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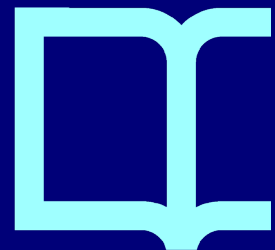
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**Transformation and Communication in Sports Events in the Context of COVID-19**

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

This research analyzes how the Spanish Sports Federations have adapted their communications and events during the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020- March 2022).

### **Methods**

The Communication Managers of these organizations have been contacted (N=65), initially using surveys (n<sup>1</sup>=45), and later using semi-structured interviews (n<sup>2</sup>=9).

### **Findings**

The results show that, after the cancellation of all events in the **Spring** of 2020, virtual or hybrid events were **adopted** (39.1% in 2021). When the health situation improved, the first face-to-face events prioritized absolute and senior categories, in “bubbles” and without public attendance. 2022 has meant returning to face-to-face formats (with only 10.9% of hybrid events), limiting the virtual events to training sessions. The Federations’ communication strategy also **changed** during the pandemic: 41.3% switched channels (more streaming, their own channels and social channels), and focused on new techniques and content including more athletes’ personal stories.

### **Practical Implications and Research Contribution**

The results provide insights into how sports organizations can communicate and organize sports events in future scenarios where face-to-face interactions are not possible.

**Keywords:** communication, digitalization, Spain, mass gathering, crisis, pandemic, risk management

**Research Paper:** Empirical research

## **Introduction**

During COVID-19, officially declared a global pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO), mass sports gatherings were postponed or canceled, due to the high transmission risk.

This resulted in an unprecedented situation with both financial and non-financial impacts analyzed by several authors (Begović, 2020; Parnell et al., 2020; Reade & Singleton, 2020; Sato et al., 2020; Byers et al., 2021; Crawford et al., 2021; Horkey, 2021; Lee, 2021; Manoli et al., 2022). Furthermore, the relationships between athletes and their fans were also modified (Sharpe et al., 2020; Simmons et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the pandemic led to a boost in event virtualization, which has been included in research that highlights the importance of virtual reality, augmented reality, and interactivity (Van Winkle & Buddefeld, 2020; Celuch, 2021; Estanyol, 2022a). Nevertheless, although digital transformation has accelerated in the events industry, some authors state that “virtual events are lacking social interactions and are characterized by lower levels of engagement” (Godovykh et al., 2022, p.1).

This research paper intends to analyze the adaptation of Spanish Sports Federations to the pandemic and its public health aspects, by capturing the opinions of their Communication Managers (C.M.s) about the changes adopted in the sports events they organized and in their communication strategy.

To reach these objectives, the Spanish Sports Federations listed by the Consejo Superior de Deportes (CSD, Spanish National Sports Council) were contacted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, a survey was sent to the C.M.s of the 65

existing sports Federations, receiving answers from 45 of them; and second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 9 of these professionals, in order to collect further information.

Previous studies have analyzed the impact of COVID-19 on how sports events are held, focusing on specific sports or specific stages of the pandemic (Reade & Singleton, 2020; Parnell et al., 2020; Crawford et al., 2021; Horky, 2021; Lee, 2021). The value of the present research lies in the fact that it offers a global view of the impact of the pandemic on the organization of official competitions for federated sports In Spain, while revealing the modifications made to their communication processes, and covering all their phases: from March 2020 through March 2022. The measures adopted make it possible to identify practices to be implemented in case that the sports organizations face similar situations in the future. Theoretical implications are discussed, focusing on the virtualization of sports events and sports organizations' communication, especially on crisis management, stakeholders' relationships, and social media strategies.

## **Literature Review**

### *Spanish Sports Federations as Communicators*

Sports Federations may be described as organizations that “establish the rules that govern their sport and ensure that they are applied” (Olympics, n.d.). National Sports Federations are “responsible for governing all aspects of a sport within their respective countries” and they “must respond to multi-level complexity arising from internal stakeholder needs and commercial, government and social demands” (Pedras et al., 2020, p. 482). These federations interact in the sport system. Therefore, as other sports organizations, they “must develop

relationships and networks between their internal and external stakeholders” (Miragaia et al., 2016, p.113).

Communication is one of the five basic dimensions for sports organizations (Ballesteros-Herencia, 2021), involving internal communication (employees, members, etc.) and external communication (suppliers, media, etc.). It is important to highlight that the ultimate objective of corporate communication and public relations is to raise awareness about the organization and build and maintain positive relationships with all those stakeholders (Gregory, 2020; Smith, 2020). In fact, recent trends in corporate communication are digitalization (Bourne, 2022), the convergence between advertising, marketing, and public relations (Gesualdi, 2019), the increasing importance of internal communication and crisis communication (Li et al., 2021; Coombs, 2020), and the need to boost creativity (Estanyol, 2022b). All these issues also impact sports organizations’ communication.

Among all the communication tactics, special events are one of the most valued for the organizations as they facilitate interaction with members (Bowdin, 2006; Ballesteros-Herencia, 2021; Muñoz & Solanellas, 2020). Focusing on sports events, most of them are designed both for participant interaction and as spectator activities, but they can also contribute to public diplomacy (Smith, 2020). The communication value of event organization for Sports Federations stands out, going beyond their foundational objectives and helping them to improve their users’ loyalty and motivation. The events sector is focusing on improving sustainability (Mair, 2022), but also on digitalization and hybridization, topics that will be discussed in the following section.

### ***The Virtualization of Sports Events***

It has to be said that even before COVID-19, the events industry was already incorporating technological innovations and fostering digitalization, although in some cases still at a very early stage (Bustard et al., 2019; Wreford et al., 2019; Hanaei et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2020; Salomon & Feldman, 2020).

The pandemic increased the virtualization of events, a topic that has been addressed by authors such as Van Winkle and Buddefeld (2020), and Celuch (2021). A good example can be found in the virtual races (marathons, etc.); and virtual cycling (eCycling), which grew during the pandemic (Rojas-Valverde et al., 2022).

