The User Experience of Sports Media Companies on Instagram: A Gen Z Perspective

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Abstract

Instagram is continuing to grow as a significant space for visual communication and for organizations to increase their audience engagement. However, with the changing preferences of new generations, particularly Gen Z, organizations are challenged with adapting their communication strategies to cater to this generation. This is especially the case for sport media companies as the interest of Gen Z in consuming sports is gradually decreasing. This research explores the communication of ESPN and Bleacher Report on Instagram to uncover the user experience it constructs and how it appeals to a U.S. Gen Z audience, thus, answering the follow research question: How does the user experience of sports media companies on Instagram in the United States appeal to Generation Z?

This study is based on a thematic analysis of 248 Instagram posts combined from ESPN and Bleacher Report. The analysis established that the main visual and textual communication elements of the Instagram posts are perception of design and informativeness, image management of people and activities, integration of various media types, and interactivity through emotion and overall feeling, which were expressed by the companies to varying degrees. The findings revealed that ESPN's communication exhibits low simplicity, moderate entertainment, and moderate emotional connectedness while Bleacher Report's communication displays moderate simplicity, high entertainment, and high emotional connectedness. The results also indicated that a U.S. Gen Z audience is likely to appeal to both companies, though, favoring Bleacher Report to a larger degree. The study, thus, offers sports media companies direction on the aspects of their current communication strategy on Instagram that they can consider further improving to optimize the audience engagement of Gen Z.

Keywords: *Instagram, social media, user experience, Generation Z, sports media*
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1 Introduction

Sports have long been a significant part of culture and exude a high level of meaning for individuals globally. They have an immersive presence in many aspects of life from fashion to music to movies (Bleacher Report, 2022). Sports have thus been recognized as influential products of consumption and are constantly being communicated throughout media which continues to grow largely due to digital advancements and societal progressions (Duncan, 2020; Leszczynski et al., 2022). Key actors of this communication and consumption are sports media companies as they hold a powerful role in engaging audiences across the globe with sports (Duncan, 2020). Nonetheless, in this digitalized world, there are countless new and diversified media outlets and techniques that organizations can utilize to interact with their audience, simultaneously providing them with a plethora of opportunities (Soerakoesoemah, 2021).

1.1 Problem Definition

One of the most transformative types of media that has greatly evolved communication is social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017; Lopez-Carril et al., 2020; Romney & Johnson, 2020). Social media platforms have developed into valuable communication channels that allow for greater participation that can strengthen the relationships companies have with their audience and the experience they provide to heighten audience interests (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017; Suciu, 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). In particular, Instagram has become a popular platform used by younger audiences (Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). These audiences are the future of sports consumption. However, the changing characteristics and diversification of new generations presents sports media companies with challenges towards the effectiveness of their communication (Leszczynski et al., 2022; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). One of the most recent generations that has brought up new challenges is Generation Z (Gen Z).

Gen Z are not following sports in the traditional sense of watching live events on TV as much as past generations and have shifted their sports consumption behavior (Maese, 2020; Silverman, 2020a; Silverman, 2020b). Born into a progressively digitalized world, Gen Z has a

connection to technology and digital media unlike other generations (Fromm & Read, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2020; Maese, 2020; Munsch, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2019). This gives them unique characteristics and motivations for media consumption that differentiate them from previous generations such as Millennials and Baby Boomers (Goldring & Azab, 2021). On average, Gen Z spend about nine hours each day in front of a smart device and, specifically, nearly an hour of that time is spent on Instagram, which is more than any other generation (Suciu, 2021). Therefore, it is evident that social media platforms like Instagram have become their dominant source of sports content (Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). This is the foundation of the significance of this research in helping to illustrate the direction consumption behavior with sports is heading towards.

Moreover, many companies are still struggling to keep up with digital shifts and adopt new ways of communication such as social media (Leszczynski et al., 2022; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). Simultaneously, they often lack a deep understanding of and connection to Gen Z and, as a result, are potentially in jeopardy of losing this substantial and vital consumer group (Maese, 2020; Leszczynski et al., 2022). Accordingly, with Gen Z's growing affinity for social media platforms like Instagram alongside their distinct characteristics, sports media companies are further challenged with finding the best strategies to connect and engage with this younger audience.

1.2 Research Question and Research Objectives

Existing research have different perspectives on when Gen Z starts and ends. To approximate, the generation is born between the late 1990s to early 2000s. This study, more specifically, will utilize the date range 1997 to 2012 when defining the age of Gen Z (Cho & Youn, 2020; Goldring & Azab, 2021; Meola, 2022; Munsch, 2021). The research herein will draw on generational cohort theory and uses and gratifications theory to examine Gen Z's personal values and consumption needs regarding social media and apply them to a sports context. To explore this subject matter, the following research question and research objectives have been formulated:

Research question: How does the user experience of sports media companies on Instagram in the United States appeal to Generation Z?

Research objectives:
1. *What are the dominant visual and textual communication elements on the companies' Instagram?*
2. *How do the elements differ between ESPN and Bleacher Report?*
3. *How do the elements construct the user experience of the companies' Instagram?*

1.3 Academic Relevance

This study provides emphasis on a significant cultural phenomenon, a widely used social media platform, two of the most popular sports media companies in the industry, and one of the newest and most crucial generations of consumers. Further, it investigates a more particular angle around these subject matters by combining them into one study, which is largely missing from existing research.

Many researchers have engaged in research related to the affordances of social media for organizations and the evolution of sports media coverage (Duncan, 2020; McKinney, 2018; Rhee et al., 2021; Shultz & Arke, 2015; Zhao et al., 2022). Particularly regarding Instagram, researchers have been increasingly recognizing the importance of its use for communication and have been incorporating it into their research as the platform has been gaining more attention. For example, many studies have been conducted around Instagram in various countries with focuses ranging from cultural institutions and activities (Mele et al., 2021; Rhee et al., 2021; Vrana et al., 2019) to fashion organizations (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022) to politics and news (Russmann & Svensson, 2016; Al-Rawi et al., 2021), most of which use quantitative or mixed methods. In a sports context, some studies have investigated specific directions within Instagram communication such as narrative and storytelling and its influence on audience engagement, taking a quantitative content analysis approach (Romney & Johnson, 2020). However, there is little attention on distinctions, particularly age, amongst audiences and how various techniques might engage these individuals differently, while also incorporating a qualitative-centered perspective into the research.

With regards to Gen Z, current literature largely focuses on their relationship with digital media and technology as well as their characteristics and how appealing to them as consumers is different than other generations (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Fromm & Read, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2020; Katz et al., 2021; Kushwaha, 2021; Munsch, 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Roth-Cohen et al., 2021). Additionally, research on Gen Z and consumption commonly center around the fashion industry (Cho et al., 2021; Cho & Youn, 2020; Dobre et al., 2021; Goldring & Azab, 2020) and food consumption (Su et al., 2019; Zuo et al., 2022). Few studies study how Gen Z in particular consumes sports with relation to social media, including a focus on the Polish market and how they consume sports (Leszczynski et al., 2022). Nonetheless, what is lacking is more specific emphasis on the particular social media platforms that Gen Z prefer to engage in, such as Instagram, rather than looking at social media as a whole.

This study contributes to more understanding of how U.S. sports media companies communicate on Instagram and the user experience it creates. It aims to account for the gaps in existing research on the distinctions in audience engagement based on generational characteristics and more detailed specifics of consumption through Instagram both in a sports media context. As such, through this study, knowledge is gained with relation to uncovering how Gen Z might appeal to the communication of certain sports media companies on Instagram.

1.4 Societal Relevance

Given their cumulatively young age, many members of the generation are still developing as individuals. As such, it is important to peak their interests while they are still young and in their early years of adulthood before their behaviors and consumption patterns become more concrete (Maese, 2020; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). For sports media companies, this is therefore the most crucial time period for understanding Gen Z to ensure long term success and build strong, loyal relationships. Though the generation has turned their attention to social media when it comes to consuming sports, their interest as a whole in sports is gradually waning (Silverman, 2020a; Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). Identifying the distinctions of generations, in this case, Gen Z, can help sports media companies find the best strategies to curate and distribute sports content to the generation and maintain their interests (Yim et al., 2020). Gen Z represent

the future and, thus, it is vital for these companies to improve and maximize how they appeal to this generation to keep the significance of sports ever-present.

1.5 Chapter Outline

In the following chapters, firstly, this paper will review and discuss literature regarding the fundamental components of this research, including sports media companies, Instagram, and Gen Z. Secondly, the methodology of the study will be explained. Next, the results of the analysis will be presented and detailed. Lastly, the paper will conclude with a discussion of the main findings, answers to the research objectives and research question, implications for sport media companies, limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research.

2 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, sports media companies and their digital transformation will be discussed including a brief background of ESPN and Bleacher Report. Next, Instagram and its usage as a communication tool by organizations in general and more specifically in the context of sports will be explored. Thereafter, the generational cohort theory will be presented followed by the uses and gratifications theory.

2.1 Digitization of Sports Media Companies

Sports media companies facilitate the access audiences have to sports. They are the producers of a wide range of sports-related activities and information from game broadcasts to interviews to statistics. Today, the sports media industry is drastically different than how it began due to the rise of the Internet and social media alongside advancements in technology. For much of the industry's existence, traditional media remained the dominant player, including not only newspapers but also radio, television, and magazines (Duncan, 2020; Shultz & Arke, 2015). These are the channels that paved the way for what sports media has become today. Nonetheless, given the prominence of digital media, many traditional media companies have since adjusted to this change and converged with new media channels in an effort to remain active players in the industry (Duncan, 2020; Shultz & Arke, 2015).

New media, including the Internet and social media, has changed the way sports media companies produce and distribute content and, thus, how the content is consumed by audiences (Duncan, 2020; McKinney, 2018). These companies are able to instantaneously reach a wide range of users across the globe, who now have easy access to an endless amount of sports-related content without limits to time and space (Duncan, 2020; McKinney, 2018; Shultz & Arke, 2015). As such, new media has both reconstructed well-established traditional companies and opened doors for new entrants that have a primary focus on digital channels for communication.

