







# Social Capital and Interactions in the Virtual Communities of Fans of the First Division of Peruvian Professional Football

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**Abstract.** When a group of people acts together to achieve community objectives, they develop a series of strategies that are called social capital, with the emergence of social networks this capital is manifesting itself through virtual communities, so the objective of this research is to examine the concept of social capital from the perspective of the managers of the virtual communities of football fans of the Peruvian first division. To this end, a qualitative approach was applied through semi-structured interviews with the managers of these communities. Among the results, it was obtained that managers promote the realization of a diversity of digital and face-to-face interactions that allow them to achieve objectives linked to their sports purposes. It is concluded that the managers of these communities have acquired digital community management skills with which they promote symbolic values and attributes that generate a sense of belonging in their communities, which unites them to achieve objectives linked to the football club of which they are fans.

**Keywords:** Social capital, virtual communities, soccer, fans, social networks.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Virtual Communities

Virtual communities are Internet sites where social interactions mediated by technology are shared based on common interests or expectations and needs [1, 2, 3]. Virtual spaces are configured, therefore, as an extension of the Habermasian concept of public opinion [4], through public squares or forums in which debates, information searches, agreements and transactions, entertainment, and the development of fantasies are interrelated, together with the opportunity to exist as an alterity parallel to the objective personality [5]. From the commercial perspective, virtual communities and followers contribute to the brand, generating value and providing fans with a sense of status [6] Cabero [7], from this angle, argues that virtual communities are groups of

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people identified by values and interests. Authors such as Pazos, Pérez and Salinas [8] affirm that these groups are related to specific topics on which they share resources and documents. In addition, Peña, Lazkano & Larrondo [9] argues that the introduction of innovative devices facilitates the opinion and retention of media content, given that not only is more content disseminated, but there is also an individual appropriation of it. And this interpretation is shaped by the perception of the audience, real or imagined [10], that is, the traits of each community determine the attributes that underpin the profile of the conversations held online. This dynamic, during the COVID-19 pandemic, moved interaction to online platforms, allowing sports clubs to reach new audiences [11]. Clubs take advantage of the tribal nature of followers through social media, encouraging co-creation. In addition, they highlight the importance of understanding local communities and developing digital spaces [12]. For this reason, this research describes the way in which virtual communities of Peruvian football fans are interrelated around common interests that generate social capital

## 1.2 Social Capital and Sports Communities

Social capital, from a sociological perspective, is a concept that refers to the socio-structural resources available to individuals and social groups that allow them to carry out coordinated and reciprocal actions to achieve development [13, 14, 15]. According to the aforementioned authors, this social capital is composed of social networks (in the sense of the ties that unite people), along with the bonds of social trust and social norms (of voluntariness, altruism, behavior). In these networks of friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, among others, actions and resources are combined to achieve a specific goal [16, 17]. García [18] states that social capital involves investing in social media resources with the aim of making a profit. These groups have certain conditions to generate social capital and are roles and rules, social relationships, trust and reciprocity, solidarity, cooperation, generosity, proactivity [19]. Vásquez [20] argues that online social networks, being made up of connected people, also promote the development of social capital by encouraging the exchange of information, ideas and opinions among their members. Villena [21], on the other hand, argues that sports generate community social bonds with a strong affective charge, which generates the creation of social capital. Social capital is strengthened online, boosting trust and civic engagement [22]. Electronic data supports its conceptualization, while the accumulation of online social capital attracts users [23]. Teams and followers use social networks to build brand communities, linked to social capital, which is key to understanding interconnections and social mobility [24]. Over the last thirty years, the concept of social capital has been addressed by multiple disciplines, each from its own perspective. In the field of sociology and political science, this term refers to networks of social relationships based on trust and reciprocity, which promote mutual benefits for their members [25].