Exercise became even more important during the lockdown periods, despite the increased difficulty in its practice, one of the consequences being “the proliferation of home-based exercise technologies, equipment, and virtual experiences” (Skinner & Smith, 2021, p. 323). In fact, the exercise and fitness industry shifted workout classes from in-person to on-demand online classes with huge growth in 2020. As an example, the revenue of Peloton Interactive, Inc. (a home fitness products manufacturer including bicycles, treadmills, and connected fitness subscriptions), strongly increased during the pandemic. However, in 2022 its revenues dropped dramatically as people preferred to return to the gyms (Winchester et al., 2021; Elting, 2022).

Therefore, while virtual reality technologies were a strategic response to the effects of COVID-19 in some sports, studies on athletes' readiness to participate in eSports and

virtualized competitions in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era show mixed results (Woyo & Nyamandi, 2022; Sharma & Singh, 2022).

### *Social Networks, Streaming and Broadcasting*

When events without spectators started to be held during the pandemic, a way to keep the supporters involved had to be devised, trying to reduce the decrease in the engagement rates. For that purpose, some events chose to use live-streaming or live chats, as “we are starting to see a decline in the viewing of sport with others via broadcast television, and in contrast an increase in the consumption of sport alone via mobile devices” (Crawford et al., 2021, p.13). In fact, the coronavirus acted as a catalyst for the fans, the athletes, and the clubs to increase their online interaction, taking advantage of the bi-directional communication that social media provide (Kim et al., 2021; Naraine et al., 2021) and launching new content (Hayes, 2022; Ruihley & Li, 2020).

The athletes themselves acted as communicators on social media, with their live-streaming sessions (for instance, using Instagram LIVE), which contributed to creating a more humanized image of them (Feder, 2020). Some athletes even became role models during the COVID-19 pandemic (Leng & Phua, 2022), thanks to the altruistic tone they used in their social media messages (Sharpe et al., 2020). TikTok was one of the social networks that became more popular during the pandemic among young people (Quiroz, 2020), with some athletes being recent adopters and increasing the engagement level of their fans (Su et al., 2020).



Due to COVID-19, mass media also had to face the challenge of finding new formulas to fill the programs that used to include sports competitions, and to keep fans entertained (Coche & Lynn, 2020; Crawford et al., 2021; Bell, 2021). Part of the media decided to broadcast alternative programs, mostly bringing back old shows, featuring successes of athletes and teams (Goldman & Hedlund, 2020). During the months of March, April, and May of 2020, the period when most sports events were cancelled, the sports media and the sports sections of newspapers, and radio and television stations, shifted towards health, safety, and quality-of-life content, with doctors and other health professionals as sources (Sadri et al., 2021). Later on, when competitions were held again (without spectators), these started to be broadcasted as before, while the background noise of the stadiums was replaced by other sound effects linked to sports activities, which were amplified (Marín-Montín, 2021). Other resources were used as well, to replace the images of the empty stands, such as virtual stands. All these changes impacted the communication strategies of sports organizations, particularly when dealing with media relations, one of the main functions of corporate communications professionals (Zoch & Molleda, 2006).

As a result of this, it goes without saying that sports events and sports organizations' communication have changed from the pre-pandemic world, as the conditions are no longer certain. Considering this theoretical context, the research questions for this study are the following:

*RQ1: What has been the impact of COVID-19 on the number and format of events organized by the Spanish Sports Federations? What changes have taken place, when comparing 2020, 2021 and 2022?*

*RQ2: What is the opinion of the Communication Managers of the Spanish Sports Federations regarding the virtualization of events, and the future of event organization?*

RQ3: *How has the pandemic impacted the communications of the Spanish Sports Federations? Have these modified their strategies, channels, and tools?*

## **Methods**

### ***Contextualization: the Case of Spain***

In Spain, the state of alert was declared on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and brought about a lockdown that lasted until mid-June 2020. It was not until March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022, when sports events could be held with 100% of venue capacities. In between, a gradual lockdown lifting process took place, deeply impacting the organization of sports gatherings, which had to meet the requirements included in the protocols issued by the CSD.

Likewise, the guidelines issued by the WHO (2020a, 2020b, 2020c) for mass gatherings in the context of COVID-19 control and prevention were considered by the Spanish Government, the Autonomous Governments, and the Sports Federations.

A month and a half after the cancellation of all events, on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2020, the Spanish Government presented the *Plan para la transición hacia una nueva normalidad* (Transition Plan towards the New Normal, La Moncloa. Gobierno de España. Presidencia del Gobierno, 2020) and, in the first week of May 2020, the gradual lockdown lifting process began (involving specific venue capacities, opening only by appointment and with individualized services, the use of gloves and face masks, etc.). Each Autonomous Community could enter the new stage depending on its health conditions, provided that the minimum duration of those stages was 15 days. Regarding sports gatherings, their timeline is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Title: Sports gathering timeline during COVID-19

Stage number	Stage name	Time period	Description
0	Lockdown	From March 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	Did not consider the holding of events and only allowed basic training sessions in professional leagues and professional and federated athletes.
1	Beginning of the lockdown lifting process	From May 11 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	Allowed gatherings with up to 30 people indoors, up to 200 people outdoors, and medium-level training in professional leagues.
2	Intermediate	From May 25 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	(50 people indoors, 400 people outdoors). Regarding professional and federated sports, full-level training was allowed in professional leagues, and championships could be held behind closed doors or with limited capacities
3	Advanced	From June 8 <sup>th</sup> , 2020	(80 people indoors, 800 people outdoors). Medium-level training was allowed in non-professional leagues and sports activities could be held with limited venue capacities. Matches could be held, and gyms could open, with one-third of their venue capacity, as well as outdoor sports activities. In September 2020, the Spanish Ministry of Health also published a document entitled <i>Recomendaciones para eventos y actividades multitudinarias en el contexto de nueva normalidad por COVID-19 en España</i> (Recommendations for Events and Mass Gatherings in the Context of the COVID-19 New Normal in Spain), emphasizing that sports events were still considered risk situations, due to the number of people involved, the intensity of contact and the difficulty of mitigating associated risks. In August 2021, the Ministry of Health agreed to a maximum capacity of 40% for outdoor events, and 30% for indoor

			events, provided that an interpersonal distance of 1.5 meters could be guaranteed.
4	New Normal	From September 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2021	Given the reduced incidence of the virus and the fact that 76.9% of the Spanish population had been fully vaccinated, the Ministry of Health and the governments of the Spanish Autonomous Communities started to authorize sports events with 100% of the venue capacities (La Moncloa, 2021).
5	Final	From March 4 <sup>th</sup> , 2022	100% of venue capacity was allowed for sports gatherings, with no restrictions

