



COLECCIÓN CONOCIMIENTO CONTEMPORÁNEO

Tendencias de investigación en comunicación

Coord.
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EN COMUNICACIÓN

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SANTIAGO MAYORGA ESCALA

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TENDENCIAS DE INVESTIGACIÓN EN COMUNICACIÓN

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SPONSOR INTERACTION AND IMMERSIVE COMMUNICATION: THE KING LEAGUE CASE STUDY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, traditional sports leagues are constantly seeking innovative ways to communicate with fans and enhance sponsor interaction. The rise of fast consumption and dynamic content formats has reshaped how fans engage with sports, prompting leagues to explore innovative communication strategies to stay attractive. One such example is the football Kings League, founded by the professional footballer Gerard Pique, who has stood out for pioneering dynamic formats and immersive experiences to engage fans and improve bonding ties with sponsors. Moreover, the league's innovative approach extends beyond traditional boundaries by leveraging celebrity endorsements from various domains, thereby attracting new audiences to the sports arena. This scenario provides a baseline for investigating how the Kings League is reshaping sports communication in response to changing dynamics of fan engagement.

The Kings League was born as an alternative to the traditional and internationally recognized LaLiga EA Sports, the championship of the Spanish football league system (Campeonato Nacional de Liga de Primera División), which is widely recognized for showcasing some of the world's most talented footballers and is known for its rich history and intense rivalries. The league has a significant impact on the global footballing stage and has consistently produced top-tier teams that have excelled in European and international competitions.

1.1. THE UPCOMING IMMERSIVE COMMUNICATION PARADIGM

Although immersive communication is a reality that has not been fully achieved, we no longer conceive it as a science fiction phenomenon, and it is increasingly closer to becoming a new everyday communication scenario. Among other authors, Shen et al. (2023) argue for the almost imminent implementation of this new paradigm. They describe the three levels of change that it will imply:

First, rather than two-dimensional (2D) images displayed on a flat screen, immersive communications will deliver 3D images with parallax information. Second, in addition to audiovisual information, immersive communications will involve haptic information. Third, the pursuit of immersive experiences will further blur the boundary between the physical and the virtual worlds, allowing new forms of interactions across the two worlds (Shen et al., 2023, p. 2).

Immersive communication, as well as other immersive technologies (for example, virtual reality, augmented reality, and virtual fandom), will represent an absolute revolution in many areas. Among them is how viewers enjoy sports events. Today, we are witnessing a shift towards virtual sports spectators. This change affects not only how spectators participate in in-live events; but, also, a more satisfactory and active interaction in the events they receive through screens (Potwarka, 2022).

The significance of sports sponsorship has experienced a notable surge attributed to the proliferation of online digital technologies. Consequently, sports organizations and brands are now confronted with the task of cultivating essential competencies in management and marketing, alongside the technological infrastructure necessary to sustain a mutually beneficial, long-term partnership. The enhancement of user engagement has emerged as a pivotal element in the triumph of sponsorship initiatives, a phenomenon that originated in the early 21st century. However, the true catalyst for change lies in the potential of immersive communication, which is presently ushering in new frontiers and proffering more ambitious prospects for the future (Koronios et al., 2020).

1.2. KINGS LEAGUE

The Kings League, launched in January 2023, has quickly established itself as a significant phenomenon in the sports entertainment industry. This media football competition reached a remarkable milestone on March 26, 2023, when the Kings League finals, held at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona, attracted an impressive crowd of 92,522 spectators. Moreover, the event captivated a vast online audience, with platforms such as Twitch, YouTube, and TikTok collectively drawing in 2.1 million viewers (Murko, 2023). The league has been instrumental in blending traditional football with modern entertainment, integrating gamified elements to create high-scoring, 40-minute matches that captivate audiences. The Kings League, overseen by Gerard Piqué and influencer Ibai Llanos, represents a recent trend among Gen Z (Gallifa et al., 2023).

