

## The impact of Instagram on consumer behavior of football supporters: the case of Sport Lisboa e Benfica

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Os autores declaram que este artigo tem por base uma dissertação de mestrado apresentada à Universidade Católica Portuguesa no âmbito do mestrado de Ciências da Comunicação, variante de Comunicação, Marketing e Publicidade pelo primeiro autor Marta Araújo, com orientação do co-autor Professor Doutor Alexandre Duarte, e não foi submetido a nenhum outro periódico.

**Submissão: 02/12/2023**

**Aceitação: 21/05/2024**

# **O impacte do Instagram no comportamento do consumidor dos adeptos de futebol: o caso do Sport Lisboa e Benfica**

**Resumo (PT):** Ao proporcionarem a possibilidade de interação em tempo real, as redes sociais tornaram-se excelentes ferramentas de comunicação e relacionamento entre as organizações e os seus *stakeholders*. Os clubes de futebol, organizações desportivas e sociais de elevada complexidade, não podem ficar de fora desta nova realidade. Este artigo visa compreender o impacte que a qualidade do relacionamento, a comunicação, e o *engagement* no Instagram têm nos comportamentos de consumo dos adeptos do clube de futebol Sport Lisboa e Benfica (SLB). Para tal, foi aplicada uma metodologia mista, com entrevistas exploratórias a alguns dirigentes do clube, análise das publicações do Instagram do clube e um inquérito por questionário respondido por trezentos e sessenta e um adeptos. Os resultados confirmam que existe uma qualidade significativa de relacionamento entre os adeptos e o clube, e que a comunicação e o *engagement* no Instagram estimulam o consumo de produtos e serviços do clube, o que gera retornos financeiros significativos.

*Palavras-chave:* Sport Lisboa e Benfica (SLB), Qualidade de Relacionamento, *Engagement*, Instagram, Comportamento do Consumidor Adepto.

## **The impact of Instagram on consumer behavior of football supporters: the case of Sport Lisboa e Benfica**

**Abstract (EN):** Brands need to be where their consumers are. Social networks, by providing the possibility of interaction in real time, have become excellent communication and relationship tools between organizations and their stakeholders. Football clubs, highly complex sports and social organizations cannot stay out of this new reality. This article aims to understand the impact that the relationship quality and the communication and engagement on Instagram have on the consumption behaviors of supporters of the football club Sport Lisboa e Benfica (SLB). To this end, a mixed data collection method was applied, with exploratory interviews to some directors of the club, analysis of the club's Instagram publications, and a questionnaire survey answered by three hundred and sixty-one supporters. The results confirm that there is a significant relationship quality between the supporters and the club, and that the communication and engagement on Instagram stimulates the consumption of the club's products and services, which generates significant financial returns.

*Keywords:* Sport Lisboa e Benfica (SLB), Relationship Quality, Engagement, Instagram, Supporter Consumer Behavior.

## **Introduction**

Over the last few years, the relationship between social networks and football has gained considerable prominence (Nisar, Prabhakar & Patil, 2018; Kharmalki & Raizada, 2020; Koronios, Travlos, Douvis & Papadopoulos, 2020; Kim, Qian, Lee, Mastromartino & Zhang, 2020; Fenton Keegan & Parry, 2021). On one hand, social networks are virtual platforms that connects millions of people, regardless of the country they are in (Fenton et al., 2021). Instagram, the focus of this investigation, prioritizes communication among users through the sharing of photographs and videos (Abeza, O'Reilly, Sanderson & Frederick, 2021). This platform also encourages supporters to become more and more involved with football clubs (Kuzma, Bell, & Logue, 2014), and it is the one they most value for their interaction (Kharmalki & Raizada, 2020; Mahmoudian, Boroujerdi, Siyani & Mahmoud, 2021). On the other hand, football clubs recognize the increasing importance and impact of new media and social networks, in the detriment of the so-called traditional media, to obtain high levels of engagement with supporters, whose feeling of passion for clubs goes beyond logic and reason (Giulianotti, 2002), creating a strong relationship of commitment and loyalty to them (Kim & Trail, 2011). The goal of this study is to analyze the relationship of the football supporters of Sport Lisboa e Benfica (SLB) with their club, through a specific media channel - Instagram, analyzed throughout an entire sport season, in order to understand its impact on the relation, engagement, and consumption behavior.

## **1. Theoretical Framework**

### **1.1. A phenomenon called football**

The origin of this sport is not universally recognized, but it is commonly accepted that modern football, as well as its first regulatory institution - the International Football Association Board (IFAB) whose 1863 rules are the basis of the sport today, have emerged in England, around mid 19th century (Godoi & Cardoso, 1989; Sousa & Vieira, 2018). Considered the “sports king” (Sousa & Vieira, 2018; Quintela, 2020) and the most popular sport ever (Cruz, Schregel & Zülch, 2021; Nielsen Sports, 2018), football is responsible for millions of dollars revenue every year (Quintela, 2020), and exerts a direct influence on various sectors such as social, cultural, economic, educational and touristic (Sousa & Vieira, 2018).

