

## The Kings League challenge. Glorification of commercialized and spectacularized sport

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### Abstract

The Kings League represents a challenge within the global football industry, pushing the relationship between sport, spectacle and entertainment to its limits in the digital age. It does so through many elements: eccentric rules designed to maximize unpredictability and excitement; the combination and overlapping of different genres across matches and shows in a sort of pastiche; the tireless exploitation of the communication possibilities offered by digital technology; celebrities – mostly streamers and a few former footballers – who act as attractions; and the continuous involvement of fan-customers-prosumers, especially younger ones. All this unfolds in an atmosphere that is always halfway between competitive event and cheerful recreational show.

It is a rational strategy in economic terms, one that aims to exploit the principles of commercialization and spectacularization of sport as widely as possible, following a vigorous market logic, but also presenting itself as a cultural and commercial avant-garde for a recoding of the entire sporting canon.

**Keywords:** Kings League, Commercialization, Spectacularization, Digital entertainment, Market.

### 1. Introduction

The Kings League<sup>1</sup> is a competition created in Spain in 2022, although the first season took place at the beginning of 2023 (Kings League infojobs, 2024). It is a new sporting format, a football tournament played by seven players, which has now spread to several countries: to date, in addition to Spain, it is currently played in Italy, Mexico, Brazil, France and Germany. In a global yet centrally organized network, it operates through extravagant rules that change annually with a specific aim: to increase the spectacle of the game, maximize unpredictability and uncertainty of outcome so to make it appealing, entertaining, lively and exciting for a wide audience, especially younger generations.

Conceived specifically for the digital consumer, the Kings League represents a challenge to the global football industry, which seeks to maximize the commercialized and spectacularized logic of contemporary sport for economic purposes, systematically, methodically and openly

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<sup>1</sup> There is also a female version, the Queens League, which does not seem to have achieved the same popularity at the moment.

exaggerating its fundamental characteristics while effectively merging sport and digital entertainment.

## 2. A theoretical framework: sport as commercialized and spectacularized entertainment

To fully understand the mechanism of this new competition, it is worth situating it within the dominant characteristics of the contemporary sports industry.

Nowadays, sport is primarily configured, especially in its elite dimension, as an industrial and market reality oriented towards producing performances whose primary purpose is to entertain spectators-consumers by virtue of a profit logic.

This industry fully embodies the distinctive features of a sporting context subject to advanced commercialization processes. This expression does not simply refer to the existence of economic transactions within the sporting system – which have been present since the earliest forms of structured competitions, especially those of greater importance – but rather emphasizes a specific cultural and organizational characteristic, and an attitude towards sport and its protagonists, that tends to interpret sporting practices, events and subjects mainly in terms of economic value, market and profit (Walsh & Giulianotti, 2001, 2007; Andrews & Silk, 2018; Andrews, 2006, 2019; Boykoff, 2014; Bifulco, 2024, Horne, 2006, Sage, 1998; Rinehart, 1998).

Thus, the pursuit of profit, the centrality of the financial dimension and the adoption of market logic guide, with rare exceptions, the planning of sporting events, their staging down to the smallest details, and the relationships among the actors involved. The generation of revenue and the accumulation of capital through the commercialization of goods and services related to sporting competition consequently emerge as the dominant criteria in shaping both the definition and perception of the sport as a social phenomenon, one that ends up being, over time, integrated into common sense (Whitson, 1984; Williams, 1977; Sage, 1998).

The social and communal dimension of passion does not disappear entirely; rather, it continues to exist in a relationship of coexistence and intersection with the market structure (Crawford, 2004). It remains, after all, an important component of fans' motivation to consume, even where it comes into tension with economic logic and seeks margins for autonomous expression. Yet this framework is unlikely to play an explicit role in guiding the strategic decisions of the sports industry, except to the extent that it can be translated into consumption potential.

