



## TRIATHLON POSTS ON INSTAGRAM: WHAT ARE THE MOST ENGAGING APPEALS FOR USER INTERACTIONS?

### PUBLICACIONES DE TRIATLÓN EN INSTAGRAM: ¿QUÉ ATRACTIVOS PROVOCAN MAYOR INTERACCIÓN AL USUARIO?

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### Abstract

A brand's identity reflects the core values of a brand. Meanwhile the brand image are users' associations with the brand. Therefore, to know users' perceptions and to possibly obtain congruence between the brand identity and the brand image, it is immensely important to implement an efficient marketing strategy. Hence, this study's main aim is to analyse the differences of image appeals, comparing the sports event identities and the sports events' brand images and their effect on user interactions. A content analysis was conducted, with an overall sample of 629 Instagram images of five triathlons. An especially for this study developed codebook was employed. The most frequent appeals were people, athletes, urban surroundings, running as a sport, the start-/finish line as event momentum and concentration as an emotion with 90% showing a positive tone. Posts displaying people, emotions, a positive tone, and the start-/finishing line obtained higher interaction rates. Posts including women or swimming showed high mean values in interactions but were rather underrepresented. The results contribute to the literature on social media marketing within the field of sports events by exploring Instagram post appeals from the perspective of the organisers, and the users and their impact on user interaction.

**Keywords:** Online marketing, fan engagement, sports event, social media, content analysis.

### Resumen

La identidad de una marca refleja sus valores clave. Por su parte, la imagen de marca son las asociaciones de los usuarios con esta marca. Por tanto, para conocer las percepciones de los usuarios y obtener una posible congruencia entre la identidad y la imagen de marca es inmensamente importante aplicar una estrategia de marketing eficaz. Por ello, el objetivo principal de este estudio es analizar las diferencias de los atractivos de imagen, comparando las identidades y las imágenes de marca de los eventos deportivos en cuestión y su efecto en la interacción del usuario. Se realizó un análisis de contenido, con una muestra global de 629 imágenes de Instagram de cinco triatlones. Se empleó un libro de códigos específicamente elaborado para este estudio. Los atractivos más frecuentes fueron personas, atletas, un entorno urbano, correr como deporte, la línea de salida/meta como momento del evento y la concentración como emoción, con un 90% de imágenes mostrando un tono positivo. Las publicaciones que mostraban personas, emociones, un tono positivo y la línea de salida/meta obtuvieron mayores tasas de interacción. Las publicaciones que incluían mujeres o la natación obtuvieron valores medios elevados en las interacciones, pero fueron infrarrepresentadas. Los resultados contribuyen a la literatura sobre el marketing digital en el ámbito de los eventos deportivos al explorar los atractivos de las publicaciones desde la perspectiva de los organizadores y de los usuarios y su impacto en la interacción del usuario.

**Palabras clave:** Marketing digital, fan engagement, evento deportivo, medios sociales, análisis de contenido.



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## Introduction

With the overall digital transformation, social media marketing (SMM) has become increasingly important in the latest years and nowadays needs to be included in the integrated marketing communication (Rehman et al., 2022). Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, this phenomenon has been further strengthened (Mason et al., 2021). Businesses of all sizes use social media (SM) to connect with all their different stakeholders. Particularly for small and medium-sized businesses, SMM has become a popular tool, as the perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and SM compatibility have shown to have a positive impact (Chatterjee & Kumar Kar, 2020). Ebrahim (2020) found that SMM basically is composed of three big dimensions, which are trendiness, customisation, and word-of-mouth (WOM) which influence directly brand loyalty. Especially in the sports industry, the opportunities for engagement for sports organisations and athletes alike, have become evident (Hayes, 2022). In sports consumption, it was also shown that the fear of missing out, makes fans engage in social media activities (Lee & Na, 2023). It has been demonstrated that SMM activities positively influence customer relationship quality and brand loyalty, being a strong predictor of commitment (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023).

As sports events provide economic and non-economic benefits to host destinations (Redondo Castán et al., 2023; Sáez, 2019), these destinations need to understand sports events as influencing marketing strategies. Hence, not only in the case of destination management but also for the event organisations themselves it is essential to establish the right marketing strategies. Nevertheless, there is still a considerable research gap in studies of the brand image within the field of sports events (Martínez Cevallos et al., 2020).

In sports management, marketing, and the tourism industry, Instagram has become a progressively popular social networking site (SNS), due to its great visible features. With its ample dissemination opportunities to a global audience, Instagram is a powerful marketing tool. Moreover, nowadays, it is the most popular social network among the younger generations of 16-34 years (Datareportal, 2023). The use of Instagram showed to be a popular and powerful tool to engage with users in the context of sports, presenting a medium where a sports brand can be created (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Therefore, Instagram was chosen for the present study.

Within media and communication research, content analysis is a widely demanded method (Schäfer & Vögele, 2021). While content analyses have been developed about the cocreation of destination image between tourists and sports events, or their co-branding aspects (Hansson, 2022; Morgan et al., 2021; Taberner et al., 2022; Taberner & Juncà, 2021), the authors could not find such a study concerning the differences between the sports event branding and the user-generated content (UGC). Since SNS have an increasingly significant role in a brand's marketing communication (Wagner et al., 2017), as they are a constantly changing environment and due to the complexity of stakeholders of sports events, there is a need for empirical studies on sports event identity, sports event image, and their impact on user interaction.

