

USE OF DIGITAL MARKETING IN SPANISH SPORTS FEDERATIONS

UTILIZACIÓN DEL MARKETING DIGITAL EN LAS FEDERACIONES DEPORTIVAS ESPAÑOLAS

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Abstract

In today's landscape, digital marketing stands as an undeniably crucial tool for enhancing the competitiveness of any organization. Sports federations, with their goal of promoting and fostering physical-sports activities among the citizens, require a certain level of professionalization in their management. The aim of this exploratory and descriptive study is to assess the utilization of digital marketing by Spanish and regional federations, conducting a comparative analysis between them. The findings reveal (n = 91) a positive inclination towards innovation and digital transformation, with a wide level of adoption of digital marketing, particularly among Spanish federations. Despite this, there is a high degree of improvement in its development strategy and its implementation. The conclusions highlight critical areas demanding attention to improve the competitiveness and performance of sports federations in the digital era. These include organizational readiness, competitive pressure, observability of digital marketing, digital engagement, and the establishment of specific roles for leading digital initiatives, as well as the adoption of tools to connect with younger audiences.

Keywords: Communication, sport, innovation, online marketing, technology.

Resumen

En la actualidad el marketing digital constituye una herramienta de incuestionable relevancia a la hora de mejorar la competitividad de cualquier organización. Las federaciones deportivas tienen entre sus fines promover y potenciar la práctica físico-deportiva de la ciudadanía, para lo cual se requiere de un determinado nivel de profesionalización en su gestión. El objetivo de este estudio exploratorio y descriptivo es analizar la capacidad de utilización del marketing digital por parte de las federaciones españolas y autonómicas, realizando una comparativa entre ellas. Los resultados obtenidos (n = 91) indican que existe una predisposición positiva hacia la innovación y transformación digital, y un amplio grado de adopción del marketing digital, especialmente entre las federaciones españolas, a pesar de que existe un elevado margen de mejora en su estrategia de desarrollo e implementación. Las conclusiones sugieren que existen áreas críticas que requieren atención para mejorar la competitividad y el rendimiento de las federaciones deportivas en la era digital, tales como la preparación organizacional, la presión competitiva y la observabilidad del marketing digital, el compromiso digital y la definición de roles específicos para liderar iniciativas digitales, o la adopción de herramientas para conectar con audiencias más jóvenes.

Palabras clave: Comunicación, deporte, innovación, marketing online, tecnología.

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Introduction

Currently, we find ourselves immersed in a post-digital era, where 97.6% of the global population owns some form of mobile device, and 65.7% has internet access. In Spain, the figures stand at 94.7% (IAB Spain, & Elogia, 2023; We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). According to the same cited report, the total daily time spent on the Internet is 6 hours and 41 minutes, with one-third of this time dedicated to social media, totalling 2 hours and 24 minutes per day. Finally, in the daily usage ranking of social media platforms, TikTok claims the top spot, followed by YouTube and Facebook.

Following We Are Social and Meltwater (2023), 83.6% of the population utilizes social media in Spain, with WhatsApp being the favourite and most used platform in the country, followed by Instagram and Facebook.

The rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok has also led to the emergence of numerous sports influencers who impact the consumption and engagement in physical activity (Gil-Quintana et al., 2022). Consequently, the Internet and social media have become an essential part of personal, social, and professional life, influencing communication and socialization, even in the realm of sports (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021; Escaño, 2019).

In this context, the development and implementation of digital channels and various social networks have created spaces that allow more specific interaction with individuals, the formation of groups, messaging, and the production and consumption of content (Gil-Quintana et al., 2022). These digital spaces and social networks have triggered a true revolution in the way humans communicate and socialize (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021).

Following with this technological and digital context, and in relation to its influence on organizations, digital transformation aims to enhance entities by triggering significant changes in their characteristics through a combination of information technology, computing, communication, and connectivity (Vial, 2021). Companies, as producers, are facing a new marketing paradigm that demands adaptation to unprecedented changes, especially in the field of digital marketing.

The capability of digital marketing, defined as the ability to plan and implement digital strategies, emerges as a fundamental asset for business success in the digital era (Masrianto et al., 2022; Stegmann et al., 2023). This approach not only involves the adoption of digital technologies but also effective planning and management of customer interactions through the internet and other information technologies (Desiana et al., 2022). Companies that choose to embrace digital marketing and develop and strengthen these capabilities experience significant improvements in business performance; studies suggest a 30% decrease in campaign costs and a 20% increase in revenue (Bala & Verma, 2018; Gibson, 2018). Even with advanced technology and specialized human resources, there is observed potential for increased campaign performance (Srividhya, 2019).