The Kings League's innovative approach to fan engagement places the viewer at the centre of the experience, actively involving them in significant decisions such as the selection of certain rules and striving to immerse them fully in the experience through specific production elements (Jordán-Vallverdú et al., 2023). As well, Kings League is mainly broadcast online, via YouTube, Twitch and TikTok platforms. However, during its first season, the Kings League finalized a broadcasting agreement with Television de Catalunya on March 13, securing coverage for the finals held at the prestigious Camp Nou stadium (TV3, 2023). Subsequently, in its second season, the league expanded its scope by introducing the Queens League, a platform for female footballers. This strategic move was accompanied by a partnership announcement on May 3, wherein Gerard Piqué disclosed an agreement with Mediaset España. As part of this arrangement, Mediaset was broadcasting matches from both the Kings and Queens Leagues on their Cuatro channel during specified time slots each week (Sarabia, 2023).

The rapid growth of the Kings League is evident. As of May 2024, the league boasts over 13 million social media followers, with more than 80 million hours of content views and an additional 80 million views on TikTok. Furthermore, the Kings League's Twitch channel ranks third among Spanish-language channels worldwide (TwitchTracker, 2024).

1.3. SPORT SPONSORSHIP WITHIN THE KINGS LEAGUE

This paper will delve deeper into the area of sports sponsorship, exploring the innovative methods used by the Kings League to create immersive and engaging experiences for both fans and sponsors. To begin with, the author Shank (2014) defined sports sponsorship as “the act of investing in a sports entity, whether it be an athlete, league, team, or event, with the intention of supporting organizational objectives, marketing goals, and/or promotional strategies” (p. 8). This definition remains pertinent in today’s rapidly evolving sports industry. The global sports sponsorship market was valued at approximately USD 97.35 billion in 2023 and is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 8.68%, reaching around USD 190 billion by 2030 (Gough, 2024). This growth is driven by factors such as rapid urbanization, increasing sports sponsorship, economic prosperity, the rise of esports, widespread mobile device usage, multiple sports channels' emergence, and advancements in technology (Businesswire, 2019; PwC, 2019).

The Kings League, launched in early 2023 by former professional footballer Gerard Piqué and influencer Ibai Llanos, exemplifies the integration of sports, entertainment, and digital engagement. The league has grown rapidly, drawing significant attention both offline and online. Its innovative format includes dynamic elements such as the “Spotify Secret Weapon”, where coaches draw random cards with options that can benefit or disadvantage their teams, adding excitement and unpredictability to games. Celebrity involvement, such as guest appearances by football stars and influencers, further enhances the league's appeal.

1.4. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS INFLUENCING THE KING LEAGUE CASE

When analysing The League of Kings, a series of contextual factors are also identified that have significantly influenced this case: the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Twitch Platform and the technological advancement.

The sports sector was severely impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak that started in early 2020. Public sporting events across the world were

canceled, putting hundreds of thousands of jobs at danger and forcing many professional organizations to postpone their seasons. According to statistics, the recession has reduced sports industry revenues to \$74 billion in 2020 - nearly double the pre-COVID-19 projections (Gough, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has played a significant role in accelerating digital transformation within the sports industry. This unprecedented event has compelled sporting organizations to become more flexible, adaptive, and resilient in order to navigate the challenges posed by the crisis. One notable outcome of this transformation is the increased reliance on digital platforms for market expansion and consumer outreach, particularly within the sporting good (Keshkar et al., 2021).

Platforms such as Twitch experienced a surge in popularity during the pandemic, especially among younger audiences who prefer livestreams over traditional TV broadcasts. This shift towards virtual fan interactions has not only provided fans with alternative ways to engage with their favourite sports but has also facilitated greater participation through immersive storytelling and interactive experiences. In essence, the digitalization fostered by the COVID-19 pandemic has set a new standard for fan engagement in the sports industry (Keshkar et al., 2021).

Twitch, which was launched in June 2011, has positioned itself as a distinctive mixed media platform that combines user-generated content, game play, and the personal hosting of each streamer (Hamilton et al., 2014). Moreover, Chae & Lee (2022) investigated how Twitch users' emotional responses changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that between 2019 and 2020, the total hours watched on Twitch increased by 53%, while the number of streamers grew by 70% and the average number of users by 63%.