### *Brand identity*

As this study analyses Instagram posts based on a double perspective - the posts of the triathlon organisers and the UGC - it is pertinent to clarify the concepts of brand identity and brand image. Brand identity is traditionally defined as "a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create and maintain" (Aaker, 1996). It refers to a brand's intention on how to be perceived by its consumers and embraces its mission, vision, and values (Konecnik Ruzick & de Chernatony, 2013). Thus, the brand identity should communicate the core values of a brand (Bulovic & Seric, 2021). In the context of sports events, it was revealed that the purchase intention was mostly influenced by brand equity (Hsiao et al., 2021).

### *Brand image*

The brand image is composed of the consumers' brand associations of the attributes, benefits, and attitudes towards a brand, i.e., the consumers' perceived meanings of a brand (Keller, 1993). Thus, a sports tourism event image can be defined as: "the mental representations sports tourism participants have about the organization, environment, physical activity, socialization, fulfilment, and emotional involvement with the event" (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006). The sports event image is a necessary condition for SM content sharing, satisfaction, and WOM and has also a positive effect on WOM, revisit, and loyalty intentions (Girish & Lee, 2019; Lianopoulos et al., 2022; Prado-Gasco et al., 2017). An understanding of the brand image is crucial to obtaining information about customers' perceptions and helps in the development of a brand identity (Aaker, 2012). Instagram has shown to be a strategic SM platform to engage customers and to improve the brand image (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). Even if the concept of destination image has been widely discussed in the literature, studies about sports event images are still scarce (Martínez Cevallos et al., 2020).

The brand image shows how the brand is received, whereas the brand identity is the way how the organisation wants the brand to be perceived (Aaker, 2012). Consumers showed to be more committed when a brand is consistent with

the consumer's image (Lorgnier et al., 2022) and the quality of a brand relationship has a positive influence on fan engagement (Lou et al., 2021). Therefore, once having analysed the sports events' projected images and the UGC, it is necessary to compare any similarities and differences between the sports event identity and the sports event image.

### *Post characteristics and appeals*

The appeals shown on SM posts are significant for the message perception and therefore they have a significant effect on the effectiveness of communication (Wagner et al., 2017). Research on Instagram posts has shown significant differences between destination images provided by events, organisers, and users (Taberner et al., 2022). This is especially important for marketing purposes, as different appeals influence the interaction and engagement of users (Rietveld et al., 2020). Nevertheless, research on the visual aspects of SM and its effects on engagement is still in its beginning and needs yet a deeper understanding (Rietveld et al., 2020; Schreiner et al., 2021).

As mentioned above, research about brand images is still scarce in the context of sports events, and also there are only a few studies in this realm considering the importance of brand identity creation (Linsner et al., 2021). The lack of congruence between brand image and brand identity was found among sports clubs in Croatia (Bulovic & Seric, 2021). Nevertheless, the noteworthiness of brand congruence was emphasised in athlete branding (Linser et al., 2021). Hence, research on the impact of visual modalities of SM posts, especially in the field of sports events will help to give a more detailed comprehension of the correct management of the provided event identity and the difference to the actually perceived event image. The relevance of this study lies therefore in understanding the importance of the congruence between both.

This study seeks to further investigate the analogies and differences of Instagram image appeals of two different triathlon organisers and the corresponding UGC, by comparing the key characteristics of the published posts. Thus, this study's main aim is to analyse the differences of image appeals, comparing the sports event identities and the sports events' brand images and their effect on user interactions. Therefore, the following research questions were elaborated:

RQ1: What is the sports event identity projected by the appeals of posts on the organisers' accounts?

RQ2: What are the main sports event image appeals of the UGC?

RQ3: What are the similarities and differences between the posted image appeals of the organisers' contents and the UGC?

RQ4: Which appeals gain the highest user interactions?

## **Materials and Methods**

The present research study is based on a content analysis on Instagram. Content analysis is, within investigations of communication and media, a widely demanded method and more precisely, social media as a communication channel is increasingly the focus of research (Schäfer & Vögele, 2021).

### *Data collection*

Through the investigators' personal accounts, the selected Instagram pages, which are publicly available, were accessed and screenshots of the images to be analysed were taken. The data collection was conducted from the 22nd to the 24th of October 2022. For the analysis, the modality of triathlons was chosen, as it is a sport that combines three different mass sports disciplines, namely swimming, cycling, and running, which helps to represent a wider field. Two different triathlon organisers were chosen: ICAN Triathlon (ICAN) (Alicante and Gandía) and Mediterránea Triatlón (MTRI) (Alicante, Castellón and Valencia). All five analysed triathlons were based within the Valencian Community in Spain and celebrated in 2022.

Images were included from the beginning of the registration opening of the first triathlon of each of the organisers. Non-static images, animations, and videos were excluded, as the objective of the study lies in image appeals and not in animated pictures or videos, which are outside the scope of this study as they might have different effects on user interaction. From posts including multiple images, only the first one was taken for analysis. In cases where it was necessary to clarify ambiguity, captions and hashtags were read to see if the images should be included, as proposed by Webb et al. (2017). Also, in case of any uncertainty if a publication should or not be included, the investigators jointly discussed the issue. Thereby, posts that referred to accounts or hashtags focussing on other triathlons were excluded.