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

To understand the perception of the C.M.s on the impact of the pandemic on the planning and execution of sports events, as well as on their communication strategies, information has been compiled using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

At a quantitative level, a survey was distributed among the C.M.s of the national Spanish Sports Federations, collected from the database provided by the División de Estadística y Estudios del Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte (Statistics Division of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, 2021). All the Sports Federations (65) included in that database were contacted, receiving 45 responses (See Table 2 in Attachment 1). Survey data collection was done by using questionnaires that the researchers directly distributed to and collected from the Federations. A script with closed questions was used, organized into different segments according to the research objectives. Demographic data about the C.M.s was collected, as well as their education and career paths. The main dimensions of the script were the characteristics of their communication department, the effects of COVID-19 on communication activities, the presence and use of social media by their federation, and

the number and format of events organized during the pandemic, as well as their forecast for the future of sports events. To measure the perceptions of the C.M.s, some of these questions used a five-point Likert scale (1=definitely not, 5= definitely) in order to provide a holistic view of their opinions and level of agreement, according to recommendations provided by Joshi et al. (2015).

To complement the research, qualitative methodology was applied. Specifically, 9 in-depth interviews were held with a selection of the C.M.s. This sample was chosen according to the number of federated athletes. It was formed by the C.M.s of 3 big federations (with more than 70,000 federated athletes), 3 medium federations (with between 10,000 and 70,000 federated athletes); and 3 small ones (with fewer than 10,000 federated athletes) (see Table 3 in Attachment 2). The aim was “to capture some of the range and diversity of meaning within the ‘population’, rather than providing some ‘quantified representation’ of it” (Gaskell, 2000, cited in Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 27). In-depth interviews were chosen for its potential for generating data that provides insight into people's experiential life (Schultze & Avital, 2011). In fact, this technique has also been used recently by Westmattelmann et al. (2021) to study the virtualization of sports events during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has also been applied before in sports and leisure research (Cobourn & Frawley, 2017; Bradbury et al., 2021; Legg, 2021). The interviews were held between December 21st, 2021, and February 15th, 2022. All the interviewees provided informed consent and their anonymity is guaranteed. A semi-structured script was used so that all informants were asked about the same topics. The average length of the interviews was 37 minutes. All of them were held via videoconference, recorded, and transcribed, following Myers and Newman's (2007) guidelines.

To proceed with the analysis, the units were initially coded in categories using 3 steps: open coding -breaking up the data and labeling them with codes-; axial coding - identifying links and relationships among emerging categories-; and selective coding - connecting all categories and subcategories, and finding possible links in meaningful ways-; following the directions in Hernández et al. (2010) (see Table 4 in Attachment 3). A Big Q Qualitative approach was adopted, which implied collecting and analyzing qualitative data with a descriptive, but also a reflexive and interpretative focus (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The coding was performed by two researchers (Coder A and B) to enhance reflexivity.

## **Results**

COVID-19 has been an important setback for the organization of face-to-face events among the Spanish Sports Federations. These sports organizations had also to adapt their communications with their stakeholders within an ever-changing context.

### *Differences between Sports Events Management in 2020, 2021, and 2022*

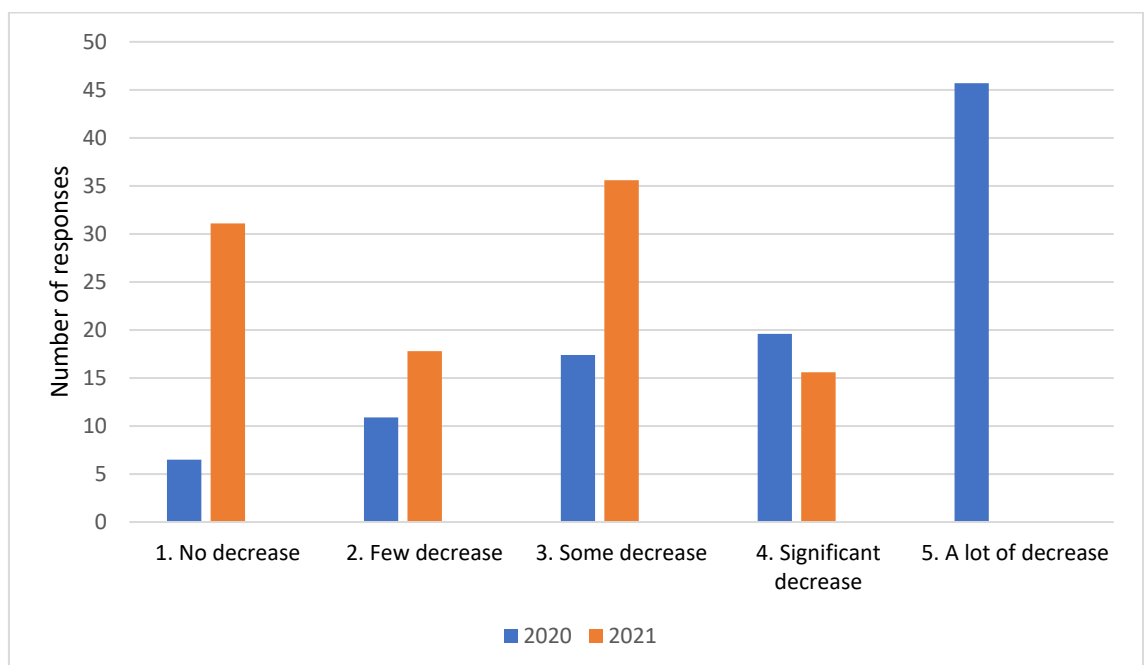
While at the beginning (Spring 2020), most sports events in Spain were cancelled, suspended, or postponed due to the lockdown; from the summer of 2020 some competitions were soon held face-to-face again, always observing the hygiene and safety measures stipulated by the CSD, Spanish Central and Autonomous Governments to halt the spread of the virus (antigen tests, etc.) that were similar than those adopted in other European countries. Spanish Federations also adopted International and European Federations' regulations when supranational competitions took place in Spain.