However, to gain a competitive advantage, digital adoption must be accompanied by digital transformation and the readiness of the organization's ecosystem (Desiana et al., 2022). In this regard, a study on digital transformation in small and medium-sized enterprises demonstrated how information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital tools impacted marketing, contributing to building positive customer relationships and creating value within the organization (Ziółkowska, 2021). Research in sports communication and marketing has experienced significant growth in the last three decades, paralleling the sports industry's emergence as a key factor in this expansion (Hambrick, 2017). According to López-Carril, et al. (2019), marketing is one of the main topics in 'sport management' field of research. Other matters related to technology, such as Big Data or social media, represent the most relevant tendencies nowadays. The sports industry, constituting 3.3% of Spain's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), provides over 400,000 jobs and generates a ripple effect in other economic sectors (Cruzado, 2023). Digital sports marketing is a current, dynamic, and rapidly evolving field that is profoundly impacting the contemporary sports business (Ratten & Thompson, 2021; Seymour & Blakey, 2020; Valcarce-Torrente et al., 2017; Valcarce-Torrente et al., 2021). It has become a crucial aspect for event promotion, brand equity enhancement, and fostering relationships between fans and sports entities and their athletes (Byon & Phua, 2021; Holland, 2015).

Presently, sports organizations employ various mechanisms such as mass media, social networks, and public relations to promote their products or services, manage their social image or simply share information (García-Fernández et al., 2017; Winand et al., 2019). In the fitness field, for example, the use of social media underscores its utility for multiple functions and interaction with clients. Marketing departments of fitness centers leverage platforms such as Facebook or Instagram to engage with their users, facilitating direct contact with a personalized tone. Social media stands out as one of the most valuable management tools employed by sports managers in the execution of their daily tasks (Pérez-Tur et al., 2023). A significant number of Spanish sports entities have focused on these types of strategies and tools, utilizing them to varying degrees. However, there is a need for further studies that analyze the implementation of such strategies, thereby highlighting strengths and shortcomings in this area among sports federations in Spain. Bengoetxea (2022) conducted a study on the level of digitalization of Spanish sports clubs. The results revealed that 88.9% of the sports clubs surveyed did not have their own app, 65.6% did not use a dedicated website for external communications with club members, relying instead on social media to lead these communications, limiting the information to followers only. Additionally, 71% lacked proprietary software, and 62% did not have their own management tool. Similar studies in the field of football, specifically digital marketing, have been conducted (Cano, 2017; Segarra-Saavedra & Hidalgo-Marí, 2020; Vargas et al., 2022). The

latter authors, for instance, highlight the opportunities that still exist in making captains of First Division teams subjects of commercial and advertising use through their social media profiles.

While most sports entities recognized by current Spanish legislation (both those included in Law 39/2022, of December 30th, on Sports, and in various regional laws on physical activity and sports currently in force) have a non-profit associative legal form, with the exception of well-known sports public limited companies, all of them tend to engage in professional management and operate within the sports market and industry, aiming to become increasingly competitive. Sports federations perform public functions delegated by public administrations and have among their goals to promote and enhance the physical-sports practice of the population. This requires a certain level of professionalization in their management, increasing their brand value, improving the relationship with their members and potential “clients” (recipients of their products or services), and positioning themselves appropriately among their counterparts.

A study by the consulting firm Deloitte (2018) compares the sports management model in Spain with 10 other countries using five dimensions, one of which is “development and innovation.” Spain ranks last among the analyzed countries, emphasizing the importance of issues such as the need to train all sports professionals and attract specialists from other sectors for effective management, incorporate new technologies and Big Data to extend sports beyond venues and improve content offerings (e.g., streaming), and include analysis to measure the return on sports sponsorship, among other improvement initiatives.

Soto et al. (2023) indicate that, structurally, there is a high level of professionalization in the communicative management of sports federations in Spain, as the vast majority, four out of five, have communication departments or offices. However, this professionalization needs to be nuanced in future research by considering other aspects, including precisely the knowledge and use of digital marketing, extending it to regional federations as well. Given the lack of specific research on the use of digital marketing in Spanish and regional sports federations and the hypothesis that certain tools are not being fully utilized, this study is proposed. The objective is, firstly, to describe and evaluate the current situation of the mentioned sports entities regarding their knowledge and use of digital marketing; and specifically, by analysing the innovation ecosystem, the degree of digital transformation these organizations present, and understanding the level of adoption, i.e., the specific actions and tools of digital marketing they currently use or do not use.