For each triathlon organiser, the most relevant hashtags were revealed, and images of those hashtags were captured (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Accounts and hashtags used for the analysis*

| ICAN Triathlon             |                        |       | Mediterránea Triatlón          |                       |       |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| Official Instagram account | Hashtags               | Posts | Official Instagram account     | Hashtags              | Posts |
| @icantriathlonsp<br>(125)  | #ICANalicante          | 38    | @mediterraneatriatlon<br>(134) | #mtrialicante         | 11    |
|                            | #icantriathlonalicante | 4     |                                | #mtrivalència         | 13    |
|                            | #icangandia            | 110   |                                | #mtricastellón        | 24    |
|                            | #icantriathlongandia   | 25    |                                | #mtri2022             | 20    |
|                            | #ICANtriathlon         | 59    |                                | #medirarraneatriatlon | 66    |

To avoid any selection bias, all images from both official accounts of the organisers were included in the analysis. The sample was 125 from ICAN and 134 from MTRI. Regarding the selected hashtags, also all images within the same time frame were captured and then a proportional sample to the volume of entries of each hashtag was randomly chosen and then included for the analysis, which was 134 images of the MTRI triathlons and 236 images of the ICAN triathlons. The final dataset was composed of 629 images ( $n = 629$ ).

### Codebook

For the elaboration of the codebook, prior studies in the field of sports, tourism and Instagram content were consulted. To examine the most suitable categories and appeals existing coding instruments were thoroughly reviewed (Ahmed et al., 2016; Ahrens et al., 2022; Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2021; Cowans, 2016; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Lacasse et al., 2019; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Sun et al., 2021; Taberner et al., 2022; Taberner & Juncà, 2021; Wagner et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2017). After reviewing these coding instruments, the main categories were finally included from four studies (Ahmed et al., 2016; Ahrens et al., 2022; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Taberner & Juncà, 2021). Those were adapted and several new categories were included which were appropriate to capture the relevant aspects of this study. As suggested by Taberner and Juncà (2021) the coding scheme includes three different dimensions: cognitive, affective and interactions.

Except for the two interaction categories, all other variables were dichotomous variables. For coding, the visible features, as well as the interactions on the posts were analysed. The first author trained a coder repeatedly on the coding process, to ensure the correct coding of the diverse dimensions, categories, and attributes. To clarify the distinct categories, the primary features are explained in the following. For the type of shot, a maximum of one category, showing the focus of the photograph had to be chosen. In the category infographic, proper infographics, advertisements, no real photographs, pamphlets, etc. had to be included, whereas multi-image was chosen for more than one picture within the image like collages, etc. The category type included the kind of person shown, and N/A images that did not contain any person. Group was chosen for images with more than one person in the focus. Momentum refers to the moment of the event that is shown, being 'before/after the race' pictures showing elements concerning the event but not during racing and not showing the starting or finishing line e.g., warm-up, medal handout, etc. Other moment includes images without an event-specific moment.

For pilot testing, a random sample of 20 images was analysed. Afterwards, where necessary, any discrepancies were reviewed and discussed to refine the coding scheme. The final resultant codebook is displayed in Table 2.

### Data analysis

First, the reliability between coders was assessed. After coding all images, frequencies, sums, minimum and maximum values, means, and standard deviations were calculated. For the statistical analysis, IBM SPSS version 27.0.1 was used.

To test the coders' reliability, 20% randomly chosen of the total sample was used, as suggested by Neuendorf (2017). As the coding scheme for this study was newly developed, the measurement of reliability between the coders was particularly important, to confirm a collective understanding of categories and ensure a proficient level of measurement objectivity. Krippendorff's Alpha was used to individually calculate the 39 categories of the instrument, as it defines and embraces diverse reliability coefficients (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). All categories showed coefficients  $\alpha > .80$  (Table 3), which means good intercoder reliability according to Krippendorff (2004).

**Table 2**  
*Codebook*

|                    |                         |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Cognitive          | Type of shot            | Selfie            |
|                    |                         | People            |
|                    |                         | Object            |
|                    |                         | Landscape         |
|                    |                         | Infographic       |
|                    |                         | Multi-image       |
|                    |                         | Athlete           |
| Type               | Nonathlete              |                   |
|                    | Staff                   |                   |
|                    | N/A                     |                   |
|                    | Solo                    |                   |
| Number of people   | Group                   |                   |
|                    | No people               |                   |
|                    | Female                  |                   |
| Focus of the photo | Gender                  | Male              |
|                    |                         | Both              |
|                    |                         | No gender         |
|                    | Scenery                 | Sea/Water         |
|                    |                         | Urban             |
| Sport              | Rural                   |                   |
|                    | No surroundings         |                   |
|                    | Running                 |                   |
|                    | Swimming                |                   |
|                    | Cycling                 |                   |
| Prize elements     | Yes                     |                   |
|                    | Before/after race       |                   |
|                    | Momentum                |                   |
|                    | Starting/finishing line |                   |
| Affective          | Emotions                | Racing            |
|                    |                         | Other moments     |
|                    |                         | Fun, happiness    |
|                    | Tone                    | Concentración     |
|                    |                         | Pride             |
|                    |                         | No/other emotions |
| Interaction        | Positive                |                   |
|                    | Neutral                 |                   |
|                    | Negative                |                   |
| Interaction        | Likes                   |                   |
|                    | Comments                |                   |

