COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Social media hook sports events: a systematic review of engagement

Abstract

Social media are nowadays used in all sectors, and likewise frequently within the sports industry. However, there is a lack of studies that offer a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of social media engagement (SME) in this area. Thus, the main object of the present study was the elaboration of a systematic review of the existing literature of the past ten years about SME within the field of sports events. The study was carried out following the PRISMA guidelines. By searching the databases Web of Science, Scopus, ProQuest, and Academic Search Ultimate, we identified 208 studies. After screening and reviewing for eligibility, we finally included 28 articles in the present study. The methodologies, types of analysis applied, main objectives, and the results on SME of the articles included in the synthesis were systematically reviewed. The findings showed that only four articles had as a principal theme the SME. Social media offer a useful tool for engagement, but SME adopts must still gain greater recognition. The need to co-create with users and engage them on social media, due to the great utility of social media in this sector is highlighted based on the results. It was found that SME around sports events remains an emerging and still developing research field which presents a wide range of future research lines.

Keywords
Engagement, social media marketing, sports marketing, sports events, social networks, interaction, literature review.

1. Introduction

Online social media platforms, whether social network sites (SNSs), blogs, forums, or social TV, although being relatively recent phenomena, are nowadays inherent to everyday life. Social media have changed the way individuals, organisations and communities interact and are hooking companies, businesses, and brands, which use them widely for marketing purposes and to increase and enhance their online presence. The one-way communication and marketing of products or services has switched to a two-way communication system with the interaction of users, clients, or potential customers.

Social media is a main research field in social sciences with a fast-changing environment, but few definitions have been drawn up (Aichner *et al.*, 2021). There are general elements, such as the interconnection of persons as presented by Boyd and Ellison (2007), but others differ widely. Before 2010 most definitions focused on the interaction of people and their common interests, whereas afterwards, the importance of user-generated content arose (Aichner *et al.*, 2021). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) were the first to mention this "creation" aspect, defining

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social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61). Social media and social network sites, even if often used as synonyms are not the same (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Due to the bidirectionality and the co-creation aspect, social media are a heterogeneous field, comprising a wide variety of SNSs and platforms. These range from the most known ones such as Facebook or Instagram, to media sharing services like YouTube, microblogging platforms such as Twitter, messaging platforms like WhatsApp or WeChat, blogs, wikis, project management services, e.g., Slack, social news, virtual learning platforms and sports apps as Freeletics (López-Carril *et al.*, 2022).

The exchange of user-generated content and the two-way communication makes them a valuable tool for organisations and businesses of all sizes. Thus, they are not only an entertainment tool for users, but furthermore, they do serve organisations in marketing aspects. According to Schivinski *et al.* (2016), the actions that take place on social media can be classified into three dimensions: consumption, contribution, and creation. The need to receive information, brand love, and empowerment were identified as the major drivers of these three dimensions (Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

As in social media, two-way communication and user-generated content are preponderant, and the challenge of rising user engagement has gained importance both in the scientific and management field. Academic interest in consumer or user engagement has been growing since the 2010s, but it is still a concept for which no unique definition has been reached yet (Barger *et al.*, 2016; Gangi & Wasko, 2016). Its definition depends on the given scope and perspective, and in the example of employee engagement, it can either be defined narrowly as an experience or more broadly as a behavioural expression (Schaufeli, 2013). In contrast, consumer engagement was shown to be a process based on an individual's commitment to a specific object or another member of a community and is both interactive as well as experiential (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). It goes beyond the simple acquisition of a product, as well as beyond mere participation. It adopts a perspective of value creation and co-creation (Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). The concept of consumer engagement can be understood as the level of interactions and connections between a consumer or a potential consumer with the brand, activities, or offerings provided by a company or organisation (Vivek *et al.*, 2014). The beginning of the consumer engagement process is mostly due to the need for information seeking by consumers, which then passes through different sub-processes, which range from learning, sharing, and advocating, to a socialising and co-creation process (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). It is therefore based on an interactive experience and the co-creation of value (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). It is precisely for this reason that it is an essential marketing concept.