ESPN, which stands for Entertainment and Sports Programming Networks, is arguably one of the most influential sports media companies in the industry. Since its launch in 1979, the company has transformed from exclusively a cable-programming business to a successful media conglomerate and a leader in sports (McKinney, 2018; Shultz & Arke, 2015). ESPN pioneered

the pay subscriber fee and inspired the popularity of the sports highlight while its dominance in TV deals sparked growth in sports leagues, athletes' salaries, ticket costs, and more (Duncan, 2020; McKinney, 2018). From these early successes that have helped build and strengthen ESPN's brand, it is evident that the company has revolutionized the sports industry as a whole. However, with their business remaining simple and uncomplicated, the complex and ever-changing nature of the digital world has prompted them to incorporate additional platforms and outlets, especially with the decline of cable television (Draper, 2018; McKinney, 2018). Two examples are ESPN's app and streaming service. They are amongst the types of new media that are integral to the sports media companies that have been introduced in this digitalized era, one of which is Bleacher Report.

Bleacher Report has excelled as one of the fastest growing sports media companies. The company, founded in 2006 by four fans, began as a startup blogging platform and has now developed into a leading entity of digital sports journalism owned by Turner Sports (Jannarone, 2012; McKinney, 2018). Bleacher Report had quickly accomplished what many existing companies struggled to achieve. It established a global reach while also catering to local- and region-specific news and events (McKinney, 2018). Moreover, Bleacher Report was able to challenge the conventional structure of sports media by not only giving fans and aspiring sports writers an open space to voice their passion but also by delivering authentic sports content that incorporates the nonprofessional side of sports (Jannarone, 2012; Lidsky, 2020; McKinney, 2018). Thus, through its various digital channels, this company has harnessed the power of new media and has built a competitive advantage.

Looking closer at social media, a key element that benefits sports media companies, including ESPN and Bleacher Report, is interaction. Social media allows for continuous two-way conversations online and collaboration between these companies and their audience, reducing the distance between both actors (Duncan, 2020; Rhee et al., 2021; Yaman & Cakin, 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). In this way, fans can take a more active, participatory role in sports communication, for example, through sharing their personal opinions and experiences. Further, as sports media companies are growing their presence on social media, they are expanding their versality and coverage of sports and increasing the convenience of accessing a range of content within one space (Duncan, 2020; Lidsky, 2020). This shows that fans also have more freedom with what kind of sports-related content they choose to consume. Given these affordances, social media has

become a vital communicative tool for sports media companies to capitalize on in order to foster a deeper and engaging bond with fans (Duncan, 2020; Lopez-Carril et al., 2020). It is evident that the industry has shifted towards a more audience-focused standpoint and is more ever-present in daily life than in the past.

2.2 Instagram as a Communication Tool

Social media creates an endless number of possibilities for content, to which, in this context, every sports-related moment has the potential to be shared with the world. As such, visual images are the most effective way to express these moments (Duncan, 2020; McKinney, 2018; Romney & Johnson, 2020). Instagram is a social media platform that emphasizes visual communication and is perhaps the most dominant in visual storytelling and user engagement (Mele et al., 2021; Romney & Johnson, 2020; Serafinelli, 2018; Zhao et al., 2022). Through the years, it's growth amongst users has been rapidly increasing. Instagram currently has nearly 160 million users in the U.S., with about 29.5% between the ages of 13 and 24 (Statista Research Department, 2022b; Statista Research Department, 2022c). Therefore, it is seemingly one of the top platforms that sports media companies should give priority to.

Visual communication is an essential component of Instagram and has become a significant mode of communicating to others. Several studies have examined the influence that sharing posts with images has on audiences (Rhee et al., 2021; Romney & Johnson, 2020; Russmann & Svensson, 2016; Serafinelli, 2018). First, compared to text individually, images have been found to be more eye-catching and have greater capacity to strengthen an individual's attention and recollection of a certain phenomenon (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). Images by their nature capture glimpses of everyday life in real time. Accordingly, they "function as a device for registering relationships and experiences to the database" of Instagram (Rhee et al., 2021, p. 530). In the context of sports, relationships and experiences typically embody graphics of athletes preparing for a game, game highlights, post-game celebrations, fan moments, and other sport-related instances, all of which display strong energies including excitement, euphoria, and exertion (Duncan, 2020; Romney & Johnson, 2020). The key element in these instances is the incorporation of people, which incites more engagement than graphics without people (Rahman et al., 2022). Thus, these imageries afford sports media companies a powerful

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storytelling tool alongside Instagram to engage with their audience and build a more meaningful emotional connection while representing the world of sports in its entirety.

Instagram also allows for different multimedia formats and metacommunicative techniques. Often on the platform, organizations communicate both visual and textual elements within posts (Romney & Johnson, 2020; Russmann & Svensson, 2016; Zhao et al., 2022). For example, text incorporated in sports-related posts might consist of information such as player stats, game scores, and athletic achievements. These elements act as a supplement to the whole of a visual and contribute additional context and more direct information (Romney & Johnson, 2020; Russmann & Svensson, 2016; Zhao et al., 2022). In other words, text brings out the main narrative of an image, together forming a more compelling message to communicate. Moreover, a format that is becoming increasingly utilized on Instagram is video. Videos have been found to have an even greater impact than the addition of textual elements to an image, especially for sports-related content, as they are livelier (Rahman et al., 2022; Romney & Johnson, 2020). In this way, incorporating these techniques and formats is considerably essential on Instagram for sports media companies as they can further strengthen their visual storytelling and produce a greater impact on audiences.

Given the importance of visuals, effective communication on Instagram also calls for strategizing. Several studies detail certain strategies and what they can achieve when implemented (Rhee et al., 2021; Serafinelli, 2018; Vrana et al., 2019). One of the predominant strategies for Instagram is setting a standard for when posts are uploaded and how many are published per day or week (Serafinelli, 2018). For sports media companies, posting on Instagram is typically a daily routine and executed at high rates. To demonstrate, ESPN and Bleacher Report both consistently post approximately between ten and 25 times a day (Bleacher Report, n.d.; ESPN, n.d.). Maintaining this regularity and frequency can help the companies achieve higher visibility (Serafinelli, 2018). As a result, higher visibility, which constitutes a larger audience reach, can potentially lead to the opportunity of building and maintaining new relationships.

Another strategy for Instagram posts is communicating unconventionality through visuals (Serafinelli, 2018). In other words, this involves going beyond the surface of what is being captured and shared. As follows, companies can enhance the emotion and feeling that their communication conveys (Serafinelli, 2018). For example, in a sports context, sports media

companies can benefit from communicating posts that display more personal and casual moments rather than merely focusing on informative and game-related content. This, in turn, might increase audience engagement. Additionally, companies can utilize hashtags and multiplatform sharing on Instagram (Rhee et al., 2021; Vrana et al., 2019). Hashtags generally describe and represent the elements of a post both objective and subjective (Rhee et al., 2021). On the other hand, multiplatform sharing allows for sharing content on Instagram as well as through other social media channels simultaneously (Vrana et al., 2019). Thus, audiences would be exposed to the content even when not directly on Instagram. With these ways, companies can increase the visibility and discovery of their content and maximize interaction (Rhee et al., 2021; Vrana et al., 2019).

The points detailed herein indicate the crucial importance for sports media companies to carefully consider and select content for their Instagram. The content they present is closely linked to the impression that audiences construct. As such, a significant determinant of what content and messages to communicate is demographics and cultural differences (Mele et al., 2021; Shultz & Arke, 2015). By understanding and paying attention to these differences, sports media companies can curate the most suitable Instagram content for their targeted audience and achieve optimal engagement.

2.3 Generational Cohort Theory

A type of demographic that sports media companies might consider understanding for effective communication on Instagram is generations. Several studies have used the generational cohort theory (GCT) to explore generations in different contexts of consumption (Goldring & Azab, 2021; Roth-Cohen et al., 2021; Yim et al., 2020). A generational cohort can be defined as a collection of individuals born during a certain period of time, who lived through the same significant historical events and share similar social experiences (Roth-Cohen et al., 2021; Su et al., 2019; Yim et al., 2020). A key aspect of generational cohorts is that they are determined by experiences and not merely age. GCT explains that the events and experiences shared by these groups take place during their formative years leading up to adulthood, when they transition to more mature selves (Goldring & Azab, 2021; Roth-Cohen et al., 2021; Yim et al., 2020). Thus, these are vital moments that shape individuals' attitudes and ideals, which will be carried with

them throughout their life. This, as a result, creates a unique identity for cohorts separate from other generations (Goldring & Azab, 2021).

Proposed by GCT, Goldring and Azab (2021) discuss that the experiences individuals go through have significant influences on their consumption behavior and patterns. In this case, utilizing GCT gave a deeper understanding of how and why Gen Z consumes sports the way that they do. A plethora of research on the theory as well as cohorts more broadly with relation to Gen Z illustrate the ways in which the generation is distinct compared to past generations while pinpointing the origin of those differences (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2021; Katz et al., 2021; Leszczynski et al., 2022; Munsch, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Roth-Cohen et al., 2021; Su et al., 2019). Moreover, many studies also demonstrate that there can be variations in generational cohorts across countries and cultures (Dobre et al., 2021; Fromm & Read, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2021; Yim et al., 2020; Seemiller et al., 2019). This is likely due to some critical historical events being different in certain parts of the world. Therefore, this study primarily utilized the previous studies conducted in the U.S when discussing the specifics of Gen Z. These existing insights contributed to investigating the communication of sports media companies on Instagram and revealing if the personal values and consumption needs of Gen Z are being represented.

Gen Z has become the largest generation in the U.S. and represent about 27% of the population (Meola, 2022). One of the most significant changes that the generational differences of Gen Z have fostered is the greater shift towards new media and away from traditional channels (Katz et al., 2021; Kushwaha, 2021; Munsch, 2021). The cohort was born into a fully digitalized world and are defined by being digital natives (Fromm & Read, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2020; Munsch, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2019). In other words, Gen Z has not experienced a world without new media and digital technology and, accordingly, have a deeper, more familiar relationship with them than previous generations. Thus, this is a key feature of their characteristics, consumption behavior, and use of new media. As such, it is understandable that Gen Z has developed strong skills in creativity and innovation as well as the desire for uniqueness (Fromm & Read, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2020; Seemiller et al., 2019).

