (5.76, from 1 to 7), which can be explained by the intrinsic need that fans have to follow their clubs, as mentioned by Kuzma et. al (2014), prioritising their interest in the content that they publish. The "Information Acquisition" construct also has a value above the mid-point (4.71, from 1 to 7), and a very high value for the statement "I follow my club on social media because it provides me with information about it quickly.", a task that social media has come to fulfil compared to the previous style of digital communication by clubs, via the website (McCarthy et al., 2022).

If we look at the study by Filip Krzyżowski & Artur Strzelecki (2023), which analysed the Polish reality, the strongest reason explaining the relationship between fans and clubs was the Interaction present on social networks. In our study, however, this is the variable with the lowest average, at 2.30 (from 1 to 7), which leads us to conclude that it's not motivated by the interactions with each other that Portuguese fans follow football clubs.

Another analysis we can make, which contrasts somewhat with what was reported by the Social Media Managers interviewed, is that although the publications with the most followers are those related to Entertainment/Commercial, when we ask fans what their reasons are for following football clubs, the entertainment category appears below the midpoint (3.51, from 1 to 7), while, according to the football clubs Social Media Managers, the publications of least interest to fans are generally informative, but this is one of the reasons for which fans follow their clubs on the social media, according to our survey, with values above the midpoint (4.71, from 1 to 7). It is therefore important to conclude the importance for clubs to nurture their fans with quality content, since they follow their clubs intrinsically, or to keep up with news about them between matches. Yet, it is occasional content, with the aim of entertaining, that most delights their fans in the digital field, which is in line with the importance of content, studied by Parganos and Anagnostopoulos (2015).

### **Club communication influencing Stadium's attendance (Hypotheses 1 to 4)**

When we try to understand the impact that social media has on the relationship between clubs and fans, we try to understand the influence it has on fans attending the stadium. After having carried out a multiple linear regression and observing that the model (which includes the various categories of social media content) only explains 10.7% of the variance in the dependent variable, we realised that the impact is small. This was already an assumption defended by the vast majority of Social Media Managers interviewed, who were unable to find a relationship between adherence to digitally published content and the variation in stadium attendances, even though some of them mentioned the importance of reminding their fans about sporting events, which corroborates the results obtained in the model, with Information Acquisition being the only statistically significant independent variable having an influence on the intention to go to the stadium. According to Machado et al. (2020), the fans who seek the most social interaction on social networks are those who go to the stadium the least. However, this is a trend that we were unable to confirm, as Social Interaction was not a statistically significant variable in our model, nor was its coefficient negative.

### **Club communication influencing fans buying club's products (Hypotheses 5 to 8)**

Regarding the second group of hypotheses, where we tried to assess if there is any impact of clubs' social media on the purchase of club merchandise by fans, the results are somewhat different. Both the Information Acquisition variable and the Social Interaction variable are significant predictors, with a positive coefficient, which is in line with what was recorded by the Social Media Managers interviewed, who mentioned the importance of publicising their products on social networks (even sometimes being the only means of publicity). This result also confirms the theory of O'Shea et al. (2011), which indicates that one of the main advantages of social networks over the previous means of communication used is the close relationship with their consumers.

In relation to the increase in social interaction explaining an increase in the purchase of club's products, the Social Media Managers also mentioned the influence that Word of Mouth has on the organic promotion of the products. Although it cannot be dissociated from its inherent quality, when the reach of the content disseminated is high, its dissemination through third parties increases the number of sales of the products, sometimes even by fans of other clubs.

In summary, and contrarily to the first hypothesis regarding stadium attendance, we believe that this model (which explains 25.7 per cent of the dependent variable) confirms the importance of the clubs' communication on social networks in the purchase of their products, having a positive influence on it.

It is also interesting to point out that, despite being outside the scope of this research, the highest correlation found in our study was between the variables "Stadium Attendance" and "Club's products acquisition", a finding supported by the study carried out by Tapp (2004), which indicates that the fans who go to the stadium most often are those who also consume their club's products the most.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

### **5.1 Conclusions and Main Findings**

It is undoubtedly essential to frame the context of the use of social media in the reality of football clubs, as well as to understand the profile of the fans who fit into this type of communication. In the Literature Review section, some studies were presented on how large European clubs communicate on social media, such as Baena (2017), who sought to study Global marketing strategy in professional sports, using Bayern Munich as an example, and Parganos and Anagnostopoulos (2015), who analysed the strategies used on social media at a club like Liverpool. In both cases, the sense of the club as a "brand" was undoubtedly more pronounced than in Portugal. Clubs like the ones mentioned above have an international reputation, and their way of communicating, according to the authors, has a much more direct relationship both at a national level, with their own fans, and at an international level, with other football followers.