Contemplating social media, it is apparent that one concept determining social media is their engagement potential. This so-called social media engagement (SME) is considered, like the general engagement concept itself, as a polysemic and multidimensional concept (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). Different metrics have been brought forward to analyse the relationship of users to social media dissemination. These are generally based on the number of "likes," "comments," "shares," "posts," "subscribers" or "followers" (De Vries *et al.*, 2012; Liu-Thompkins & Rogerson, 2012; Oviedo-García *et al.*, 2014). Reaching such a consumer engagement is a key factor of social media marketing (SMM). In SMM, the actions performed on social media, such as liking, commenting, sharing, or clicking, reflect the behavioural response of users, i.e. engagement (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). Activities in SMM showed to play a crucial role in brand experience, the intention to purchase, and the attitude towards a brand (Khan, 2022) and the importance of an effective SMM has risen since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mason *et al.*, 2021). Organisations, companies, and businesses must take advantage of these new co-creation models and user-created content as they offer a competitive advantage (Gangi & Wasko, 2016; Capriotti & Zeler, 2020).

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In the sports sector, social media plays an important role. They enable sports fans to communicate easily with each other and to interact directly with sports clubs, event organisers or even athletes. Social media are seen as a valuable medium for two-way communication between sports brands and consumers (Hopkins, 2013), but also a helpful resource for sports management or higher education (Escamilla-Fajardo *et al.*, 2021; López-Carril *et al.*, 2020). In sports, fan engagement is a key factor (Yoshida *et al.*, 2014). Recent studies have shown a positive relationship between engagement and sports practice (Caro Vásquez *et al.*, 2021; García-Fernández *et al.*, 2017). Communication in social media is essential as it can enhance fans' online community engagement, which also leads to game attendance or the sponsor's product acquisition intention (Trivedi *et al.*, 2021). To increase this valuable engagement with sports fans, specific content strategies are necessary (Annamalai *et al.*, 2021).

Recent literature reviews can be found within the context of the evolution of user engagement in tourism (So *et al.*, 2021), digital transformation and value co-creation in sports marketing (Stegmann *et al.*, 2021), sports and social media (Filo *et al.*, 2015; Wäsche *et al.*, 2017), sports marketing or sports-related studies on social media (Latififard *et al.*, 2020; Zeren *et al.*, 2022), social media in marketing (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017), and consumer engagement in social media brand communities (Santos *et al.*, 2022). Despite the widespread academic interest in social media in sports, tourism, and especially as an important marketing tool, there has so far not been a systematic review of the concept of social media engagement in the field of sports events. Therefore, and based on this background, this paper attempts to analyse the studies that investigated SME. In this respect, the following research questions are addressed:

RQ1. What is the overtime distribution of the analysed articles and in which scientific journals are they published?

RQ2. Which research methods and types of analysis are most and least applied in the studies encountered?

RQ3. What are the main research approaches?

RQ4. What are the main findings and conclusions concerning SME in the field of sports events?

The first research question is stated, to analyse if there is a relevant increase of this topic in the latest years. Even if in general terms most topics do gain more publications over time, those whose academic interest is not maintained over time, do not experience growth. RQ2 and RQ3 are proposed to outline the actual state of applied analyses and research approaches to further analyse if there are research gaps in the field of SME in sports events. Lastly, the fourth research question tries to broaden the knowledge of sports marketing in the digital age.

To provide answers to the research questions outlined above, a systematic review was carried out with the aim of synthesising the results of primary research on social media engagement in sports events over the last 10 years. The rest of this paper is organised as follows. First, the methodology applied to this study is presented. Subsequently, the results of the scientific contributions found are shown, followed by a discussion section. Finally, we conclude with the limitations, future lines of research, and the main conclusions of this systematic review.

2. Methodology

To organise the basic structure of this work and to ensure transparency of the process with coherent results, we followed the suggested steps of Pardal-Refoyo & Pardal-Peláez (2020). The study itself was elaborated following the PRISMA guidelines (Liberati *et al.*, 2009; Moher *et al.*, 2009). Four different electronic databases were used to collect the articles to reduce the selection bias, thus avoiding the collection of literature from a single database (Liberati *et al.*, 2009). To avoid publication bias, special attention has been given to objectivity when selecting and including the articles, as well as to the transparency and reproducibility of findings. In consequence, the following electronic databases were employed: Web of Science (WoS),