Its rapid evolution spurred the creation of distinct regulatory institutions at an international level, such as the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) in 1904 (Sousa & Vieira, 2018), and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), in 1954 (UEFA, 2022). At a national level, the Portuguese Football Federation (FPF) emerged in 1914 and, in 1978, the Professional Football Portuguese League (LPFP) was founded (Federação Portuguesa de Futebol, 2021). In the mid-1990s, the concept of “brand” entered the sports industry, and football won’t stayed apart of this trend. From that moment, clubs were no longer recognized as “non-profit” organizations and are now recognized as “for-profit” organizations (Sousa & Vieira, 2018), offering a set of services to their supporters, who in this way become customers that consume the products that clubs offered to them (McLean & Wainwright, 2009; Tapp, 2004; Lucena & Casaca, 2013). As stated by Irwin, Zwick and Sutton (1999), the professional sports industry would not survive nowadays without effective marketing operations. Since Football has become a worldwide huge business, with the majority of the greatest football clubs being listed on stock exchanges worldwide and generating great revenues, they become real brands, in the sense that Duarte (2023) described them, as "metaphors acting as an unwritten contract between producer and consumer, seller and buyer, actor and audience, an environment and those who inhabit it, an event and those who experience it." (p. 6). This way, the phenomenon of "club brands" has emerged as one of the most valuable assets for these organizations (Toma & Catana, 2021).

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed serious challenges on this activity, such as playing games behind closed doors, declining revenues, uncertainty in the relationships between current and potential partners in the transmission and commercialization of television rights, among others (Deloitte, 2021). Consequently, it was the communication on social networks that allowed clubs the opportunity not only to consolidate their brand power, but also to enhance their relationship with supporters, and stimulate their consumption behaviors.

## **1.2. Supporters: characteristics and relationship with football clubs**

“The supporters are the main fuel to keep the clubs alive” (Sousa & Vieira, 2018, p. 297) and, depending on victories or defeats, they can positively or negatively influence the environment experienced inside and outside the stadiums (Abosag, Roper & Hind, 2012). The big difference between a football supporter and a consumer of other products categories is that the former remains loyal, even when their expectations are unrequited

(Kuzma et al., 2014; Balliauw, Onghena & Mulkens, 2020; Aichner, 2019). Commonly associated with tribalism (Diário de Notícias, 2017) and even with religion, supporters engage with football clubs through their commitment, passion, attachment, and loyalty (McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth & Pioch, 2014; Dionísio, Leal & Moutinho, 2008; Hunt, Bristol & Bashaw, 1999). In addition to the direct relationship between the sporting event, the state of mind and sense of humor (Kim, James, & Kim, 2013), supporters invest their financial, emotional, and time resources (Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Balliauw et al., 2020), act as true brand ambassadors and, consequently, help to strengthen and expand them (Salmi, Benar & Honari, 2019). Their dedication translates into a relationship with football clubs, which can be enhanced through its quality.

By relationship quality we understand the strength of a given connection (Kim & Trail, 2011) and, in the sports field, this allows the understanding of the relationship between sports organizations and supporters in order to develop more comprehensive relationships, to obtain information about relational assessments, and diagnose and/or resolve any problems that may arise more easily (Lee, Kunkel, Funk, Karg & McDonald, 2020). According to Kim and Trail (2011), it is necessary to observe five constructs in order to consider that there is a significant relationship quality between football clubs and supporters: 1. Trust, which means the conviction that the needs of a person are fulfilled by others, and where there is a willingness to trust in those who they believe; 2. Commitment, which symbolizes the belief that the relationship is important, and that efforts by the parties to maintain it are accepted; 3. Self-connection, which reflects the degree of concern that brands have with defining people's identity; 4. Intimacy, which represents familiarity and proximity between people; 5. Reciprocity, which means the existence of a balance in relationships that have feelings of indebtedness and obligations, and that exchange favors with each other. This model was chosen due to its facility, notoriety, and largely worldwide use, having been cited for almost 300 times, and its authors<sup>1</sup> are recognized as specialists in this field. Although its authors have continued to publish and evolve, this article remains the base worldwide recognized and widespread used.

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<sup>1</sup> - Together, Professors YukYoum Kim and Galen Trail have more than 16.000 citations of their academic work.