**Table 3**  
*Intercoder reliability*

| Category       | Krippendorff's $\alpha$ | Category          | Krippendorff's $\alpha$ |
|----------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Selfie         | 1.0                     | Running           | .9503                   |
| People         | .9748                   | Swimming          | .9748                   |
| Object         | 1.0                     | Cycling           | 1.0                     |
| Landscape      | 1.0                     | No sport          | .9265                   |
| Infographic    | .9588                   | Prize element     | .9246                   |
| Multi-image    | 1.0                     | Before/after race | .8462                   |
| Athlete        | .9383                   | Start/finish line | .8748                   |
| Nonathlete     | .8852                   | Racing            | .8831                   |
| Staff          | .9053                   | Other moments     | .8411                   |
| N/A            | .9083                   | Fun               | .8676                   |
| Solo           | .9842                   | Concentration     | .9143                   |
| Group          | .9835                   | Pride             | .8234                   |
| No people      | 1.0                     | No emotion        | .8489                   |
| Female         | .9055                   | Positive          | .8448                   |
| Male           | .9208                   | Neutral           | .8448                   |
| Both           | .8492                   | Negative          | N/A                     |
| No gender      | 1.0                     | Likes             | 1.0                     |
| Sea            | .9503                   | Comments          | 1.0                     |
| Urban          | .9625                   |                   |                         |
| Rural          | .9383                   |                   |                         |
| No surrounding | 1.0                     |                   |                         |

## Results

Regarding the first two research questions, in Table 4, the results of the categorisation of the posts are shown. It should be noted that for some categories the percentage is more than 100%, as in some posts, more than one emphasised appeal was found. Considering the total frequencies and overall proportions of all analysed images, most posts included people (77.4%), who were mostly athletes (83.8%) in an urban surrounding (60.1%). Nearly half of the posts showed only men (47.9%). There was no noticeable difference between solo or group pictures, with both accounting for more than 40%. Considering the type of sports, the breakdown is as follows: the most shown sport was running (38.3%), followed by cycling (23.2%) and swimming (16.4%). As most posted momentum, racing during the event was found (37.4%). None of the posts was portrayed in a negative tone, whereas 90% of all posts showed a positive tone. Therefore, the appeal negative was excluded from further analyses. Regarding emotional features, fun (31.8%) and concentration (34%) were present in most of the published images.

Giving response to the third research question, in the following the differences between the organisers' contents and the UGC are analysed. The first analysed appeal was selfies, which was only found in the UGC, with a total proportion of sole 3%. Except for 2.5% of the UGC of ICAN, none of the other creators used mere landscape photographs. Multi-image was barely present in the overall sample, except for the UGC of ICAN (5.1%). A difference between ICAN and MTRI was noticed in the number of people present in the posts. While ICAN focussed 57.6% on just one person, MTRI included groups in nearly 70% of the images. Likewise, MTRI focussed more on females (41%), whereas ICAN posted over 55% of men. In MTRI another 20.1% was composed of both genders. The users of both triathlons posted more men than MTRI, but also more pictures of both genders than ICAN.

In Figure 1 examples of the UGC are shown: a) and c) are examples of posts which obtained high interaction, while the infographic b) did not obtain much interaction.

**Table 4**  
*Post categorisation*

|                    | ICAN (% <sup>a</sup> ) | #ican (% <sup>a</sup> ) | MTRI (% <sup>a</sup> ) | #mtri (% <sup>a</sup> ) | Proportion of total (%) | Total frequency (N) |
|--------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| Selfie             | 0                      | 6.4                     | 0                      | 3.0                     | 3                       | 19                  |
| People             | 82.4                   | 69.1                    | 84.3                   | 80.6                    | 77.4                    | 487                 |
| Object             | 4.8                    | 6.4                     | 3.0                    | 4.5                     | 4.9                     | 31                  |
| Landscape          | 0                      | 2.5                     | 0                      | 0                       | 1                       | 6                   |
| Infographic        | 12.0                   | 10.6                    | 12.7                   | 11.2                    | 11.4                    | 72                  |
| Multi-image        | 0.8                    | 5.1                     | 0                      | 0.7                     | 2.2                     | 14                  |
| Athlete            | 89.6                   | 76.3                    | 88.1                   | 87.3                    | 83.8                    | 527                 |
| Nonathlete         | 0.8                    | 11.0                    | 3.7                    | 5.2                     | 6.2                     | 39                  |
| Staff              | 7.2                    | 3.8                     | 11.2                   | 2.2                     | 5.7                     | 63                  |
| No focus           | 8.0                    | 17.4                    | 6.7                    | 9.0                     | 11.4                    | 72                  |
| Solo               | 57.6                   | 55.9                    | 24.6                   | 39.6                    | 46.1                    | 290                 |
| Group              | 34.4                   | 21.7                    | 68.7                   | 51.5                    | 42.6                    | 268                 |
| No people          | 8.0                    | 16.9                    | 6.7                    | 9.0                     | 11.3                    | 71                  |
| Female             | 26.4                   | 16.5                    | 41.0                   | 23.9                    | 25.3                    | 159                 |
| Male               | 55.2                   | 53.4                    | 31.3                   | 47.8                    | 47.9                    | 301                 |
| Both               | 10.4                   | 11.0                    | 20.1                   | 17.9                    | 14.3                    | 90                  |
| No gender          | 8.0                    | 19.1                    | 7.5                    | 10.4                    | 12.6                    | 79                  |
| Sea                | 20.0                   | 16.5                    | 16.4                   | 20.9                    | 18.1                    | 114                 |
| Urban              | 60.0                   | 60.2                    | 68.7                   | 51.5                    | 60.1                    | 378                 |
| Rural              | 15.2                   | 16.9                    | 13.4                   | 17.9                    | 16.1                    | 101                 |
| No surroundings    | 19.2                   | 19.5                    | 14.9                   | 17.9                    | 18.1                    | 114                 |
| Running            | 53.6                   | 30.9                    | 41.0                   | 34.3                    | 38.3                    | 241                 |
| Swimming           | 13.6                   | 11.0                    | 19.4                   | 25.4                    | 16.4                    | 103                 |
| Cycling            | 21.6                   | 28.8                    | 20.1                   | 17.9                    | 23.2                    | 146                 |
| No sports          | 11.2                   | 31.4                    | 18.7                   | 23.1                    | 22.9                    | 144                 |
| Prize              | 8.0                    | 13.1                    | 29.1                   | 14.2                    | 13.8                    | 87                  |
| Before/after       | 7.2                    | 17.8                    | 16.4                   | 18.7                    | 15.6                    | 98                  |
| Start-/finish line | 36.8                   | 20.8                    | 30.6                   | 21.6                    | 26.1                    | 164                 |
| Racing             | 45.6                   | 24.6                    | 44.8                   | 44.8                    | 37.4                    | 235                 |
| Other moment       | 11.2                   | 38.1                    | 8.2                    | 14.9                    | 21.5                    | 135                 |
| Fun                | 32.0                   | 28.8                    | 32.8                   | 35.8                    | 31.8                    | 200                 |
| Concentration      | 39.2                   | 26.3                    | 38.8                   | 38.1                    | 34                      | 214                 |
| Pride              | 22.4                   | 21.6                    | 20.1                   | 13.4                    | 19.7                    | 124                 |
| No/other emotion   | 9.6                    | 25.8                    | 10.4                   | 15.7                    | 17.2                    | 108                 |
| Positive           | 92.8                   | 83.9                    | 94.0                   | 94.0                    | 90                      | 566                 |
| Neutral            | 7.2                    | 16.1                    | 6.0                    | 6.0                     | 10                      | 63                  |
| Negative           | 0                      | 0                       | 0                      | 0                       | 0                       | 0                   |