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Scopus, ProQuest, and Academic Search Ultimate. Data collection was carried out between 30 October and 1 November 2022.
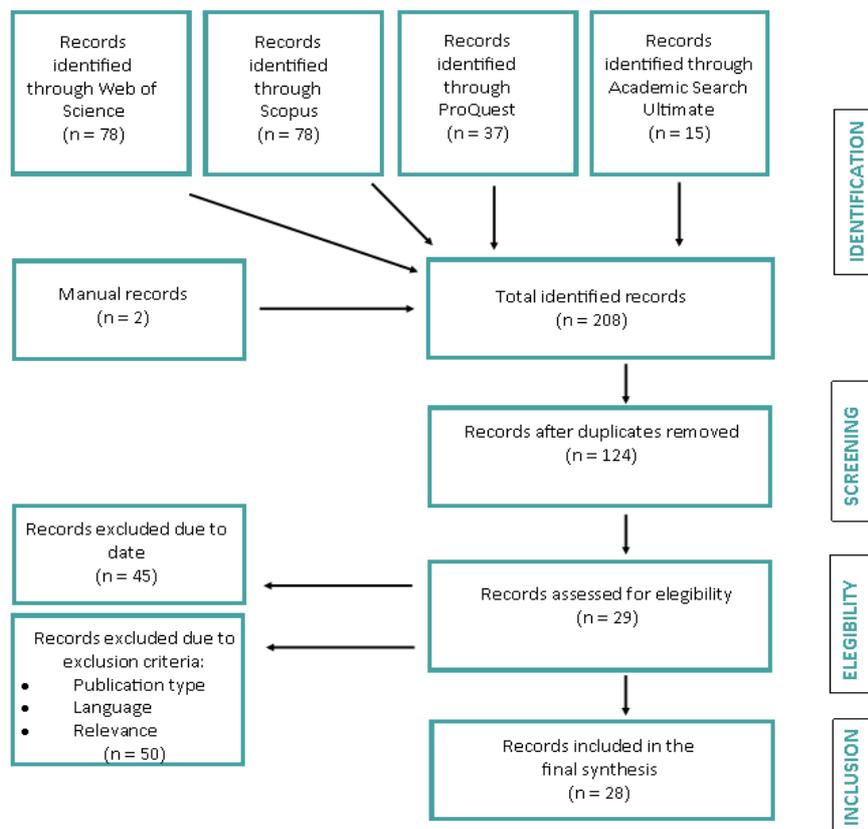
2.1. *Search criteria*

As a search strategy, the criteria for the search terms used were that they had to be present in the title, in the abstract, or in the author-provided keywords. For the search terms, the different combinations of "engagement," "(social AND media) OR (social AND network)" and "(sport* AND event*)" were used. With this search criteria, 208 records were found, of which 78 originated from WOS, 78 from Scopus, 37 from ProQuest, and 15 from Academic Search Ultimate. Once these records had been analysed, a subsequent search of the bibliographic references of the studies found was carried out to obtain all the articles addressing the topic in question (Webster & Watson, 2002).

2.2. *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

As inclusion criteria, we used articles from the last 10 years, articles from scientific journals and systematic reviews, articles written in English, Spanish or German, and the relevance of the thematic content. A time frame of 10 years was chosen, as online social media are relatively new, and their development and broad use have only begun in the latest years. Thus, prior articles are not relevant to the present analysis. The chosen languages are of the most used in the scientific field and within the realm of the authors. In contrast, conference proceedings, early access articles, books, book chapters, or other types of publications other than those listed under the inclusion criteria, as well as all articles published before 2012, duplicate articles, and studies conducted outside the scope of or not directly related to sports events were excluded.

Figure 1. Flow chart of the corpus collection process.

Source: Own elaboration.

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2.3. *Research process*

The flow chart in Figure 1 details the protocol of the search process and the recording of the studies included in the synthesis. Initial identification of the articles was done in the four beforehand mentioned databases. As this might not be sufficient for a full systematic review, according to Keele (2007), manually added sources were included ($n = 2$). Therefore, all reference lists from the primary found studies were analysed for further articles to include.

The total identified records ($n = 208$) were then screened for duplicates, which were removed. Afterwards, the exclusion criteria were applied and records which did not fulfil the inclusion criteria were sorted out. Finally, 28 studies remained and were included in the final synthesis. From these selected articles, the relevant information for this study was extracted, including authors, year of publication, journal, type of sports event analysed, RRSS or social media analysed, the aim of the study, and the relevant results and conclusions concerning engagement.

3. Results

3.1. *Overtime distribution*

Although studies in Spanish or German were also accepted according to the language inclusion criterion, all the articles included in the synthesis were written in English. The first article identified dates to 2013. In response to the first research question, the annual distribution of the articles, it was observed that the interest in the subject has grown over the last few years. In the first three years of the analysed period, only one study per year was found. From 2016 onwards, an increase in interest in the field of study could be observed, with some fluctuations until 2020, after which it expanded. By the end of October 2022, there were already six published articles focusing on SME in relation to sports events. The distribution of the studies among the journals is shown in Table 1. The journal with the most articles published over the period analysed and related to the topic of study was Communication & Sport with four publications. This was followed by Computers in Human Behavior, Journal of Human Sport and Exercise, and Online Information Review with two articles published in each of them. The rest of the journals counted with one publication each.

