



REINVENTING SOCCER COMMUNICATION THROUGH SPORTAINMENT WITH GENZERS IN SPAIN The case of the Kings League

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the Kings League's impact on sports communication and its appeal to Generation Z in Spain, contrasting it with traditional football leagues. The Kings League's "sportainment" approach, blending sport and entertainment with innovative digital broadcasting, resonates with young audiences. Key elements include its spontaneity, spectacle, and the involvement of charismatic figures. The research underscores the need for new formats and sports communication methods to engage younger generations, highlighting the importance of personalization, immediacy, and innovation in sports to maintain cultural relevance and audience engagement.

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1. Introduction

On March 26, 2023, Barcelona FC Stadium was packed but Barcelona FC was not playing. It was the debut of the Kings League, a competition promoted by Gerard Piqué a former Barcelona player. The attendance was 92,522 people, with a high percentage a young population, mainly Generation Z (Tomás, 2023). Generation Z refers to individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010, also called iGen or Post-Millennials (Twenge, 2018). The event was followed by 2.1 million people in Twitch, Tik Tok and You Tube (Sanchis, 2023). The average game of the Kings League is followed by 600,000 viewers. An average game of La Liga, such as Getafe-Mallorca, is followed in paid-TV Movistar channel by 66,000 people (Sanchis, 2023).

The Kings League is a seven-a-side competition taking place in an indoor field in Barcelona. Its dozen teams are largely made up of former players and owned and run by some of the country's most prominent streamers (Smith, 2023).

With a new format, The Kings League is as much spectacle and show as sport. There is a "giant dice that decide actions, lucky cards that unlock different game modes (such as door-to-door). Two teams playing a cup as if they were in the schoolyard. In essence, turning soccer into a hybrid of sport and video game" (Sanchis, 2023, para. 4). Teams are brand new, no history, not rooted in any region or territory. They are just a new creation whose interest comes from the popularity of the streamers and You Tubers than run them.

The Kings League denies one of the axis of European soccer, the link between sport and identity whereby soccer teams are considered ambassadors of their cities and regions (García, 2023a). They are not franchises either, like in most American sports, and fandom is much more connected to mere fun and entertainment, not the individual and collective identity usually attributed to soccer fans (García, 2012; 2023a). Two theories, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and identity theory (Burke, 1991; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000), explain the loyalty of soccer fans to the sport. Social identity theory argues that people affiliate with specific groups that nurture their self-esteem. Identity theory suggests in an impersonal world, where identity building over time and space becomes virtually impossible (Bauman, 2000), as a response, soccer becomes "a life-long project that begins at an early age and ends with the life of the fan" (Ben Porat, 2010, p. 277) for many people.

That does not seem the case of Kings League where fans are not tied to any place, territory, not even stadium, since all the games are played in a pavilion located in the port of Barcelona, a sort of "no place" (Auger, 1995), meaning a uniform, impersonal place where no organic social life is possible, in opposition to place, permeated with historical meaning and creative of social life. Kings League is played in a no place, a closed, artificial atmosphere that lacks any identity and can be transferred to any other location any time. Not surprising since the audience is only virtual, first in Twitch (although two months later it was announced that the last rounds of the season would be played on broadcast TV [García, 2023b]).

From a communication standpoint, the novelty of the Kings League aligns with the main idea of the society of spectacle (Debord, 2020). Debord argued, at the relative beginnings of the TV era in Europe, the representation of reality had supplanted reality, particularly the representation through mass media. Today this private consumption, obedient to the spectacle, would take place through the content from the platforms but also into a productive subject of it through social networks. The Kings League is after all a representation of reality, in this case the traditional soccer world, born during the analogical era. Certainly, traditional soccer has evolved, made use of digital resources, it is hyper-professionalized, and soccer organizations have expanded their fan base across the world (García, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2022). However, soccer still identity-based and soccer organizations still have a romantic aura and often have a political dimension (Carr et al., 2021; Kassing & Mean, 2021).