### **1.3. Communication and football**

The relationship between communication and sports began to be highlighted in the 1990s (Pedersen, 2017; Kharmalki & Raizada, 2020), essentially due to the increase in academic studies, the mass dissemination of events such as the UEFA Champions League, the multimillionaire contracts with the media, the creation of sports-related industries such as online betting or fantasy games, among others (Abeza, 2021; Mastromartino, Ross, Wear & Naraine, 2020; Butterworth, 2021; Kim et al., 2020; Frandsen, 2016).

Indispensable in any organization, communication is increasingly related to several other areas, such as finance, television rights contracts, technology, streaming services, artificial intelligence, promotions, the mediatization of interactions with consumers, or related with the information obtained through big data (Pedersen, Laucella, Kian & Geurin, 2020). Consequently, the demand for the amount and qualification of communication professionals in sports increases progressively. This fact is evidenced by the number of training courses specialized in the area (Pedersen et al., 2020), by empowering sports organizations that create their own departments of communication, marketing, public relations, etc. (Herencia, 2021; Mahan, 2011; Koronios et al., 2020), and for the media prominence of professions such as Communication Directors (Quintela, 2020). As a result, football clubs are becoming true media organizations, offering exclusive content, creating advertising content with them, selling them to sponsors and being financed directly by the public, with subscription fees (Borges, 2019).

### **1.4. New Media, social networks, and engagement in football**

The emergence of the internet allowed an increase in the independence of communication systems, and the appearance of a bottom-up culture. As a result of this evolution, social media emerged, which translates into internet applications, whose main characteristic are the creation and exchange of content among users. Easy accessibility, through personal devices such as smartphones, for example, contributed to their worldwide proliferation without once decisive restrictions such as location or time (Mastromartino et al., 2020; Balliauw et al., 2020; Popp, Germelmann & Jung, 2016). In the context of social media, social networks arised, which are electronic platforms that allows consumers to disseminate and share their thoughts and experiences about any type of subject through written, visual, or audiovisual forms (Hussain, Naz, Shahzad & Bajwa, 2021; Ozora & Susanto, 2021; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In addition, they have several benefits for organizations, such as: reduction of marketing costs by acquiring detailed information;

building customer loyalty and commitment; obtaining immediate feedback on services or products; strengthening the brand image and the opportunity to act proactively (Mabić, Lasić & Zovko, 2019; Balliau et al., 2020).

Instagram is a social network founded on October 6th, 2010, by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. This platform allows the sharing of photos and videos, accompanied by descriptions with unlimited characters (Aragão, Farias, Mota & Freitas, 2016; Kharmalki & Raizada, 2020; Ozora & Susanto, 2021), and it is increasingly used by global brands to achieve brand recognition and image goals (Anagnostopoulos, Parganas, Chadwick & Fenton, 2018). Instagram is currently the third most used social network in the world (Hussain et al., 2021) — excluding exclusive conversation platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger — and has more than 830 million users (Hootsuite, 2021).

Supporters use this social network to follow their clubs, which in turn is responsible for most of the engagement between this parties (1.5 billion engagement), compared to other social networks such as Facebook (140 million) or Twitter (41 million) (Nielsen Sports, 2018). Overall, supporters engage with brands four times more on Instagram than on Facebook (Price, 2017) because they prefer visual and instant interactions to written information (Kharmalki & Raizada, 2020; Hussain et al., 2021; Teo, Leng & Phua, 2019; Clavio, 2013).

Engagement contributes to the success of football clubs' strategies, as they can develop solutions that meet the demands and expectations created by the supporters (Aichner, 2019; Alonso-Dos-Santos, Rejón Guardia, Pérez Campos, Calabuig-Moreno & Ko, 2018; Stander, Llewellyn & Kemiso, 2016; van Doorn et al., 2010). Moreover, it allows to determine the level of interaction, intimacy, influence, and involvement that consumers have with organizations (Nisar et al., 2018; Obradović, Alčaković, Vyugina & Tasevski, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2014). Thus, when supporters' consumption motives and the degree of satisfaction that clubs provide them are congruent, engagement levels are significant and rewarding, loyalty between parties increases significantly (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018).

### **1.5. Relationship quality, communication, engagement on Instagram and consumption behaviors**

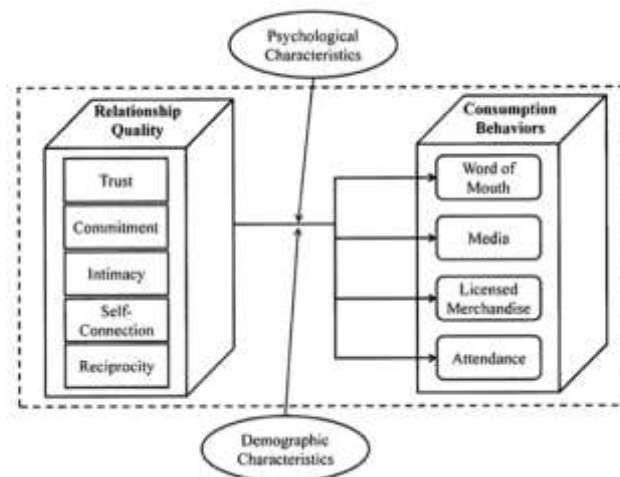
Relationship quality has a strong influence on the performance of consumption behaviors, with a direct correlation between the emotional and relational connection of supporters