Materials and Methods

Participants

As observed in Table 1, a total of 91 responses have been recorded at the questionnaire closing date. Of these, 25.3% correspond to Spanish national sports federations (23), representing nearly one-third of the total Spanish federations (34.8%). The remaining 74.7% corresponds to regional sports federations (68). In this case, given the broader universe, the percentage among federations in their territorial scope is naturally much smaller, although it is considered a sufficiently extensive sample for this exploratory descriptive study.

Table 1
Simple Data

	Autonomous Federations	Spanish Federations	Global Average
Average Age	50	44	49
Federation Scope	%	%	
	74.73	25.27	
Gender	%	%	%
Female	27.94	17.39	25.27
Male	72.06	82.61	74.73
Position or main occupation within the federation	%	%	%
Marketing and/or Communication-related personnel	19.12	60.87	29.67
President, Vice-President, and/or Secretary	66.18	30.43	57.14
Level of knowledge in marketing and communication	%	%	%
Low	20.59	0.00	15.38
Medium	54.41	34.78	49.45
High	25.00	65.22	35.16

Note: Results are displayed in percentage except for age.

The average age of people who answered is 49, with a predominance of male (two-thirds) over female respondents (one-third of those surveyed). Regarding the positions held, 29.7% indicated working in departments related to communication and/or marketing. These figures are higher in Spanish federations than in regional ones (60.9% versus 19.1%). However, positions such as Presidency, Vice Presidency, and Secretary responded to the survey in a higher percentage in regional federations, reflecting a lack of specific personnel for these professional roles in those entities (66.2% versus 30.4% in Spanish federations).

The Table 1 shows that a 49.4% of the total respondents indicated having medium knowledge of digital marketing, approximately 35.2% had high knowledge, and only 15.4% considered their level of knowledge to be low. However, it is surprising that the low knowledge level rises to 20.6% in regional federations, with a predominance of medium knowledge (54.4%). In contrast, in Spanish federations no one indicated having a low level of knowledge, and high knowledge is predominant (65.22%).

Instruments

Following validation and adaptation by experts, the finalized questionnaire comprises 39 items, organized into three dimensions: (1) preparation of the innovation ecosystem (with 10 questions, assessed using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5), (2) digital transformation (with 7 questions, also employing a Likert scale with values from 1 to 5), and (3) adoption of digital marketing (with 22 questions regarding the use of various digital marketing tools, using a nominal scale, responding with yes or no). Therefore, it closely resembles the previously reviewed questionnaire in terms of its structure.

Additionally, several sociodemographic questions have been added at the beginning of the questionnaire to enhance the description of the sample and explore potential relationships between variables of interest. The requested information in this section includes the age of the respondent, gender, position or department within the sports organization, and the perceived level of knowledge about digital marketing. Finally, a clause of informed consent for participants was included, outlining the use of data and information exclusively for academic and research purposes.

Procedure

The research has been conducted from a descriptive and quantitative approach, serving as an exploratory study to investigate the utilization capacity of digital marketing techniques in Spanish national and regional sports federations. Additionally, a comparative analysis has been developed between these two types of federations.

A literature review was carried out in the initial phase. After consulting some studies conducted with less comprehensive questionnaires and with limited applicability to our research focus, or those that had not been validated (such as the one used by Santes et al. (2017), to measure the use of certain digital marketing tools in Mexican companies), the questionnaire created and validated by Masrianto et al. (2022) was selected as a starting point. This choice was made because it closely aligns with the objectives outlined by the authors and provides a scientifically tested instrument. The selected questionnaire enables the calculation of a Digital Marketing Utilization Index (DMUI) proposed by the authors to measure the level of digital marketing usage in companies. This aspect is of significant interest when considering its potential application to organizations such as sports federations in the future.

The questionnaire is divided into three aspects: the preparation of the innovation ecosystem, digital transformation, and the adoption of digital marketing. Thirty-two indicators are employed to calculate the index, with 10 originating from the preparation of the innovation ecosystem, seven from digital transformation and 15 from digital marketing transformation. Thus, the index facilitates the identification of specific areas within digital marketing where an organization needs further improvement and those that are already implemented correctly. This allows for the maximization of organizational benefits.

It is crucial to emphasize that the tool is validated within the business context. However, to ensure its appropriateness (validity) and potential replicability in the future (reliability) within the realm of sports organizations, an adaptation and validation process by experts have been undertaken, covering both formal and content-related aspects.