## 2 Methodology

This research is basic and descriptive because its objective is to analyze the management of the virtual communities of the fans of clubs in the first division of Peruvian men's football through social networks. The analytical method was applied because the causes of the origin of the phenomenon of communities on the internet were studied, as well as its nature and effects [26]. Considering that the research topic has a substantial theoretical basis, it was decided to carry out a research based on the interpretative paradigm. One of the attributes of this paradigm is to study the nature of reality [27]. This form of research focuses on the way in which understanding of people and society as such is produced [28]. Likewise, this paradigm attempts to understand a social situation as an event, interaction, guild or association [29].

In carrying out this study, the qualitative approach was applied, since it enables the scientific investigation of imaginaries, representations and cultural expressions, in addition to considering the perspectives, opinions or understanding of people linked to a specific topic [30, 31, 26]. Additionally, the researcher applies his criteria to filter the data, which means that the data extracted under this approach are subjective. In order to mitigate the risks of interpretation, the researcher is required to be trained in a personal discipline and to adopt a disciplined subjectivity [32]. In this way, the qualitative researcher starts with the premise that the social world is "relative" and can only be understood from the perspective of the subjects studied [33].

To obtain the information, the semi-structured interview technique was applied, in which a guide of questions was used and, in addition, additional off-script questions could be asked to clarify the ideas that arose in the conversation [34]. This questionnaire was validated by expert judgement to determine that its elements are understandable, unequivocal, adequate and allow the objectives of the research to be achieved [35]. In addition, a pilot interview was applied to contrast the operational validity of the instrument. Therefore, an organized procedure was carried out to collect information by answering a series of questions. In addition, closed-ended and open-ended questions were used to gather a variety of information, providing them with defined response options along with the opportunity to express themselves freely when not all possible answers could be foreseen [36]. The selection of the interviewees was carried out by applying non-probabilistic sampling by judgment, in which the active participation of the managers of virtual communities of fans of football clubs in the Peruvian first division was considered as a basic condition. This sampling is limited because it does not allow generalizations to be made about the findings, but it is effective because it allows us to contact hard-to-reach populations [37, 38]. This sample was chosen because no studies of this type of virtual football communities were found, neither in the Peruvian nor international context. The selection of this type of sampling is based on the fact that the research has a qualitative approach, and it is also relevant when it is not possible to calculate the totality of the population studied.

### **General Objective:**

To examine the concept of social capital from the perspective of the managers of the virtual communities of football fans in the Peruvian first division.

**Specific objectives:**

- Compare tactics for promoting social capital among the chosen population
- Evaluate the mechanisms of interaction that take place within these same communities.

For this work, managers of virtual communities of fans of clubs in the Peruvian first division who met the following criteria were selected:

1. The group of selected are managers of virtual communities of teams from both Lima and the provinces, these groups use digital social networks for their existence.
2. The interviewees manage virtual communities that are fans of clubs in the first division of Peruvian football during the championship that is taking place in 2024.

Based on these criteria, those selected from the sample are detailed in table number 1.

**Table 1.** Sample of managers of virtual communities of football fans of the Peruvian first division.

Name	Club	Community that manages and social network	Number of followers
Cesar Becerra (CB)	Alianza Lima	Entre Grones / Facebook	33000
Christian Montero (CM)	Alianza Lima	Expansión blanquiazul/ Facebook	13000
Jazmín Lopez (JL)	Sporting Cristal	Amor Cristal/ Facebook	979
Sara Villanueva (SV)	Sporting Cristal	Hablemos de Cristal/ Facebook	45000
Christian Guerra (CG)	Fc Melgar	Soy rojinegro/ Facebook	4000
Kassandra Alfaro (KA)	Fc Melgar	Piel rojinegra/ Facebook	2500
Michael Américo (MA)	Fc Melgar	Los magistrados/ Facebook	3500
Nestor Gonzales (NG)	Cienciano	Vamos Cienciano/ Facebook	1800
Eduardo Annco (EA)	Cusco Fc	Sangre dorada/ Facebook	920
Orlando Vargas (OA)	Universitario de Deportes	Crema mi gran amigo/ Facebook	27000