The salient features of this configuration of sport can be traced back to several elements: the central role of large corporations operating directly within football or related sectors, led by managerial elites and oriented towards capital accumulation and profit maximization in both organizational and competitive choices; the systematic promotion of sporting and commercial brands; the increasing spectacularization of events, designed to attract large audiences and consumers of products and services; the use of celebrities as tools to build and strengthen identity and parasocial bonds with fans – bonds that are, in turn, subject to economic exploitation (Andrews, 2019). The commercialization of sport is therefore characterized by a constant focus on expanding the economic value of the entire sector and its potential, with a conspicuous interest in strategic markets such as merchandising, sponsorship, advertising, broadcasting rights,

season tickets and matchday admissions. The conduct of the actors involved is guided by explicit economic rationality in the planning of events and related commercial activities.

The key element through which the sports industry attempts to maximize its economic potential is spectacle. Sport is, in fact, a complex form of entertainment economy, geared towards channeling multiple forms of consumption: competitions, protagonists, venues and locations hosting competitions, side events, promotional messages, media discourse and even expressions of supporters are incorporated into a spectacular dimension whose aim is to imbue participation with emotionally engaging and seductive content capable of stimulating consumption. From athletic performances to ceremonial rituals, from entertainment shows to architectural spaces, from media narratives to the continuous flow of data and information, from the dynamics of celebrity to the aesthetics of uniforms, from advertising to fantasy sports, everything contributes to a spectacular totality aimed at entertaining, attracting and encouraging consumer behaviour (Andrews, 2019, pp. 41-42).

At the same time, the sports industry is becoming increasingly globalized. Companies interested in the commercial exploitation of sport – from sports governing bodies to multinationals and media agencies – aim to penetrate markets and capture audiences on a global scale, distributing resources according to market-driven criteria. Even the main players in contests operate within a globalized labour market, gravitating towards the most remunerative opportunities.

In this context, stadiums and sports arenas are themselves designed as consumer spaces, conceived to offer intense visual and entertainment experiences, but also diversified goods and services that extend well beyond the competition in the strict sense and may even incorporate dedicated areas for sales or consumption (Tosi, 2018).

The commercialized form of sport is based on the so-called sports-media complex or media-sport production complex (Lefever, 2012; Jhally, 1989; Tirino, 2025), i.e. on the structural interdependence among sports governance, media industries, and sponsoring companies. These are complex relationships, not without competitive and conflictual elements, yet characterized by systemic convergences of interest.

Sport is called upon to guarantee a continuous flow of events and content, set within predictable calendars cycles and established narrative patterns – rivalries and the drama of competition – which seek to attract and retain public attention. The constant production of competitions, results and news feeds attractive narratives within a universe familiar to fans and spectators, in which tradition, history and renewal coexist. This combination of novelty, outcome uncertainty and recognizable frameworks constitutes a significant source of commercial potential (Rowe, 2004, pp. 31-33).

The media, for their part, transform the attention of fans into economic value by building around sports content, in addition to broadcasting competitions, news or entertainment programming and leveraging the full narrative and communicative potential offered by digital platforms. In exchange for substantial economic investments, they aim to expand the audience they offer to the advertising market and strengthen their corporate legitimacy. The sale of advertising space generates significant resources for both media agencies and the sports sector, while advertisers benefit from privileged exposure to large consumer audiences.

Within this integrated system, the elite sports industry, in order to demonstrate its capacity to absorb huge financial flows, is deeply permeated by the logic and language of the market (Boyle

& Haynes, 2004). Broadcasting rights, sponsorships, advertising, the exploiting the digital engagement, and the development of productive relationships closely linked to the media ecosystem and the interests of major brands, all become instruments for maximizing profitability. In this context, the fan – the bearer of the passion that animates the system – is mainly considered as a spectator and consumer – and today also as a prosumer – whose attention represents the fundamental economic resource (Jhally, 1984). Although television remains a central player, the landscape is changing due to digitalization, the emergence of new platforms, processes such as disintermediation, and prosumerism as a new mode of engagement for fans, who are now not only consumers but also producers of content or digital traffic, and above all unwitting unpaid workers in the economic system (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018).