Table 1. Distribution of published articles by journal.

Journal's title	Number of published articles
Aslib Journal of Information Management	1
Communication & Sport	4
Computers in Human Behavior	2
Digital Journalism	1
Innovation: Management, Policy, and Practice	1
International Journal of Sport Communication	1
International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship	1
Journal of Advertising Research	1
Journal of Business Research	1
Journal of Cultural Marketing Strategy	1
Journal of Human Sport and Exercise	2
Journal of Physical Education and Sport	1
Journal of Sports Media	1
Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	1
Managing Sport and Leisure	1
Online Information Review	2

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Psychology and Marketing	1
Public Relations Review	1
Sport in Society	1
Sport Mangement Review	1
Sustainability	1
The ICHPER-SD Journal of Research in Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport & Dance	1

Source: Own elaboration.

3.2. *Research methods and types of analysis*

Concerning the second research question on the type of methodological approach as well as the type of analysis used, the results are reflected in Figure 2 and Figure 3. Regarding the methodological approach (Figure 2), it could be observed that more than half of the studies adopted a quantitative methodology (53.57%). The second most used methodology of the analysed studies was qualitative (32.14%). In contrast, mixed methods were only used in four studies (14.29%).
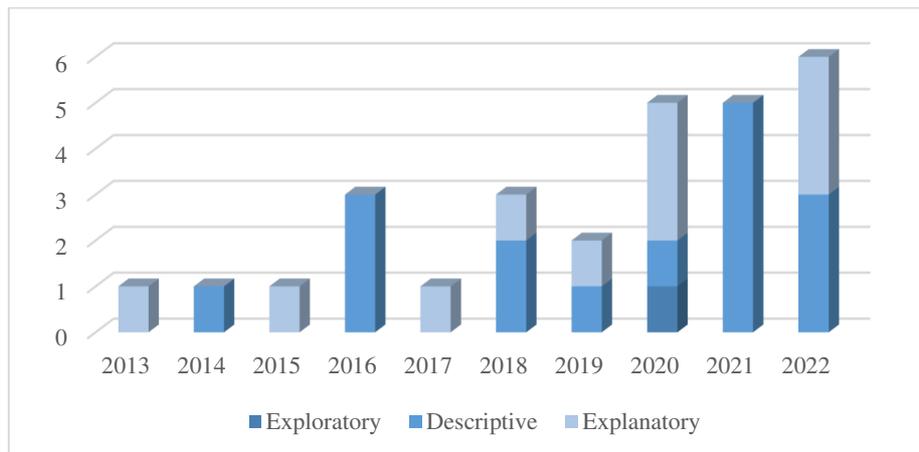
Figure 2. Methodological approach over time.

Source: Own elaboration.

Considering the type of analysis most frequently used (Figure 3), it was shown that the descriptive analysis was applied in the majority, more precisely in 57.14% of all analysed studies. The rest of the articles opted for an explanatory analysis (39.29%), except for one which carried out an exploratory reflection (Buehler, 2020). While in 2021 the sole use of descriptive studies was noteworthy, in the three previous years and again in 2022 the studies employed both descriptive and explanatory analyses. Hollebeek *et al.* (2014) stated that, even if an academic interest in engagement within marketing research could be perceived, most of the studies were exploratory and there was a lack of empirical research in the field. It now can be observed, that over the past years, this fact has changed, and more descriptive and explanatory analyses are being carried out.

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Figure 3. Type of analysis over time.

Source: Own elaboration.

3.3. *Main research approaches of analysed articles*

Table 2 presents a list of all articles that addressed social media engagement in sports event environments and which results from the systematic review conducted. Focusing on the third research question, it turned out that the focus and main objectives of the analysed articles were largely related to the analysis of communication, usage, behaviour, and the relationship between television and social media. Only four of the encountered studies focused their main objective directly on SME or engagement as such (Burton *et al.*, 2019; Jacobson, 2016; Li & Feng, 2021; Singh & Sharma, 2022).