The Federations had to undergo a constant adaptation process: first, by modifying calendars and postponing competitions, and by adopting virtual formats (for instance, open-entry races, running); later, by planning hybrid events (virtual and face-to-face with restrictions); finally, some events had to be duplicated on the same day to provide for larger audiences. Other events were hosted with capacity restrictions, which forced them to close their doors to the public, or with varying capacities depending on the virulence of COVID-19, according to the stage level faced (0 to 5) detailed previously in Table 1.

While most C.M.s stated that COVID-19 had a great impact on the events planned for 2020, it was a little or very little in 2021 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:

Title: Perception of the Federations' Communication Managers of the decrease in sports events in 2020 and 2021

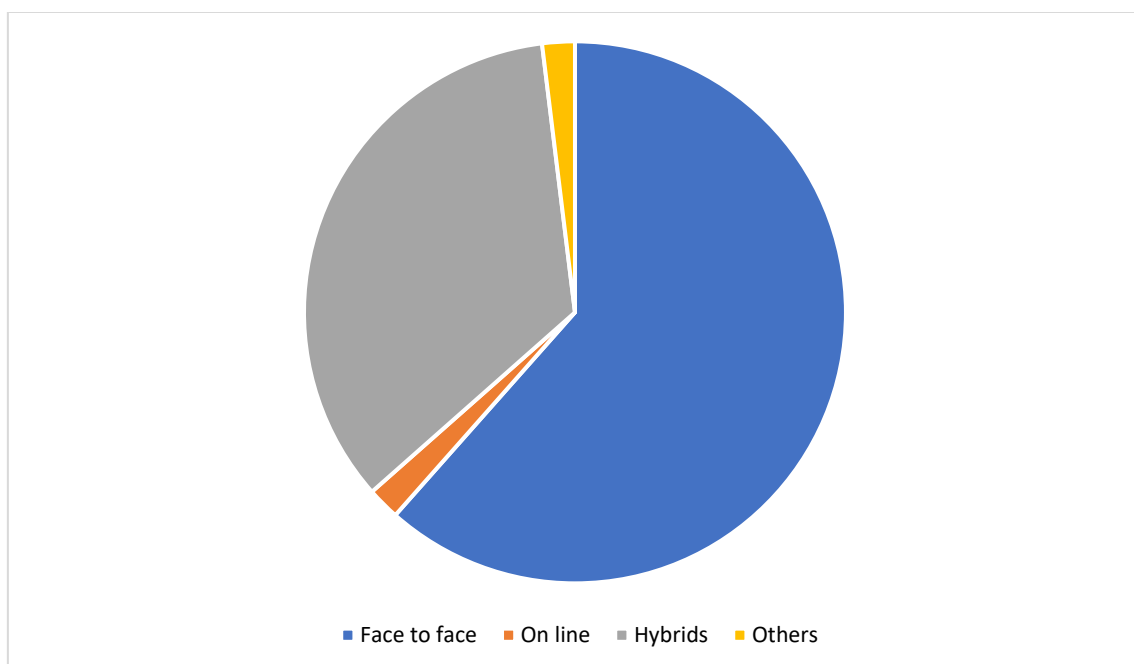


After the lockdown, Federations started organizing sports events in all categories and at all levels (63% of them), or prioritizing events that included National and Absolute categories, with athletes of legal age (26.1%)

In fact, the number of C.M.s that indicate that they have hosted face-to-face Federation events since the beginning of 2021 is surprising, even while observing the health restrictions in force when these were held (69.6%), as compared to those hosted with a hybrid format (39.1%) (See Figure 2).

Figure 2:

Title: Format of sports events hosted during 2021 by the Spanish Sports Federations



Important differences were identified in the in-depth interviews between larger and smaller Federations. Sports with greater contact and played indoors (basketball, futsal, volleyball, etc.) were considered the riskiest and were therefore the most affected. The



largest Federations, such as Football, Basketball, Hunting or Golf, which are the ones with the highest number of federated athletes in Spain according to the Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte (Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sport, 2020), were heavily impacted by the cancellation of competitions, also due to their bigger interdependence with tournaments' tickets and mass media revenues. As reported by C.M.1 and C.M.2 -both from large Federations- they were forced to organize competitions in an “absolute bubble” format, which meant that the athletes, the referees, and the coaches had to provide a negative PCR test before entering, another one during the competition, and not to leave the premises until that competition was completed. That bubble also forced all of them to stay at the same hotel, to use a single transportation means, and exclusive dining halls. Moreover, some competitions had to be held outdoors, which required important adaptations for indoor sports, their athletes, and their organizers as well, as they had to find new venues.

Furthermore, fans could not attend the games. This closed-door policy caused some negative effects according to the C.M.s interviewed, missing the “home-field advantage”, given that “the local team is cheered by its fans, which boosts the emotions of the players, while putting extra pressure on the opposing team”, as highlighted by C.M.1.