Out of the six expert individuals contacted, meeting at least two of the three inclusion criteria proposed by the authors (specifically: (1) holding a university degree related to the fields of Marketing, Physical Activity and Sports Sciences, or Economics and Business; (2) being a member of the Board of Directors or part of the staff of a Spanish or regional sports federation; (3) being a researcher with extensive experience in quantitative methodology), responses were received from only four experts. These experts rated the seven requested items on a scale of 1 to 5, addressing issues such as representativeness, comprehension, interpretation, and clarity. They also provided some editorial observations.

Ultimately, the proposal proved to be understandable, valid, reliable, and applicable to the objectives and context of this study, with minor adjustments made based on expert feedback. Subsequently, it was distributed to sports federations via email or by notifying associations of Spanish and regional sports federations through telephone communication. The questionnaire remained open for approximately two months, from September 10 to November 15, 2023.

It is noteworthy that it was recommended and emphasized that the respondent be working within the communication, press, or marketing department (if existing) of the federation, or alternatively, be the person with the most expertise on the subject. The gathered data were compiled in an Excel spreadsheet and analysed using Google Sheets software to facilitate a description and comparison between Spanish and regional sports federations.

Results

At this point, a descriptive and comparative analysis of the results obtained after applying the previously described questionnaire is presented, based on the proposed dimensions of analysis. Through this tool, the aim is to depict the current situation of both Spanish national and regional sports federations, concerning their knowledge and utilization of digital marketing strategies. This may lead to the establishment of an index from which improvements can be made to enhance their positioning and performance as sports organizations.

Preparation towards an Innovation Ecosystem

Regarding the assessment of the sports organization's situation concerning innovation in the specific realm of digital marketing and communication (see Table 2), the results reveal a generally positive perception towards the utility (achieving a quite high overall average score of 3.79) and ease of implementation of innovations in digital marketing. At the national level, Spanish federations exhibit a greater willingness and positive perception compared to the regional ones. Perceived utility (with the highest mean value obtained, 4.30) and innovation in management (the second-highest mean score recorded, 3.87) are particularly strong areas at the national level.

Table 2

Assessment of the sports federation's status regarding innovation in the specific fields of digital marketing and communication: PREPARATION TOWARDS AN INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

	Autonomous Federations	Spanish Federations	Global Average
Perceived Ease of Use.			
Our organization's staff can easily implement digital marketing innovations.	3.10	3.52	3.21
Perceived Utility.			
Digital marketing innovations are beneficial for the performance of our organization's staff.	3.62	4.30	3.79
Organizational Readiness.			
Our organization is prepared to implement digital marketing innovations.	3.10	3.26	3.14
Innovation in Management.			
Our organization's management is actively introducing innovation in digital marketing.	3.22	3.87	3.38
Customer/Affiliate Need.			
Our affiliates and/or members currently use digital marketing innovations.	2.94	3.26	3.02
Competitive Pressure.			
Our competitors will have an advantage if we do not implement digital marketing innovations.	3.46	3.91	3.57
Innovation Infrastructure.			
Public administrations in Spain have built sufficient infrastructure to support digital marketing innovation	2.28	2.52	2.34
Thought Leadership.			
In general, opinion leaders and media frequently discuss digital marketing innovation.	2.99	3.39	3.09
Flexibility.			
It is easy to implement digital marketing innovation in our management and operational procedures.	2.72	3.04	2.80
Observability: Understanding and Monitoring Capability.			
It is very easy to distinguish how digital marketing works compared to conventional marketing.	2.99	3.87	3.21

Note: X Likert Scale 5 for responses from regional federations, national federations, and the global average between both.

However, there is a need to enhance organizational preparedness, competitive pressure, and observability of digital marketing in both instances. The innovation infrastructure, with the lowest overall average score of 2.34, and opinion leadership (with an overall mean of 3.09), also present opportunities to strengthen the digital marketing environment in Spain. In summary, while there are areas of strength, there is some room for improvement in the preparedness (3.14), competitiveness, and visibility of innovation in digital marketing within the Spanish federative landscape.

Digital Transformation

Regarding the assessment of the current level of digital transformation within the organization, specifically concerning digital marketing and communication (see Table 3) in terms of the use of digital channels for marketing and promotion, Spanish federations lead with an average score of 4.39, slightly surpassing regional federations which obtained 4.21, resulting in an overall mean of 4.25. Additionally, Spanish federations excel in operational improvement, scoring 4.22 compared to 3.90 for regional federations, with an overall mean of 3.98. However, both show areas of opportunity in business model reinvention, with relatively low scores of 3.52 and 3.43, respectively, and an overall mean of 3.45.