Moreover, innovations such as the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) in football have enhanced the viewing experience, ensuring more accurate decision-making during matches (Spitz et al, 2020).

1.5. THE PREFERENCES OF YOUNGER GENERATION AUDIENCE: GEN Z AND GEN ALPHA

Gen Z and Gen Alpha exhibit distinct behaviours and preferences that are reshaping the sports industry. These younger audiences prefer interactive and immersive experiences, often consuming content in short, engaging formats. Digital platforms like Twitch, YouTube, and TikTok have become the go-to mediums for these demographics, who favour livestreams and real-time interactions over traditional TV broadcasts.

Gen Z was born between 1995 and 2009 and are considered the tech-savvy generation since their relationship with technology is more fluent and fruitful than in all the previous cohorts. For Gen Z, IT is the means to solve every kind of task as a source of instant gratification. They have replaced traditional TV with VOD platforms and have become heavy consumers of audiovisual content. Apps are also a strategic medium to reach this segment of the target.

Gen Alpha was born in 2010. Technology is important and intrinsic to the life of children in Gen Alpha. They are digital natives, often multi-tasking, who learn faster and with enthusiasm. They have swapped books and boards for smartphones and tablets. They usually use chatbots and will be fond of artificial intelligence. However, their favourite medium is still television, although they watch it on VOD platforms and use their gadgets, as their tablet on which they can also play video games (Palomo-Domínguez & Zemlickiene, 2022, p. 8).

The shift towards digitalization has enabled sports organizations to reach younger audiences more effectively. By offering personalized and participatory experiences, these organizations can align with the preferences of Gen Z and Gen Alpha. For instance, a YouGov report (2022) found that only 31% of global sports fans aged 18-24 watched live matches, compared to 75% of those over the age of 55. This data underscores the need for sports organizations to adapt their engagement strategies to cater to younger audiences.

Additionally, a Morning Consult poll conducted in the United States revealed that almost half of Gen Z, defined as people born between 1997 and 2012, have never attended a live professional sporting event. Furthermore, only 53% of Gen Z respondents identified as sports fans, compared to 69% of millennials. The accompanying Morning Consult report highlighted that Gen Z's overall interest in sports remains significantly lower than that of previous generations (Noble, 2024).

2. OBJETIVES

2.1. GENERAL OBJECTIVE

This research aims to present and describe the Sponsorship strategy developed in the Kings League as an illustrative example of new trends in marketing communication and the adoption of the immersive communication paradigm.

2.1. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

- Examine the innovative approaches the Kings League uses to engage fans and develop sponsorship relationships through dynamic formats and immersive experiences.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of dynamic formats and immersive experiences in capturing audience attention and building strong fan relationships.
- Compare the communication strategies of the Kings League and traditional sports leagues such as La Liga, identifying differences and similarities in approaches to fan engagement and working with sponsors

3. METHODOLOGY

For this qualitative study, document analysis is employed as the primary methodological approach. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents of various types, including printed, electronic, audiovisual, advertising formats, and interviews, among others. When this method is executed correctly and thoroughly, data can be examined and interpreted to understand the meaning, gain insight, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009).

In our study, official league documents, encompassing reports, press releases, marketing materials, and broadcasting content from the Kings League and La Liga channels, are systematically identified and selected for analysis, with a focus on extracting relevant textual data concerning the sponsorship implementation.

Additionally, three social media platforms of the Kings League and La Liga (Instagram, YouTube, and Twitch) are examined for sponsor-related content, including sponsored posts, branded hashtags, and promotional campaigns.