Regarding new media, Gen Z is often constantly connected to and heavily engaged on social media platforms, especially Instagram, for numerous activities (Fromm & Read, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2020; Katz et al., 2021; Meola, 2022; Munsch, 2021). This generation, as a

result, is dominantly accustomed to continuous online access and active interaction with others, which has established certain characteristics. They typically have a shorter attention span, higher information processing abilities, and more expansive multitasking skills than past generations (Fromm & Read, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2021; Munsch, 2021). In this regard, Gen Z is quickly able to navigate between platforms or settings and decide what appeals to them amongst the vast amount of content they are exposed to. Further, their upbringing and characteristics create expectations that must be upheld. For example, Gen Z expects the companies they interact with to provide them valuable and reliable information that they otherwise have the ability to uncover themselves (Goldring & Azab, 2020; Munsch, 2021).

Another defining feature of Gen Z is that they are the most diverse cohort (Fromm & Read, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Meola, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2019). Compared to previous generations, Gen Z is comprised of the most minorities, totally to nearly 50%, and are predicted to be the last generation with a majority of White individuals (Fromm & Read, 2018; Meola, 2022). Additionally, they represent the largest number of bi-racial and multiracial individuals, and, currently, there are the most multiracial marriages that there has been over the past few decades (Fromm & Read, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2019). This demonstrates the increasingly blurred barriers amongst races during the span of Gen Z and beyond. Diversity is, therefore, a significant characteristic of the generation that translates to their view of the world and behavior.

A monumental historical event with relation to diversity is the election and re-election of the first black U.S. president, Barack Obama (Rodriguez et al., 2019). With regard to this and their diverse composition, Gen Z is exceedingly socially and politically conscious, open-minded, as well as driven by progress, change, and making a difference in the world (Fromm & Read, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Meola, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Seemiller et al., 2019). In these ways, it is evident that much of this generation advocates for social causes including Black Lives Matter, women's rights, marriage equality, and transgender rights (Fromm & Read, 2018; Meola, 2022). Gen Z also strongly values authenticity, and has higher levels of confidence, self-esteem, and independence (Fromm & Read, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Seemiller et al., 2019). Moreover, given these points, it is likely that the generation participates in frequent conversations about identity and global issues, are more mature for their age, and are more aware of both themselves and the world.

Some additional pivotal events that occurred through Gen Z's formative years thus far are the Global Financial Crisis, the Great Recession, 9/11, Sandy Hook, and ISIS (Fromm & Read, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2019). Further, other characteristics Gen Z has developed include a more realistic, cautious, and responsible mindset as well as a stronger work ethic for success (Fromm & Read, 2018; Goldring & Azab, 2020; Katz et al., 2021). Thus, Gen Z characteristics and behavior have undoubtedly been influenced by these negative events as they have seemingly not experienced a time without the threat of war, terrorism, or conflicts, both global and regional. As such, with all these characteristics of Gen Z developed from their experiences, they preferably engage with companies that align with their own personal values and ideals (Cho et al., 2021; Goldring & Azab, 2020). This shows how crucial it is for sports media companies to pay attention to these distinct values in order to effectively engage Gen Z with their communication on Instagram. Nonetheless, the other side of determining the best strategy of communication is looking further into the expectations Gen Z has with social media platforms and what they seek to gain from using them and consuming content.

2.4 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Understanding the details behind Gen Z social media use can be achieved by delving into their overarching motivations and consumption needs regarding this new media. This is the basis of the uses and gratifications theory (UGT), which has also been used in many studies of Gen Z, largely related to social media consumption (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Rahman et al., 2022; Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Yaman & Cakin, 2021). Thus, the ideas explained by the theory constitute it is as a fundamental aspect to media research and this study.

UGT illustrates that individuals choose certain media and content to fulfill their consumption needs, whether it is socially or psychologically, and to reach satisfaction (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Rahman et al., 2022; Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Yaman & Cakin, 2021). In this way, people play an active role in their social media consumption and generally have their own agenda for what they consume. The user-centered focus of the theory suggests that autonomy contributes considerably to an individual's user experience, to which they choose the user experience they desire most. Moreover, due to

individuals having certain consumption needs, the same form of media or content is likely to vary with how it affects or appeals to different people and could lead to contrasting usage rates (Cho & Youn, 2020; Rahman et al., 2022; Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Yaman & Cakin, 2021). For example, aligned with GCT, different people could be those belonging to certain generations as they have specific experiences with social media. Hence, due to the upbringing of Gen Z and the events and characteristics that define them, it is understandable that they have distinct motivations for and consumption needs from social media compared to past generations.

Several U.S. studies have drawn upon UGT and highlight significant factors that are purposeful to Gen Z's satisfaction with social media platforms (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). These studies are further supported by other U.S. research that focus on Gen Z motivations and consumption more generally (Cho et al., 2021; Fromm & Read, 2018). This cumulation of research shows how Gen Z's consumption needs with social media generate a certain consumption pattern and what it entails. These findings thus helped understand how Gen Z might appeal to the communication of various sports media companies on Instagram. Additionally, UGT and motivations research help give context on the "why" of social media consumption and a deeper depth into the concepts behind the theory (Cho et al., 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Seemiller et al., 2019; Yaman & Cakin, 2021). In this respect, the studies present several explanations of motivations and satisfactions as well as the main reasons for a desirable outcome, which were correlated with the findings from the U.S. studies detailing the "how" and "what." As such, these existing insights provided useful context to uncover why Gen Z might prefer consuming sports through Instagram and why they might prefer a certain company over another.

To begin, a motivation, also referred to as a gratification sought, can be defined as an aspect that drives an individual to use a social media platform (O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Seemiller et al., 2019; Yaman & Cakin, 2021). In other words, it constitutes the desire an individual wants to fulfill from particular media usage and, thus, can determine their media behavior both intended and actual. Further, satisfaction, or a gratification obtained, refers to the resulting outcome from a user's experience with a social media platform (O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Yaman & Cakin, 2021). Combining both concepts, when the gratification obtained is satisfactory to a user, their motivation for using the certain social media platform increases (O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Yaman & Cakin, 2021). In this way, the extent of a user's

satisfaction leads to either continued behavior on a platform or the search for an alternative channel until a desirable outcome is achieved.

For Gen Z, one of the most dominant motivations for using social media, proposed by UGT, is entertainment (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Entertainment is a hedonic, or leisure, gratification, which regards to an individual having an enjoyable or playful experience (Cho & Youn, 2020; Cho et al., 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020). This motivation might range from having an escape to passing time to relaxing. Accordingly, entertainment stems from the need to release stress or satisfy boredom (Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Gratifying these needs is then often going to result in greater user engagement that is positive. Moreover, entertainment is also linked to uniqueness. Uniqueness can be described as a need for distinctness or aspects that standout (Cho et al., 2021). Thus, when a Gen Z individual desires a unique experience, they are more likely to also seek out entertainment on social media through the content they consume.

Another primary motivation for social media use with Gen Z, according to UGT, is emotional connectedness (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Emotional connectedness is a social or value-expressive need that refers to an emotional experience when interacting on a social media platform (Cho & Youn, 2020; Cho et al., 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). This motivation is maintained by the need to self-identify with what is being consumed (Cho et al., 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020). Emotional connectedness is, thus, also likely to produce higher engagement when this consumption need is satisfied. Additionally, it can be connected to uniqueness to which consuming content that conveys a user's own values can constitute as a unique and personal experience. To follow, the outcome of satisfying emotional connectedness is often feeling a sense of belonging and being a part of something bigger than themselves, which Gen Z largely values (Cho et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019).

Furthermore, simplicity, adjusted from UGT for this study, is a third motivation that drives Gen Z to use a certain social media platform (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021). Simplicity can be defined as an experience that elicits ease and straightforwardness. It is contradictory to the gratification of information sharing which several UGT studies discuss as a motivation for social media in general separate from generation specifics (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Information sharing is a cognitive gratification

and regards the need to seek out and receive explanatory and descriptive facts or news (O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). As such, in this case, Gen Z is not motivated by information sharing due to their dislike for over-informative content and unnecessary information, subsequently leading to low engagement (Cho & Youn, 2020; Fromm & Read, 2018; Kamble et al., 2021). This relates back to the plethora of content that Gen Z consumes on a daily basis and their short attention span. Therefore, they are more motivated by simplicity based on the need of consuming information that adds value to them, to which the outcome is likely to result in a meaningful experience and increased engagement.

To conclude, given that Gen Z is approximately between the ages of ten and 25 as of 2022, there are a fraction of them still in their formative years. This suggests that the attitudes and ideals of the generation are still forming. However, it has been found that even as generations mature, they still maintain a unique identity and set of consumption needs compared to past generations and further develop differentiated characteristics as they grow older (Yim et al., 2020). Thus, this early look into the personal values and consumption needs of Gen Z, through UGT as well as GCT, remains useful to investigate how they align with the user experience of sports media companies' communication on Instagram.

2.5 Conclusion

Romney and Johnson (2020) demonstrate in their study that focuses on the communication of U.S. sports networks on Instagram how the platform is an effective tool for "transmitting ideas and deepening interest and engagement with audiences" especially given its growing popularity (p. 97). It is evident that there are contrasts between the techniques these organizations use in their communication and how they translate to audience engagement. A contribution could be made with the communication of U.S. sports media companies on Instagram and its appeal to Gen Z as this study is interested in a similar but more particular phenomenon, namely how certain social media communication engages a specific generational audience. The findings of the existing research show that sports networks effectively incorporate communication tactics in their social media strategies while also distinguishing the networks from each other (Romney & Johnson, 2020). As such, the study herein explores the

communication of two popular sports media companies on Instagram and its role in constructing a user experience, specifically how it appeals to a U.S. Gen Z audience.