Instead, the Kings League can be considered sportainment. This term is a confluence of sport and entertainment and derives from the so-called infotainment. Postman (2005 [1985]) described the merge of news and entertainment in the era of TV during the 80s to meet the demands of an audience grown during the TV era and in need of more light news formats. Sportainment is a sequel of the term created by Postman born in the strategic marketing of sport brands world to describe the merge of sports and entertainment (Desbordes & Richelieu, 2019; Richelieu, 2021; Richelieu & Webb, 2021). Not that the sport is not a sort of entertainment per se, especially its mass version. There is a tradition of totalitarian regimes that use sport as a transcript of the old panem et circenses to entertain people and

distract them from politics (Logothetis et al., 2012; Zarza Rondón, 2017; Ubeda et al., 2014). There is also a tradition of business tycoons that offering spectacle through the ownership of soccer organizations pretend to gain public reputation and do better business (García, 2023; Nicolau, 2011).

This notion of sport and entertainment is appealing to the Generation Z due to technological developments and changed in the consumption patterns. Recent studies confirm that game formats, videogames, and realities, for example, as well as audiovisual and social media content that expresses emotions are popular among this generation (López Vidales & Gómez Rubio, 2021). The lack of interest of young people in traditional media and their replacement by video-on-demand platforms and social networks has caused TikTok and Twitch to become the main sources of information and entertainment for them, demanding an evolution in brand content (IAB 2022). The Kings League can be understood as a clear attempt of the advertising industry to transform its communication strategies addressed to the Generation Z. There is evidence in Spain young people remember more the brands that appear as sponsors of events in Twitch, even better than Tik Tok (García Rivero et al., 2022).

Moreover, Spilker et al., (2018) note that linear-TV is re-emerging in novel formats such as the concepts of 'spatial switching' and 'affective switching', they describe how Twitch practices and infrastructures introduce new dimensions of flexibility, convenience, and user-control to flow, liveness and linear-TV.

Hence, the aim of this article is, after a careful assessment of the Kings League as a novel form and format of sport communication and its comparison with League of Professional Soccer (LFP), to suggest a new approach to sport communication to reach the younger generations. As such, this article is going to conceptualize the sportainment communication mix of the Kings League. How has the introduction of sportainment crystallize the bond between the organization of a new league and the young audiences in a record time? Our hypothesis is the Kings League understood the fit between the concept of sportainment and the Generation Z in Spain. While Florentino Pérez, Real Madrid President, and leader of the European Super League project, repeated several times the purpose of that new tournament was "to save the football. The situation is dramatic" (Calonge, 2021) because of the lack of connection with the new generations, although he did not provide any data. However, the success of the Kings League in a short period of time shows there is a need of new formats and new ways of sport communication with younger audiences. "Effective strategic marketing of a sport brand, or marketing through sport, must present a fit between the relationship the target audience has with sport on the one hand, and the sportainment level of the sport-related initiative, on the other" (Richelieu & Webb, 2021, p. 2). For that purpose, this paper is structured as follows: first, a literature review, second, the methodology; third, the case of the Kings League and our findings (survey, in-depth interviews, and content analysis); and fourth, a discussion and conclusion (including limitations of the study and future research directions).

1.1. Hypotheses

This paper analyzes the perception that Generation Z in Spain has about the sport communication style of the Kings League and how differs from the LFP. The following hypotheses were made:

- H1. The Kings League embraces an idea of sportainment that is more appealing to younger audiences than traditional professional soccer leagues such as LFP.
- H2. GenZers prefer to build their own narratives than relying on traditional journalism.
- H3. There is more spontaneity and more showing in Kings League retransmissions and sport programs.
- H4. Shorter and unpredictable matches are perceived as positive features.
- H5. The role of youtubers, streamers and former players with charisma is more appealing than the figure of the traditional business tycoon type of president.
- H6. Semiamateurism is perceived as more authentic than professional players.

For this purpose, we implemented a survey among an audience of 272 Generation Z members, mainly college students with 24 closed questions and 4 open questions. The answers to open questions are used in surveys carried out in various disciplines because they are considered an essential extension of the questionnaires when it comes to exploring and delving into a complex or little-known topic (Walliman, 2011). The aim is to collect spontaneous information from the individuals surveyed who, even though

they pose difficulties in subsequent coding, offer textual and non-textual data that provide opinions and attitudes of these individuals, thereby enriching the information about a group of people, among other advantages (Pope, 2012).