In Portugal, we are witnessing two different realities: clubs of national relevance, with an established brand and which, perhaps on a smaller scale than the clubs mentioned above, have a communication capacity with the power to influence the perception of the community around them, and clubs of local relevance, with communication clearly aimed at their audience, using social networks mainly as a vehicle for information. It is on the basis of this comparison, as well as the interviews conducted, that we believe there is still a long way to go in terms of how some Portuguese clubs should communicate on social media, knowing that they will always be very dependent on the sporting success of their club, as well as the socio-demographic reality of the region they represent.

In carrying out this academic research, we sought to answer three questions: what are the reasons for Portuguese fans to follow clubs' social networks, and whether the content published by the clubs had any influence on whether fans went to the stadium and bought clubs' merchandise. In the first instance, from the results of our study, we quickly realised that the main reason for fans following clubs on social media had to do with the fact that they were already fans of the club, so it wasn't the content published by the clubs that made their fans follow them on social media, but rather their existence on digital. We also realised the importance for fans of acquiring information, highlighting that it was crucial for them to receive

information about the club via social media, which goes hand in hand with the content strategy, especially for clubs with a more local reach, with much of their content being informative.

As for the next question (“Does the relationship between clubs and fans on social media affect whether fans go to the stadium?”), we found a weak influence between clubs’ communication on social networks and fans going to the stadium, where only information acquisition was statistically significant according to our model, something that had already been confirmed by the vast majority of Social Media Managers interviewed, who attribute the club's sporting success as the main cause of the variation in the number of fans at the stadium.

Regarding the last question (“Does the relationship between clubs and fans on social media affect fans' purchases of club merchandise?”), we observed there is a greater importance attached to the content shared by clubs on social networks, since both the Information Acquisition and Social Interaction variables were statistically significant. Regarding the former, this is justified by the fact that the main channel for advertising the clubs' products is online, via social networks. As for Social Interaction, it is because not only what is published by the club on social networks is important, but also what the fans say to each other. The use of word of mouth among fans as a way of promoting the club's products is justified in the model and contributes to the viralisation of both its communication and the club itself.

## **5.2 Limitations and Future Suggestions**

As with other studies, there were some limitations associated with this study. The first one relates to the sample: 157 responses were validated for this study, which, despite being considered an acceptable number, limits the universe of responses and may lead to some biased conclusions. The fact that only Portuguese fans were admitted to respond to the survey and that, above that, they had to follow Portuguese clubs on at least one social network also conditioned the process.

Another limitation was the number of Social Media Managers interviewed. We believe that in a study of a relationship between two parties, the clubs and the fans, it is necessary to understand and analyse both sides in order to draw the proper conclusions, which is why we carried out a quantitative survey of the fans and qualitative interviews with the clubs' Social Media Managers. Despite our best endeavours, we only managed to conduct four interviews, and although we think this is a reasonable number, given the national relevance of some of the clubs interviewed, as well as the geographical dispersion between them, a greater number of

interviews could undoubtedly provide additional relevant insights and maybe reveal different conclusions.

The third limitation we encountered has to do with the constructs we came up with. When we tried to understand the reasons that led fans to follow their clubs on social media, we relied on the available literature to find a set of possible "topics", knowing, however, that there may be alternative ones, and that, consequently, they may affect the model differently. In the same way, we also used the available literature to understand the consequences of the impact of the club's social networks on fans, knowing however that this relationship could trigger reactions other than going to the stadium and buying club merchandise.

There is also information that was not analysed in this study, such as the geographical location of both fans and clubs, as this was not the scope of this dissertation, but it could be interesting in the future to understand how both parties react, depending on their geographical location, and how their communication varies.

Finally, we believe that the lack of available content on the reality of Portuguese clubs' social networks (and not just Portuguese, but globally) may have limited our study, especially when analysing from the perspective of the clubs. Therefore, and as a suggestion for any possible similar study, we would emphasise the importance of having a good sample, both quantitative and qualitative, as well as trying to design a statistical model (in the case of quantitative analysis) that is as complete as possible.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1 - Interview Guide**

Q1: Do you divide your content publications into categories? What are these categories and what is their purpose?