The theoretical background shows how social media and certain types of communication can have varying effects on and appeals to different audiences. With its increasing user growth especially by organizations driven to further interact with their audiences (Duncan, 2020; Statista Research Department, 2022b), Instagram is evidently an important tool for achieving optimal user engagement. Additionally, the visual-centric component of Instagram allows sports media companies to use the social platform to showcase the liveliness and emotional nature of sports to engage audiences (Romney & Johnson, 2020). Nonetheless, as new generations continue to form and shift in terms of characteristics compared to previous generations, their appeal to certain social media communication and tactics also changes due to their different upbringing. This highlights the need for sports media companies to recognize these shifts and adapt their communication strategy and user experience to appeal to these generations and remain relevant. In this way, ESPN and Bleacher Report are seemingly interesting case studies to investigate regarding Instagram communication as it gives insights to the overall user experience of these companies and its presumed appeal to a U.S Gen Z audience. This study, thus, utilizes a collection of Gen Z personal values and consumption needs proposed by U.S. research regarding the distinct generational characteristics of the cohort (Fromm & Read, 2018; Katz et al., 2021) as well as their motivations for social media use (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019), supplemented by additional studies to help answer the research question.

3 Methodology

In this chapter, the research design is described, first by detailing the reasons for a qualitative approach, visual media as data, and a multiple-case study. To follow, the process of sampling and the specifics of the sample criteria will be presented and explained. Next, the operationalization of the main concepts is discussed. Then, the thematic analysis of this study is clarified with more depth, including the steps, the codebook used, and the interpretation process. Lastly, the chapter ends with a discussion of the validity, reliability, and reflexivity of the study.

3.1 Data collection method

This study answers the following research question: How does the user experience of sports media companies on Instagram in the United States appeal to Generation Z? A qualitative approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the Instagram user experience of sports media companies with an emphasis on Gen Z. Given that a majority of current studies around this topic use quantitative methods (Goldring & Azab, 2020; Leszczynski et al., 2022; Rhee et al., 2021), using a qualitative approach gave a different perspective and added to existing research. Additionally, a significant element of qualitative research is making sense of "the diversity of meaning and values created in media" (Brennen, 2017, p. 11). This method helped to establish the differences in the social media content between two sports media companies, namely, ESPN and Bleacher Report. Further, it helped illustrate how these companies communicate about sports on Instagram and construct a user experience, taking into account Gen Z audiences.

A corpus of visual media from the companies was collected through Instagram to explore what visual and textual communication elements are present in those posts. Visual media from Instagram can foster higher information discovery than alternative data collection methods where data needs to be created (Brennen, 2017). Thus, the most efficient way to analyze how sports media companies communicate about sports on Instagram was through collecting data directly from their primary Instagram page and examining the posts. ESPN and Bleacher Report are used as case studies to compare the variations of sports communication on Instagram. In media research, case studies are useful for in-depth investigations of organizational communication to

explore a certain phenomenon (Norander & Brandhorst, 2017). Another advantage of case study research is that it allows for comparing and contrasting across multiple cases (Norander & Brandhorst, 2017). In these ways, a multiple-case study was a suitable method for this study.

3.2 Sample

ESPN and Bleacher Report are the two most popular sports media companies in the U.S. based on the number of actions carried out on their brand pages on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Statista Research Department, 2022a). To add, a considerable portion of each companies' audience are between the ages 18 and 35 (Lidsky, 2020; Smith, 2022). Therefore, these companies were selected for the study as this research can generate even greater benefits for the companies in terms of implications for their communication strategy given their popularity. Moreover, ESPN and Bleacher Report are both highly active on Instagram, posting approximately ten to 25 times a day, which provides this study with an adequate amount of data for analysis. This research also aimed to compare and contrast companies established within different time periods to which one of the two pertains to the Gen Z era. As such, ESPN and Bleacher Report, launched in 1979 and 2006 respectively, remain appropriate selections to study.

Instagram was chosen for data collection as it has one of the highest Gen Z usage rates amongst social media platforms and this rate is also estimated to continually increase over the next few years (Insider Intelligence, 2022). In addition, it is one of the top platforms Gen Z use for consuming sports content (Silverman, 2020b). As such, the more time this generation spends on Instagram, the more important it is for sports media companies to understand how to appeal to them through this communication channel. Moreover, amongst other popular platforms used by Gen Z such as Snapchat and TikTok, Instagram has a higher degree of visual communication and business to consumer interactions (Rhee et al., 2021; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). Given these reasons, Instagram was the most suitable social media platform for this study.

To ensure saturation and extensive depth of information for the research objectives while remaining feasible and realistic to the timeframe of this study, data collection resulted in a total of 248 posts: 132 from ESPN and 116 from Bleacher Report. The sample consisted of a full week of posts communicated on each companies' Instagram page from Monday, April 11, 2022 to Sunday, April 17, 2022. The data was collected on April 18, 2022 and included all posts from

every day of the time range. This sampling method is based on purposive sampling (Sharma, 2017) as the data collected are the most recent posts published during the start of this study. Moreover, including all posts within the time frame represents the companies' overall current social media communication at this time, accounting for any differences of content within one day and across days as well as reducing selection bias. Purposive sampling is also commonly used in qualitative studies to select cases that are rich in information to capitalize on the resources available (Sharma, 2017). Thus, through selecting two sports media companies, purposive sampling captured the similarities and distinct variations regarding the communication of sports on Instagram.

The data analyzed consists of the visual component of the Instagram posts for each company, which includes images, videos, reels, etc. Using all types of posts contributed to the differences and similarities in how the companies communicate sports content and determining what kind of user experience they create. Each post published by the companies within the specified dates were screenshotted and added to a document folder. After data collection was completed, the data was uploaded into Atlas.ti for further analysis and interpretation. For the posts that were videos or reels, along with their screenshots, screen recordings were also made and added to a separate folder. These recordings were referred back to during the analysis and coding process.

3.3 Operationalization

To answer the research question and research objectives, the following four concepts based on Russmann's & Svensson's (2016) research on organizational use of Instagram have been operationalized: perception, image management, integration, and interactivity. This section gives a description of these categories which were used during analysis and how they pertain to the theoretical framework.

3.3.1 Operationalization of "Perception"

Perception gives insights on what user's first thoughts are regarding the content being communicated to them when they encounter a post of a sports media company on Instagram

(Russmann & Svensson, 2016). To identify this concept, the following five categories were included: official context, unofficial context, broadcasting, not broadcasting, and composition.

"Official context" is an official photo or video taken by a professional or a post designed to look professional and is identified by the codes official photo, official video, and professional collage. Conversely, "Unofficial context" represents more casual posts typically taken on a smart device and consists of snapshot, snap-video, and casual collage. "Broadcasting" is the dissemination of information to an audience, in this case, through Instagram posts (Russmann & Svensson, 2016) and includes the codes news, statements, and stats such as game or player performance. "Not broadcasting" refers to messages that are intended to elicit an active response from the audience and is identified as polls and questions. Lastly, "composition" is the type of visual structure used in a post, including the codes simple and creative. Simple denotes a post that is not elaborate and incorporates the basic aspects of configuring a post in terms of layout, quality, detail, etc. Creative refers to a more complex post with artistic structure in terms of patterns, color, font, etc. or imaginative aspects such as cartoons, animations, illustrations etc.

The concept perception has an emphasis on information sharing versus simplicity. Sports-related content on Instagram is commonly expressed as short facts and statements as well as highlights or clips that give quick recaps of games (Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). On the other hand, sports content can also be expressed as more lengthy and detailed news. This concept, thus, attempts to explore the presence of the two. Additionally, the category of composition and the code not broadcasting explore entertainment. Two components within entertainment are creative imagery and polls and questions which both contribute to an escape and pleasurable experience for audiences (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Polls and questions, in particular, allow for more interaction between companies and their audience, giving users an opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions (Soerakoesoemah, 2021).

3.3.2 Operationalization of "Image Management"

Image management involves the impression users have of the image ESPN and Bleacher Report are communicating through their Instagram posts (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). The

following seven categories were included to identify this concept: personal versus non-personal, professional context, private context, sports, gender, race, and athlete versus nonathlete.

"Personal versus non-personal" is the level of personalization within the posts and centers on whether there is a focus on an individual or a group context. It consists of the codes non-personalized and individualization. Non-personalized exemplifies many people in an Instagram post where not one individual is the focus. In a sports context, this is typically expressed as team-oriented highlights. Individualization is an emphasis on a single individual and, in many cases, their personality or identity. "Professional context" represents the professional side of sports and is set in a public landscape, which is coded as game setting or press. Game setting refers to posts where a game is exhibited, or information is given regarding a game, season, or performance. This can be past, present, or future. Press relates to interviews with reporters and ranges from post-game interactions to other sporting events.

"Private context" refers to instances that are not explicitly public but rather are a more private view of sports and depicts a brief look into the moments of an athlete or nonathlete that are out of the direct spotlight. This category is coded as leisure and behind the scenes. Leisure is participation in athletics intended for fun outside of an official game setting or press. Behind the scenes refers to a glimpse of athletes before a game, such as in the locker room, as well as candid moments of fans, sports personnel, and athletes. "Sport" signifies the type of physical activity that is being communicated in an Instagram post, including American football, baseball, basketball, etc. "Gender" is the biological sex of the individuals shown in the Instagram posts, thus, signified as either male or female. "Race" is the category of an individual based on their similar physical characteristics with others in society and is coded as Asian, Black, Hispanic, or White. Finally, "athlete versus nonathlete" refers to the role of the individuals shown on Instagram and heard in the audio of videos, emphasizing if posts show professional athletes or other individuals, including celebrities, children, family, fans, and sports personnel.

Image management has a main focus on emotional connectedness, particularly self-identifying values. The category personal versus nonpersonal projects high emotion where individual highlights include a single athlete's personal achievements, statements, family moments, etc. and team-oriented highlights include team celebrations, locker room instances, in-game moments, etc. (Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). Sport, gender, race, and family all contribute to a user's self-identity and relatability with content and are, thus, linked to

emotional connectedness (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Furthermore, private context is included as an entertainment gratification as the category immerses audiences deeper into the whole experience of sports and the more non-professionalized moments (Kamble et al., 2021; Soerakoesoemah, 2021).