2. Literature review

Soccer is a civil religion (Xifra, 2008). Indeed, in an increasingly impersonal and globalized world where traditions (family, country, church, etc.) are unable to provide meaning (Castells, 1997), soccer organizations have replaced religions as a main factor that affect the self-perceived personal and collective identities (Xifra & Ordeix, 2008). Liturgy, rituals, expectations, and human bonds are alike between secular religions such as soccer and spiritual and metaphysical religions (Sterchele, 2007).

Identity is a big issue in soccer, and we can argue the social importance of soccer is because of the identity factor. Qatar World Cup, a tournament based on then identification of the fans with their national teams, was watched by 3.5 million people (beIN SPORTS, 2022). Identity is “our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and reciprocally other people’s understanding of themselves and of others (which include us)” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 18).

In the world of soccer, the allegiance to a team is usually linked to a city, a region, a country, an ethnicity, or at least a territory. Soccer clubs represent specific places and groups of people in a globalized environment (Harris & Parker, 2009; Giulianotti, 2009; Evans & Norcliffe, 2016). Soccer is active in the construction of social identities (Giulianotti, 1999; Stodolska & Tainsky, 2014). Tajfel (1970) and Tajfel & Turner (1986) argued that individuals often see themselves through affiliation with specific groups and that people tend to associate themselves closely with groups likely to boost their self-esteem. That explain why soccer fans of a small-town team in any part of the world share their loyalty with a high-end team such as Liverpool, Bayern Munich or Real Madrid. They are dual fans. Sport fandom is particularly an attractive way to enhance personal identity since it is merely subjective (you just have to self-identify as a fan of any given team and you become one), it does not require any skill and small or no economic investment at all (Zillmann et al., 1989). Being a fan, or a viewer by the same token, is just “watching people work” (Rascher et al., 2021, p. 111). In the case of the Kings League, it happens in Twitch which is completely free unlike cable/paid TV and collective identity, as mentioned above, is not tied to any territory.

Identity theory adds to social identity theory the role of personal identity in the creation process of fan identity (Jacobson, 2003). According to identity theory, human beings are a collection of identities, each of which occupies a particular role in an individual’s personality (Stryker, 1968; Burke, 1991; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Although each of the different identities offers a partial answer for defining the individual self, the individual gives more salience to some identities than others. Soccer fandom is one of them for many people. The secret of popular global clubs is their fans in other parts of the globe like to be associated with winner teams. Global fans may also feel attracted to one or several players, their nationality, the club values, or an attractive way of playing. Since Kings League fans are mainly in Spain and the identity territorial factor does not play a role, there must be other factors that generate allegiance such as the values of the league itself, the personality of players and/or the influencers/streamers that are the presidents of the clubs, or just the fun they get watching the games. The purpose of this research is to figure it out asking GenZs about it and how a different style of sport communication contribute to it.

“Sportainment” is a portmanteau word which reacts to the need to reflect on the commercial establishment of sports within the sphere of media entertainment” (Radosinska, 2018, p. 23). Due to the mutations that have occurred in society, sport is becoming sportainment, “a gradual historical fusion of sport and entertainment” (Richelieu & Webb, 2021, p. 5). Technological advancements, changes in consumer behaviour and new expectations from stakeholders are leading to an approach to sportainment in the world of sports (Richelieu, 2021). One of the best examples is the Super Bowl event, an annual event of the National Football League (NFL) in United States that with time has become popular all over the world. It is a combination of show business events such as music concerts and spectacular and expensive advertising. It does not even require from the spectator a narrative since it is a single match. Indeed, most audiences outside of the US do not follow NFL on a regular basis.

There are a number of actors and celebrities that are becoming involved in sport management. The list is long: Will Ferrell owns LAFC; Natalie Portman co-owns with Serena Williams Angel City FC; David Beckham bought Inter Miami, Rene Witherspoon owns the Tennessee Titans, etc. (Yoesting, 2022). By

any means, the merge of sport, show business and spectacle is new even preserving the framework of traditional soccer. Silvio Berlusconi owned Milan AC during the 90s while he was the President of one of the main media and entertainment conglomerates in Italy and Europe. The so-called Real Madrid “Galácticos” era brought entertainment and glamour to competitive soccer. Beckham or Ronaldo were more than players, but metrosexual sex symbols. They were capable of “scoring a good goal, having an affair, painting their nails black, shooting underwear commercials for Calvin Klein or Armani, and so on” (García, 2011, p. 290). José Angel Sánchez, Real Madrid’s general marketing director with Florentino Pérez, defined soccer as a “business of contents” (Campos, 2002, p. 236). So, the idea of sport as entertainment is not new. It is argued that sport in Ancient Greece and Rome was associated with significant levels of commercial activity and as a mass-spectacle (Vanplew, 2022). In current times, big sport mega-events, such as the World Cup or the Olympics, have become entertainment for global masses with a high dose of spectacularisation and entertainment to project soft power (van der Westhuizen, 2011; Gruneau & Horne, 2015; Giulianotti, 2015).