with a football brand and their willingness to demonstrate behaviors that value it (Kim & Trail, 2011). The five relational constructs mentioned above — trust, commitment, self-connection, intimacy, and reciprocity — become dimensions of consumption triggered by yearning, preferences, and decision-making power (Albert, Merunka & Valette-Florence, 2008).

The result of the relationship quality between supporters and football clubs translates into consumption behaviors such as word of mouth, media consumption, purchase of merchandising and presence in club activities (Kim & Trail, 2011), as can be seen in the following figure 1:

Figure 1 - Conceptual structure proposed for the effects of the relationship quality between sports organizations and supporters



Source: Kim e Trail (2011)

In turn, Instagram allows supporters to benefit from a more active role in their relationship with the clubs, as they have the opportunity to express their love, belonging and, in some cases, criticize the behavior of their constituents both within and off the field (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Mastromartino et al., 2020). For clubs, Instagram allows, through communication, the ability to engage and persuade current and potential supporters, while building a relationship of trust in real time (Nisar et al., 2018). Thus, the greater the involvement of supporters on Instagram, the greater is the demonstration of their loyalty and attachment to the clubs that they choose to “follow” on this platform (Mahmoudian et al., 2021).

The relationship quality between supporters and clubs, combined with the communication and engagement generated on social networks, can lead to win-win results: supporters can express their needs, and clubs have the opportunity to understand and satisfy them (Williams & Chinn, 2010; Stavros, Meng, Westberg & Farrelly, 2014). Consequently, if supporters are satisfied, they'll be more committed, and will develop more consumption behaviors of the clubs' products/services (Kim & Trail, 2011). Furthermore, clubs can achieve significant financial profits, in the most varied areas of activity (Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, Shibuya & Fujiwara, 2018; Maderer & Parganas, 2018; Thompson, Martin, Gee & Geurin, 2018).

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Hypothesis**

Based on the literature review and on the object of study, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

**H1** — SLB has a defined communication strategy for the development of engagement on Instagram;

**H2** — There is a direct and positive effect of the relationship quality on the consumption behaviors of SLB supporters;

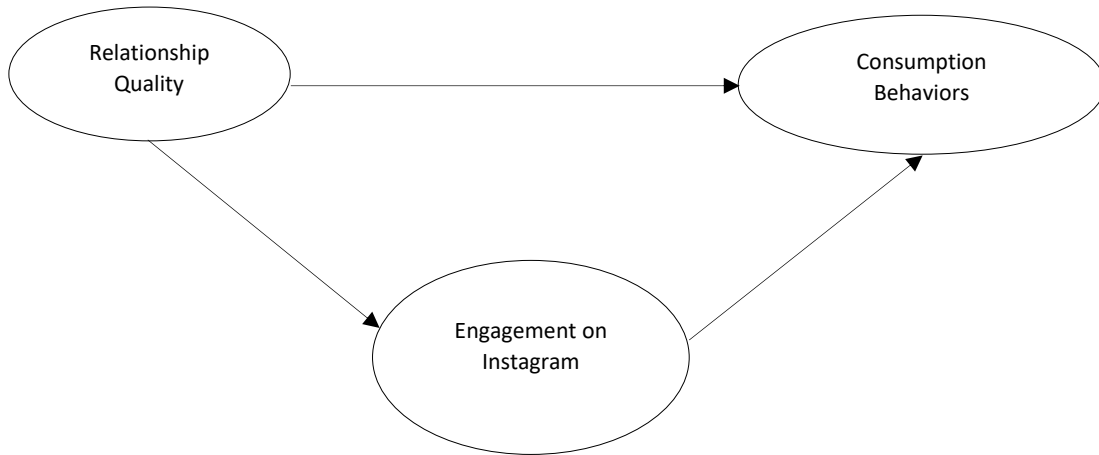
**H3** — There is a direct and positive effect of the relationship quality on the engagement on Instagram;

**H4** — There is a direct and positive effect of the engagement on Instagram on the consumption behaviors of SLB supporters;

**H5** — Engagement on Instagram plays a mediating role in the effect that the relationship quality has on the consumption behaviors of SLB supporters.

## 2.2 Research Model

Figure 2 - Proposed investigation model



Source: Authors self elaboration

In this research model, it is assumed that there is a mediating effect of the variable “engagement on Instagram”, in the association between the variables “relationship quality” and “consumption behaviors”.