3.4. *Main results on SME of the analysed articles*

Regarding the last research question, the main findings, and conclusions of the research on engagement and social media in the field of sports events, the overview is presented in Table 2. The co-creation of spectators, athletes, and event organisers showed to be part of the experience of a sports event, regardless of whether it was of a small, medium, or large scale. The interaction with the users on social media, building up a relationship with them and making part of the content creation process is crucial for an efficient SMM in the sports event sector. The exchange of visual content as well as the creation of content of sports events have become substantial features of the sports fan experience today (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2021). The overall interest and passion for sports together with the growing increase in the use of mobile phones amid prosumers are key drivers for SMM (Santomier *et al.*, 2016).

It is noted that most of the studies focused on large or mega-events, such as the Olympic Games (OG), World Cups, the Super Bowl, the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC) events or the Tour de France, among others. The events on which most of the studies were carried out were the OG with 27.59%, followed by the FIFA World Cups with 24.14% of the total number of analysed research studies. Regarding the type of used social media, in most cases, social media were analysed in general (in nine research studies), or several social networks were englobed. Twitter was the most frequently investigated social network, followed by Instagram and Facebook. Few studies used social media other than the most popular Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. However, three studies were found that specifically focused on a different social media than the most analysed. These were a study focused on the use of WhatsApp (Weimann-Saks *et al.*, 2020), another one on the interactive live-streaming platform Twitch (Qian, 2022), and one about the Chinese social network Weibo (Li & Feng, 2021). Overall, the studies confirmed the importance of SME in the field of sports events.

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Table 2. Summary table of the articles included in the synthesis investigating social media engagement in the context of sports events.

Autor/s (publication date)	Sport event	Social media	Aims	Results regarding engagement
Abuín-Penas *et al.* (2019)	OG Pyeong Chang, 2018	Instagram	Contribute to the understanding of athlete communication on Instagram	- Importance of the OG in the impact generated by athletes on social media
Alonso Dos Santos *et al.* (2020)	Soccer World Cup, 2018	Social media in general	Exploring how fans' feelings of patriotism and social media knowledge acquisition influence their intention to buy sponsored products	- Patriotism has a positive effect on fans' attitudes and behaviour toward sponsors - It operationalises the achievement of fan activation of sponsorship as a fan engagement response to a sponsor's SMM communications
Bober (2014)	Soccer, Formula 1	Twitter, Facebook	Investigate the relationship between television, audience, and Twitter in relation to the creation of social TV events	- Similar trends in engagement in both sports events and reality TV shows
Buehler (2020)	Several	Several	Tracking the follow-up of alternative broadcasts and examining how they contribute to the current fracturing of sports television, how they both continue to weaken the engagement of sports television and how it is reshaped	- Second-screen experiences preserve sports television's ability to engage 'mass' audiences by offering complementary content on digital devices and prioritising the traditional broadcast venue - Instead, alternative broadcasts offer audiences multiple broadcasts of the same event, thereby breaking down the shared forms of engagement that have long-defined sports television
Burgers *et al.* (2022)	Dutch Eredivisie	Twitter	Evaluate bias in the use of social media through live sports clubs' comments on Twitter	- More fan engagement with tweets about positive intra-group events (vs. extra-group), but no difference in negative events
Burton *et al.* (2019)	American Football, Super Bowl	Social media in general	Examining the prior impact of SME with a Super Bowl advertising campaign on consumers' traces of affection and retrospective evaluations of TV ads	- Viewing an ad on social media is primarily driven by the degree of engagement, seriousness, or humour that consumers believe it contains - Interactions on a social media ad are primarily driven by consumers' cognitive thoughts about the ad or brand
Burton *et al.* (2021)	OG Pyeong Chang, 2018	Instagram, Twitter	Investigate how the sponsors of the OG and Paralympic Games (PG) activated their partnerships and the representation of the PG and para-athletes in sponsor marketing	- Content analysis and analysis of the number of social media posts revealed a lack of activation of the PG by sponsors - Increased opportunities for engagement with followers during the PG are highlighted