Another aspect of sportainment is the relevance given to the “hidden background” (Radosinska, 2018, p. 24), that gains relevance for the oversaturated media audiences. Museums, stadium tours, shopping areas, restaurants develop at the heat of sport. Entertainment usually precedes monetization. That is the case of Real Madrid and Barcelona museums in Spain that attract more visitors than most of art museums even if they are much more expensive (García, 2021; Richelieu & Webb, 2021). This overcommercialisation of entertainment has changed the audiences of soccer in the stadiums, which has switched to an international or even tourist composition in detriment of the traditional Spanish working-class aficionado. It also has excluded the young population which is one of the distinctive aspects of the Kings League. The tickets sold in Barcelona stadium for its presentation costed 10 euros and attracted a mass of young people.

This notion of sportainment squares well with the Debord’s Society of spectacle (1967). Debord, founder of the International Situationist, describes a society in which who controls the spectacle, has the power. According to Debord, postmodern life has become a representation of reality in which spectacle replaces genuine activity. The world we see is not real but the one we have been conditioned to see (Jeffries, 2021). Artificial spectacles are the norm in the search for spectacularisation and become a new reality (Webb & Richelieu, 2021). And this principle applies to any industry and brand including sports and soccer (Stratton, 2021).

An important factor of sportainment is interactivity. While in traditional sport communication, sports journalists have been the ones who predominately shape and define dominant narratives, that is less the case in a sportainment environment. This hyper digitalized era (Lawrence & Crawford, 2018) now allows athletes, fans, and sports organizations to impose their own narrative frames on sporting events in the real time (Ojo, 2018). This has changed the tenor and tone of sport communication, and the fast connection of the Kings League with Generation Z is a proof of that.

3. Method

In today's media ecosystem, the pairing of digital media and sporting events has become an object of study, from the perspective of how these new broadcasting channels transform the format, consumption, and perception of sporting events (Andrew et al., 2020). A space in which the Kings League can be included due to its innovative approach to integrating entertainment, leisure, and sport (Michels et al., 2023).

In this context, this paper, which focuses on the perception and behaviours of viewers towards the Kings League, uses a quantitative methodology that attempts to capture the complexity of measuring these attitudes in the digital age (Heere, 2018). To this end, survey research has been designed to detect patterns of preference in individuals regarding the consumption of content provided by the Kings League and how it compares to traditional football championships such as LaLiga.

This option has been chosen for its usefulness in validating hypotheses related to descriptive analyses and correlations between variables (Creswell and Creswel, 2018). In sports marketing (Veal, 2017).

In this sense, firstly, a descriptive analysis is proposed that provides an overview of the data, using measures of central tendency and dispersion, to summarise the main characteristics of the study

variables. The interpretation of these descriptives provides a first understanding of the sample and key variables (Heiman, 2013). Secondly, an inferential analysis is applied, where relationships are sought between variables, previously described, that allow generalizations to be established in the profile submitted to the survey. At this point, Pearson's correlation coefficient is applied as a backbone to assess the strength and direction of linear relationships between quantitative variables (Coolican, 2018). The application of descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation coefficient follows standard statistical methodology for the analysis of survey data, providing a sound basis for the interpretation of patterns and relationships between variables (Field, 2018). Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) is obtained by dividing the numerator by the square root of the product of the sums of squares of the denominator:

Figure 1. Pearson's correlation.

$$r = \frac{\sum(x_i - \bar{x})(y_i - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum(x_i - \bar{x})^2 \sum(y_i - \bar{y})^2}}$$

Source(s): own, 2024.

This approach allows not only to describe the characteristics of the sample but also to explore the strength and direction of associations between Kings League consumption and factors such as age and Internet use.