Note. <sup>a</sup> % within creator.

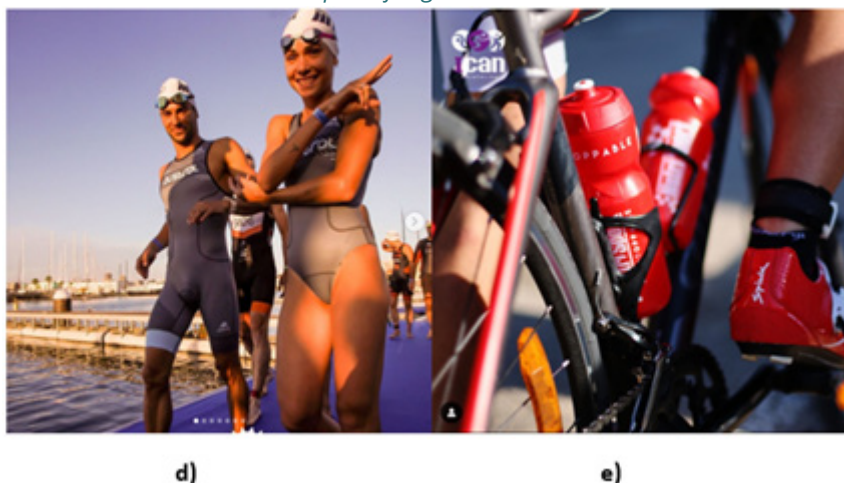
**Figure 1**  
Examples of UGC



a) #ican: prize element, pride, positive tone; b) #ican: infographic, no emotions, neutral tone; c) #mtri: start-/finish line, fun, pride, positive tone.

In Figure 2 examples of the event organisers' posts are displayed. The first picture posted by MTRI (Figure 2, d) obtained high interaction, whereas the mere objective focussed picture without any kind of emotion of ICAN (Figure 2, e) did not receive any comments.

**Figure 2**  
Examples of organisers' content



d) MTRI: Swimming, start-/finish line, fun; e) ICAN: Object, cycling, no emotion.

It is noticeable that in the UGC of ICAN, 11% were nonathletes, whereas the total proportion of posts of nonathletes was only 6.2%. Nevertheless, also in the UGC of MTRI, nonathletes had a higher percentage than in the posts of the organiser. Staff was more often displayed by the organisers than by the users. In contrast, users posted more content with no focus on people than the organisers. The greatest difference between the organisers themselves was found in the appeals solo, group, female, male, and prize.

Considering the type of sports displayed, running stood out universally, but it had a peculiarly higher presence in the organisers' content (ICAN 53.6%; MTRI 41.0%) than in the UGC. Swimming was displayed above average in the UGC of MTRI (25.4%). The UGC of ICAN displayed cycling (28.8%) and no sports (31.4%) above average. The prize element was mostly shown in MTRI. Regarding the event's momentum, the organisers and the UGC of MTRI displayed most posts while racing, with both in about 45% of their images. In change, the UGC of ICAN only displayed 24.6% while racing. A difference between the organisers and the UGC was found in the start-/finish line, where the organisers accounted both over 30%, whereas the UGC only about 20%.

Focussing on the affective dimension, slight differences in fun were found. The UGC of ICAN had less content showing concentration than the average of the other creators and the UGC of MTRI showed less pride (13.4%). Both organisers only



had approximately 10% of their posts with no/other emotion, thus showing values below the total average of all images. Surpassing this average, the UGC of ICAN had over one-fourth of posts with no/other emotions. As for the tone, most of the posts were positive. While in the case of MTRI, both the organisers and the user accounted for the same percentage, in the UGC of ICAN more neutral content was found than in the organisers' posts.