Table 3

Assessment of the current level of digital transformation within the organization, concerning digital marketing and communication. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

	Autonomous Federations	Spanish Federations	Global Average
Digital Channels.			
Our organization uses digital channels (such as the website, social media, mobile, etc.) to market and promote our products, services, or activities (such as licenses, courses, merchandise, etc.).	4.21	4.39	4.25
Operational Improvement.			
Technological innovations in our organization have allowed affiliates and/or members to interact in new ways with our operational procedures.	3.90	4.22	3.98
Business Model Reinvention.			
Our organization has launched or revamped its business model or operations using digital technology.	3.43	3.52	3.45
Digital Vision.			
Transforming the future of the organization digitally is among the strategic objectives of our federation.	3.76	4.30	3.90
Organizational Commitment.			
The organization promotes the cultural change necessary for digital transformation.	3.57	3.96	3.67
Leading the Transformation.			
Our organization is characterized by clear roles and departments responsible for implementing digital initiatives.	3.09	3.26	3.13
Technological Leadership.			
The performance of the informatics/technology/communication department or similar (or the person in charge of such tasks) in our federation has been able to meet the entity's needs for digital transformation (technological leadership).	3.32	3.87	3.46

Note: \bar{x} Likert Scale 5 for responses from regional federations, national federations, and the global average between both.

Concerning digital vision, national federations achieve a higher score with 4.30 compared to 3.76 for regional federations, with an overall mean of 3.90. Likewise, in organizational commitment and technological leadership, Spanish federations also outperform regional ones with scores of 3.96 compared to 3.57, and 3.87 compared to 3.32, respectively, resulting in overall means of 3.67 and 3.46.

While there is a clear direction in digital transformation, there is some space for improvement in organizational commitment and the definition of specific roles to lead digital initiatives. Technological leadership is an area of strength, however continued attention to these areas could further enhance the success of digital transformation in the federations.

Adoption of Digital Marketing

Regarding the current level of use of specific digital marketing actions and tools by the sports organization (see Table 4), the obtained results reflect a broad adoption of various digital marketing strategies at both regional and national levels

in sports federations. In terms of marketing on LinkedIn, for example, Spanish federations surpass regional ones with an adoption rate of 30.43% compared to 13.24%, resulting in a global mean of 17.58%. A similar trend is observed with marketing on TikTok, where adoption is higher in Spanish federations (34.78%) compared to regional ones (14.71%). In various strategies such as digital advertising, digital newsletters, and online public relations, Spanish federations lead with percentages higher than regional ones, and the overall mean reflects this pattern.

Table 4

Level of use of specific actions and tools in digital marketing currently employed by the sports federation.
ADOPTION OF DIGITAL MARKETING