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D'Andréa & Stauff (2022)	Fifa World Cup, 2018	Twitter	Verify the systematic contribution of sport to what they call "mediated engagement with technologies"	- The mediatisation of sport, its partisanship, and its ambivalent relationship with technologies stimulate engagement beyond the question of fair refereeing
Einsle & Escalera Izquierdo (2022)	Taekwondo Clubs Championship, Spain 2021	Facebook, Twitter, Youtube	Identify different motivations and perceptions of social media usage and types of social media used in the championship	- Facebook was identified as the SNS with the highest engagement and YouTube with the lowest engagement within the scope of the Spanish Taekwondo Clubs Championships
Hayes Sauder & Blaszka (2018)	Soccer World Cup, 2015	Twitter	Investigate the self-presentation of female athletes on Twitter with a focus on communication strategies during a mega-event	- Analysis of follower engagement through retweets indicated a greater interest in athlete communication backstage compared to on the field
Hoeber *et al.* (2016)	Tour de France, 2013	Twitter	Analyse the use of visual analytics software to facilitate the interactive discovery of emerging themes in social media	- The power of visual analytics methods and the advantages of Vista software for analysing the engagement of sports fans at a mega-event is demonstrated - Possibility of more general use to explore any topic of interest that audiences engage with on Twitter
Jacobson (2016)	OG London, 2012	Social media in general	Analysing the opening ceremony of the OG to contribute to the debate on social media participation and engagement	- Proposal of the term "networked spectators" to identify people who participate in content creation, social media moderation, and conversation using social media
Jin & Cheng (2020)	Common-wealth Games, 2018	Twitter	Advance the theoretical understanding of social media communication in the nexus between event and tourism	- Governing bodies as central actors to connect the different communities during, but not before the event - Large and medium-sized sports associations and news agencies key in the information flow both before and during the event - Need to understand the co-creation capacity of key influencers
Judge *et al.* (2013)	Youth OG, 2012	Social media in general	Evaluate the impact of attitudes, public awareness, and access to social media on the Korean sports community regarding Youth OG participation through TV or event attendance	- When the Youth OG are advertised through social media, awareness and attendance rates increase - Information, knowledge, and popularity of sports events were related to awareness and attendance at the events
Kharouf *et al.* (2020)	OG, World Cup	Social media in general	Examining online event experiences and their effects on consumers' behavioural intentions towards mega-events	- Importance of providing potentially global consumers of a mega-event with mechanisms that facilitate a positive experience, regardless of the channel they use to interact with the event

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Li *et al.* (2018)	OG Río, 2016	Twitter	Examine how the Olympic audience used Twitter to follow US national federations during the OG	- Sport performance and the number of tweets had direct positive relationships with the increase in the number of followers - The number of "likes" had a significant negative relationship with fans' interest in following the federations' Twitter feed
Li & Feng (2021)	Soccer World Cup, 2018, 2019	Weibo	Examine the SME in the context of country branding (China) around a recent mega-event	- The two Weibo accounts focused on citizen engagement in public communication through event-related content - Beyond that, engagement in public participation was found to be weak
Lim *et al.* (2015)	OG Sochi, 2014	Social media in general	Explore user behaviour patterns in the use of social media during live events	- Functional engagement had a direct impact on social presence and communal engagement had a direct effect on channel loyalty - Effect of emotional engagement on channel loyalty mediated by channel engagement - Social presence led to channel loyalty mediated by channel engagement
Mataruna *et al.* (2021)	TIFL Games	YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter	Understand the motives of the National Olympic Committees in the MENA region to invest in, organise and promote the TIFL Games	- Opportunity to develop engagement with consumers and identification of future talents as main reasons for organising this type of event - Opportunity for sports participation, sports promotion, and Olympic education in a region with a deficit of sports for development
Prado-Gascó *et al.* (2017)	Triathlon, Spain, 2015	Social media in general	Determine the extent to which combinations of the sports event performance and social media variables predict the intensity of social media use in relation to events and which predicts satisfaction and word of mouth	- Overall event image as a necessary condition for all cases: sharing comments, sharing photos and videos, participant satisfaction, and word-of-mouth
Qian (2022)	NFL	Twitch	Examine the relationships between co-streamer experience, identification and fit, virtual interactions, and continuous watching intentions	- Experience and co-streamer identification showed significant and positive influences on virtual interactions
Santomier *et al.* (2016)	OG London, 2012	Social media in general	Demonstrate how effective management of innovations in (a) information and communication technologies and (b) SMM has led to a new platform model for live sports events worldwide	- Four main responsible drivers: a) The foresight, planning, diligence, and effectiveness of the management of the Olympic Delivery Authority, the Organising Olympic and Paralympic Committee, and their technology partner b) Increased use of mobile devices and SME of prosumers c) Willingness of sponsors, marketers, and global media companies to take risks with innovative media communication strategies and SMM strategies d) Global enthusiasm and passion for sports among prosumers