Sport itself, across its various disciplines, as well as the activation of community and identity dynamics, serves primarily an instrumental function insofar as it attracts spectators and customers to whom entertainment, goods and services can be sold, and brands promoted, benefiting from high visibility thanks to the widespread attention generated by tournaments, competitions and their protagonists.

The commercial and media exploitation of sport has thus progressively intensified the need to increase the spectacularization of events and refine the mechanisms for attracting increasingly segmented audiences. Within the sports and media entertainment complex, every element – from sporting performances to ceremonies, from biographical narratives to gossip, from the configuration of spaces to advertising – takes on a widespread spectacular dimension (Andrews, 2019).

A profit-oriented sports product therefore tends to operate across specific parameters in different ways and with different levels of integration depending on the case: favouring identification, amplifying drama, preserving outcome uncertainty, intensifying emotional peaks and enhancing aesthetic aspects, accentuating dynamism, keeping the duration of competitions limited – although not too short – and making use of – and/or amplifying – the relevance of events and the personalization of the protagonists (Clarke & Clarke, 2015).

This involves strategies aimed at maintaining constant audience engagement, leveraging identity, belonging, performance excellence, game aesthetics, the drama of competition and, in some cases, even economic incentives linked to betting.

It is not only the programming and staging of events, in addition to their narration, that are used to achieve this ideal of extended involvement of the fan-spectator-consumer. The continuous regulatory changes in the various disciplines are also directed towards the same aim (Sewart, 1987).

Contributing to this logic are changes to the rules of various sports, introduced over time to increase the appeal and telegenicity of competitions, the aesthetic and dynamic qualities of play, greater protection for the most talented athletes, as well as the reorganization of calendars to better meet the needs of global audiences. At the same time, the ways through which sport is covered – tv programmes and contents on digital platforms – are organized around a combination of images, sounds, comments and data that make the most of technological potential, including big data and analytics, to enrich both the interpretative and dramatic dimensions of competition (Bifulco & Bory, 2020).

Based on these processes, the aim is to convert the spectacular potential of sport into economic value through a circuit that risks being highly recursive: media visibility reinforces the commercial nature of the industry, commercialization requires increasingly spectacular competition, and spectacular entertainment tends to increase audiences and, consequently, the overall visibility of the system (Miller, Lawrence, McKay, & Rowe, 2001, p. 68).

### 3. Principles of economic rationalization: the Kings League, its rules and market logic

The Kings League is a football competition with teams of seven players, organized mainly – but not exclusively – around national tournaments<sup>2</sup>. In most cases, there are twelve teams – in Brazil there are currently ten teams, in Germany eight, while in the case of the Kings World Cup Nations in 2026 there were twenty national teams, divided into four groups, where the European finals and the world club tournament clearly had a different schedule. The format of the tournaments and matches, as well as the rules of the game, are explicitly designed and periodically modified to try to improve and increase entertainment and spectator engagement, especially in the digital environment. The matches, events and related programming are mainly streamed and broadcast on social media, across which posts, reels and stories abound – although matches can also be broadcast on television channels.

The teams are created in imaginative and original ways and are directly linked to the presidents (team managers), who are streamers, influencers or former footballers or, occasionally, media celebrities or active footballers – with the specific aim of attracting a young audience. Although there is currently no direct reference to territorial identities in the teams, some more or less veiled references to football or territorial affiliations can sometimes be included, always with the intention of exploiting their engagement or promotion potential. This is the case in Italy with teams such as Zebras FC, which recalls the most widely supported club in Italian football, or Zeta Como, or some uniforms that can evoke the colours of established traditional clubs. On the other hand, in the broader commercial exploitation of the competition, the establishment of links with local cultures is not ruled out a priori, both in the definition of the teams and in the staging of spectacular support. At the same time, over time, it is likely to expect that teams will develop mechanisms of loyalty and attachment or identity-based affiliation, event if not territorial, a dynamic that already happens today, especially in relation to the presidents (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2024).