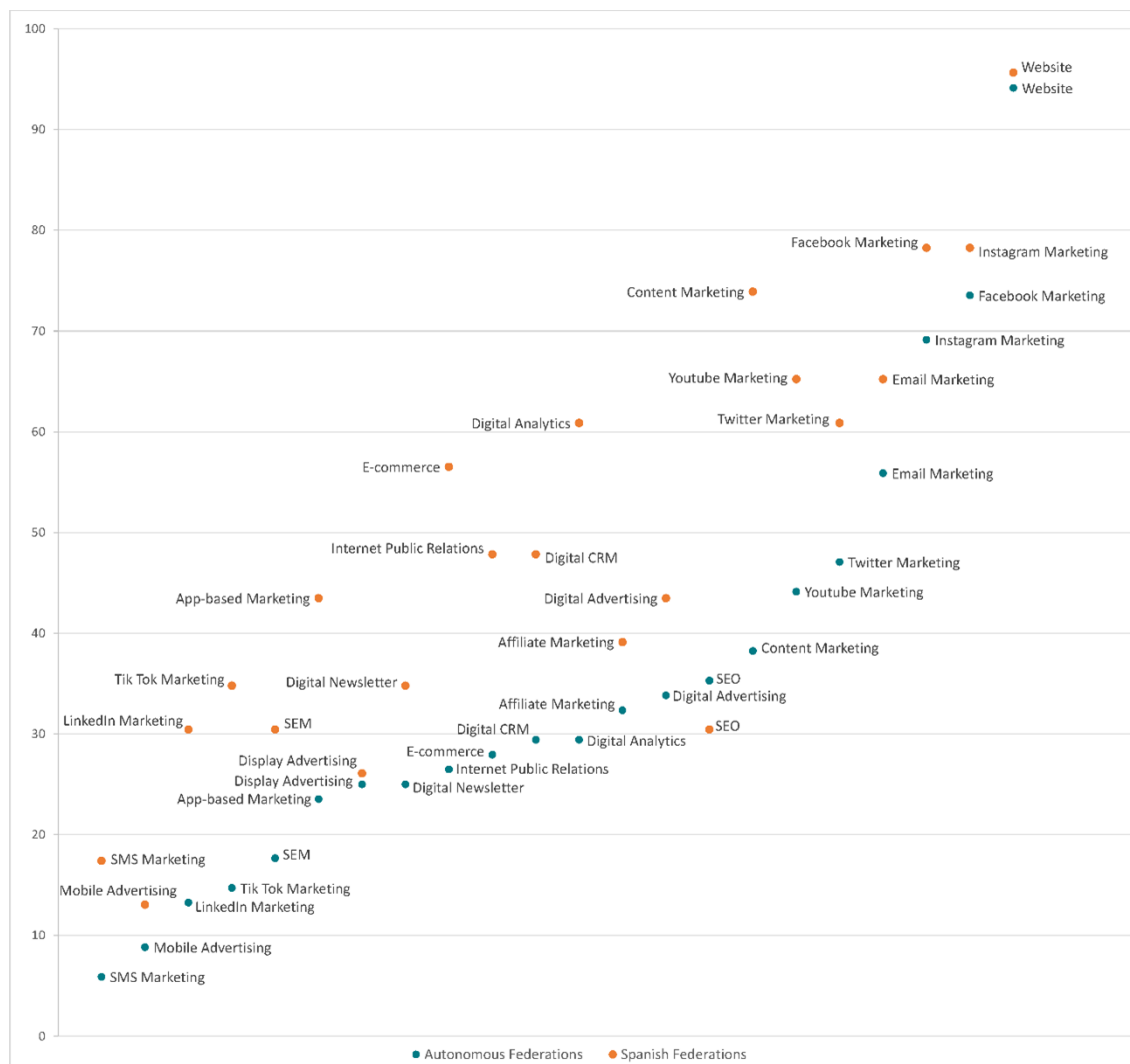
	Autonomous Federations		Spanish Federations		Global Average	
	%		%		%	
	SI	No	SI	NO	SI	NO
SMS Marketing	5.88	94.12	17.39	82.61	8.79	91.21
Mobile Advertising	8.82	91.18	13.04	86.96	9.89	90.11
LinkedIn Marketing	13.24	86.76	30.43	69.57	17.58	82.42
Tik Tok Marketing	14.71	85.29	34.78	65.22	19.78	80.22
Search Engine Marketing (SEM)	17.65	82.35	30.43	69.57	20.88	79.12
App-based Marketing	23.53	76.47	43.48	56.52	28.57	71.43
Display Advertising	25.00	75.00	26.09	73.91	25.27	74.73
Digital Newsletter	25.00	75.00	34.78	65.22	27.47	72.53
Internet Public Relations	27.94	72.06	47.83	52.17	32.97	67.03
Digital Commerce (e-commerce)	26.47	73.53	56.52	43.48	34.07	65.93
Search Engine Optimization (SEO)	35.29	64.71	30.43	69.57	34.07	65.93
Digital Customer Relationship (Digital CRM)	29.41	70.59	47.83	52.17	34.07	65.93
Digital Analytics	29.41	70.51	60.87	39.13	37.36	62.64
Affiliate Marketing	32.35	67.65	39.13	60.87	34.07	65.93
Digital Advertising	33.82	66.18	43.48	56.52	36.26	63.74
Content Marketing	38.24	61.76	73.91	26.09	47.25	52.75
Youtube Marketing	44.12	55.88	65.22	34.78	49.45	50.55
Twitter Marketing	47.06	52.94	60.87	39.13	50.50	49.45
Email Marketing	55.88	44.12	65.22	34.78	58.24	41.76
Instagram Marketing	69.12	30.88	78.26	21.74	71.43	28.57
Facebook Marketing	73.53	26.47	78.26	21.74	74.73	25.27
Website	94.12	5.88	95.65	4.35	94.51	5.49

Note: Results are presented in percentages.

On the other hand, regional federations have lower usage and presence in content marketing (38.24% compared to 73.91%) and marketing on YouTube (44.12% compared to 65.22%). Spanish federations, therefore, outperform regional ones in most of the analysed strategies. However, in some applications, usage is similar, as in marketing on Instagram (78.26% compared to 69.12%) and marketing on Facebook (78.26% compared to 73.53%). The use of websites is also high in both, with regional federations showing a 94.12% and Spanish federations a 95.65%, resulting in an overall mean of 94.51%. On the other hand, both entities need improvement in the use of mobile and SMS marketing and advertising, as they have lower usage rates.