## 2.3 Methodological strategy

A mixed methodological strategy was chosen, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research (Creswell, 2009).

### 2.3.1 Exploratory data

For primary data collection and analysis, two techniques were used: exploratory interviews and documents analysis. The exploratory interviews had a semi-structured script, but without a specific order and with open questions. The documental analysis allowed the obtaining of more and better information and knowledge about the study object, by identifying various communication elements that the club prioritizes on Instagram and which type of content supporters most value and interact with, that consequently results in greater engagement.

### **2.3.2 Primary data**

A questionnaire survey was applied for ten days (from April 5 to April 15, 2022), with a non-probabilistic convenience sample. The link was shared in supporter's groups and pages on both Facebook and Instagram, and the aim was to understand their perception about the variables of the study and their connection. Subsequently, the snowballing technique was used, whereby these initial contacts were asked to recommend others to participate (Ray, 2012).

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 Exploratory Interviews**

Although the interviews were exploratory, they provided valuable insights that allowed not only to discover SLB's "communication backstage" on Instagram, but also to understand the Directors' perspectives regarding the relationship between the club and the supporters, and the behaviors that they adopt/may adopt. The Communication Director, Pedro Pinto, stated that there is a growing investment in the management of the platform's human resources and that the most used tones of communication are informative and informal.

The Social Networks Director, Diogo Canas, confirmed that there is a defined communication strategy to achieve greater engagement with supporters and increase the relationship quality with them. He also stated that Instagram is the club's best social network, as it offers advantages such as reaching a younger audience and more interactions than any other platform. The Corporate Communication Director, Ricardo Maia, reinforced the advantages of Instagram and added the flexibility in publishing content and the possibility to communicating in different languages. Both the Directors of Social Networks and Corporate Communication recognized the importance of the connection between the investigated variables — relationship quality, communication, engagement on Instagram, and consumption behaviors — for the success of the various areas of activity of the club and highlighted the importance of understand it better through a mix methodology like the one applied on this study. However, they also mentioned that this success will always depend on the results and on the performance of the team's club, because these factors have great influence in the state of mind of the supporters.

These interviews allowed the authors to understand the main communicational elements used by the club on Instagram and what are the perceptions of employees about the quality of the relationship with fans, communication and engagement on Instagram and the consumption behaviors of fans.

### **3.2 Documental Analysis**

The document analysis allowed the confirmation of the communication elements mentioned and the identification of new ones, as well as which forms of engagement are most adopted by fans and which contents they interact with most. Also, the publications observed on SLB's Instagram allowed a general understanding of the contents that the club publishes in the various competitions and sporting phases. Game days are the ones that generate more publications and greater engagement, with a special focus on supporters, games results, the “men of the match”, and player debuts. On the other hand, there is less engagement in contents like goals celebrations, extra game information, warm-up moments and team backstage. The defeats with the most direct rivals, such as Sporting Clube de Portugal (SCP) and Futebol Clube do Porto (FCP), influences the lower influx of publications by the club and even a minor supporter's engagement. It should be noted that factors such as different competitions, coach changes, among other adversities that may occur in the club's environment, do not affect its form of communication which remains cohesive throughout the entire season.

### **3.3 Questionnaire Survey**

This measurement item reunites the previous dimensions, based on the fans' perspective. The goal is to better understand the perceptions regarding the club in terms of the quality of the relationship, communication and engagement on Instagram, and the consequent consumption behavior.

The survey was composed by a sample of 361 individuals (Table 1), of which 60.1% are male and 39.6% are female. As for ages, the age group from 19 to 25 years old (45.7%) is predominant, followed by the age group from 36 to 59 years old (28.8%), from 26 to 35 years old (14.4%), higher over 60 years old (8%) and under 18 years old (3.0%). Education with a degree/bachelor's degree is the one with the highest percentage among respondents (41.3%), followed by secondary (25.8%), master's/doctoral (15%),

postgraduate (7.2%), 3rd cycle (5%) and non-higher post-secondary (4.4%). The remaining respondents have primary education and the 2nd cycle (1.4%). In terms of region, most come from Lisbon and the Tagus Valley (74%), followed by the Center (10.2%), North (5.5%), Algarve (4.7%), Alentejo (3.6%). The remaining surveys came from the archipelagos of Madeira and the Azores, as well as from other regions (2.0%). The vast majority considers themselves as SLB supporters since childhood (87%) due to family influence (87.9%). As for the fact of being a club member, the respondents are divided with 52.4% saying that they are and 47.6% saying that they are not.