The selection of the sample, 270 participants, is based on the accessibility and availability of these participants. It is a convenience sample like previous studies that seek to obtain immediate insights into new trends or emerging phenomena (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, snowball sampling has been carried out because of its usefulness in cases where the research target is difficult to reach (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). It is a practice that involves recruiting participants who, in turn, identify and recruit others within their social networks, allowing access to a broader and more diverse sample within the community of interest (Sadler et al., 2010).

For the design of the questionnaire, clear, concise, and relevant to the research objectives questions were always sought, which were validated by a committee of five experts, represented by university professors, specialists in the field (Dillman et al., 2014). Furthermore, the inclusion of Likert-scale questions allows for a nuanced assessment of attitudes and perceptions, to the benefit of quantitative analysis of attitudinal data (Likert, 1932).

From an ethical and legal point of view, a process of informed consent was developed, so that respondents had all the necessary data concerning the nature and purpose of the study, as well as the availability of the study in an accessible manner, so that they could make informed decisions about their collaboration in the study (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). Along the same lines, appropriate measures were taken to preserve and protect the privacy of the members under study, for which data anonymisation systems were used in the survey itself (Resnik, 2021).

It is necessary to point out the limitations of this approach in terms of representativeness and generalisability of results. A problem that will be addressed by triangulating data with future qualitative research and analysis of trends in the consumption of sports content through social networks.

4. Results

The survey was launched with a special focus on the 18-34 age group (94.5% of the total), although due to its snowball sampling, it also reached the 35-44 age group, as well as a small group over 45 (5.5% of the total). Two segments of the population that also provide valuable prospective information in terms of changing generational attitudes towards the consumption of sports content. As for the location of the respondents, most of the answers were collected in the Madrid region, although the form was also completed by individuals from Seville, Badajoz, Guadalajara, Almeria, Barcelona, Murcia, Granada, and Andorra la Vella, among others. Likewise, more than half, 52.57%, had completed university or higher education, followed by 24.26% with a baccalaureate. In third place, 15.07% have completed a higher-level training cycle and only 8.09% only completed ESO or did not complete official studies.

After this brief socio-demographic profile, an exploratory analysis is carried out, from which some insights related to age range, level of studies, distribution of time spent on the Internet and consumption of sports content are extracted. This analysis shows a variety in the consumption of sports content

according to age range and level of studies. For example, young people aged 18 to 24, with training and without completed formal studies, have a high rate of consumption of sports content. In contrast, in the 45+ age group, consumption is significantly lower, except for those with university or higher education, where there is 25% consumption.

Table 1. Percentage of people who consume sports content, broken down by age range and level of education

Age Range	Baccalaureate	Formative Cycle	ESO	University or Higher Education	No Official Studies Completed
18-24	73.68%	81.82%	80.00%	66.67%	83.33%
25-34	85.71%	63.16%	66.67%	76.92%	100.00%
35-44	50.00%	0.00%	100.00%	71.43%	100.00%
Over 45	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	0.00%

Source(s): Own, based on Google Forms and Excel.

Once it has been verified that the most representative sample analysed claims to consume sports content, information is extracted about their perception of sporting competitions, including the Kings League, La Liga, and the Champions League. This is a block of questions common to all three competitions, with the aim of being able to establish similarities and differences, which may condition the consumption habits of the sample. The questions posed are as follows:

1. Watch Kings League, La Liga, or Champions League (Yes | No | Sometimes)
2. What would you highlight about the Kings League or LaLiga (the brands involved | the commentators | the players | the staging | the rules | the advertising)?

It is particularly striking how the 25-34 age group has the highest percentage of regular Kings League viewers (52.17%), followed by the 35-44 age group (45.45%) and the 18-24 age group (37.23%). Viewers who have watched the Kings League "Sometime" have relatively high percentages in all age groups except the 45+ age group. The 45+ age group shows a strong preference for not watching the Kings League, with 75% stating that they do not watch it. Among the aspects of the Kings League that stand out, the rules and the staging are the most mentioned aspects in the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups. In the 18-24 age group, the rules are also the most important, while the players are particularly valued in the 45+ age group.

With respect to La Liga, the results are similar, although with a higher degree of loyalty in the older age segments. For example, the 18-24 age group has the highest percentage of regular viewers of La Liga (58.51%), followed by the 25-34 age group (53.62%) and those over 45 (50.00%).

Viewers who have watched La Liga "Sometime" have significant percentages in all age groups, especially in the 35-44 and 45+ age groups with 45.45% and 50.00%, respectively.