3.3.3 Operationalization of "Integration"

Integration involves the hybridity of platforms and different types of media rather than solely identifying them as separate entities (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). To identify integration, the following three categories were included: traditional media, new media, and media format.

"Traditional media" is any form of offline communication that is explicitly referred to in an Instagram post such as television (TV). "New media" is any form of online, internet-based communication that is explicitly referenced expressed by the codes social media, website, and podcast. "Media format" refers to the various media components that can be incorporated into a piece of content. These types include audio, graphic, text, video, and music. In an Instagram post, each media can stand alone or form a multimedia, which is a combination of two or more types.

The concept integration incorporates gratifications of entertainment. Videos, especially of athletes and sports, can have a greater chance of satisfying entertainment as they tend to prompt increased engagement (Romney & Johnson, 2020). Music also constitutes entertainment as it can achieve a more captivating user experience (Seemiller et al., 2019). Moreover, there are some links to emotional connectedness and self-identity as different generations are likely to relate to different types of traditional and new media (Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021).

3.3.4 Operationalization of "Interactivity"

Interactivity is how sports media companies engage and create a connection with their audience on Instagram through their posts (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). It encompasses the two-way interaction that these companies are establishing with users and the emotions and feelings they are trying to provoke from them. As such, graphics and other types of content often

elicit some type of response from the receiver (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). The following six categories were included to identify interactivity: positive emotion, negative emotion, neutral emotion, positive tone, negative tone, and neutral tone.

Firstly, emotion can be defined as "a complex state of arousal that occurs as a reaction to a perceived situation" (Kent, 2006, para. 1). In this way, emotions can lead to positive or negative mental states and, sometimes they can remain neutral and unexpressive. For the analysis, these categories constitute the extreme cases of each type of emotion, largely pertaining to positive and negative emotion. Moreover, it focuses solely on the people that are present in an Instagram post as well as the lack of people.

"Positive emotion" refers to a state of pleasure and reactions that are often desirable for an individual and contributes to their general well-being. This category is coded as excitement and happiness. Excitement is conveyed by enthusiasm, energy, and extreme passion. Happiness is associated with joy, content, and delight and is typically portrayed with a smile. "Negative emotion" signifies a state of sadness or dislike and can lead to a decline in an individual's overall satisfaction with life or a certain situation and, often, elicits a quick reaction. This category is coded as anger and disappointment. Anger is a mental state of annoyance or animosity and, typically, this emotion causes a person to resent or be irritated towards someone or something. Disappointment is associated with being letdown and a loss of hope or courage. "Neutral emotion" refers to a post with no display of totally positive or totally negative emotion. It constitutes content where the individuals represented are, for example, shown playing in a game or when their expressions are not clearly visible as well as where no individuals are present at all.

Secondly, tone can be defined as "a very vague critical term usually designating the mood or atmosphere of a work" (Baldick, 2015, para. 1). In other words, it represents the overall feeling or attitude expressed through an Instagram post to the audience. Thus, these categories focus on a combination of all the components present in a post, such as text, people, and audio. Moreover, tone, in this case, usually centers in on a specific subject matter and prompts a total feeling of positivity, negativity, or neutrality.

"Positive tone" denotes uplifting content, which can be revealed through amiable language, positive emotion, or both. It refers to Instagram posts that exhibit pleasant situations as well as instances to look forward to. The codes for this category include comedic, optimistic, and triumphant tone. A comedic tone is an overall mood that is related to humor or amusement.

Optimistic tone is linked to feelings of inspiration, hope, and bliss. Triumphant tone is associated with success, victory, and achievement. "Negative tone" refers to a display of bad news or information and an overall pessimistic feeling in an Instagram post and signifies situations that elicit displeasure or a discouraged outcome. This category is coded as defeated and tension. A defeated tone is related to failure, loss, and misfortune. Tension is associated with conflict, rivalry, critique, and disagreement. Lastly, neutral tone indicates that there is no portrayal of totally positive or totally negative tone. In this way, Instagram posts with a neutral tone express minimal or no strong feelings but rather are more factual, to which the overall mood cannot be clearly identified.

Interactivity is the concept with primary emphasis on emotional connectedness. Any type of explicitly displayed strong emotion or attitude, positive or negative, is generally in some way relatable to and has been experienced by audiences (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). The code comedic tone is also included as entertainment as many studies link this gratification with humor and fun (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Further, in terms of neutral tone, this category overall expresses more rationality and is connected to informative content and, as such, is included as information sharing (O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Sheldon & Newman, 2019).

3.4 Data Analysis

Following data collection, this study conducted a thematic analysis of visual data to investigate the user experience with sports media companies on Instagram and whether they incorporate Gen Z personal values and consumption needs. This analysis method was suitable to achieve the research objectives by identifying the core patterns of the communication of different sports media companies on Instagram, which were reviewed to determine the user experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In doing so, it helped answer the research question through considering how the user experience interpreted appeals to a U.S. Gen Z audience. Moreover, a significant aspect of thematic analysis is its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This flexible nature allowed for a procedure adaptive to the objectives of this research and the development of a broad range of insights from data analysis and interpretation.

The process of analysis was adapted from Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis to align with the study. The data analyzed were images and videos from the Instagram of ESPN and Bleacher Report. The approach to the analysis was theoretical and included the use of a coding structure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study utilized a preexisting codebook created by Russmann and Svensson (2016) and adjusted it to fit a sports context and the data being analyzed (see Appendix A). The goal was to look for the fundamental visual and textual communication elements of the sports media companies' Instagram posts, interpret what kind of user experience they create, and then, determine how it appeals to a U.S. Gen Z audience. The codebook chosen was appropriate for this aim as it focuses on revealing how organizations communicate to their audience on Instagram and how it is perceived by taking a user-centered perspective (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). It allowed for thorough and diverse coding that did not solely rely on sensitizing concepts related to Gen Z. As such, this left open the possibility of coding elements that do not appeal to Gen Z to emphasize comparisons between ESPN and Bleacher Report.

The thematic analysis of this study consisted of five steps and was conducted in Atlas.ti. The first step of analysis was immersing into the data and developing initial ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The Instagram posts from ESPN and Bleacher Report were briefly reviewed to get a general sense of the dataset while taking notes. Next, Russmann and Svensson's (2016) codebook was adjusted accordingly to account for any additional general elements present in this context and not represented in the codebook. The second step involved coding the data entirely (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The posts were examined with more detail, using the adjusted codebook to assign the appropriate codes in Atlas.ti for every Instagram post of the two companies.

The third step of analysis consisted of re-examining the dataset and codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal was to ensure that any single post was not missing a code and to remove codes that were not used. The fourth step involved consolidating the codes into larger subthemes and themes as well as formulating coherent descriptions for what they each pertain to, which was guided by the adjusted codebook (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes and their descriptions were then entered into a table (see Appendix B). The fourth step also focused on considering what relationship the final themes and subthemes have with each other and how and why they achieve the research objectives. This was essential for identifying the features that appeal to a U.S. Gen Z audience. Lastly, in the fifth step, two separate coding tables were created for ESPN

and Bleacher Report with the themes, subthemes, codes, and frequency of each code present in respective dataset (see Appendix C & D).

To interpret the analysis, the following concepts from previous research were utilized: entertainment, emotional connectedness, diversity and inclusion, and simplicity (Cho & Youn, 2020; Fromm & Read, 2018; Kamble et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). As aforementioned, they represent the personal values and consumption needs of Gen Z regarding social media and what aspects they most desire. The operationalization demonstrates how the coding links to these concepts discussed in the theoretical framework. The results of the analysis were, thus, evaluated with these four concepts pinpointing the comparisons and contrasts between the two case studies, ESPN and Bleacher Report. This is a key part to answering the research question and determining how the user experience of sports media companies on Instagram aligns with the personal values and consumption needs of Gen Z.

3.5 Validity, Reliability, and Reflexivity

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach and contributes to uncovering meaning associated with the communication and user experience of ESPN and Bleacher Report on Instagram and their appeal to a U.S. Gen Z audience. This is accomplished through interpretation of the data by means of coding with a pre-existing codebook adjusted for a sports context, which can be applicable for other sports media companies in practice and as a guide for further research (Boeije, 2010). The validity of this study, which concerns the truthfulness of the findings, is indicated by the transparent findings, their contribution to answering the research question and research objectives, and how they fit with existing research findings (Cypress, 2017). On the other hand, the reliability of this study, which concerns consistency in research application, is demonstrated as a result of the thorough theoretical framework and clarity of the research process while keeping in mind limitations (Cypress, 2017). When connecting the theoretical concepts to the analyzed data, the researcher has a significant role in interpretation and fitting it into an ideal outcome. Reflexivity involves being aware of a researcher's personal views, principles, and assumptions which can produce various meanings and increase bias (Haynes, 2012). Therefore, to minimize bias and subjectivity, the theoretical framework was continuously

developed with new or relevant information and important decisions were recorded and explained throughout the research process.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter firstly discussed the choice of a quantitative approach for in-depth understanding and diversity of meaning regarding the study focus, visual Instagram media as data for higher information discovery, and a multiple-case study for comparison between ESPN and Bleacher Report. Secondly, the sampling and collection process was described thoroughly including justifications for those decisions. Furthermore, the operationalizations of the following concepts were presented: perception, image management, integration, and interactivity. Next, the choice of a thematic analysis for flexibility and identifying patterns were discussed alongside a detailed account of the analysis steps and interpretation. Lastly, the validity, reliability, and reflexivity considerations of the study were touched upon.

4 Results

This study explored the following research question: How does the user experience of sports media companies on Instagram in the United States appeal to Generation Z? In this chapter, the research findings of the thematic analysis will be presented based on the dataset of 248 Instagram posts published by ESPN and Bleacher Report combined from April 11, 2022 to April 17, 2022. The main section highlights the four central themes that were formulated during the thematic analysis, which will help to answer the research objectives and research question. First, *perception of design and informativeness* distinguishes how a user perceives an Instagram post when they initially come across it in terms of appearance and display of information. Second, *image management of people and activities* denotes how sports media companies are constructing self-presentation and portraying the sports industry on Instagram through the display of certain people and activities. Next, *integration of various media types* identifies how additional media channels are integrated and what media components are being incorporated into Instagram posts. Lastly, *interactivity through emotion and overall feeling* indicates how sports media companies engage and create a connection with their audience on Instagram through the emotions and feelings displayed in their posts. Each theme is discussed in depth, highlighting the categories and the codes established with examples from the dataset. Furthermore, throughout this section, an explanation of the differences between ESPN and Bleacher Report regarding the visual and textual elements the companies communicate is also discussed.