**Table 5**  
*Interaction distribution according to attributes*

|                    | Likes  | M(SD)           | Comments | M(SD)          |
|--------------------|--------|-----------------|----------|----------------|
| Selfie             | 1,118  | 58.84 (49.72)   | 71       | 3.74 (4.56)    |
| People             | 43,246 | 88.80 (87.14)   | 2,965    | 6.09 (17.74)   |
| Object             | 2,419  | 78.03 (94.87)   | 79       | 2.55 (3.73)    |
| Landscape          | 239    | 39.00 (32.72)   | 7        | 1.17 (1.17)    |
| Infographic        | 4,538  | 63.03 (90.51)   | 2,689    | 37.35 (129.18) |
| Multi-image        | 636    | 45.43 (26.76)   | 45       | 3.21 (3.93)    |
| Athlete            | 46,057 | 87.39 (87.82)   | 5,582    | 10.59 (51.52)  |
| Nonathlete         | 3,252  | 83.38 (84.06)   | 165      | 4.23 (4.94)    |
| Staff              | 3,180  | 88.33 (101.94)  | 758      | 21.06 (109.25) |
| No focus           | 4,075  | 56.60 (73.91)   | 181      | 2.51 (4.46)    |
| Solo               | 24,264 | 83.67 (91.98)   | 1,790    | 6.17 (10.76)   |
| Group              | 24,006 | 89.57 (82.07)   | 3,911    | 14.59 (71.24)  |
| No people          | 3,926  | 55.30 (73.60)   | 155      | 2.18 (3.49)    |
| Female             | 17,429 | 109.62 (105.80) | 2,293    | 14.42 (67.58)  |
| Male               | 22,357 | 74.28 (74.80)   | 1,957    | 6.50 (22.02)   |
| Both               | 7,946  | 88.29 (85.33)   | 1,402    | 15.58 (76.52)  |
| No gender          | 4,464  | 56.51 (71.66)   | 204      | 2.58 (4.39)    |
| Sea                | 10,438 | 91.56 (95.85)   | 780      | 6.84 (26.37)   |
| Urban              | 35,340 | 93.49 (89.92)   | 3,702    | 9.79 (42.92)   |
| Rural              | 6,035  | 59.75 (52.01)   | 365      | 3.61 (7.27)    |
| No surroundings    | 7,726  | 67.77 (84.71)   | 1,691    | 14.83 (78.42)  |
| Running            | 22,341 | 92.70 (79.39)   | 2,504    | 10.39 (49.68)  |
| Swimming           | 9,388  | 91.15 (98.27)   | 1,932    | 18.76 (84.16)  |
| Cycling            | 10,738 | 73.55 (76.41)   | 939      | 6.43 (21.73)   |
| No sports          | 10,040 | 69.72 (94.17)   | 506      | 3.51 (5.74)    |
| Prize              | 8,186  | 94.09 (73.34)   | 674      | 7.75 (27.55)   |
| Before/after       | 8,366  | 85.37 (77.41)   | 499      | 5.09 (7.77)    |
| Start-/finish line | 18,174 | 110.15 (111.43) | 3,345    | 20.27 (85.35)  |
| Racing             | 17,287 | 73.56 (62.79)   | 1,403    | 5.97 (25.27)   |
| Other moment       | 8,645  | 64.04 (84.69)   | 621      | 4.60 (14.04)   |
| Fun                | 17,996 | 89.98 (101.09)  | 1,933    | 9.67 (35.31)   |
| Concentration      | 17,301 | 80.85(76.60)    | 2,286    | 10.68 (57.81)  |
| Pride              | 12,950 | 104.44 (89.89)  | 1,728    | 13.94 (63.90)  |
| No/other emotion   | 5,851  | 54.18 (64.63)   | 339      | 3.14 (6.59)    |
| Positive           | 49,375 | 82.98 (86.41)   | 5,718    | 10.10 (49.76)  |
| Neutral            | 2,821  | 44.78 (50.79)   | 138      | 2.19 (4.44)    |

Giving response to the last research question, in Table 5 the sums of likes and comments, means and SDs according to the post appeals can be found. ICAN triathlons reached a total of 28,336 likes and a mean of 78.49 ( $SD = 87.75$ ) of which 11,049 were given to publications of the organiser and the rest to UGC. MTRI triathlon accumulated 23,860 likes with a mean of 89.03 ( $SD = 84.35$ ), with 13,861 likes on posts of the organiser and the remaining on UGC. As for comments, ICAN

triathlons obtained a total of 2,925 comments and a mean of 8.10 ( $SD = 38.51$ ). Of those 1,395 belonged to the organiser's posts and the rest to UGC. In the case of the MTRI triathlons, a total of 2,931, and a mean of 10.94 ( $SD = 57.03$ ) could be found, with 2,188 given to posts of MTRI and the remaining 743 to the UGC. A substantial difference in the sum, as well as the mean of comments between the publications of organisers and the UGC of the MTRI triathlons, was found. In the case of ICAN, there were also differences in the mean values but not that immense. In change, regarding the likes, the UGC of both triathlons had lower mean values than the event organisers' content.