In the first selection of the sample, more than 50 units of analysis were identified in the indicated sources and channels, which provided the content of interest for the study in the period between January 1, 2023, and May 31, 2024. Subsequently, this sample was refined, delimiting it to 12 units of analysis:

- Three press releases: two of them are from sponsors, the other from LaLiga:
- Spotify Helps Kick Off the Americas Kings League Santander as the Official Audio Partner. Published on Spotify Press Room (January 17th, 2024).
- *McDonald's se suma al patrocinio de la Kings League*. Published on McDonald's Press Room (February 6th, 2023).
- LaLiga reaches 200 million followers across social networks and cements its position as a global leader in digital strategy. Published on LaLiga Press Room (June 29th, 2023).
- One post in a sponsor own media:
- *Xiaomi España, nuevo patrocinador oficial de la Kings League InfoJobs*. Published on Xiaomi Community (a section on the Official Xiami website).
- One story news on a specialized news channel:
- LaLiga unveils new strategies positioning and international branding. Published on Exchange4Media (June 3rd, 2023).
- The Kings League official account on Instagram (@kings-league).
- LaLiga official account on Instagram (@laliga).

- Kings League official channel on YouTube (@Kings-LeagueOfficial).
- LaLiga official channel on YouTube (@LaLiga).
- The Kings League official channel on Twitch (kingsleague).
- LaLiga official channel on Twitch (LaLiga).
- LaLiga official website (www.laliga.com).

It should be noted that although 12 units of analysis are counted, the amount of extractable information is high since 7 of these units are channels on platforms that, in turn, include a high number of documents in the period indicated above.

Considering the above described document sample and the research topic, the following themes have been identified to conduct a thematic analysis of the collected data: sponsor agreements, activations, campaigns, and partnerships.

4. RESULTS

4.1. KINGS LEAGUE INNOVATIVE SPONSOR APPROACHES

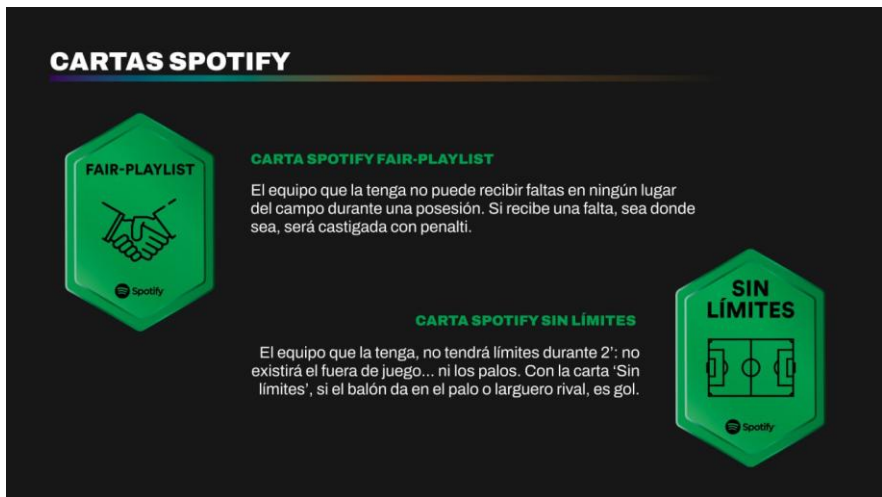
Initial analysis reveals that the Kings League employs various innovative approaches to engage fans and cultivate sponsorship relationships. Below, high-impact actions carried out by three sponsors, Spotify, Xiaomi and McDonalds, are described.

4.1.1. Spotify Secret Weapon and Play List

An example of dynamic formats in the Kings League is the incorporation of the “Spotify Secret Weapon” collaboration. It consists of an in-game dynamic: before the start of each match, coaches pull a random card from their briefcase containing various options that can benefit or disadvantage their team depending on luck. This surprising element adds excitement and unpredictability to games, engaging fans and participants alike.

In Figure 1, two of these letters are seen. In the one above, called “Fair-Playlist” the following instruction is recorded: “the team that has this card cannot receive fouls anywhere on the field during possession. If it receives a foul, wherever it may be, it will be punished with a penalty”. The card below, “Spotify Card Without Limits” offers another type of advantage: “The team that has this card will have no limits for two minutes. There will be no offside or posts. It will always be a goal”.