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Shermak (2018)	MLB	Twitter	Evaluate how newspaper sports beat reporters meet the information needs of consumers during live events	- Tweets with only game results received less engagement than those with more content
Singh & Sharma (2022)	Cricket Premier League	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube	Investigate viewer engagement on selected social media platforms	- Significant increase over the last few years in the number of fans on social media and their engagement through likes, shares, and comments
Taberner & Juncà (2021)	Outdoor sports events, Spain	Instagram	Explore whether participants and organisers of small-scale sports events can contribute to destination image creation through the content they post on Instagram	- The engagement results show different data depending on the dimension, with "people" in the users' images and "culture" and "event" in the organisers' images getting the most "likes" - Comments from participants concentrated on the dimension "culture"
Tereso *et al.* (2022)	UFC	Twitter	Understanding the influence of combat sports fighters' trash talk on fans' audience and social media use	- Fan behaviour and reactions to fights are more directly impacted by individual fighters than by the event itself - Events in which the most popular and polarising fighters engage in pre-fight trash talk are more likely to obtain more viewers on PPV - Fighters' trash-talking in pre-fight press conferences as an effective medium to directly influence fan behaviour both on PPV and in social media activity
Toffoletti *et al.*, (2021)	Soccer World Cup, 2015	Instagram	Investigate how women's sports fans use Instagram to self-represent their hobby	- The production and sharing of visual content related to sports events have become important features of the contemporary sports fan experience
Weimann-Saks *et al.* (2020)	World Cup, 2018	WhatsApp	Explore the use of WhatsApp and smartphones among Israeli viewers of televised broadcasts of World Cup matches	- The level of behavioural engagement was significantly higher than emotional engagement - The correlation between overall spectator engagement with the match and enjoyment was significant, positive, and strong and mediated using a smartphone, especially WhatsApp

Source: Own elaboration.

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4. Discussion

As a response to the questions initially stated, the present systematic review was developed. The main objective was to compile the main objectives, results, and research methods used from primary research on social media engagement in the field of sports events.

To begin with, and giving response to the first research question, an increasing academic interest in SME in sports events has been discovered. To outline the actual state of applied analyses and research approaches, the research questions two and three have been stated. Thereby, it was shown, that even if both, quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in the latest years, few attempts have been made in adopting mixed methods approaches. The usefulness of contextualisation with the help of mixed methods to better understand the interaction on social media needs still a greater recognition (Shibuya *et al.*, 2022).

Regarding the main findings on SME in sports events among the analysed articles, first, the importance of the type of content of posts to increase interactions such as "likes," or "retweets" should be highlighted. Accordingly, the inclusion of visual content led to a higher number of interactions on Facebook and Twitter in several studies (Einsle & Escalera Izquierdo, 2022; Shermak, 2018). Instagram posts with content type categories focused whether on people or on a cultural or event-related aspect gained more likes than other categories (Taberner & Juncà, 2021). In the case of combat sports, the focus on an individual fighter rather than the context of an event obtained more fan reactions (Tereso *et al.*, 2022). Posts that included content such as analysis, opinion, or entertaining subject matter obtained higher engagement rates (Shermak, 2018).

Similarly, there was a positive correlation between engagement, enjoyment, and WhatsApp usage for match-related messages that were transmitted between spectators, whereas it was negative for non-game-related topics (Weimann-Saks *et al.*, 2020). Content that reflects users' experiences and emotions, such as values and beliefs, also frequently showed online interaction (Li & Feng, 2021). A combination of opinion analysis, entertainment, and visual content was more effective in engaging consumers than mere game results (Shermak, 2018). This is confirmed by the results provided by Pletikosa Cvijikj & Michahelles (2013) who point out that the level of engagement increases if entertaining content is combined with informative content.

A further indicator for generating more interaction in terms of the number of "likes" and an increase in followers was the sports performance of the sports team or the athletes (Abuín-Penas *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2018). This finding is similar to the results obtained by Doyle *et al.* (2022), who stated that content which included athletic performance got higher consumer engagement rates. Notwithstanding, not only the sports performance but also a positive event image is crucial. The sports event image is an important factor for users to spread positive word about the event. Thus, the combination of the participants' satisfaction and the positive event image, as well as the combination of the use of social media and the positive sports event image, led athletes to share content on social media (Prado-Gascó *et al.*, 2017). Likewise, it is vital to consider the specific timing of content posting. In this way, more social media activity and interaction were observed during or at the end of different events (Abuín-Penas *et al.*, 2019; Bober, 2014). Hence, the specific timing of the event can affect both the image of the destination in which the event takes place, as well as the engagement with the publications (Taberner & Juncà, 2021). This goes along with the findings of Annamalai *et al.* (2021) who found that Facebook content strategies need to adapt depending if it is peak season or off-season. Additionally, Cuevas-Molano *et al.* (2022) point out that brands need to consider their timing schedules for posts to increase engagement.