The lowest percentage of people who do not watch La Liga is found in the 45+ age group, with 0%, indicating a generalised interest in the sport among respondents in this age group.

In contrast to the Kings League, it is the players that La Liga consumers highlight the most in this case. Other aspects, such as the commentators and the staging, also receive mentions, but to a lesser extent than in the Kings League. Advertising and rules go virtually unnoticed, with almost residual ratings.

Table 2. Aspects to be assessed in the Kings League and La Liga by age group

Theme	Most valued aspects of the Kings League			
	18-24 (%)	25-34 (%)	35-44 (%)	Over 45 (%)
Brands	6.91%	2.90%	0.00%	0.00%
Commentators	10.64%	2.90%	9.09%	0.00%

Players	13.83%	13.04%	0.00%	25.00%
Staging	12.77%	15.94%	27.27%	25.00%
Rules	20.21%	26.09%	27.27%	0.00%
Advertising	6.91%	4.35%	0.00%	0.00%
Most valued aspects of La Liga				
Theme	18-24 (%)	25-34 (%)	35-44 (%)	Over 45 (%)
Brands	3.19%	2.90%	0.00%	0.00%
Commentators	5.32%	7.25%	0.00%	0.00%
Players	44.15%	31.88%	45.45%	50.00%
Staging	2.66%	5.80%	0.00%	25.00%
Rules	2.13%	5.80%	0.00%	0.00%
Advertising	3.72%	1.45%	0.00%	0.00%

Source: Own, based on Google Forms and Excel.

Having completed the first part of the research, where emphasis was placed on the cultural and demographic profile of the sample, as well as on their preferences and aspects of La Liga and the Kings League, the second part of the study aims to determine the perception of the Kings League, taking into account the degree of agreement and disagreement of the public surveyed with a series of statements, measured on a Likert scale. The results have been categorised according to age groups and the statistical criteria: Mode, Mean, Median and Standard Deviation.

The claims raised are as follows:

1. The Kings League provides better development and growth opportunities for participants in other professional competitions.
2. The production and broadcasting of events in the Kings League is of a higher quality than in other professional competitions.
3. The Kings League encourages more sportsmanship and fair play than other professional competitions.
4. Communication with participants and supporters in the Kings League is clearer and more effective than in other sporting competitions.
5. The Kings League adapts and evolves more adequately to changes in e-sports than other sports competitions.
6. The job posting on InfoJobs gives the Kings League a positive impact on the local community and promotes sportsmanship.
7. The day Ronaldinho played for Ibai's team had a positive impact for the Kings League.
8. The day Ibai went down on the pitch to take a penalty against Casillas had a positive impact for the Kings League.
9. The draft-based transfer system and the purchase of fictitious money cards has a positive impact on the Kings League.

Of all the statements, it is particularly striking how in the 18-24 and 24-35 age groups there are trends of 5 and averages above 4 for questions 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9.

Thus, firstly, the results of statement 4 highlight the greater ease of communication between participants and fans compared to other sports competitions. The proximity, Twitch's own qualities as one of the competition's broadcasting channels, and the empathy generated by the team presidents themselves, who are also streamers, seem to generate links with their audience.

There is therefore a kind of symbiosis between sports broadcasts and accessibility to the protagonists of such events. A circumstance that is in line with the usual practice of these content generators, their followers, and subscribers, around the live streaming of video game matches, such as Fortnite, among others, as can be inferred from the reactions collected in question 5.

Following on from the previous statistical analyses, where great importance was given to the novelty of the rules of the competition, statements 7 and 8 reinforce the concept of gamification and sportainment, the object of study of this work, where spectacularity and script twists, outside the rules established by traditional football, seem to be the keys to its success. The moments in which celebrities from the world of sport or streaming, who come down to the pitch to share some kind of activity with the public, are very positively valued.

For example, the day Ronaldinho wore the shirt of Ibai Llanos' team had an average acceptance rate of 4.19 and 4.16, out of 5, in the 18-24 and 24-35 age groups, respectively. Something similar occurs when it comes to evaluating the day that Ibai Llanos and Iker Casillas, both presidents of teams in the Kings League, met on the pitch, with the intention of the Basque content creator beating the former Real Madrid and Spanish national football team goalkeeper from the penalty spot.