All interviews were conducted from January to February 2024 using the Zoom and Google Meet apps. The main questions were organized taking into account the categories and subcategories and were adapted according to the club of which the interviewee was a fan. In addition, given the format of semi-structured interviews, the interviewee was given the freedom to expand on their answers, accompanied by re-questions that enriched the understanding of their experiences related to the topic. The interviews were then transcribed, allowing the data to be analyzed, coded and interpreted, in order to answer the research questions that guide this work [39]. This process allowed the coding of the results, demonstrating the effectiveness of the instrument that can be replicated for research that addresses the same topic in other foreign sports leagues.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Social Capital in Football Virtual Communities

As presented in the theoretical part, social capital is strengthened online, boosting trust and civic participation [22]. In this sense, the interviewees state that they have a common goal, which is to grow their virtual community and make the club aware of it and make them benefit from it. This intensification of ties produces a greater implicit commitment to be able to promote their passion for the club, being present at all the matches and making it a daily occurrence for all members of the community (CB/Entre Grones, CG/Soy Rojinegro, EA/Sangre Dorada, KA/Piel Rojinegra). The members of the community create social circles where they even come together for non-football issues such as political, philosophical, legal, scientific thoughts that go hand in hand with their passion for the club (MA/Los magistrados, KA/Piel Rojinegra).

Some aspects that make up social capital are trust, voluntariness and proactivity [13, 14, 15, 19], in this sense, managers try to demonstrate their commitment to the club and the community by ensuring that the information in their content is true, so they resort to reliable sources so that their followers are aware and have verified news. Several managers express that their level of commitment is also manifested by giving the time and quality that is necessary for their virtual communities (NG/Vamos Cienciano, MA/Los magistrados, CB/Entre Grones, JL/Amor Cristal, KA/Piel Rojinegra). On the other hand, a small portion of managers measure their engagement based on how much dedication they give to the Facebook page during the week. Mostly they try to balance their time during the week and dedicate it so that they have a progressive evolution (EA/Golden Blood, C/Red and Black Being, CM/Blue and White Expansion). On the other hand, they also try to contribute to the generation of economic income for their club, for example, Let's Talk About Crystal encourages the purchase of original products to support the team, for this they apply specific strategies:

In addition, to encourage them to buy original products to support the team. If you check our community, you will see that we suggest where to buy or when there are offers. Situations that we see that you can buy like in Adidas [...] we put out a post where we show how to buy (SV/Let's talk about Crystal).

Social capital is also manifested in coordinated and reciprocal actions to achieve community development [13, 14, 15]. In the communities studied, this is manifested, to a greater degree, in times of crisis because managers face the challenge of maintaining the interest of fans, so they recognize that transparency and the delivery of reliable information are essential to keep the community involved and attentive to the club's movements. The management of communication in difficult times becomes a key strategy to keep intact the bond between the team and its followers, avoiding the loss of interest and the decrease in participation in social networks (CM/Expansión Blanquiazul, CB/Entre Grones, JL/Amor Cristal). Assertive responses to fans' concerns and the promotion of a positive attitude are also appealed to, being key strategies to keep the spirit of the community high. (EA/Golden Blood, KA/Red-and-Blackskin, MA/The Magistrates, OV/Cream My Great Friend). However, the importance of the constant presence of the community is recognized, especially in the most difficult moments, where messages of support and activity on the page can positively influence the mood of the team and the coaching staff (CG/Soy Rojinegro, NG/Vamos Cienciano, SV/Hablemos de Cristal). According to the profile recognized by the administrators of these fan enclaves of the first division of Peruvian soccer, we find that there are the following types of management of the virtual community:

- Intra-community virtual management. Managers are in charge of organizing, administering, and directing your virtual community.
- Inter-community virtual management. Managers manage their community, but they also engage with other like-minded communities.
- Hybrid community management. Managers organize face-to-face activities that are mostly linked to the participation of their teams, and also others that may have integration or social aid purposes.