Of course, in the case of competition between nations, the reference to national identity is explicit.

The managerial logic that emerges is that of an actual cartel (Sage, 1998), which centrally controls the production, organization and marketing of competitions and all related services and goods, also regulating the relationships between the actors and operators involved. The management of economic and contractual dynamics, merchandising, competition preparation and media rights is concentrated in an organizational, industrial and professional network that firmly controls its decision-making and logistical power, establishing formats, rules of the game, how to allocate

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<sup>2</sup> As we have already mentioned, tournaments are currently held in Spain, where the Kings League originated, as well as in Italy, France, Germany, Mexico, and Brazil.

resources, how to build teams, the exploitation of media revenues, market management and the identification of segmented audiences at national and international level.

This is, therefore, a distinctive case in which processes driven by economic rationalization and the bureaucratization of the system are fully realized in the planning and implementation of a sports and market project systematically from start to finish, from the conception of the sport and its mode of play, to the organization of matches, their impact on the media ecosystem, the relationships between the actors involved – from the players on the pitch to the fans, from celebrity presidents to the governing body of the sport, from sponsors to media operators – and the development of all the mechanisms and processes involved.

Commercial imperatives strongly influence the size and objectives of the Kings League, thoroughly embedded in commercial logic, since the structure of the competition is organized according to rational market logic (Sewart, 1987; Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007).

Among the most obvious aspects is the progressive reorganization of the rules of the game in these early years. The game has, in fact, become an industrial product designed for the audience, governed by economic motivations and centralized control of its staging.

If its internal logic, which combines rules, tactics and skill, is designed primarily to maximize profit and entertainment, and therefore to attract the attention and continuous involvement of audiences, this means that, on an organizational level, this amounts to a substantial subordination to the spectacular or aesthetic dimension, and above all to the market principles that govern the competitive aspect, sporting merit and athletic quality (Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007).

Thus, the rules and formats have changed continuously over time, not to improve the intrinsic quality of the game, but rather to generate marketable and appealing performances (Sewart, 1987), designed to increase spectacle, unpredictability and uncertainty of the results (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2024). We are in the logic of producing entertainment that is increasingly optimized and geared towards younger audiences, who may be less attracted to traditional forms of sport, despite attempts to modify the various classic disciplines over time.

Having been created explicitly with the clear objective of innovating sport to meet the needs of spectacular entertainment, fan engagement and commercial exploitation, the Kings League has no qualms about revolutionizing and experimenting with new game modes and rules over time. The underlying objective is to be increasingly exciting and engaging.

It suffices to list some of the main current rules<sup>3</sup> to understand the underlying orientation.

The rules stipulate two halves, the first lasting twenty minutes and the second sixteen minutes, with two different mechanisms for resolving the match: if the score is tied, penalty shootouts<sup>4</sup> will determine a winner; if one team is ahead, the match will continue with a gradual reduction in the number of players (scale-down) until there are two players per team, including the goalkeeper (matchball mode). At that point, if the leading team scores, it wins the match. The team that is behind is allowed, if it does not concede the final goal, to equalize the score – at which point the match will end in a draw. The match begins with two players per team – one outfield player and the goalkeeper – with one player per team being added progressively every minute until the match is played seven vs seven (scale-up). To start the match (the kick-off), the

<sup>3</sup> [https://cms-es.kingsleague.pro/uploads/kwcn\\_2026\\_regulations.pdf](https://cms-es.kingsleague.pro/uploads/kwcn_2026_regulations.pdf); <https://cms-es.kingsleague.pro/uploads/book-of-rules.pdf>; <https://pages.kingsleague.pro/rules>