Q2: Which categories/types of publications have the most followers?

Q3: How do you measure the online and offline impact of the content you share?

Q4: What influence do you think it has on purchases of club products? And on going to the stadium? (If you can show metrics to prove it, all the better)

### **Appendix 2 – Original Online Survey Guide (in Portuguese)**

#### **Aquisição de Informação**

Q1: Sigo o meu clube nas redes sociais porque me fornece informações sobre o mesmo rapidamente.

Q2: Sigo o meu clube nas redes sociais para obter informações sobre eventos relacionados com o mesmo.

Q3: Sigo o meu clube de futebol nas redes sociais para obter informações “de dentro” do clube.

Q4: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais para obter informações sobre jogadores e treinadores.

Q5: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais para obter informações sobre investidores.

Q6: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais para obter informações sobre transferências.

#### **Entretenimento**

Q1: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais porque é emocionante.

Q2: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais porque é engraçado.

Q3: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais porque me dá prazer.

Q4: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais para participar em desafios.

Q5: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais para participar em questionários.

#### **Interação Social**

Q1: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais para conhecer outros adeptos.

Q2: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais para expressar minhas opiniões sobre assuntos relacionados com os clubes.

Q3: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais para partilhar ideias com outros adeptos.

Q4: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais para participar em ações organizadas por outros adeptos.

### **Clubismo**

Q1: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais porque sou adepto de um clube.

Q2: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais porque sou adepto de futebol.

Q3: Sigo clubes de futebol nas redes sociais porque sou fã dos jogadores.

### **Ida ao estádio**

Q1: É provável que eu vá ao estádio do meu clube ver um jogo.

Q2: Eu irei ao estádio do meu clube ver um jogo.

Q3: Eu tenciono ir ao estádio do meu clube ver um jogo.

### **Produtos do clube**

Q1: É provável que eu compre produtos do meu clube.

Q2: Eu irei comprar produtos do meu clube.

Q3: Eu tenciono comprar produtos do meu clube.

## **Appendix 3 – SPSS Output (Descriptive Statistics)**

### *Descriptive Statistics*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Entretenimento	157	1,00	7,00	3,5159	1,26534
AquisicaoInf	157	1,50	7,00	4,7123	1,13410
Interacao	157	1,00	7,00	2,3041	1,53598
Publicacoes	157	2,00	7,00	5,7643	1,17746
Ida	157	1,00	7,00	6,0807	1,41240
Produtos	157	1,00	7,00	4,9958	1,83313
Valid N (listwise)	157				

#### Appendix 4 – SPSS Output (Multiple Linear Regression for the first Hypotheses Group)

<i>Model Summary<sup>b</sup></i>					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	,361 <sup>a</sup>	,130	,107	1,33437	1,852
<sup>a</sup> : Predictors: (Constant), Publicacoes, Interacao, Entretenimento, AquisicaoInf					
<sup>b</sup> : Dependent Variable: Ida					

#### *Coefficients<sup>a</sup>*

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	3,665	,577		6,346	<,001		
	Entretenimento	,026	,105	,023	,247	,805	,650	1,539
	AquisicaoInf	,330	,119	,265	2,775	,006	,627	1,595
	Interacao	,047	,081	,051	,583	,561	,738	1,355
	Publicacoes	,115	,107	,096	1,066	,288	,712	1,404

<sup>a</sup>: Dependent Variable: Ida

#### Appendix 5 – SPSS Output (Multiple Linear Regression for the second Hypotheses Group)

<i>Model Summary<sup>b</sup></i>					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	,525 <sup>a</sup>	,276	,257	1,58006	1,906
<sup>a</sup> : Predictors: (Constant), Publicacoes, Interacao, Entretenimento, AquisicaoInf					
<sup>b</sup> : Dependent Variable: Produtos					

Coefficients<sup>a</sup>

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	1,129	,684		1,651	,101		
	Entretenimento	,168	,124	,116	1,352	,178	,650	1,539
	AquisicaoInf	,535	,141	,331	3,795	<,001	,627	1,595
	Interacao	,221	,096	,185	2,304	,023	,738	1,355
	Publicacoes	,043	,127	,028	,340	,734	,712	1,404

<sup>a</sup>. Dependent Variable: Produtos