Finally, the adaptation of formats such as the fictitious money-based player selection system, in the purest showbusiness style of the NBA Draft night, is also well received by the audience with a 5 out of 5 rating in the 18-44 age group.

Table 3. Statements about the Kings League most highly rated by the sample

4. Communication with participants and supporters in the Kings League is clearer and more effective than in other sporting competitions.				
Statistician	18-24	25-34	35-44	Over 45
Fashion	5.00	5.00	5.00	3.00
Media	4.14	4.20	3.82	2.50
5. The Kings League adapts and evolves more adequately to changes in e-sports than other sports competitions.				
Fashion	5.00	5.00	4.00	3.00
Media	3.96	4.16	3.91	2.50
7. The day Ronaldinho played with Ibai's team had a positive impact for the Kings League.				
Fashion	5.00	5.00	5.00	3.00
Media	4.19	4.16	3.82	2.75
8. The day Ibai went down the pitch to take a penalty against Casillas had a positive impact for the Kings League.				
Fashion	5.00	5.00	5.00	3.00
Media	4.21	4.03	3.73	3.00
9. The draft-based transfer system and the purchase of fictitious money cards has a positive impact on the Kings League.				
Fashion	5.00	5.00	5.00	3.00
Media	3.81	3.84	4.09	2.75

Source: Own, based on Google Forms and Excel.

Finally, a series of prospective correlations are presented between the consumption of Kings League content and the rest of the variables analysed. For this purpose, the Pearson correlation coefficient, which measures the linear correlation between two quantitative variables, was used. Since some of the variables are categorical (e.g. yes/no responses or rating scales from 1 to 5), these responses were converted into numerical values to calculate the correlations.

By applying this coefficient, we seek to understand the dynamics that affect viewer behaviour and their interaction with competitions such as the Kings League. The variables that have been cross-referenced to see how they influence the consumption of Kings League content revolve around 6 factors:

1. Easier communication between participants and supporters.
2. Adaptation of the competition to e-sports including the impact of famous players or e-gaming personalities on the competition.
3. Its commitment to innovation in formats and rules of the game.
4. Call for participation in the non-professional competition.
5. Impact of the InfoJobs recruitment call.
6. Impact of the draft-based transfer system.

The Kings League reveals significant insights into the preferences and behaviours of its audience. Firstly, effective communication with participants and fans emerges as the most influential factor in the consumption of the Kings League, with a correlation of 0.6102. This finding underlines the importance of clear and effective communication in sports, supporting the idea that engagement and transparency are crucial to maintaining and growing the viewer base (Ishak, 2021).

Innovation in terms of formats and rules of competition, with Ronaldinho's intervention in Ibai's team as the most valued fact, is the next most important factor, with a moderately high correlation of 0.5186. This reflects how the search for new ways of presenting and structuring sports competitions can attract a young and dynamic audience, in line with previous studies, which highlight the demand for innovative sports experiences among younger consumers. These events generate immediate attention and contribute to the Kings League being perceived as a vibrant and exciting competition. A claim in line with existing literature on the effect of celebrities in increasing perceived value and viewer interest (Kowalski, 2022).

Adaptation and evolution in the face of changes in e-sports, with a moderate correlation of 0.4334, as well as the draft-based signing system and purchasing with dummy money cards, with a correlation of 0.4158, are other factors to be considered. Results that point to the importance of integrating elements of e-sports and innovative approaches to team management can enrich the spectator experience (Abbink et al., 2021).

However, the impact of initiatives such as the call for applications for job offers on InfoJobs, with a correlation of 0.3295, and the perception of the Kings League as an interesting alternative to traditional competitions, with a correlation of 0.3559, is low. Therefore, it does not seem to be a differential value that stimulates links with the audience and leads us to think that La Liga, the Champions League and the Kings League are bound to coexist, as they are not mutually exclusive.

Table 4. Pearson's correlation on the influence of variables on Kings League consumption

Factor	Correlation	Magnitude
Effective communication with participants	0.6102	High
Innovation in competition formats and rules	0.5186	Moderate
Adapting to changes in e-sports	0.4334	Moderate
Fictitious money card system for signing and buying with cards	0.4158	Moderate
Call for applications for job vacancies on InfoJobs	0.3295	Baja
Perception as an alternative to traditional competitions	0.3559	Baja

Source: Own elaboration, based on Google Forms and Excel.