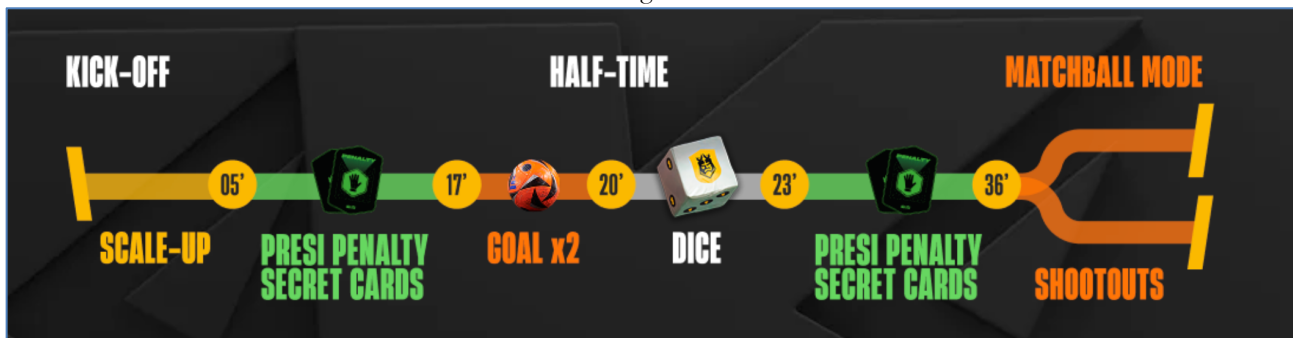
<sup>4</sup> Shootouts are a traditional format based on a highly dynamic duel between a goalkeeper and a player, which makes the psychological pressure and strategic skill spectacular and exciting.

ball is thrown from above – as in water polo – specifically from a cage, and the two outfield players compete for control. Between the fifth and seventeenth minutes of play, and between the twentieth and thirty-sixth minutes, the teams can, using two different coloured buttons, take a presidential penalty kick – executed by the celebrity president – or play a secret card granting a specific advantage. The second half begins with the roll of a dice, which will determine the number of players per team on the field – 1 vs 1, 2 vs 2, 3 vs 3 (with the goalkeeper), with a subsequent scale-up. In the last three minutes of the first half, goals count double, and the ball has a different colour.

Shortly before the start of the match, the presidents each draw a secret card from a deck, which remains hidden from the public until played. Secret cards may include: goal counting double for four minutes; the temporary suspension of an opposing outfield player for four minutes; the possibility that the first goal scored by a specific player is worth double; the right to take a shootout; a reverse penalty to be taken by the opposing team: if scored, nothing happens, if missed, the team that played the card receives a point; a penalty; a joker card, which allows the holder to use one of the above options of your choice or to steal the opposing team's card.

Yellow cards exclude a player for two minutes, except in matchball mode, where the sanction entitles the opposing team to a shootout. A sending-off leaves the team without a player and, during matchball mode, allows the opponents to take a penalty.

Fig.1



Source: <https://pages.kingsleague.pro/rules>

It is not difficult to understand how these rules are rationally designed to increase the marketability of the sports product in terms of attention span, entertainment, unpredictability, and outcome uncertainty, ideally remaining as balanced as possible. The element of chance is amplified, even in situations where meritocratic equality of opportunity can be waived – for example, secret cards, which are drawn at random, do not give the same advantage.

This configuration of the game, then, aims to make it fun, lively and exciting, adapting it as much as possible to the expectations of the target audience, with the possibility of continuously changing the rules over time, in a very agile and fast way and without bureaucratic delays, depending on the needs. The appeal lies in constantly provoking attention, maintaining constant excitement and stimulating engagement as much as possible. The immediate impact, the drama, the twists and turns, the aesthetics of the show, and even the possibility for fans to interact are not secondary elements compared to the quality of the game, the technical and tactical aspects, and even more so the competitive aspect.

#### 4. The ritual and the pastiche

As we have seen, the Kings League is challenging the traditional sports industry, competing with it on the same terrain, that of spectacular commercialization and the market, with the advantage of having originated and been shaped directly within that domain and with that spirit.

The game is constantly being reimagined, in the name of innovation and experimentation driven by spectacular and business logic.