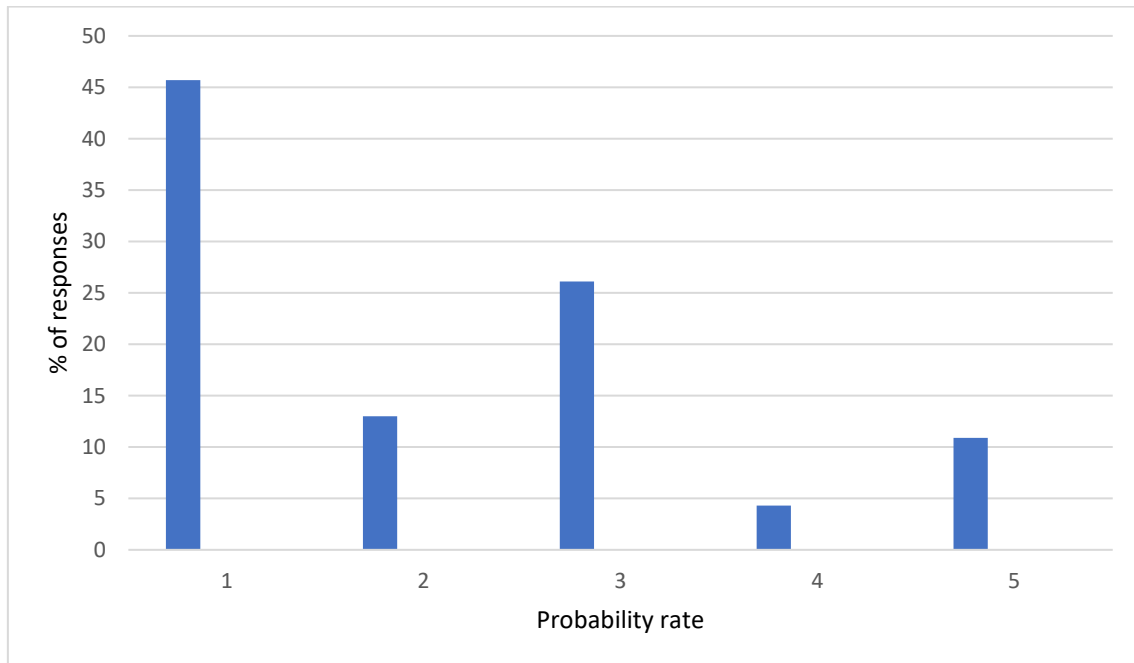
### *Formats of Sports Events in the Future*

The survey results show that most C.M.s (67.4%) were optimistic, as they believe that events in 2023 would be fully planned as face-to-face, just like before the pandemic. As detailed in Figure 3, 45% think that hybrid events would not be used, compared with 10.9% who believe that they would.

Figure 3:

Title: Opinion from Communication Managers about the probability of hosting future events with a hybrid format

(1 very unlikely to be hybrid, 5 very likely to be hybrid)



Consequently, 29 out of 45 state that they organized their 2022 events just as they did before the pandemic, that is, as usual, and 100% in a face-to-face format. As a matter of fact, the importance of the face-to-face events is highlighted by all the C.M.s interviewed. In the words of C.M.7, “the pandemic has raised awareness among the athletes and their teams about the importance of event organization, because its quality has provided them with something that they need: to compete”. C.M.1 also states that “once the pandemic is over, and all this becomes water under the bridge, I am not quite sure that these formats [hybrid and virtual] will survive”. Another one declares that “sport has a great social component, which is missed when the meetings do not take place face-to-face”.

Therefore, it can be stated that face-to-face is still the preferred format for sports competitions.

*The Virtualization of Sports Events, an Emergency Option, or a Future Preference?*

Federations involved in this research have ambivalent opinions regarding event virtualization. Their C.M.s believe that it is a very valid format for media conferences, the presentation of new players, internal administrative meetings, press conferences, or training sessions. In fact, several Federations used that format during the pandemic highlighting the easy access and cost reduction. Regarding hybridization, while it has been considered more an emergency format than a future preference, interviewees agreed that it does entail advantages such as the possibility of increasing the number of followers and reaching new audiences. Therefore, an increase in virtual and hybrid format in this kind of events is expected by Federations in the future, compared with to pre-pandemic times.

On the other hand, the opinion of the C.M.s is that the virtual format is still not useful for sports championships, and particularly not for team sports, arguing that sports need the players, referees, and fans to share the same physical area. Nevertheless, some specific initiatives were highlighted during the interviews, linked to individual sports such as judo -with katas contest, cycling, or gymnastics -with a parkour tournament, which have been successful in their virtual formats during the pandemic.

In addition, it is important to mention that not all sports present the same degree of difficulty when considering the organization of online or hybrid events. This aspect was

mentioned by several C.M.s interviewed. According to C.M. 9, “every championship was canceled except for chess, which was easier to transfer to an online environment. Therefore, our findings suggest that all-encompassing virtualization is a difficult issue in the sports arena with the current technology. Results indicate that virtual reality needs to improve to allow a higher level of interactivity among athletes. A better integration of technology into the sport activity and a sports simulators upgrade are expected in the future.

### *Changes applied to Communications by the Federations during the Pandemic*

The findings revealed that Spanish Sports Federations modified their communication strategy (26.1%), as well as their tools, techniques, and channels to communicate with their audiences (41.3%). A crisis response communication strategy had to be applied, in many cases improvised and without a clear plan. Websites, newsletters, and emails were the first channels used to inform stakeholders about the cancellations of sports events and the anti-COVID measures adopted.

The in-depth interviews reveal that most Federations did change the type of messages and content that they shared, distributing images, preparing interviews, and retrieving materials from their files, in order to feed their own channels and the media.

C.M.s agreed that it was necessary to maintain the relationship with sports fans beyond the playing field. To achieve that, they changed the content they created, focusing on the personal stories of how athletes were dealing with the pandemic, while previously the main communication was focused on competition results. Federations also adopted a more emotional tone when communicating through social media, and their number of followers increased. “We produced several videos, how they [the athletes] maintained

their training routines at home, how they had adapted, etc.”, explains C.M.5. This content was shared on owned media: on social networks (for instance, Instagram stories and YouTube videos), as well as on the Federations’ websites. C.M.9 comments that “previously our communication was more focused on professional aspects, now it was more focused on personal aspects”. Stories related to the pandemic were also featured, for example including Federation members that, in addition to being athletes, also performed essential tasks during the pandemic (doctors, nurses, firefighters, police officers, etc.); these were distributed in their own channels, but also shared with the media, therefore generating publicity (earned media). Accordingly, organizational communication messages that include nostalgia, proximity, and empathy have been identified as effective in health crisis situations.