Posts having their focus only on landscapes obtained the lowest mean of interaction. Even though staff was only present in 5.7% of all posts, these obtained high means of interaction. The highest mean of comments was found within infographics, which is probably because there were several Instagram competitions where users had to like and comment on an infographic post. Sea and urban almost had the same mean of likes, while urban obtained more comments. It is noteworthy to show that sea, even if it obtained high interaction, was only visible in 18.1% of the total posts. In change, rural images showed low values in both likes and comments. Moreover, no surroundings obtained more likes than landscape and showed the highest mean of comments of all scenery appeals. Swimming had a higher mean of likes than cycling and nearly as high as running. Regarding the comments, swimming had the highest mean ( $M = 18.67$ ) of all sports. Even though, swimming was only present in 16.4% of all posts. Swimming was more present at the MTRI event, and most found in the UGC of MTRI. As for the affective dimension, pride showed the highest mean of likes and comments. Notwithstanding, pride was only visible in 19.7% of the total sample. Yet, ICAN posted slightly more images than MTRI, in both cases organisers and users. ICAN found congruence in this appeal between the brand identity and the event image.

## Discussion

As research on the brand image and brand identity on SM in the context of sports events is very scarce in the academic literature, the main objective of this study was to investigate the contrasts and the effect on interactions between the event branding of two different triathlon organisers and the UGC regarding these events employing a content analysis of posts on Instagram. It was aimed to identify the projected appeals of the organisers' posts and the UGC, analysing their differences, similarities, and the associated user interactions. In this sense, this study contributes to filling the gap in the literature of users' perceived sports event image and the projected event's identity on SNS. The relevance of this study lies in the need for research on the visual modality of SM posts on the example of Instagram to provide deeper insight into the effects of post appeals on user interaction and a better understanding of the importance of the congruence between the sports event identity and the sports event image.

Regarding the general displayed events identities, the official accounts mostly posted images containing people, most of them athletes and pictured as solo in ICAN and as groups in MTRI. The majority were in urban surroundings with running being the prevalent sport. Concentration and fun were the most displayed appeals of the affective dimension. Considering on the other hand the UGC, the most striking difference to the organisers' contents were selfies and landscapes. The users posted fewer running and more other sports. Differences between the two triathlon organisers were found mostly in the higher number of posts containing females and prize elements in MTRI. The results show the preponderance of an overall high mean in likes in images including a prize element. Nevertheless, this appeal was only visible few posts of ICAN, whereas MTRI focused on this feature in a higher percentage, and also the UGC of both triathlons included prize elements more often than ICAN. As stated by Bajac et al. (2018), and supporting the congruence theory, the more congruence exists between a brand and a consumer, the better the favourable attitudes. In this aspect, MTRI achieved a better marketing strategy.

Considering the last research question, it was found that generally, images which did not focus on any person, no sports, without an event-specific moment, or no emotion presented fewer likes than other appeals. It was found that post appeals can whether have a positive or a negative impact on user interaction, which goes along with the findings of Wagner et al. (2017). Multi-images showed low mean values in likes and comments. This was also similarly found by Aramendia-Muneta et al. (2021) who confirmed that multi-images and fake pictures harmed likes. The start-/finish lines obtained the highest mean of likes. Comparably, in the study of Taberner and Juncà (2021), who used similar categories for the event moment, the finishing line generated the most likes, followed by the starting line. Interestingly, the second highest mean after the start-/finish line was obtained by images containing women and likewise, the comments were visible higher than those for mere men containing images. On the one hand, MTRI posted 41% of their images with a focus on women, but on the other hand, ICAN and the UGC of both triathlons did not mainly post images with a female focus. Romney and Johnson (2020) also found in their study of Instagram images of athletes, that the coverage of female athletes was significantly smaller than men's and women were often shown alongside a man. The strong underrepresentation of women in the study's overall sample goes along with the still-existing gender gap in the sports industry (Donoso et al., 2022). Women are also still underrepresented in sports media (Parry et al., 2023). Nevertheless, fan engagement in female sports showed to be as high as in male sports, but the performance of female athletes was strongly underrepresented (Johnson et al., 2021).

As pride was mostly present in images also containing a prize element, organisers should consider posting more images with this combination. A neutral tone resulted in few interactions, with the third lowest mean values of comments after the appeals of landscape and images not containing any person. Emotional appeals showed to be key factors for user engagement (Rietveld et al., 2020) and in the case of branded posts, emotional appeals also obtained higher engagement rates (Tavares & Nogueira, 2021). The affective experience showed to be the most influential dimension in the relationship between brand experience and the sports event image (Girish & Lee, 2019). Therefore, it is important to focus the SMM strategies on posts with a positive tone, filled with emotional appeals. Given the modest mean of interaction on selfies and landscape posts, both organisers adapted well their SM strategy in not using these appeals. As stated by Bajac et al. (2018), consumers are more satisfied when a brand is consistent with the image, in the case of the appeals selfies and landscape the organisers obtained congruence with the users' image. Notwithstanding, generally MTRI creators showed higher interaction mean values than ICAN creators. Similar to the outcomes of Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) it was found that sports event organisers' SM posting still lacks analytics, as is the case of ICAN where still the needs of the users are not fully considered. It can be interpreted that MTRI optimized their SM strategy to exploit popular post appeals among the triathlon community.

Coinciding with Taberner et al. (2020) and Aramendia-Muneta et al. (2021) the present study shows clearly that certain appeals obtain higher user interaction as well as the existing differences between organisers and users. Thus, it is not only one characteristic that leads directly to user engagement but rather quality content that provides a positive tone, including emotions and cognitive appeals, where a leading cause might be the emotions and the tone (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020).