Overall, this proposal, together with the vehemence with which it is pursued, also for commercial ends, indicates an explicit attempt to recalibrate the sporting canon (Rinehart, 1998), i.e. the combination of forms, rules and meanings that define the characteristics considered essential for sport, which over time could become naturalized in the common sense.

With the aim of sustaining spectator attention, i.e. the economic asset par excellence of commercialized sport, the competition combines the logic of football (with seven players, at least in the central phase of matches) with that of “gaming”, with secret cards that can be used during the game, periods during which goals count double, the possibility of team presidents taking penalty kicks, a scale-up and scale-down of the number of players, a dice roll determining the number of players on the pitch at the start of the second half, extra time to score the winning goal or equalize. All this takes place in a persistent tension between sporting performance and light-hearted entertainment.

In this space of tension, the Kings League stands as a *avant-garde* practice (Rinehart, 1998), between innovation and tradition, where the sporting ritual maintains and exacerbates the most spectacular and exciting factors of the competition, maintaining a dramatic aspect, but also excessively increasing the elements that depart from the linear narrative of the match, through the enhancement of aesthetic performance, spectacular shock, irony, parodic variables, lived fan experience, and digital interaction.

Entertainment is structured as extended dramatization, oscillating between predictable storylines and sudden ruptures due to unpredictability, with a clamour that aims to be pervasive, in which the technical-sporting side coexists, not always as the dominant feature, with the scenic effect. At the same time, the atmosphere of the show aims to bring media fans towards an entertaining experience at once consumable and, thanks to online interaction, immersive.

The spectacle is not a secondary effect of the game, it is the game.

The structure of the matches takes the form of a *pastiche* (Dyer, 2007): a combination, neither original nor copy, of heterogeneous ingredients that preserves identifiable differences while recomposing them into a new unity that is effective, multivocal and rich in its own way, based on likenesses, on recognizable but distorted imitations, selecting essential features, perhaps in a marked way, even in the presence of apparently discrepant and incoherent elements.

This mixing and overlapping occur on several fronts. First, there is a mixture of genres: elements typical of sport, entertainment, performing arts, quiz shows, gaming, reality shows, and digital entertainment are combined, assembling sporting, theatrical, aesthetic, artistic and video game factors into a specific amalgam. At the same time, the simple sporting dimension itself takes on a strong combinatorial aspect, where in a recognizable football context, the draft for the purchase

of players borrowed from the NBA or the start of the match resembling water polo (to some extent basketball too) with the ball dropped from above and contested are combined.

The result can take on fictional, kitsch or pseudo-sporting “trash” forms, where aesthetic simulation aims to fascinate and excite the consumer.

Irony, parody and playfulness become central to the mood of the game, rather than secondary to the competitive aspect. For example, the commentary on the matches and the commentators’ remarks rarely focus on technical and tactical aspects, but are instead marked by cheerful, albeit excited, tones that often give the competition a light-hearted feel. Beyond the competitive part of the matches, moments such as presidential penalties, which give the chance to score but above all create excitement and fun, can include gags and playful situations, including costumed appearances by key figures. The use of secret cards further contributes to the overall theatricality. The player market, in turn, takes place within a show organized as online entertainment. Added to all this are other ritualized moments of a ceremonial character. This is in addition to the extensive supporting social media content – reels, trailers, online games – which follow the typical logic of digital communication and entertainment, where the consumer-audience may itself become, in some cases, an integral part of the spectacle.

All this is part of the consideration of sport as integral entertainment, which, responding to a need for recreation, incorporates element extraneous to athletic performance proper.

In this context, the famous personality – especially in the case of the president – is essential to the spectacle. They accompany and amplify the competition, but enrich it with ironic and parodic tones, sometimes distorting the purely competitive dimension of the game, ultimately breaking down the grey seriousness of sport (Lasch, 1979) and giving the crude and sensationalist component a not insignificant weight on a cultural and sporting level.