Regarding media relations, the largest Federations received more pressure from the mass media, to generate more content, given that, due to the lack of competitions, lots of media slots had to be filled. For that reason, several Federations decided to share images from their files and interviews with their athletes. As C.M.1 states, “even if it was ‘canned [sport]’, we reviewed our files to present them in original formats, turning them into good options to fill the spare time during the lockdown and the inactivity periods”.

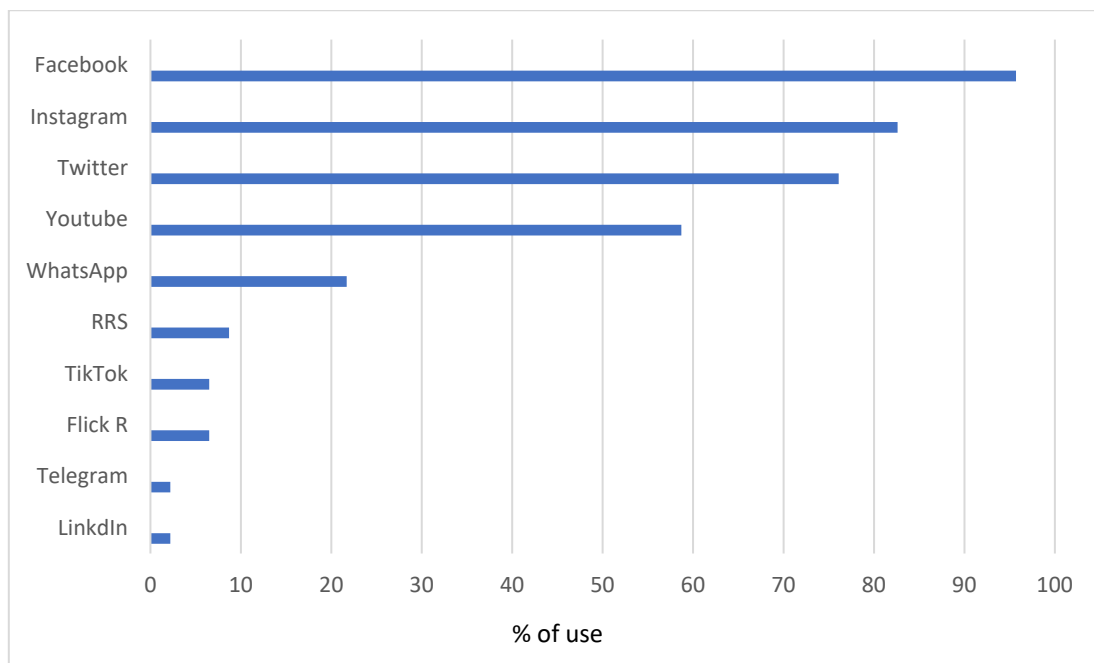
When competitions were held again -behind closed doors-, streaming was the main option. The Basketball and Handball Federations, for instance, were already broadcasting their competitions, either via traditional media, or via streaming, so they already had some experience with hybrid formats. However, findings indicate that other Federations such as Gymnastics, used streaming for the first time due to the pandemic situation. Nevertheless, the smallest federations admitted to having few financial and human resources to adopt those formats, therefore their use was more limited. In addition, data

show that new collaboration agreements were signed with television stations, for the broadcasting via Teledeporte (Spanish publicly owned TV channel) of the competitions by Federations that had never before had this support to reach their fans.

C.M.s also stated that the pandemic brought about an increase in the use of other channels, particularly social media; Facebook (95.5%), Instagram (81.8%), Twitter (75%) and YouTube (56.8%) being the most frequently used, while TikTok was only used by 6.8% of them (See Figure 4). This data shows that Federations wasted opportunities on the use of TikTok, considering that it has 13.73 million users in Spain (Kemp, 2022), becoming the social platform with the highest increase in the recent years.

Figure 4

Title: Social networks used by the Spanish Sports Federations



Regarding the type of content and the communication style used on social media, C.M.s explain that these were adapted to the characteristics of each platform. For instance, C.M.5 states that “Twitter was positioned as the information medium, with content that we wanted to reach the mass media. Instagram was a more entertainment-focused medium, there we tried a more dynamic approach, with emojis, stories, and reels”. Similarly, C.M.1 indicates that they used Twitter to connect athletes and their fans: “With an open Twitter account, fans could post questions that we delivered to them [the athletes] and they provided answers”. These findings suggest that Spanish Federations are aware of the opportunity these platforms present to establish a two-way communication channel with their stakeholders, something that has been increased during the pandemic.

## **Discussion**

Our study, focused on Spanish Sports Federations, shows how these organizations - representing almost every sport- have reacted in the different stages of the pandemic. While one of the limitations of this study is that it is focused on one single country (Spain), the information depicts the adaptation of 45 sports to the COVID-19 pandemic and can be compared to those of other countries. The adjustments that these sports organizations made during that crisis are helpful to be better prepared for an uncertain future where people must maintain interpersonal distance. The results highlight the push the pandemic has given to events virtualization, although they also identify the weak points of events organization and communications, which have practical and theoretical implications that will be discussed below.

Regarding RQ1, we can state that the measures stipulated by different organizations (the WHO, the Spanish Central and Autonomous Governments, the CSD) were crucial to successfully guide the Spanish Federations on how to organize events during the

pandemic. Federations followed the 5-stage scenario plan based on health conditions detailed in Table 1, changing the amount and format of sports events. This was translated into: prioritizing competitions and categories, controlling capacity, PCRs, and mandatory vaccination, opting for outdoor spaces, and organizing competitions in bubbles. Keeping in mind that, from the epidemiological point of view, it is confirmed that pandemics will continue to strike humanity in the future (Hanaei et al., 2020), the measures adopted during COVID-19 have practical implications and position risk management as an important issue for all kind of organizations. Including these procedures in new health emergency and risk management manuals for each sport organization is recommended to provide a guide for sports events managers to deal with uncertain future scenarios. How to better coordinate the policies and mandatory restrictions against pandemic(s) provided by the different level governments (from international to regional ones), and how to specifically adapt them to every sport, is something expected. Therefore, upcoming cross-cultural research into the reaction of the different sports organizations against COVID-19 could help to identify other best practices. Mountjoy et al. (2023) for instance, recommend hosting medical committees and “educating event participants on public health principles to infectious disease mitigation” (p.4). This can embed the current work into a broader understanding of pandemic crisis sports events management.