Table 1 - Sociodemographic Profile of the Sample – Frequencies

	Absolute Frequency (n=361)	Relative Frequency (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Masculine	217	60,1
Feminine	143	39,6
Omitted	1	0,3
<b>Age</b>		
<18	11	3,0
19-25	165	45,7
26-35	52	14,4
36-59	104	28,8
>60	29	8,0
<b>Education</b>		
Primary	2	0,6
2° Cycle	3	0,8
3° Cycle	18	5,0
Secondary	93	25,8
Non Higher Secondary Post	16	4,4
Degree/Bachelor's Degree	149	41,3
Post-Graduation	26	7,2
Masters/Doctoral	54	15

<b>Region</b>		
Lisbon and the Tagus Valley	267	74,0
Center	37	10,2
North	20	5,5
Alentejo	13	3,6
Algarve	17	4,7
Madeira	2	0,6
Açores	2	0,6
Other	3	0,8
<b>How long are you a SLB supporter</b>		
Since little	315	87
Many years ago	43	12
Recent time	4	1
<b>Are you a club member</b>		
Yes	189	52,4
No	172	47,6

### 3.4 Internal consistency and descriptive analysis of the scales

Synthetic indices were created with the respective scales and their internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, as shown in Table 2. According to Pestana and Gageiro (2005), coefficients above 0.9 have very good internal consistency; between 0.8 and 0.9 good; between 0.7 and 0.8 reasonable; between 0.6 and 0.7 weak; and below 0.6 inadmissible. Thus, it is observed that the synthetic indices "relationship quality" and "consumption behaviors" present very good internal consistencies (0,913 and 0,919) and the index "engagement on Instagram" a reasonable internal consistency (0,797). The item "likes" was removed from this last scale, having substantially improved its internal consistency.

Analyzing Table 2 it is observed that the respondents have very positive perceptions regarding the relationship quality that they have with the club. This index has an average well above the midpoint of the scale ( $M=478$ ,  $SD=0.97$ ), with special emphasis on the perceptions "I treat SLB as my club" ( $M=5.56$ ;  $SD=0,99$ ), "I am eternally loyal to SLB" ( $M=5.50$ ,  $SD=1.41$ ) and "I support SLB whatever the sporting situation in which it finds itself" ( $M=5.42$ ,  $SD=1,09$ ). Far from these averages, the item with the lowest score is

presented: “I feel that the club rewards me for what I give it” (M=3.72; SD=1.40). Regarding the engagement with the club's communication on Instagram, it is observed that it presents an average above the midpoint of the scale (M=3.74; SD=1.44), suggesting that respondents interact with the club in this platform essentially through shares (M=3.75; SD=1.56) and comments (M=3.73; SD=1.60). Regarding consumption behaviors, they are quite positive, with the average of the index above the midpoint of the scale (M=3.94; SD=1.22). The items “I am more interested in the activities and initiatives undertaken by the club” (M=4.45, SD=1.29), “I want to get more involved with the club” (M=4,42, DP=1,37), “I support my club more” (M=4.19, SD=1.54), and “I want to become or remain a member” (M=4.10, SD=1.61) stand out. With the lowest average in this index, we have the item “I participate in more online debates about the club” (M=3.28; SD=1.56).

By offering an overview of the mean scores, standard deviations, and internal consistency reliability for each scale and item, this descriptive analysis confirms the validity of the respondents' perceptions and behaviors related to their relationship with the club and engagement on Instagram.

Table 2 - Descriptive Analysis of the Scales

Item (n=361)	M	DP	<i>Cronbach Alpha</i>	M	DP
<b>Relationship Quality</b>					
- I have a high degree of confidence in the club.	4,63	1,29			
- I am eternally loyal to SLB.	5,50	1,41			
- I support SLB, whatever the sporting situation.	5,42	1,09			
- I treat SLB as “my club”.	5,56	0,99			
- I feel that I belong to the SLB universe.	5,05	1,23			
- I defend the club as if it were a family member.	4,64	1,47	0,913	4,78	0,97
- SLB can stir my state of mind.	4,97	1,30			
- I use the name and emblem of the club as a way to represent myself.	4,14	1,48			
- I dedicate financial, emotional, and temporal resources to support the club.	4,16	1,51			
-I feel that the club rewards me for what I give.	3,72	1,40			



<i>Engagement on Instagram</i>					
- Shares.	3,75	1,56	0,797	3,74	1,44
- Comments.	3,73	1,60			
Consumption behaviors					
- I have more interest in the activities and initiatives done by the club.	4,45	1,29			
- I am willing to get more involved with the club.	4,42	1,37			
- I participate in more online discussions about the club.	3,28	1,56			
- I post more pictures and/or videos of the club.	3,55	1,62	0,919	3,94	1,22
- I support the club more.	4,19	1,54			
- I go to more games.	3,98	1,62			
- I buy more merchandising of the club.	3,50	1,57			
- I have a desire to become or remain a member.	4,10	1,61			

1=Strongly Disagree; 6=Strongly Agree; M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation.