Although both federative levels demonstrate a widespread presence on various platforms such as social media, differences in specific areas and digital customer interaction are evident (see Figure 1). While regional federations show a lower overall implementation percentage in digital actions and tools, Spanish federations stand out for a strong presence in content marketing. These data provide a foundation for identifying opportunities for improvement and optimization of digital marketing strategies in the context of sports federations in Spain.

Figure 1
 Comparison of the percentage usage level of specific actions and tools in digital marketing currently employed by Spanish National and Regional Sports Federations



Discussion

Preparation Towards an Innovation Ecosystem

Regarding the importance of creating a positive space and climate for digital innovation, the present study acknowledges the level of commitment of Spanish sports organizations to digital transformation when carrying out communication and marketing tasks, aligning with observations made by Fernández-Souto et al. (2023). They note a high degree of professionalization in the communicative management of Spanish federations. This contrasts with findings in our neighbouring country, Portugal, as reported by Eiró-Gomes and Nunes (2018), where most Portuguese national sports federations barely prioritize digital communication, both institutional and corporate. They lack specialized departments and specific personnel, except for more professionalized organizations (football or basketball). In the rest federations, little more is observed than the use of their websites and Facebook for communication with clubs or associations, public authorities, or potential business partners.

In recent years, attention has been directed towards issues related to high-level sports management in Spain, as it is shown in a report by Deloitte (2018). There is also a favourable predisposition towards innovation and digital transformation in sports organizations. The results of this study confirm this, especially in the case of Spanish national sports federations compared to regional ones. It is crucial to have organizational preparedness and improve the innovation infrastructure; and also requiring conscientious leaders who decisively incorporate individuals into the strategic planning of these entities, emphasizing digital communication and marketing, as highlighted by Seymour and Blakey (2020). This is particularly important in regional federations where a strong structure supporting this innovation ecosystem appears to be lacking.

In contemporary society, this can lead to clear difficulties and disadvantages when competing with other entities to attract funds, sponsorships, etc. As asserted by Byon and Phua (2021), the pace of evolution in marketing communications due to technological advances requires increased attention to the study of such communications within the realm of sports organizations, aiming to enhance their competitiveness. In alignment with authors like Masrianto et al. (2022) and Stegmann et al. (2023), the prowess of digital marketing represents a crucial asset for contemporary business success, capable of enhancing the performance of any organization, as proposed by Gibson (2018) and Bala and Verma (2018). Specifically, the sports industry must also ready its structure for innovation in communication and marketing, not only within the realm of popular fitness sports, but also in the domain of federated competitive sports.

Digital Transformation

In order to enhance and render a more competitive sports entity in contemporary society, digital transformation must become a reality. Within the sports industry itself, operating within the realm of digital marketing can exert a highly positive influence, such as in the promotion of events, augmentation of brand equity, and the relationship between followers (fans), entities and their athletes, as suggested by Byon and Phua (2021) and Holland (2015). While the federations examined in this study exhibit a significant use of digital channels for commercialization and promotion, it is crucial to note the emergence of new agents, especially on digital social platforms; podcasts, YouTube channels, Facebook Watch, etc., present a new digital model that disrupts the hierarchy of traditional media, as outlined by Seymour and Blakey (2020), representing a revolution in contemporary communication and socialization (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021). This reinforces the notion that specialized staff is necessary in organizations of all types and scopes, establishing roles with well-defined specific functions within the realm of strategic communication and digital marketing within the studied federations.

Nevertheless, significant deficiencies in the level of digitization are still evident, especially in Spanish sports clubs, as highlighted by Bengoetxea (2022). While valid tools and strategies are employed in marketing and promotion, sports clubs and federations cannot afford to remain aloof from the technological and digital revolution, unlike sectors such as fitness, where a strong utilization of digital marketing strategies is observed, as indicated by various studies (Ratten & Thompson, 2021; Seymour & Blakey, 2020; Valcarce-Torrente et al., 2017; Valcarce-Torrente et al., 2021). Similarly, in the realm of sports startups, Lobillo-Mora and Paniagua-Rojano (2023) suggest the need to enhance the level of professionalism related to communication and marketing management, as, in many cases, there is a reliance on self-management of communication and social media or outsourcing services to agencies, not always specialized in the sector, a common practice among sports federations, especially those at the regional level.