Concerning RQ2, although the pandemic has encouraged digitalization in society (Delanty, 2021), our results cast a new light on the weaknesses of the virtualization of sports. Most of the Spanish Federations strongly believe that face-to-face sports competitions are still not reproducible in a virtual format, which has practical implications for the improvement of digital technology applied to sports. As a matter of fact, if virtual and hybrid formats were adopted in 2020, these have not been the preferred option when



face-to-face events have been allowed again in 2021 and 2022. In addition, although the transformation in sports events during the pandemic has brought about a great degree of digitalization with some successful examples in individual sports (cycling, judo, athletics, etc.), most of them cannot yet be called 4.0 events, according to the definition provided by Ryan et al. (2020), as they are still not digitally managed, nor are they fully integrated communication systems. Therefore, although virtual events are expected to increase in the future -consistent with the findings of Ke and Wagner (2022)- our study highlights the importance of face-to-face sports events as communication tools, to foster their participants' cohesion, motivation, and loyalty. After many months with restrictions, people seem to need to socialize more than ever (Ostelea, 2021) and sports allow live collective experiences. The social nuances of sports that have been highlighted by the C.M.s, and which were greatly damaged during the pandemic, are aligned with those of hope, unity, belonging, and sociability identified by authors such as Evans et al. (2020), Grix et al. (2020), Mann et al. (2020), and Smith and Skinner (2022).

This may raise concerns about the future of virtualization in sports events, so more research is encouraged in the future to identify how sports competitions can be virtualized by adopting new technologies, the convergence of sports and eSports, and what role the now embryonic 'metaverse' will play in the future of sports, continuing the studies of Simons (2019), Van Winkle and Buddefeld (2020), Westmattmann et al. (2021) and Celuch (2021).

Finally, regarding RQ3, although COVID-19 was a non-predicted crisis, Federations were able to respond rapidly in terms of communication and to maintain the relationships with the different stakeholders, as recommended by crisis communication experts such

as Coombs (2020). Thanks to the strong relationships built previously and the channels used regularly (especially website updates and social media), Federations were able to keep their audiences updated. However, many reactions were improvised, so we recommend the ongoing professionalization of these organizations' communications departments, with continuous learning about crisis and digital communications. Actually, the need for the professionalization of sports organizations has also been highlighted by authors such as Nagel et al. (2015), and it is also important in the communication arena - especially in crisis communications-, as it requires a high level of knowledge and specialization.

Regarding media relations, "it is generally accepted that professional sport and the media are involved in a symbiotic, interdependent relationship" (Bruce & Tini, 2008, p. 108). During the lockdown and the first COVID-19 adaptation periods, this relationship suffered stress. Our results reveal that the communication departments of Spanish Sports Federations had to supply new content and use a new tone if they wanted to fit the new media frame and agenda-setting that appeared during the pandemic. C.M.s interviewed explained that the lack of sports events gave rise to online interviews, canned matches, and training sessions and press conferences via videoconference. This kind of content was also identified by Sharpe et al. (2022) as being used by other sports organizations during the pandemic "providing positive experiences to boost morale in less positive times" (p. 158). It is therefore advisable that, going forward, sports organizations keep filling up their archives with content to be prepared if they must suddenly cancel sporting events.

Superior results are seen for streaming technology, which became the main option when competitions started again according to the participants of our study. Some examples

highlighted are medium-sized Federations' competitions, which started being live-streamed during pandemic with successful audience results. In fact, this technology, which before the pandemic was only adopted by big-sized Federations, has turned out to be a great ally to amplify the reach of sporting events, as suggested by Crawford et al. (2021), being this a trend to be observed in the future.

The pandemic also gave Federations the chance to experiment with being more innovative and to create new content based on the athletes' day-to-day lives and home workouts. C.M.s interviewed explained how athletes used their homes as training spaces during lockdown, adapting creatively furniture and using their technology to record their performances or showing how they maintained nutrition habits, just like the Olympic organizations (Hayes, 2022) and other sports organizations did during the pandemic (Ruihley & Li, 2020; Sharpe et al., 2020). This content was adapted by federation-owned channels, as well as delivered to the mass media, with the aim of gaining publicity, as other authors such as Marín-Montín (2021) and Sadri et al. (2021) have pointed out. Our findings reveal that another communication trend adopted during the pandemic by the Federations was a more personal, fresher communication style.

Regarding social media strategy, Spanish Federations improved the dialogue and tried to better engage with the stakeholders during the pandemic, as recommended by public relations dialogic scholars such as Kent and Taylor (2002). However, it is surprising that less than 10% of them were present on TikTok, while studies such as those carried out by Su et al. (2020), Feder (2020), Šíma (2021) and Sharpe et al. (2022) highlighted the potential of this social platform to achieve athletic fan engagement. Therefore, Federations are encouraged to incorporate these new platforms into their social media

plan, considering their increase in users in recent years, especially among the youngest population (Kemp, 2022).

Ultimately, our study reveals that Federations are willing to reinforce digitalization within communication strategies, which is also aligned with the guidelines provided by the last Dircom study (2022), according to which online communication and social media are the most important areas of growth identified for the next three years (2025); but they seem to need more references of best practices. Forthcoming studies are encouraged to discover how to increase sports organizations' stakeholder engagement through social media, and which new communication trends and strategies can be adopted.