Thus, in the ritual of the Kings League match, the set of emotions, symbolic elements, and objects upon which attention is focused (Lukes, 1975) is constructed to encourage participation aimed, ultimately, at commercialization. In the internalized cognitive dimension and in the social relationships triggered by the spectacle, the entertainment, the passion, even the forms of identification with the players, the athletic effort, the technical aspect, and the playful character of the protagonists converge as driving force of digital exploitation and are accompanied by the ritualistic, veiled yet pervasive presence of sponsors, who follow the development of many moments of the show and its offshoots online and on social media.

## **5. Celebrity, the role of fans and digital communication**

The Kings League focuses a significant portion of its appeal on the ability of certain celebrities – mostly streamers, often gaming specialists, influencers and a few retired footballers, but also some show business personalities – to draw attention to the competition and engage fans (Rojek, 2001; Smart, 2005; Cashmore, 2006; van Krieken, 2012; Bifulco, 2017). The ability of many of these personalities to navigate digital codes, to interact constantly, with great flexibility across communication registers – from irony to more reflective analysis, from impromptu to more structured content – and above all to embody an often colloquial and spontaneous communicative style, makes them particularly well-suited to younger audiences, which, among

other things, greatly appreciates online content creators, by virtue of an emotional bond that valorizes simplicity, frankness and communicative proximity (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2025).

The most important role is that of team president, but the celebrities involved can also be simple brand ambassadors, commentators or even, in limited cases, protagonists of the matches.

It is no coincidence that one of the rules of the competition is that a thirteenth player can be added to a particular match – teams have a total of twelve players – who may be a football legend, an elite professional player, a celebrity or public figure, or one of the presidents. This is in full accordance with the main characteristics of celebrity culture, with the possibility, in certain cases, to trigger a nostalgic effect.

The influence and appeal of these personalities represent a very important source of visibility (Driessens, 2013; Gunter, 2014) for attracting audiences to a spectacle where, as we have seen, entertainment is fundamental.

As mentioned, the role of the president is clearly central to the attraction mechanism. Presidents – entertaining, attractive figures who are a far cry from the grey representatives of industry and finance who have traditionally led the football industry – have a direct role in the game and in the entire ritual, being able to take a penalty at any point in the match chosen on the spur of the moment – a moment that interrupts the flow of the competition and fuels a pastiche-like combination in the contrast between actual players and characters who intervene, adding a spectacular connotation – but above all by providing live commentary on their teams' matches and participating in the media ecosystem through multiple interventions and online content. As we have said, they are celebrities of various kinds in theory – from the web, from sport, more sporadically from traditional entertainment industry – but for the most part they are streamers, taken from the range of characters potentially capable of appealing younger audiences, exploiting the popularity of digital platforms in those age groups, the ability to monetize online content and experiences by integrating new languages into the economic and spectacular enhancement of the entire project. By constructing communicative performances – beyond those related to football penalties – and shareable and engaging narratives about their personal involvement in the team, they work to jointly expand their personal brand and that of the competition.

The fan-viewer-consumer is, in its own way, central to the innovative Kings League project. It is no coincidence that this competition is an attempt to readapt football to youth culture and digital consumption, where an audience is rationally built with a promise of fun and participation. All forms of consumer motivation are involved in some way. Although territorial identity is largely absent, even if possible future links with more deeply rooted local cultures are not ruled out *a priori*, other forms of identification are at play, such as those with celebrities associated with a team. It is clear that, over time, forms of attachment to various teams, although the result of original creations and emotional choices, can consolidate and open up new scenarios of belonging. In the product's packaging and consumption, an important role is played by the aesthetic, exciting, uncertain and entertaining dimension of the experience of watching matches, as well as online interaction – with engagement that can offer gratification or material advantage, such as prizes.

Fan engagement is therefore part of a deliberate strategy to exploit the opportunities offered by platformization and the broader consumption of the sporting experience – matches are streamed

and, more recently, broadcast on pay-tv – through an intense social media presence, highlights and viral content, and multiple opportunities for interaction and resharing.