Knowing the differences between the event identity and the users' actual event image is key to creating and maintaining a strong brand. Evidence is shown that a careful selection of the appeals posted on SM is crucial for event branding. Communication through visual content has a powerful impact on users but it must be contemplated that this impact might be positive or negative, and therefore the correct displayed content needs to be ensured (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). In prior studies, it was shown that different advertising or SM post appeals do affect the perception of athlete endorsers and impact user interaction (Kunkel et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2017). Likewise, this study depicts the post appeals of both the organisers' contents and the UGC and their impact on interactions. Thus, Instagram facilitates the co-branding between event organisers, athletes, and spectators, which was also shown by Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) in the case of professional team sports organisations. Collaboration and value co-creation should be considered by sports event organisations as they can lead to brand engagement and offer opportunities for further consumption (Grohs et al., 2020). Consequently, organisers need to thoroughly consider both, their brand identity shown through the different appeals on their SM posts and the event image reflected on the UGC.

## Conclusions

This study responds to the need for research on the effects of post appeals on user interaction, contributing to a better understanding of the similarities and differences between a sports event image and the sports event identity. Among the 629 posts, selfies and landscape photography were only found in UGC and obtained few interactions. Most differences between the two organisers were found in the appeals solo, group, female, male, and prize. Overall, MTRI adapted better to the actual market demands with higher means of likes and comments as they opted for the inclusion of more posts with women or prize elements being those appeals which obtained a considerable number of interactions. The results show that the presence of emotions and a positive tone were important for user interaction. Women obtained high mean values of likes and comments but were still underrepresented in ICAN and the UGC. Similarly, swimming showed to obtain more interaction than cycling but was sparsely displayed, except in the UGC of MTRI. The study provides evidence of the importance of the different image appeals and the differences between sports event identity and sports event image. In this sense, sports event managers should adapt their SM strategy to the needs of the users to gain congruence between the brand identity and the event image. Instagram has shown to be a valuable instrument that can be used as a strategic SNS to enhance a sports event image by engaging users.

### *Limitations and future research lines*

Finally, it is necessary to consider the limitations of this study to highlight perspectives for future research and to obtain a better contextualisation of the conclusions. First, the study examined only one SNS. As there is a variety of other visual-centric SNS, differences between the content of Instagram and those other similar SNS could be considered. Although the study focussed on triathlons, to have a greater variety of sports disciplines, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all kinds of sports events. Sports need to be viewed as a heterogeneous market, with different disciplines needing different infrastructures and thus different approaches. While the present study offers increased knowledge and insightful information on image appeals, sports event identity and sports event images, there is still ample capacity to further expand this research area, as research of sports event image, especially on SM is still limited. Moreover, as SM present a rapidly changing environment with a continuously developing process and new SNS are emerging ongoingly, the users are

adapting and changing their habits. SMM strategies and different images or even video appeals in new and popular SM e.g., TikTok could present an interesting area of future investigations. Additionally, future studies of sports event branding should integrate a closer synergy between sports management, UGC, and SMM studies to advance the understanding of their interrelationships.

### *Theoretical and practical implications*

This study contributes to the body of literature on sports event marketing, and specifically to sports event branding on SM, by providing evidence on the discrepancies between sports event identity and sports event image. By doing so, the existing gap of studies in the context of sports event branding, more precisely on sports event image on SM is addressed.

Moreover, several practical implications are provided based on the obtained results. First, the similarities and differences between the events' contents and the UGC have been pointed out. Event managers need to gain knowledge about the sports event image users perceive to adapt their marketing strategies accordingly. Secondly, it has been shown which post appeals lead to more user interactions. Considering the results of this study, the focus should be given to posts containing people, the start-/finish line, a positive tone, and pride. Posts with a focus on women, and posts about swimming need to be reinforced. Effective content management on SM is therefore crucial to encourage sports event participants to interact with the content which then can lead to better brand engagement. Some important and positive appeals are not used to their fullest by the analysed sports event organisers, which presents opportunities to fully leverage the potential of Instagram to create an optimal event image and achieve higher engagement rates. The findings suggest that triathlon or similar sports event organisers should adapt their communication and SMM strategies to encourage users to interact, co-create and engage with the event on SM. In this sense, the results of the present study are not only useful for triathlon event organisers to become aware of the importance of the implementation of an appropriate SMM strategy but also generally spoken for sport event organisers to structure the impact and influence of their sports event, as well as its promotion and marketing communication with the help of social media.

### **Ethics Committee Statement**

Not applicable due to the use and analysis of publicly available data.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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### **Authors' Contribution**

Conceptualization C.S.E.; Methodology C.S.E.; Validation C.S.E. & J.G.-F.; Formal Analysis C.S.E.; Investigation C.S.E. & J.G.-F.; Data Curation C.S.E. & J.G.-F.; Writing – Original Draft C.S.E.; Writing – Review & Editing C.S.E. & J.G.-F.; Visualization C.S.E.; J. G.-F. & G.E.I.; Supervision J.G.-F. & G.E.I.; Project Administration G.E.I.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on the official Instagram profiles of @icantriathlonsp, @mediterraneatriation and following the hashtags #ICANalicante, #icantriathlonalicante, #icangandia, #icantriathlongandia, #ICANtriathlon, #mtrialicante, #mtrivalència, #mtricastellón, #mtri2022 and #mediterraneatriathlon.

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