## **Conclusion**

Spanish Sports Federations responded to the COVID-19 crisis in terms of event management and communication revealing: (a) The importance of adaptability when an unpredictable crisis appears. Unprecedented communication and technical measures were adopted after the first stage of competitions and training cancellations, to maintain the relationship with the stakeholders, help the athletes train, and not lose sports fans' engagement. (b) Seized and unseized opportunities in terms of digitalization and virtualization of events. While virtual trainings sessions and meetings were adopted and well valued, few virtual competitions and eSports were organized (with individual competitions exceptions). In fact, (c) although digitalization -especially hybrid formats-, is considered a useful option and seen as an increasing trend in the future, the pandemic paradoxically has highlighted the importance of the face-to-face format in sports,

particularly in team sports, emphasizing its social and emotional impact for fans, athletes, referees, coaches, and the society in general.

Regarding communication, (d) the Federations' communication strategy changed in content and style (focusing more on the personal athletes' personal life, canned content, and the use of a more emotional and personal tone). (e) Streaming became the preferred technology adopted by Federations when the public was not allowed in the stadiums. (f) Establishing -or reinforcing a previously existing- partnerships with TV channels also helped fans to follow the competitions. Finally, (g) the strong stakeholders' relationships these organizations had already created prior to the pandemic helped to cope with the crisis focusing on website content updates, newsletters, and (h) the reinforcement of social media, with follower increase as a result. However, YouTube and Tik Tok are still not fully explored by Federations, social media strategy can be more two-way, and dialogic, and the stakeholders' engagement increase continues to be a challenge for the future.

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**Attachment 1. Table 2.** List of Contacted Sports Federations

<b>Federations that have participated in the study</b>	<b>Federations included in CSD's listings, but not currently active</b>	<b>Federations that have not replied</b>	<b>Federations that have refused to participate in the study</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Underwater activities</li> <li>-Athletics</li> <li>-Automobilism</li> <li>-Badminton</li> <li>-Dance sport</li> <li>-Basketball</li> <li>-Handball</li> <li>-Pool</li> <li>-Colombiculture</li> <li>-Pigeon keeping</li> <li>-Physical disability sports</li> <li>-Intellectual disability sports</li> <li>-Sports for the blind</li> <li>-Sports for the deaf</li> <li>- Ice sports</li> <li>-Galgo</li> <li>-Gymnastics</li> <li>-Golf</li> <li>-Weightlifting</li> <li>- Equestrian sports</li> <li>-Hockey</li> <li>-Judo</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Speleology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Aeronautics</li> <li>-Chess</li> <li>-Baseball &amp; Softball</li> <li>-Boxing</li> <li>-Hunting</li> <li>-Cerebral Palsy Sports</li> <li>-Winter sports</li> <li>-Fencing</li> <li>-Water skiing</li> <li>-Football</li> <li>-American football</li> <li>- Kickboxing &amp; Muaythai</li> <li>-Paddle</li> <li>-Modern Pentathlon</li> <li>-Petanque</li> <li>-Taekwondo</li> <li>-Olympic Shooting</li> <li>-Triathlon</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Cycling</li> <li>-Lifesaving and lifeguarding</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Karate</li> <li>-Olympic wrestling</li> <li>-Mountaineering and climbing</li> <li>-Motorcycling</li> <li>-Motor boating</li> <li>-Swimming</li> <li>- Orienteering</li> <li>-Skating</li> <li>-Pelota</li> <li>-Fishing and casting</li> <li>-Canoeing</li> <li>- Polo</li> <li>-Rowing</li> <li>-Rugby</li> <li>-Squash</li> <li>-Surfing</li> <li>-Tennis</li> <li>-Table tennis</li> <li>- Shooting</li> <li>-Archery</li> <li>-Sailing</li> <li>-Volleyball</li> </ul>			
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**Attachment 2. Table 3.** List of Interviewed Communication Managers of Spanish Sports Federations

	<b>Size of the federation</b>	<b>Position of the interviewed person</b>	<b>Date of the interview</b>	<b>Length of the interview</b>
C.M.1	Large	Communication Manager	07/01/2022	29 minutes
C.M.2	Large	Communication Manager	03/02/2022	43 minutes
C.M.3	Large	Communication Manager	07/01/2022	33 minutes
C.M.4	Medium	Communication Manager	15/02/2022	65 minutes
C.M.5	Medium	Communication Manager	21/12/2021	49 minutes
C.M.6	Medium	Communication Manager	08/02/2022	14 minutes
C.M.7	Small	Communication Manager	02/02/2022	18 minutes

C.M.8	Small	Communication Manager	25/01/2022	28 minutes
C.M.9	Small	Communication Manager	22/12/2021	51 minutes

**Attachment 3. Table 4.** Codification

Level 1 (category)	Description	Level 2 (subcategory)	Level 3 (topics)
Events format changes	Main differences between the organization of sports events in 2020, 2021 and 2021	2020	Competitions suspension and postponement. Virtual trainings. Improvisation. Prioritization of National and Absolute categories.
		2021	CSD measures adopted- Autonomous communities' bans adopted (venue capacity reduction, closed-door policy). Federation anti-COVID measures (PCR tests, bubble formats). International federations measures adopted in international competitions.
		2022	As before the pandemic (face-to-face). Increase of virtual courses.
Communication	Modifications, at a communication level, that the Federations introduced during the pandemic	Strategy	Adaptation to media needs, generating more content. Pre-pandemic strategy maintained. Interaction's increase on social media.
		Tools, techniques, and channels	Media relations increase. Internal communication reinforcement. Social media increase: Twitter (information medium), Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube (entertainment-focused medium). Streaming. Television broadcasting. Website updating.
		Content	More focused on personal aspects of athletes' daily life during the pandemic. Athletes, referees, and trainers' stories related to the pandemic.

Virtual events	Opinions about virtual events	Positive  Negative	Virtual valid for media conferences, presentation of new players, federation gatherings, training sessions. Hybrid format. Not for sports championships (just some exceptions in individual sports).
Future	Forecasts regarding the future of sports event management		Return to face-to-face sports events. Increase of virtual events (for press conferences and internal meetings). Focus on social engagement with fans.