### 3.5 Correlations between variables

Table 3 presents the data referring to the correlations among the variables. According to Pestana and Gageiro (2005), correlations below 0.2 are considered very weak; between 0.2 and 0.39 weak; between 0.4 and 0.69 moderate; between 0.7 and 0.89 high; and between 0.9 and 1 very high. It can be seen from the analysis of Table 3 that, for the total sample (n=361), relationship quality (r=0.458; p<0.01) and engagement (r=0.553; p<0.01) show statistically significant correlations with behaviors. These correlations are positive and moderate. Regarding the sample of Instagram users (n=217), the variables "relationship quality" (r=0.345, p<0.01) and "engagement" (r=0.456; p<0.01) shows statistically significant correlations with behaviors. The correlation between relationship quality and consumption behaviors is positive and weak. The correlation between engagement and consumption behaviors is positive and moderate. Thus, the higher the relationship quality and the engagement on Instagram, the more pronounced the consumption behaviors of SLB supporters.

Table 3 – Pearson’s linear correlations

Variables	Total Sample (n=361)		Instagram (n=217)	
	RQ	EN	RQ	EN
<i>Engagement</i>	0,334**		0,220**	

Consumption Behaviors	0,458**	0,553**	0,345**	0,456**
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RQ: Relationship Quality EN: *Engagement*; \*\*p<0,01

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### 3.6 Mediation Model

To verify the hypotheses, the mediating role of engagement on Instagram on the effect that the relationship quality has on supporters' consumption behaviors was tested for the subsample of supporters who follow the club on Instagram, using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2017). The assumption of normality of the residuals was validated by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (Figure 3), that of homoscedasticity of the residuals by the graph output (Figure 4), and that of multicollinearity by the Tolerance and VIF statistics (Figure 5). Table 4 shows that the model is globally significant ( $F=39.756$ ;  $p<0.01$ ). Through the analysis of the adjusted R2, it is concluded that 27% of the variability of the supporters' consumption behaviors is explained by the two predictors: relationship quality and engagement on Instagram. In fact, both relationship quality ( $\beta=0.471$ ;  $p<0.01$ ) and engagement on Instagram ( $\beta=0.336$ ;  $p<0.01$ ) exert a direct and positive effect on consumption behaviors. Relationship quality ( $\beta=0.358$ ;  $p<0.01$ ) was also found to have a direct and positive effect on engagement on Instagram.

To test the mediating effect of engagement on Instagram, we used the bootstrapping method for a 95% confidence interval and 5000 subsamples (Hayes, 2017). The results confirm that there is a mediating effect of engagement on Instagram on the relationship between the variables "relationship quality" and "consumption behaviors" ( $\beta=0.120$ ;  $CI=0.029$  and  $CI=0.249$ ). In fact, we find that the direct effect of relationship quality ( $\beta=0.351$ ;  $p<0.01$ ) on consumption behaviors is smaller when controlled by the engagement on Instagram variable, suggesting a partial mediation effect (Figure 6). Thus, hypotheses H2, H3, H4 and H5 are accepted.

Figure 3 – Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for Normality of Residuals