FIGURE 1. Spotify Secret Weapon Cards



Source: Kings League X account (@KingsLeague), 2023

In addition, the league enhances the fan experience by providing customized Spotify playlists for the league and each team, creating a multi-sensory experience that connects music with the excitement of competition. This would be a clear example of transmedia strategy (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Spotify Americas King League Playlist Heading Banner



Source: Spotify, 2024

4.1.2. Xiaomi Video Assistant Referee (VAR)

An example of immersive experiences in the Kings League is the sponsorship collaboration with Xiaomi for the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system. Xiaomi serves as the league's main partner and sponsors the VAR (Instant Replay) technology. This sponsorship not only enhances the league's technological capabilities but also integrates the sponsor's branding into the core elements of the game. Figure 3 shows a plan for the broadcast of a match on Twitch. As can be seen, the Xiaomi brand logo captures all eyes due to its extraordinary location at a time when the audience and attention are at maximum.

4.1.3. McDonald's in-game ads and social media advertising campaigns

McDonald's sponsors event-related content within the Kings League, including countdowns to match kick-offs, as can be seen on Figure 4. Again, it is an extraordinary brand placement at a time when the audience and attention are at maximum.

FIGURE 3. Spotify Americas King League Playlist Heading Banner



Source: Sponsor United, 2024

FIGURE 4. McDonald's in-game advertising for countdowns to match kick-offs



Source: Marketing Directo, 2023

Additionally, McDonald's displays banner ads on Twitch and other social media networks, effectively promoting its McDelivery services and engaging fans across digital platforms (see Figure 5)

FIGURE 5. McDonald's Advertising Display Banner on Facebook



Fuente: Facebook, 2024

4.2. KINGS LEAGUE INNOVATIVE SPONSORSHIP EFFECTIVENESS ON THE AUDIENCE

Preliminary findings indicate that dynamic formats and immersive experiences in the Kings League have been successful in capturing audience attention and cultivating strong fan relationships, especially among the youngest generation, Gen Z and Gen Alpha. It is evidenced by the league's substantial social media following achieved in a short period of time, since its creation after January 2023.

However, there is still a substantial difference between the number of followers of the Kings League and LaLiga, with those of LaLiga being clearly higher on all the mentioned channels (see Table 1). Proportionally, the most significant difference is recorded on Instagram, where the King's League has 5.3% of LaLiga's followers, while the slightest difference is on YouTube, the platform that records better proportional followers figures for the King's League (9.6%). On Twitch, the Kings League has (7.8%) of LaLiga's followers on the same platform.

TABLE 1. *Followers/Suscribers metrics comparative between the Kings League and LaLiga on YouTube, Instagram and Twitch.*

	YouTube	Instagram	Twitch
The Kings League	1M	2.6M	3.2M
LaLiga	10.4M	49 M	41M

Source: Created by the authors

4.3. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES COMPARISON BETWEEN THE KINGS LEAGUE AND LALIGA

Initial comparison of communication strategies between the Kings League and LaLiga reveals both similarities and differences in their approaches to fan engagement and sponsor collaboration.

While both leagues utilize social media platforms and official channels to spread sponsor-related content, the Kings League appears to place greater emphasis on interactive and immersive experiences, whereas LaLiga focuses more on traditional marketing tactics and match-centric promotions.

From an overall point of view, there is an apparent intention to reposition the La Liga brand without losing its consolidated image as a leader but simultaneously pretending to be more attractive to the younger generations (Gen Z and Gen Alpha). This aspect is not only seen in the active use of networks specifically oriented towards these audiences (such as Twitch), but also in the restyling of the brand's visual identity that was developed in 2023, a few months after the appearance of the Kings League.

5. DISCUSSION

This research delves into a novel and intriguing phenomenon of communicative interest that has the potential to shape the future of sponsorship strategies in the sports industry. By employing the documentary analysis method, we have conducted an exploratory study on a topic that is still in its infancy in the scientific literature. While the study

sample is expandable, it provides a comprehensive overview and serves as a solid foundation for further research in this area.