4.1 Dominant Visual and Textual Communication Elements

To begin, dominant visual and textual communication elements pertain to the first research objective of this study. Four central themes were generated during the analysis for both companies combined, as shown in Appendix B, including a brief description of the themes and their overall frequency. Appendix C (ESPN) and Appendix D (Bleacher Report) exhibit the findings of the analysis for each company with greater detail. All the elements that were found across the Instagram posts in the dataset are represented by both ESPN and Bleacher Report. However, the subthemes and codes of the central themes vary between the data for ESPN and Bleacher Report in terms of the amount represented and often depend on the company involved.

Nonetheless, the findings supplement existing literature when making a parallel between Bleacher Report as a Gen Z-era company and Gen Z personal values and consumption needs. The differences of both companies will be further emphasized in the following subsections, which pertains to the second research objective. The themes constructed during analysis are perception of design and informativeness, image management of people and activities, integration of various media types, and interactivity through emotion and overall feeling.

4.1.1 Perception of Design and Informativeness

Perception of design and informativeness is the second most prominent theme throughout all the Instagram posts analyzed in the dataset. It establishes the general first impressions audiences might have of Instagram posts published by ESPN and Bleacher Report with regards to design and informativeness. The data of each company had opposing results regarding the theme, which, thus, could generally lead to differing initial audience perceptions. This subsection further examines the following subthemes: official context, unofficial context, broadcasting, not broadcasting, and composition.

ESPN maintains a higher focus on official context and simple composition, as shown in Appendix C. For example, ESPN primarily communicates professional collages including a post of a National Basketball Association (NBA) player that displays a collection of official photos of the athlete assembled on a basketball court in a unified and professional manner (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. ESPN Instagram Post

Moreover, many ESPN posts focus on exhibiting a basic layout in terms of simple composition. To demonstrate, ESPN communicated two graphics side-by-side of an Ohio State football athlete during a game with no additional visual or textual elements (see Figure 2). Thus, the analysis suggests that the company has a greater focus on creating Instagram content in a professional manner and incorporating uncomplex components into posts.

Figure 2. ESPN Instagram Post

Conversely, apart from professional collages, Bleacher Report also emphasizes casual collages and snap-videos regarding unofficial context. For example, Bleacher Report communicated a 15-second video taken by an NBA athlete on a smart device of him and his fellow teammates walking to a sports arena for a game (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

In addition, the company publishes a more creative composition overall including many illustrations and animations. To demonstrate, Bleacher Report curated a 15-second animation of former baseball player Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball (MLB) 75 years ago with bold text in the background regarding this accomplishment (see Figure 4). The findings imply that Bleacher Report centers more on creating content that is more elaborate and artistically structured while also maintaining a near balance of official and unofficial contexts. These features exemplify the gratification of entertainment and, thus, a greater appeal on a U.S. Gen Z audience than ESPN's features which consist of less creativity and a more professionalized appearance. This connects to Sheldon and Newman's (2019) study in the U.S. detailing that Gen Z are largely gratified by visual creativity, relaxed content, and escapism.

Figure 4. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

Furthermore, ESPN significantly communicates news more than statements and stats (see Appendix C). For example, the company presented a 35-second video with news about an upcoming world championship for heavyweight boxing including information about when the event is, where to watch it, and who is participating (see Figure 5). Therefore, ESPN centers in on more descriptive communication of sports-related events and information.

Figure 5. ESPN Instagram Post

On the other hand, Bleacher Report dominantly publishes stats compared to the other types of broadcasting, as shown in Appendix D. To illustrate, the company communicated a graphic of NBA player Trae Young combined with large bold text of his performance stats for the season thus far and a league achievement in smaller text (see Figure 6). This infers that Bleacher Report focuses more on providing its audience with quick and minimal information that stands out regarding team and player accomplishments or status in the league. These examples demonstrate that ESPN connects closer to information sharing while Bleacher Report displays more simplicity. In this way, previous research supports that a U.S. Gen Z audience would appeal more to Bleacher Report due to their preference for content that is not too informative or factual, embodying a 'less is more' perspective (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021).

Figure 6. Bleacher Report Instagram Post
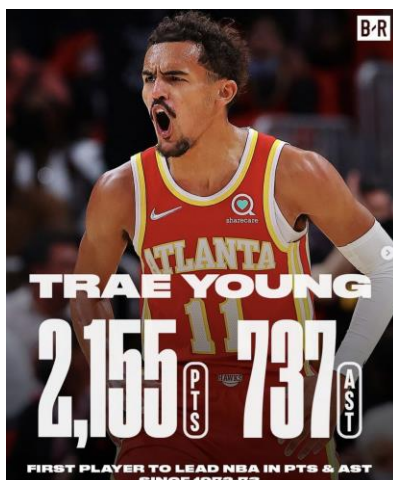
Additionally, not broadcasting was communicated by both companies very sparsely. For example, Bleacher Report posted four polls and questions across the dataset including a visual of several NBA players from different teams side-by-side with bold text included of a question asking the audience which player from the league will lead their team to the NBA Playoffs (see Figure 7). ESPN posted a poll or question only once. As polls and questions link to entertainment, the findings indicate an unfulfillment of this gratification on the basis of this feature. Thus, the low incorporation of polls and questions suggests a negative influence on the appeal of a U.S. Gen Z audience given that they value more interaction and opportunities to express themselves (Soerakoesoemah, 2021).

Figure 7. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

4.1.2 Image Management of People and Activities

Image management of people and activities is the leading theme of both ESPN and Bleacher Report and predominantly surpasses the other themes by a vast amount. It uncovers how the companies manage their Instagram posts in terms of the people and activities they incorporate through which they develop a self-presentation and a certain portrayal of the sports industry. The findings from the analysis are evidently different between ESPN and Bleacher Report, however, on several occasions the results yield more similarities. This subsection further examines the following subthemes: personal versus non-personal, professional context, private context, sport, gender, race, and athlete versus nonathlete.

Appendices C and D show that ESPN and Bleacher both dominantly communicate a more non-personalized view of sports with many posts displaying multiple athletes, including Figures 5 and 7, and more team-oriented highlights. For example, ESPN communicated a clip about 45 seconds long of a high school American football team and their dance routine for a game entrance (see Figure 8). This larger emphasis on a group context and teams by the companies is consistent with sports' innate projection of a sense of community (Su et al., 2019).

Figure 8. ESPN Instagram Post

To add, Bleacher Report has a moderately higher display of individualization than ESPN often showcasing the achievements of one athlete (i.e., Figure 6) as well as their personalities. To further illustrate, Bleacher Report posted a creative collage with a graphic of NBA player Kyrie Irving and a statement he gave relating to how he responds to tension from the fans of an opposing team (see Figure 9). This implies that, compared to Bleacher Report, ESPN chooses to abstain from putting a high amount of focus on showcasing one person in a post. As individual and team-oriented highlights both pertain to emotional connectedness, the findings of personal versus non personal indicate that a U.S. Gen Z audience would generally appeal to Bleacher Report as well as ESPN on this basis. This supports previous U.S. studies that have found that the interests of Gen Z are in both types of sports-related highlights (Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). More specifically in this instance, a U.S. Gen Z audience is likely to favor Bleacher Report more than ESPN as the generation prefers one-to-one connections between them and athletes (Soerakoesoemah, 2021).

Figure 9. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

Moreover, most posts from ESPN and Bleacher Report are in a professional context, as shown in Appendices C and D. Many of these posts depict a game setting, for example, ESPN presented a 15-second highlight from a National Hockey League (NHL) game of a player moving the hockey puck between his legs away from an opponent followed by shooting it past the competing team's goalie and scoring (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. ESPN Instagram Post

On the other hand, private context is thus less prevalent in the dataset, however, Bleacher Report communicated this feature considerably more than ESPN both with behind the scenes, such as Figure 3, as well as leisure moments (see Appendix C & D). To demonstrate, Bleacher

Report posted a 15-second snap-video of football player Tom Brady playing a friendly game of one-on-one basketball with one of his sons (see Figure 11). These results imply that Bleacher Report chooses to communicate a moderate amount of fun and candid moments rather than put most of the focus on a professional context while ESPN dominantly emphasizes sports from a professional point of view on Instagram. Bleacher Reports' higher communication of the less professional side of sports connects to entertainment to some degree (Kamble et al., 2021) and exemplifies more "the increasing blurring between the private and public sphere" (Russmann & Svensson, 2016, p. 6). As such, a U.S. Gen Z audience might prefer Bleacher Report in this case, as this younger audience is highly curious about all the moments that occur around sports-related events, which subsequently can create an escape (Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Soerakoesoemah, 2021).

Figure 11. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

Appendices C and D show that the most prevalent sport within the dataset is basketball. Basketball is exhibited in more than half of the posts from ESPN and Bleacher Report, to which a significant amount depicts the NBA. ESPN presents more sports overall than Bleacher Report aside from American football, baseball, and martial arts. The other sports displayed throughout ESPN's posts are gymnastics, boxing, golf, softball, fitness, and track and field while Bleacher Report only additionally incorporates soccer, sports betting, and wrestling. Though ESPN gives slightly more emphasis on baseball and American football, all sports compared to basketball remain considerably less common for both companies. Previous survey studies have found that

Gen Z are engaged the most with the NFL and the NBA (Gough, 2022; Silverman, 2020a). In this way, Gen Z are more selective with the sports they consume compared to previous generations, especially since they are the generation that watches sports the least. Therefore, based on this previous research, a U.S. Gen Z audience would appeal to both companies' dominant focus on the NBA and slight incorporation of American football. However, they might be more engaged by Bleacher Report's narrower focus of sports rather than ESPN's mention of many other less popular sports that are favored more by other generations (Silverman, 2020a).