Variable	Statistic	gl	p value
Standardized waste	0,046	217	0,200

Figure 4 – Homoscedasticity of the Residuals

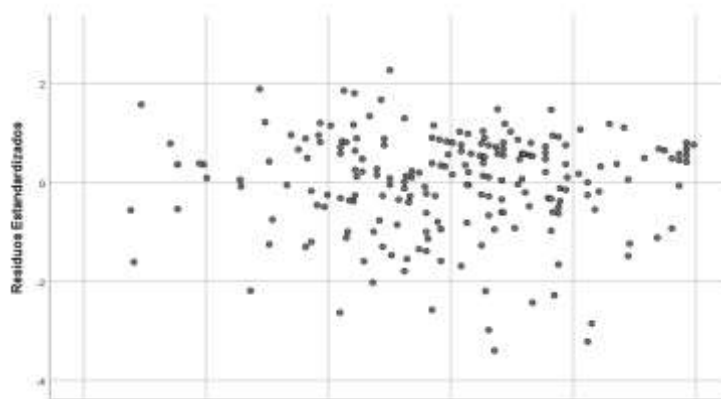


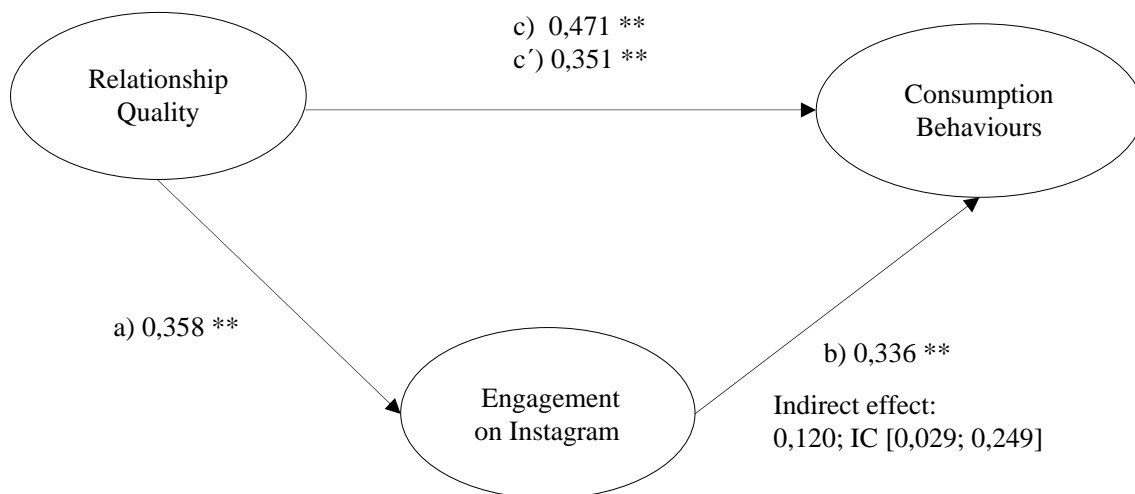
Figure 5 – Multicollinearity

Variable	Tolerance	VIF
Relationship Quality	.952	1.051
Engagement	.952	1.051

Table 4 – Effects of Relationship Quality and Engagement on Instagram on Consumption Behaviors

Steps	$\beta$	SE	$t$	$p$
Effect of Relationship Quality on Consumption Behaviors ( <i>c path</i> )	0,471	0,088	5,388	0,000
Effect of Relationship Quality on Engagement ( <i>a path</i> )	0,358	0,108	3,307	0,001
Effect of Engagement on Consumption Behaviors ( <i>b path</i> )	0,336	0,050	6,678	0,000
Effect of Relationship Quality on Consumption Behaviors controlled by Engagement ( <i>c' path</i> )	0,351	0,082	4,295	0,000
			LL95%CI	UL95%CI
Bootstrap results for the indirect effect	0,120	0,055	0,029	0,249
<b>Total and Direct Effect: Adjusted R2=0.2709; F(39.756); p=0.000</b>				

Figure 6 – Mediation Model



## Conclusion

Despite the increasing number of publications on the relationship between social media and soccer clubs, this phenomenon is still relatively recent, and mostly focused on international soccer clubs (Mahmoudian et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2021; Ozora & Susanto, 2021; Herencia, 2021; Kuzma et al., 2014). As there is no research on the role of the relationship quality, and of the communication and consequent engagement on Instagram on SLB supporters' consumption behaviors, this study contributed to adding to the existing body of theory on the topic by bringing new data on the relationship of these variables.

This study allows us to validate all the research hypothesis, and proved the impact of the relationship quality both on the engagement on Instagram, as well as on the fans' consumer behavior. The engagement on Instagram was proved to be a mediator factor in the effect that the relationship quality has on the consumption behaviors of SLB supporters. Also, it showed that the communication strategy defined by the club didn't change despite the events occurred during the season, both internal (e.g., results of the football team), or external (President's judicial problems).

The conclusions here presented constitute valuable insights to football clubs, as they are now able to use these results to understand and further solidify the relationship quality with its supporters and, through communication, generate greater engagement. As a

consequence, supporters can develop more consumption behaviors for their products and services, resulting in a more positive financial return.

### **Limitations and future research**

The main limitation of this research was the impossibility of analyzing all the publications made by SLB on Instagram (concerning the "2021/2022" sports season), since they are extraordinarily numerous and would have made the research too exhausting. Also, it was impossible to access to all the statistics of SLB's Instagram posts (e.g., the number of views on photos or photo sequences), since these data are only available on videos.

Regarding future research, the authors suggest extending the study to other social networks, such as Facebook, since the answers to the questionnaire indicated that it is the second most used social network by respondents (29.1%). Another interesting line of research could be comparing the results obtained between different social networks, to identify which ones are more significant. It would also be pertinent to deepen the issues mentioned by respondents regarding performance and sports results, which would allow the measuring of their influence and the identifying of their impact on the correlation between the different variables.

Another possibility of future research, which were not made because the work would become very extensive, could be compare and analyze the data regarding gender or age groups, and search for some similiarities, differences or another eventually interesting facts.

It would also be interesting to deepen the study of the people who said they were not paying attention to the communications made by the club on social networks to identify their characteristics and, on the other hand, to understand their motives and find what resources are necessary to eventually change their behavior. Finally, this study could be adapted to any other national or international football club that wants to explore the importance of the mentioned variables, their effects, their connection, and consequences.

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