Our analysis of the documents has revealed key themes in sponsorship strategies and has identified unique aspects of the new communicative paradigm driven by immersive communication. These findings have significant implications, particularly in understanding the influence of these strategies on the younger generations, Gen Z and Gen Alpha, in the sports industry.

Being able to analyse the effectiveness of these strategies in the audience will require, in the future, expanding the study with the use of qualitative methods that allow us to know the public's perception and assessment of these strategies and tactics. However, the metrics analysis has revealed important information that allows us to measure the speed with which the Kings League has made its way against the leading and consolidated championship for decades, LaLiga. As a limitation of this metrics analysis, it is worth noting that the options for approaching a comparison are affected by the great difference in magnitude and age of both championships.

The documentary analysis carried out by the Kings League and LaLiga has been sufficient to identify similarities and differences in the strategies of the King's League and La Liga. However, further research is required to assess the effectiveness and implications of these divergent strategies on fan engagement and sponsor relationships.

It also leaves the door open to a question: Are LaLiga's signs of repositioning (reinforcing a rejuvenated image) an adaptive response to the possible competitive threat the Kings League poses?

Apart from the aspects above, two limitations or difficulties add to this object of study. On the one hand, given the recent creation of the Kings League, it is still early to predict its viability, especially in a media environment immersed in accelerated and continuous changes. On the other hand, this changing and dynamic aspect of the medium makes the analysis process difficult. It requires an exhaustive review of a trans-media reality comprising numerous channels with an incessant flow of information. In that sense, the corpus of study becomes practically

incomprehensible. It requires judgment on the part of the researchers to decide on a purposive sample that focuses on analysis units of high informative value.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The communication strategy has been a critical element in the Kings League's football business model. This strategy has opened doors to a new collaboration framework with new sponsors and new segments of the target audience.

Related to the first research objective, it can be stated that The Kings League case demonstrates how the sports industry is rapidly evolving due to changes in customer behaviour and technology advancements. Since its January 2023 launch, the Kings League has grown to prominence in the sports entertainment sector by combining traditional football with modern, gamified components to appeal to a younger demographic. It uses innovative strategies inspired by the new paradigm of immersive communication and aimed at enhancing user interaction with sponsoring brands. Besides, those innovative strategies were driven by contextual factors that favoured a new media scenario: In order to maintain fan engagement during a time of major disruption, sports organizations were forced to innovate and adapt in response to the COVID-19 epidemic, which moved quickly the shift towards digitalization.

In response to the second research objective, which aims to reflect on the effectiveness of the Kings League sponsorship and communication strategies, our study concludes that the success of the Kings League emphasizes the importance of adjusting to the preferences of Gen Z and Gen Alpha, who value immersive, interactive, and short-form content above traditional forms of media. The preference for digital platforms, immediate interaction, and immersive experiences among Gen Z and Gen Alpha has led sports leagues to provide customized and interactive content. This change is reflected in the strategy used by the Kings League, which uses digital media for fan interaction and broadcasting, incorporates interactive components into the competition, and works

with influencers to increase its appeal. Additionally, sports marketing and consumption have changed dramatically as a result of technological innovations like the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) and the growing usage of digital platforms like Twitch, YouTube, and TikTok.

Finally, regarding the third objective related to the comparison between the strategies developed by the Kings League and LaLiga, it should be noted that the criteria of digitalization of communication and the intense use of social media channels is a constant for both competitions. Although the Kings League develops more creative actions or actions that interfere more with the user experience, more consolidated or traditional brands with LaLiga also venture to explore the possibilities that immersive communication offers and intensify the prominence of their sponsors. Perhaps, the Kings League has energized this process that, with greater financial resources and greater audience reach, LaLiga intends to continue.

It is work to cover an introductory page in the study of this phenomenon, encouraging researchers to continue along this line that predicts innovative and continually changing communication strategies.

On the other hand, besides its academic interest, it aims to have applications in the advertising and public relations industry, where the new emerging formats need to be named and catalogued.

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