The audience is attracted and somehow involved, participating in the symbolic production of events interactively, both during matches and through various forms of intervention: commenting and debating online – perhaps on the use of secret cards, their effectiveness or the phase of the march in which they will be used –, voting on the performances or various tactics and strategies employed by coaches or players, creating personal content, suggesting possible measures and changes to the Kings League rules, predicting results, participating in fun moments and online experiences.

It is no coincidence that younger fans are attracted by this combination of sporting elements and pure entertainment, by the ease of interacting with other fans and the main characters in the game, the ability to access matches and content on digital platform quickly, personally and at their own pace, and not having to submit to the intercession of the media and traditional journalism, since the Kings League manages its own communication with a high level of skill in the stylistic and expressive mechanisms of digital media (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2024).

While audiences may not always feel central when physically present, online they take on a significant role, perceiving a degree of ritual centrality and feeling that they are “there”, through the consumption and circulation of online content, commentary and sharing. This participation, which makes such a football event a hybrid and complex practice, turns it into a cultural device that aims to strengthen emotional attachment and legitimize the entire sporting spectacle. In the digital environment, the audience perceives – more or less realistically – an active role in the production of the spectacle<sup>5</sup>, contributing to establishing its emotional, narrative, cultural, symbolic and media value.

However, this involvement channels participation within a framework defined by market logic, where the fan not only consumes, but also plays a productive role without enjoying the economic benefits. The mechanism takes full advantage of the rules of the attention economy and capitalizes on the logic of prosumerism, where the user is both consumer and producer, and where the need to express oneself, participate and belong becomes beneficial to the needs of the market (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018).

## 6. Conclusions

As we have seen, the Kings League is a new sport, but above all a spectacular event that feeds on processes of recombination and recoding (Rinehart, 1998) of sports designed to meet media exploitation – in this case created specifically for digital platforms – which favours visual innovation, speed, overall spectacularity, within the processes triggered by participation and digital communication, beyond the purely technical nature of the game, and where creative

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<sup>5</sup> In the contemporary sports industry, there is a strong link between the expressive desires of fans and the consumer culture that supports commercialization mechanisms (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Sandvoss, 2003; Crawford, 2004; Horne, 2006).

demands, economic interests, symbolic circuits, logics of visibility and media interaction are continuously intertwined.

Its explicit aim is to guide, revolutionize and represent the future of the sports and sports entertainment industry, characterized by the indistinguishable fusion of sport and entertainment within the industrial process.

Between avant-garde and kitsch, ritual and parody, seriousness and irony, sport and video games, this experience takes the form of a hybrid cultural and economic performance, deeply spectacularized and commercialized, where elements of theatricality and visibility are amplified, also by virtue of regulatory and format changes (Sewart, 1987), where the integration of electronic gaming experience takes on great importance, and where an incisive communication system – especially within digital environments – supports its consumption (Carrero Márquez, García Muñoz, & García Chamizo, 2024).

Thus, the industrial organization of sporting events completely assimilates the game into the entertainment industry, with organizational and regulatory criteria defined in terms of entertainment and profitability, and competition is primarily constructed as a product to be sold and consumed, tailored to the demands of a future audience.

We are faced with a clear case in which the definition of the sporting event, its aims, values and cultural meanings are explicitly guided by market rationality, based on economic calculation and media appeal, which considers the community dimension of sport primarily in the form of shared consumption.

It is no coincidence that the corporation that controls and organizes the Kings League is characterized by a transnational dimension and the alignment between a sporting technocracy, media capital and major brands (Maguire, 1999).

Within this scenario, we are witnessing a declared normalization of the absorption of spectacular, commercial and entertainment-based logics and relations into sport and recreational practices. Not only is the link between sport, commercialization and spectacle accepted, but it is also praised and incorporated into common sense, with a clear focus on profit, assimilating the dominant sporting culture into the social form of commodity (Whitson, 1984; Sage, 1998).

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