The analysis of the articles showed that the use of social media around sports events is an efficient and important tool to generate engagement with followers or fans (Abuín-Penas *et al.*, 2019; Burton *et al.*, 2021). In current times, for the sports fan experience, producing and

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sharing of sports-related content are critical aspects to consider (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2021). In addition, emphasis is placed on the opportunities that can be created through co-creation with users and the adaptation of communication strategies using innovative ways to involve users to achieve engagement (Jin & Cheng, 2020; Kharouf *et al.*, 2020). Engagement with content, effective communication, online consumer interaction, and virtual interactions are associated with future intention. Engagement influences the online experience and affects future behavioural intentions toward the sports event (Kharouf *et al.*, 2020). Both the awareness and the intention to attend an event are strongly related to the use of communication media, and if advertised on social media the awareness and the attendance rate showed to rise (Judge *et al.*, 2013). In the example of Twitch, it was revealed that viral interactions were positively associated with the continued viewing intention of the NFL (Qian, 2022).

The studies confirm that a higher SME provides advantages for sports events. It can lead to more opportunities for all stakeholders around the event, such as team supporters or sponsors (Singh & Sharma, 2022). Moreover, the inherent value of SME for sponsors is clearly elucidated (Burton *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, the strategic use of social media still needs more recognition and attention. It was found that there is still a deficiency of activation of the PG by sponsors and there are good opportunities for fan engagement, especially during the PG (Burton *et al.*, 2021). On the one hand, emphasis is placed on the set of social media practices with conventional measures of sports fans' engagement (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, innovative ways to involve users, consumers and communities need to be considered (Kharouf *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, the value of co-creation in this field must be understood and recognized. Building up a lasting relationship with social media users, obtaining interaction and making them part of the overall creation process is vital. Hence, event organisers and host venues need to understand the importance of co-creation with key influencers and it is important that they reinvent their own communication design to engage with these influencers at different stages of an event for both economic and non-economic benefits and the overall benefit of the destination (Jin & Cheng, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on the multiple ways in which users can participate in social media. For this purpose, Jacobson (2016) proposes the term "networked spectators" and concludes that participation should specifically include monitoring and moderation of social media as a form of participation. This concept points out the different ways that users can engage and differs from the traditional binary of active versus passive participation in media events. Furthermore, the focus on a positive experience for the users should be given, for consecutive positive behavioural intentions towards an event (Kharouf *et al.*, 2020). Thus, a positive experience with active participation and co-creation of users leads to benefits for the events, that should be taken advantage of.

4.1. *Limitations and future research*

Although an attempt has been made to avoid selection and publication biases by including several electronic databases (Liberati *et al.*, 2009), it is acknowledged that there may be some limitations to the present study. The selection of keywords may not cover all existing online social media strands and consequently, the studies conducted on them. Also, since the author's keywords were used, it is possible that, although an author may have analysed engagement but did not name it under this concept in the keywords, title, or abstract, this study would not appear in the present analysis.

There is considerable scope for future investigation in the field of SME in sports events. The importance of user engagement needs greater recognition and still, empirical research in the field needs to grow. Important research lines might be the analysis of the impact, determinants, and effects of SME in sports events with an approach by mixed-methods as this approach is still scarce (Arora *et al.*, 2018; Shibuya *et al.*, 2022), and by doing so offering a balance between explanatory and descriptive studies. Attempts in building models which

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explain cognitive, as well as affective factors that affect SME should be also further developed (Ma *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, the interrelation between virtual and offline activities should be considered more in detail, focusing on comparative research between SME and physical event engagement. Future research might also pay attention to the specific roles of the differences of SME regarding the kind of sport and scale of the event.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the 28 articles revealed that most of the studies focused on large or mega-events, evaluating the use of social media in general or in combination, with Twitter being the most analysed social network. More than half of the studies worked with descriptive analysis and the most used methodology was quantitative. All studies were written in English and the overall interest in the field of SME started to grow slightly in 2016 with an expansion from 2020 onwards. Only four studies were found to be focused directly on SME. It was detected that SME is still a relatively new academic field and its importance in the realm of sports events was confirmed. Social media proved to be a useful tool to create engagement with fans and their involvement in content creation is necessary and still in need of greater recognition from organisations and academics alike. Therefore, it is essential to provide users, fans, and consumers with an experience that motivates them to co-create and get involved in the content.

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