In terms of gender, Appendices C and D portray that ESPN and Bleacher Report communicate posts with an exceedingly high representation of males in nearly every post. Conversely, females are shown in approximately less than a fifth of the dataset. This is likely to be largely associated with the continued domination of male sports and athletes in the industry in terms of audience popularity and media coverage (Adgate, 2022). As such, a U.S. Gen Z audience would likely not appeal to the low representation of females given their general advocation for women's rights (Fromm & Read, 2018; Meola, 2022). Nonetheless, this audience might favor Bleacher Report more to some degree as the company represents females slightly more than ESPN. Furthermore, across all Instagram posts, Black individuals are depicted the most, followed by White individuals, Hispanic individuals, and Asian individuals, most of which are athletes. However, the minority races Hispanic and Asian are represented to a considerably lower degree. This distribution aligns with the representation of racial groups amongst sports leagues in the U.S. where athletes overall are dominantly Black, especially within the NBA which is exceedingly communicated by both companies (Brassil & Lutz, 2020).

Lastly, aside from athletes which are dominantly communicated throughout the dataset, there is a considerable representation of nonathletes, largely consisting of sports personnel, though, they are often shown or heard in conjunction with athletes (see Appendix C & D). For example, many of the videos posted by ESPN and Bleacher Report portray a professional context with a broadcaster or commentator in the audio with visuals of athletes competing in a game. Particularly, ESPN exhibits other sports personnel apart from broadcasters and commentators, such as referees and coaches, a small extent more than Bleacher Report. On top of that, looking more specifically at race, ESPN's Instagram posts exhibit a slightly higher representation of White individuals whereas Bleacher Report's posts incorporate a slightly higher representation of minority individuals. These findings are further consistent with the diversity in the sports

industry as head coaches and staff tend to be White and ESPN has a higher representation than Bleacher Report of the MLB which also comprises of mostly White individuals (Brassil & Lutz, 2020). In this instance, a U.S. Gen Z audience might appeal more to Bleacher Report with regards to the generation's overall high support for racial diversity (Fromm & Read, 2018; Meola, 2022).

4.1.3 Integration of Various Media Types

Integration of various media types is the theme represented the least in the dataset of ESPN and Bleacher Report. The theme discovers how the companies incorporate the different types of media into their Instagram posts. The data for ESPN and Bleacher Report generally showed a similar level of communication in this case. This subsection further examines the following subthemes: traditional media, new media, and media format.

For ESPN and Bleacher Report, the main traditional media present is TV networks, typically related to sports. For example, Bleacher Report communicated a post of an illustration regarding the upcoming NHL Winter Classic game taking place in 2023 with a sports TV network displayed at the top, namely, NHL on TNT (see Figure 12). Moreover, ESPN, to a small extent, incorporated more traditional media and included TV series, while Bleacher Report had no mention of them.

Figure 12. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

In terms of new media, social media was the most common type referred to in the Instagram posts of the dataset. This likely connects to the general shift away from traditional media in everyday life, especially with communication (Katz et al., 2021; Kushwaha, 2021; Munsch, 2021). ESPN includes this type of media partially less and predominantly incorporates Twitter. To illustrate, ESPN posted a graphic of MLB player Brett Phillips placed side-by-side a graphic of a young female fan with a tweet from Cut4 included (see Figure 13).

Figure 13. ESPN Instagram Post
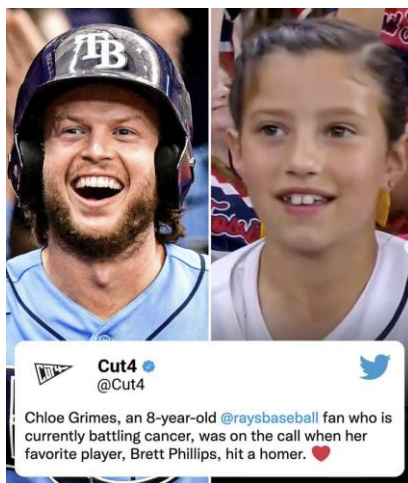
On the other hand, Bleacher Reports' posts focus more on Instagram with a small mention of TikTok and also refer to other types of new media including websites and podcasts. For example, Bleacher Report posted a graphic of NBA players Stephen Curry and LeBron James with a statement by Curry about playing basketball with James and text at the top of the post with the name of the podcast where the statement originated, namely, The Draymond Green Show (see Figure 14). As such, a U.S Gen Z audience is likely to appeal less to ESPN, first, due to their low interest in media such as TV shows compared to older generations, especially Millennials (Silverman, 2020b). Second, Twitter is more popular amongst Millennials and very minimally favored by Gen Z, whom, aside from Instagram, prefer social media platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat as their sources for sports content (Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). Thus, a U.S. Gen Z audience would likely appeal more to Bleacher Report's traditional and new media references.

Figure 14. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

Regarding media format, a vast majority of the posts in the dataset are a combination of graphic and text or audio, text, and video. Bleacher Report dominantly has posts that are graphic and text, a majority of which illustrate a creative composition. To demonstrate, Bleacher Report published a professional illustration regarding the Football Association Cup Final match that depicts one athlete from each of the teams participating walking in a desert-like landscape towards the championship trophy (see Figure 14).

Figure 15. Bleacher Report Instagram Post
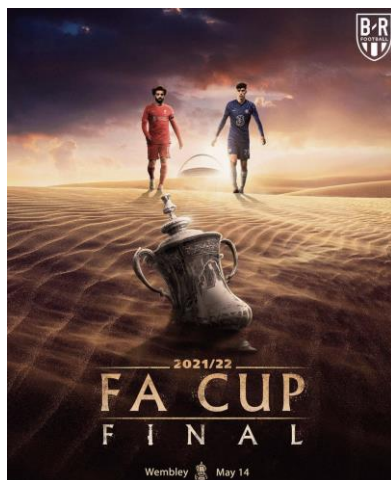
On the contrary, ESPN dominantly has posts with audio, text, and video combined, a majority of which demonstrate a game setting or press in terms of professional context. For

example, ESPN posted a 15-second video clip of an MLB game with text related to the clip included and audio of commentators talking about the events happening in game (see Figure 15). However, graphics in general, with and without text, are published the most by both companies.

Figure 16. ESPN Instagram Post

In addition, for both companies, there was a small collection of videos that incorporated music with an Instagram post instead of the original audio. Connecting to previous studies, a U.S. Gen Z audience would appeal to both companies in terms of the large focuses on videos and graphics with text given the higher engagement that videos often produce as they are livelier than graphics and, thus, likely to be more captivating (Romney & Johnson, 2020). Looking further, a U.S. Gen Z audience would appeal more to Bleacher Report in terms of the company's higher integration of music, as the generation has an affinity for music (Seemiller et al., 2019). Though simultaneously, this audience would also appeal to ESPN more in terms of their higher incorporation of videos, however, that appeal potentially decreases due to the company's larger focus on professionalized content.

4.1.4 Interactivity through Emotion and Overall Feeling

Interactivity through emotion and overall feeling is the second least dominant theme incorporated across the dataset. It establishes the types of emotions and feelings that ESPN and Bleacher Report exhibit through their Instagram posts to connect with their audience. On some

accounts, the findings from the analysis yield interesting contrasting results between the two companies. This subsection further examines the following subthemes: positive emotion, negative emotion, neutral emotion, positive tone, negative tone, and neutral tone.

Starting with emotion, the most common type for ESPN and Bleacher Report is positive emotion, as shown by Appendices C and D. ESPN's communication focuses more on visuals of happiness, for example, a graphic of track and field athlete Allyson Felix with a smiling expression accompanied by a statement she released about dedicating her least season to women and her daughter (see Figure 17).

Figure 17. ESPN Instagram Post

Bleacher Report's communication incorporates positive emotions in total slightly higher than ESPN and displays a near balance between happiness and excitement, including, a post of two NBA players from opposing teams with ecstatic expressions and bold text indicating an upcoming game series between their teams (see Figure 18).

Figure 18. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

Aside from positive emotion, the second most common emotion displayed across the Instagram data is negativity in Bleacher Report's posts and neutrality in ESPN's posts. To illustrate, Bleacher Report communicates many posts exhibiting disappointment such as a graphic of former Laker's coach Frank Vogel with a subtle frown expression, including bold text indicating that he was fired from the franchise (see Figure 19).

Figure 19. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

On the other hand, ESPN communicates many posts that show no explicit positive or negative emotion much more than Bleacher Report, for example, a 20-second video of college

football players on a field in position to start a game with their expressions concealed behind their helmets (see Figure 20).

Figure 20. ESPN Instagram Post

Continuing with tone, the findings in terms of positivity, negativity, and neutrality have parallels with the findings of emotion. Both companies exceedingly emphasize positive tone. ESPN focuses the most on triumphant tone, including a post of basketball player Jordan Poole with an excited emotion accompanied by bold text of the high number of points he scored in his team's first NBA Playoff game of the season (see Figure 21).

Figure 21. ESPN Instagram Post

ESPN also has a high incorporation of optimistic tone, for example, a one-minute video of Duke's men's basketball coach receiving a puppy on behalf of his team to celebrate the close of their collegiate season (see Figure 22).

Figure 22. ESPN Instagram Post

Conversely, Bleacher Report exhibits more of a balance between triumphant, optimistic, and comedic tone which aligns with the emotion findings. Moreover, the company expresses a comedic tone more than ESPN, such as a post comparing two 15-second videos played side-by-side, one showing NBA player Kevin Durant enacting his routine pregame dance and the other depicting the movements of a giraffe indicating a similarity between the two (see Figure 23).

Figure 23. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

Also aligned with emotion, Bleacher Report incorporates negative tone the second most and to a larger amount than ESPN. For example, the company has many posts with a tension tone, including a cartoon-like illustration of two NBA players from opposing teams and their mascots battling each other, suggesting an upcoming game against each other (see Figure 24).

Figure 24. Bleacher Report Instagram Post

Finally, ESPN's second most displayed tone is neutrality, which is further similar with the emotion findings. To demonstrate, ESPN presented a post detailing the structure of the NBA Play-in Tournament for certain teams based on their ranking and how it works for a chance to participate in the NBA Playoffs (see Figure 27).