### 3.2 Interaction in football virtual communities

Virtual communities interact through connections that are mediated by internet technology to satisfy common needs or interests [1, 2, 3]. In this regard, the evolution of formats has facilitated closer interaction between users and page administrators. For example, managers respond directly to fan comments and questions, either through posts or live streams. In addition, community participation is encouraged, allowing followers themselves to express their opinions and share relevant information, including through WhatsApp groups. This collaboration contributes to a more enriching and closer experience for fans, regardless of their geographical location (CM/Expansión Blanquiazul, JL/Amor Cristal, NG/Vamos Cienciano, OV/Crema mi gran amigo).

However, this constant evolution can also lead to confusion and challenges for some managers. Some may fear taking the leap into new trends and being left behind in outdated formats. However, many are willing to take the risk and adapt, for which they hire specialized social media personnel and, thus, seek to increase their follower base exponentially. In addition, they strive to constantly renew the content to avoid monotony and stay top of mind with followers. This includes emulating successful strategies

from the club's official pages, seeking to maintain consistency and relevance in its online presence (MA/Los magistrados, SV/Hablemos de Cristal).

### 3.3 Interaction with other communities

Managers also develop collaborative interactions with other virtual communities, for which they share important content between related pages, generating a strategic alliance that benefits both parties. A key tactic to maintain this collaboration is the creation of WhatsApp groups, which facilitate intergroup parasocial relationships. These groups allow for greater coordination to achieve common goals, such as sorting tickets or sharing relevant information. In addition to sharing posts, managers exchange ideas, opinions, and content, thus enriching the quality of the content on their own pages. Sometimes, some collaborators participate in multiple groups simultaneously, further strengthening the network of collaboration (CM/Blue and White Expansion, CG/Soy Rojinegro, EA/Golden Blood, MA/The Magistrates, NG/Vamos Cienciano, SV/Let's Talk About Crystal). However, there are also cases where the collaboration is not reciprocal. Black-and-Red Skin offers help to other close groups without receiving reciprocal help, which hinders page growth and generates frustration among managers:

We try to be able to help, but you can help in everything, but when you ask for help unfortunately it is not the case [...] they don't respond many times, but we do try to support everyone [...] they ask us for interviews and we try to help or, in my case, they designed the content by making a video (KA/Piel Rojinegra).

On the other hand, it is important to note that managers can establish direct communication with the club, which can result in more formal and beneficial collaborations. Through contacts within the institution, managers are hired to create specific content for the team's networks. Not only does this collaboration provide a monetary gain for the managers, but it also increases their visibility by being directly associated with the club. In addition, they are given the facility to share exclusive information, such as possible signings or lineups for upcoming matches, which increases the interest and participation of the fan community (CB/Entre Grones, JL/Amor Cristal).

### 3.4 Face-to-face interaction

Beyond virtual interactions, members also try to maintain and perform face-to-face actions. One aspect that has been visualized in some groups is the ability to organize themselves to be able to go to the stadium and that is where they hold their face-to-face meetings. That is to say, they are not only in charge of sharing information, but also of being in the stands, whether at home or away and on different occasions they try to relate to the club to generate content and cover (OV/Crema mi gran amigo, NG/Vamos Cienciano, KA/Piel Rojinegra). In addition, the managers encourage interaction with the supporter and try to increase their popularity by carrying out activities: "Right now we do a penalty contest in a small goal that they put on the street and you put some cans and you have to throw away the 5 or a game of questions about how much of an Alianza fan you are" (CB/Entre Grones).