The Kings League has effectively positioned itself as an innovative alternative to traditional football, aligning itself with the interests and digital lifestyle of Generation Z. This alignment is due to its interactive approach and extensive use of digital platforms for broadcasting and audience engagement.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The study confirms Generation Z's trend towards gamification, sportainment and distraction. While traditional football is far from dead among young people, it cannot and should not be based on tradition and player quality alone, leaving aside other possibilities.

In terms of the hypotheses put forward in our research, it has been possible to demonstrate that the Kings League, with its sportainment approach, aligns with the preferences of Generation Z in Spain. The contrast with the Professional Football League is great.

Out of the 6 hypotheses that were put forward, five of them have been confirmed by the research (1 to 5) and one has been refuted as being of little relevance to the young respondents. Namely, it is proven that:

H1. The Kings League is attractive to young audiences thanks to its mix of sport and entertainment, its innovative use of Twitch and other platforms to stream matches.

H2. Another element of attractiveness of this young league is the creation of its own narratives that are distinct from traditional journalism.

H3. The Kings League stands out for its spontaneity, spectacle, shorter matches (50 minutes less than professional football) and unpredictability. The involvement of charismatic streamers and ex-players, rather than traditional corporate moguls, is also new.

H4. Personalisation and immediacy of consumption are key elements in attracting this young segment. The Kings League capitalises on these trends by offering more individualised and accessible experiences through digital media.

H5. The research underlines the importance of innovation in sport beyond technology, e.g. experimental gamification formats, as a mechanism to maintain cultural relevance and engagement with youth audiences. The influence of the Kings League has already been felt in traditional broadcasting.

On the other hand, we must discard H6. referring to the greater authenticity of semi-amateurism, since the most interesting moments of the first edition of the championship corresponded to the on-screen presence of Ronaldinho, Kun Agüero and Iker Casillas, three footballers with long professional careers.

So far, Professional Football League broadcasts have reacted to the spectacle of sports broadcasting by adopting the Kings League's multi-screen, digitally native language. For example, they already include a camera in the commentary booth so that the audience can see in real time the reaction of the commentators during the scoring of goals on split screen, interviews with professional players at half-time and interviews with both players and coaches by ex-footballers at the end of the match. In addition, with the collaboration of the official operators holding the audiovisual rights of La Liga, the VAR (Video Arbitration) audios of the matches have started to be made public after the end of each day's competition. The league's governing body and the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) took this measure since the end of 2023 as a necessary step to explain refereeing decisions.

The comparison of these two examples with the Kings League is automatic, as from the beginning this competition introduced cameras in the club presidents' booths and wireless microphones for referees so that both their decisions during matches and their live conversations with players could be always heard by the audience.

Ted Gioia (2024) argues that the shift from entertainment to "distraction" is the driving force behind contemporary culture. Gioia predicts the emergence of a "post-entertainment culture" where gamification and digital addiction, driven by the algorithms of digital platforms, dominate the landscape. The Kings League fits into this trend.

Another factor of interest of the Kings League is that it dismantles traditional notions linked to European football, in particular the deep-rooted link between sport and local and regional identity. In contrast to the representation of football teams as ambassadors of their cities and regions, the Kings League departs from this tradition, not following the franchise model characteristic of American sports. Here, the enthusiasm of the fans is focused more on entertainment than on a personal and collective identification traditionally associated with football fans. Theories of social identity (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and personal identity (Burke, 1991; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000) explain why

football often generates deep loyalty among its fans, nurturing their self-esteem and offering a sense of belonging in an increasingly impersonal world.

The Kings League, however, creates an experience detached from any specific local or territorial context. This form of sportainment, initially broadcast exclusively on Twitch and later free-to-air television, underlines a fundamentally virtual interaction with its audience, suggesting a reconfiguration of the relationship between fans and football towards a more globalised and delocalised dimension.

In the future, to observe whether this phenomenon in sports communication constitutes a trend beyond the Spanish framework, it will be useful to analyse emerging sports leagues in which gamification and sportainment are protagonists and with disruptive approaches both in terms of formats and the use of technology. These studies should focus both on football - the Kings League has announced plans to expand into Latin America - and other sports such as wrestling, the World Balloon World Cup or any others that may arise, if there is a business opportunity involved.

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