Adoption of Digital Marketing

The results reveal a widespread presence on social media, particularly on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as the availability of websites or the use of email, aligning with current social digital practices (IAB Spain & Elogia, 2023; We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023). The availability of these digital tools assists federations in fostering greater interaction and communication with their followers (Gil-Quintana et al., 2022; Pérez-Tur et al., 2023). However, in both groups of federations, a gap in the adoption of LinkedIn and TikTok is noticeable, with the latter being more popular among the younger audience, indicating a potential area for improvement to achieve connection and communication goals with target audiences (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021; Escaño, 2019).

In terms of digital advertising and content marketing, both strategies are widely employed, with content marketing being more pronounced in Spanish federations, enabling them to have a greater impact on their associates and facilitating commercial use, as noted by Vargas et al. (2022); Cano (2017); Segarra-Saavedra and Hidalgo-Marí (2020).

Digital commerce and online public relations show higher adoption rates by Spanish federations than regional ones, suggesting a greater exploration and use of such tools in the former group. Search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM) have moderate adoption in national federations (especially in national ones) and in regional ones. Digital customer relationship management (Digital CRM) exhibits moderate adoption overall, with some possibilities for improvement, especially among regional federations. In both cases, there is a deficiency in the development and use of display ads, SMS marketing, or mobile advertising. In the study by Masrianto et al. (2022), the results also indicate a need for improvement in these areas to enhance the digital marketing capabilities of these entities.

This analysis provides a detailed insight into the adopted digital strategies, with room for implementation and development, as asserted by Bengoetxea (2022). It identifies specific areas where entities could enhance and optimize their digital marketing approaches, as indicated by Valcarce-Torrente et al. (2017); Seymour and Blakey (2020); Valcarce-Torrente et al. (2021) and Ratten and Thompson (2021), through increased understanding and the establishment of a concrete development strategy, as advocated by Deloitte (2018).

Study limitations and future perspectives

The main challenge among the limitations encountered was reaching a larger number of federations, particularly at the regional level, to augment the sample size and acquire more representative data at this level. This limitation raises concerns about the potential impact on the generalizability of the results.

Looking ahead to future research endeavours, it is recommended to adopt a longitudinal approach, conduct additional qualitative studies, expand the sample size, and assess emerging strategies. Furthermore, a more extensive international comparison could offer a global perspective on best practices in digital marketing within the sports domain.

Conclusions

This study unveils a detailed overview of the state of digital marketing strategies in sports federations, both at the national and regional levels in Spain. The research is situated within the post-digital era, highlighting the omnipresence of mobile devices and the internet in everyday life, particularly in the realm of social media.

A high degree of adoption of digital marketing strategies is observed, including social media platforms, email marketing, and websites, with Facebook and Instagram leading in popularity. However, certain gaps in adoption, such as the use of LinkedIn and TikTok, are identified; it indicates some potential areas for improvement in connecting with younger audiences. Furthermore, the analysis underscores the moderate adoption of strategies like search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM), as well as a need to enhance digital customer relationship management (Digital CRM) interactions.

Concerning readiness for an innovation ecosystem, a generally positive perception is noted regarding the utility and ease of implementation of digital marketing innovations, with Spanish federations showing a greater inclination toward innovation compared to regional counterparts. Nevertheless, there is an identified need to improve organizational readiness, competitive pressure, and observability of digital marketing at both levels.

Related to digital transformation, a robust adoption and orientation toward digital transformation are highlighted, especially at the level of national federations. While there is a clear direction, there is an opportunity to enhance organizational commitment and define specific roles to lead digital initiatives. With these data, further investigation is deemed highly valuable to determine which federations exhibit a higher degree of digital transformation, examining their level of professionalization and comparing the results with those obtained from sports organizations in other countries in the vicinity. This would help propose specific avenues for improvement.

The conclusions suggest that, despite the high degree of adoption of certain digital marketing strategies, there are critical areas that require attention to enhance the competitiveness and performance of sports federations in the digital era. The study provides a valuable foundation for identifying opportunities for improvement and optimization in digital marketing strategies within the specific context of sports federations in Spain.

Ethics Committee Statement

Not applicable because the study does not collect personal data.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest. The financing entities or institutions had no influence on the design of the study, the analysis of the data, or the interpretation of the results.

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Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Methodology M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Software M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Validation X M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Formal Analysis M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Investigation M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Resources M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Data Curation M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Writing – Original Draft M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Writing – Review & Editing M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Visualization M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Supervision M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Project Administration M.P.P. & M.V.T.; Funding Acquisition M.P.P. & M.V.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the corresponding author (mperp@unileon.es).

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