These initiatives are not only limited to sporting events, but also extra-sporting activities with a social impact such as parties for low-income children on festive dates (CG/Soy Rojinegro). While another group carries out face-to-face activities, helping their club with administrative procedures or also going to training to support the players (OV/Crema, my great friend).

However, the reality is that not all managers have the same opportunity to meet in person due to various work commitments. Faced with this limitation, many choose to hold virtual meetings prior to matches to discuss and improve aspects related to the content of their pages (CM/Expansión Blanquiazul, SV/Hablemos de Cristal). For this reason, this type of virtual interaction encourages collaboration and the exchange of ideas between managers, thus contributing to the enrichment of the club's digital community of fans (SV/Hablemos de Cristal). On the other hand, many of the managers are close to several members of the bars, some of the latter also have their own virtual community, which gives rise to collaborations to improve their content and support each other (JL/Amor Cristal, KA/Piel Rojinegra, MA/Los magistrados, NG/Vamos Cienciano). Apart from this, the group of magistrates tries to differentiate themselves from the others, since thanks to the fact that they are a community mostly made up of lawyers, they instruct the bar so that they know how to defend their rights in the event that the police try to arrest them and that they are not subject to abuse of authority (MA/The magistrates).

## 4 Discussion and conclusions

In a similar way to the research of Sánchez [1], Ferri [2] and Budiño [3], this paper agrees that virtual communities are internet sites configured based on symbolic values and attributes. In these groups, where technology-mediated interactions are shared, grouping occurs through common interests. In accordance with the objectives of this research, it is concluded that the communities studied are managed by managers, who are responsible for encouraging social capital, of enlivening the sense of belonging, with tactics such as questions or answers to fans, the generation of publications or live broadcasts. Managers are aware that they are part of authentic "public squares", which interrelate the social with the intimate [4]. Therefore, as we have seen in the results section, managers are responsible for encouraging community participation [5], as well as adapting to keep their community cohesive [7]. In addition, another finding, which coincided with what was predicted by Coleman [13] and Forni et al. [15], is about the concept of social capital that is combined in the spaces studied, through which social groups have socio-structural resources that facilitate them to carry out coordinated and reciprocal actions to achieve group development. According to the managers consulted, this concept, in the case of the Peruvian first division of football, consists of promoting the development of the virtual community until the club becomes aware of it. Likewise, the bonds of trust and social norms that are demonstrated by giving news and truthful information about the club are highlighted, as they constitute reliable sources. In other words, managers take a more journalistic approach to content creation. Likewise, the



managers interviewed mentioned the application of assertive communication to respond to the concerns of fans, through their virtual community, coinciding with the research of Vásquez [20], which indicates that the development of social capital is promoted through the exchange of information and opinions. Based on the research, it is concluded that a new type of social capital is developed in the football communities studied, which we will call *virtual social capital* due to its online nature.

Regarding the objective of evaluating the interaction mechanisms that occur within these same communities, it is concluded that they base their existence on digital interactions in which they share similar interests and content [7, 8, 40]. However, it is considered relevant to mention the face-to-face interaction of these fan communities, showing a coincidence with the work of Yoshida [41]. In this sense, in this research, active participation in virtual or physical environments was found, establishing fan-to-fan relationships. In other words, the managers of the virtual communities of fans are not only in charge of underpinning virtual relationships, but also of being present in the stands, whether at home or away, and on different occasions they try to relate to have their community always active and also obtain new followers. In addition, another of the findings is the exchange of ideas, opinions and content between various communities, being a kind of alliance and thus favoring the quality of the content of their own Facebook pages [8].

Despite the findings, it is worth mentioning that this research had limitations due to the difficulty of access to the sample. Another aspect to mention is that due to the qualitative approach of the work, its results and conclusions are not generalizable, however, the findings are proposed as lines of research for future works that study social capital in other types of virtual communities and also in other social networks, therefore, it is proposed to extend the study to virtual communities of fans from other countries and other sports, which will allow us to continue expanding the line of research proposed by this work.

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