Figure 25. ESPN Instagram Post

The findings of interactivity through emotion and overall feeling suggest that ESPN focuses on curating posts that express positivity while minimizing the amount of negativity. They also imply that Bleacher Report focuses on communicating emotions and tones that are explicitly positive and explicitly negative more than taking a neutral portrayal. In this way, Bleacher Report connects deeper to gratifying emotional connectedness while ESPN gratifies that need to a lesser degree due to the high presence of neutrality (Cho & Youn, 2020). As such, a U.S. Gen Z audience would likely favor Bleacher Report on the basis of the larger degree of strong emotion across the company's Instagram posts. This is consistent with Cho and Youn's (2020) study detailing that Gen Z are more engaged by an experience through which strong emotions are communicated. Nonetheless, there is still likely to be strong appeal for ESPN due to the high positivity that is expressed. Additionally, the Gen Z audience would interact less with ESPN and appeal more to Bleacher Report given their higher presence of comedy, relating to entertainment which the generation also values in their experience with social media (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019).

4.2 Conclusion

ESPN's and Bleacher Report's Instagram communication generally have distinct characteristics. The analysis reveals that the sports media companies incorporate multiple different focuses throughout their posts when compared to each other, which are often parallel with the companies' age. An interesting difference is that ESPN embodies a more professional and informative way of communicating sports-related content, as many posts display official context, news, game setting, and neutral tone. On the other hand, Bleacher Report expresses a more artistic and entertaining way of communicating demonstrated by their publication of many posts with creative composition, private context, and comedy. Nonetheless, they both present several similarities associated with the continuing evolution of communication, including higher references of new media than traditional media, and connected to preferences of Gen Z, such as many posts with videos and strong emotion.

A majority of the visual and textual communication elements of both ESPN and Bleacher Report to some degree have a positive influence on the appeal of a U.S. Gen Z audience. Overall, the companies have many linkages to Gen Z appeal in terms of the things they value and the

gratifications they desire from consuming Instagram content both generally and more specifically related to sports. It is therefore not unexpected that ESPN and Bleacher Report are two of the most popular and successful sports media companies in the industry. As such, both companies seem to be effective in establishing modern strategies on Instagram to stay adaptive to the consumption patterns of newer generations like Gen Z.

5 Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to answer the following research question: How does the user experience of sports media companies on Instagram in the United States appeal to Generation Z? In this chapter, the answer to this question in addition to an answer to the research objectives will be presented. Then, the preceding sections discuss theoretical implications, managerial implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

5.1 Research Objectives and Research Question

The analysis of this study examined how sports media companies communicate to their audience on Instagram. The results reveal that ESPN and Bleacher Report communicate four main visual and textual elements throughout their posts. This pertains to the first research objective: What are the dominant visual and textual communication elements on the companies' Instagram? The four elements are perception of design and informativeness, image management of people and activities, integration of various media types, and interactivity through emotion and overall feeling.

When exploring the initial perception audiences might have of ESPN's and Bleacher Report's Instagram posts, five key subthemes are applicable. First, official context is professionally taken or designed photos and videos. The second subtheme is unofficial context, which is more casual, snap-like photos and videos. Third, broadcasting is the publication of information such as news and stats. The next subtheme is not broadcasting and refers to interactive messages such as polls and questions. Lastly, composition is the visual structure of a post including simple and creative. In terms of dominance, professional collages are the most frequent type of official context while snap-videos are more frequent within unofficial context. Further, across all posts news is the more common type of broadcasting information and increasingly more prevalent than not broadcasting while simple and creative composition yield more of a balance overall.

With regards to image management and the types of people and activities represented by the companies throughout their Instagram posts, there are seven subthemes including personal versus non-personal, professional context, private context, sport, gender, race, and athlete versus nonathlete. This theme was the most substantial within the entire dataset. First, personal versus

nonpersonal refers to whether a post is more personalized or a group context such as a team. Next, professional context is the more formal side of sports including game setting and press interactions followed by private context, which is the more informal side of sports such as leisure moments and behind the scenes. The fourth subtheme is sport and refers to the type of athletic activity associated with a post. Then, gender is the sex of the individuals in a post, either male or female. The sixth subtheme is race with regards to an individual's physical characterization expressed as Asian, Black, Hispanic, or White. Finally, athlete versus nonathlete refers to the role of the individuals in the post. Looking at some of the frequencies of these subthemes in the entire dataset, the most common types are team-oriented highlights, game setting, basketball in terms of sport, males, Black individuals, and athletes.

Next, after exploring how ESPN and Bleacher Report integrate different types of media into their Instagram posts, three main subthemes are significant, namely, traditional media, new media, and media format. Traditional media is offline communication including TV networks and TV series. Conversely, new media is online communication and consists of social media, websites, and podcasts. Third, media format refers to the media components of a post in terms of audio, graphic, text, video, and music. The more common type of media communication is new media, specifically social media. Though traditional media is less referred to, the most common type of that communication is TV network typically related to sports. Regarding media format, videos and graphics with text are both largely and near equally represented in the dataset overall while graphics without text are represented exceedingly less.

The fourth theme uncovered the level of interaction expressed in the Instagram posts with relation to emotion and overall feeling. Six subthemes are applicable, three each for emotion and tone in terms of positivity, negativity, and neutrality. Positive emotion is pleasurable reactions from the individuals exhibited in posts including happiness and excitement whereas positive tone signifies an overall pleasant feeling of the entire post. Similarly, negative emotion is linked to reactions of dislike of individuals consisting of anger and disappointment while negative tone elicits an overall pessimistic feeling. On the other hand, neutral emotion and neutral tone refer to instances that are not explicitly positive or negative. Across the dataset, the most dominant emotion and tone is positive, particularly happiness and triumphant overall feeling.

Moreover, aside from the findings more general to the dataset as a whole, ESPN and Bleacher Report communicated certain visual and textual elements to varying degree. This

connects to the second research objective: How do the elements differ between ESPN and Bleacher Report? Reviewing the findings, several considerable contrasts are revealed. To begin with perception of design and informativeness, ESPN's communication leans more towards official context, news, and simple composition. Bleacher Report, however, seems to focus nearly the same on official and unofficial context as well as on stats and creative composition. These differences indicate that ESPN curates dominantly professionalized and informative content related to sports while Bleacher Report largely creates posts that are creative and provide quick information.

With image management of people and activities, one of the most significant differences is Bleacher Report's higher emphasis on private context compared to ESPN. This emphasis demonstrates the increasing overlap between the professional, more public side of sports and the private, more personal moments (Russmann & Svensson, 2016). In this way, it is evident that ESPN has some distance from this prevalent shift and chooses to focus on more formal content whereas Bleacher Report seems to choose to embrace this shift more. Another key difference with this theme is the larger number of individual highlights published by Bleacher Report than ESPN aside from team-oriented highlights. Other smaller scale differences include Bleacher Report's slightly higher depiction of minority races and females than ESPN.

Regarding integration of various media types, ESPN communicated many more videos and Bleacher Report dominantly presented graphics with text. However, the videos posted by ESPN demonstrate more professionalized content while the graphics with text posted by Bleacher Report exhibited more creativity, which coincides with previously detailed differences. Further, amongst the videos incorporated by both companies, ESPN incorporates longer videos between 15 to 60 seconds while Bleacher Report typically publishes 15-second videos. The following main difference in this theme is the slightly higher reference of new media by Bleacher Report contrasted with the slightly higher reference of traditional media by ESPN. More specifically with relation to new media, Bleacher Report largely refers to Instagram whereas ESPN only makes references to Twitter.

Touching upon interactivity of emotion and overall feeling, the main distinction between the companies, excluding both of their exceedingly dominant expression of positivity, is ESPN's higher amount of neutrality compared to Bleacher Report's higher amount of negativity. This indicates that Bleacher Report focuses more on displaying strictly strong emotions either positive

or negative. Contrastingly, ESPN focuses on communicating positivity and minimizing the amount of negativity. Another important difference is the larger expression of comedic tone in Bleacher Report's Instagram posts.

Looking further into all of these differences across the four main visual and textual communication elements, the findings are perhaps most significantly linked to Bleacher Report's more recent establishment in a Gen Z era compared to ESPN as a much older company. In this way, ESPN seems to be still making efforts to stay current with modern communication and shifting audience preferences as well as restructure from traditional strategies particularly those that are more applicable for past generations (Draper, 2018; McKinney, 2018). On the other hand, Bleacher Report developed their business in the midst of many digital changes with younger audiences like Gen Z as the prime target audience (Lidsky, 2020; McKinney, 2018).

Nonetheless, the different communication strategies of ESPN and Bleacher Report on Instagram subsequently construct different and unique user experiences for their audience. The user experience of the companies is generally delineated by the primary gratifications proposed by UGT regarding social media including entertainment, emotional connectedness, and information sharing (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). This connects to the third research objective: How do the elements construct the user experience of the companies' Instagram?

Beginning with entertainment, this gratification is achieved through having an escape as well as satisfying boredom and stress and also encompasses creativity, humor, and engagement (Cho & Youn, 2020; Cho et al., 2021; Kamble et al., 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Given this, the visual and textual communication elements included in this gratification are creative composition, polls and questions, private context, graphics with text, videos, music, and comedic tone (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Romney & Johnson, 2020; Seemiller et al., 2019; Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). As such, revealed through the analysis, ESPN incorporates many graphics with text and videos, several posts with creative composition, as well as a small amount of private context, music, and comedic tone. Conversely, Bleacher Report publishes many posts with creative composition, private context, graphics with text, and videos, several posts with music and comedic tone, and a very small number of polls and questions. These results, thus, suggest that ESPN embodies entertainment to a moderate extent while Bleacher Report highly expresses entertainment.

The next gratification is emotional connectedness and is achieved through feeling relatable to the content being consumed in addition to the presence of strong emotion and feeling (Cho & Youn, 2020; Cho et al., 2021; O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). With the involvement of relatability, emotional connectedness might often be dependent on the specific individual consuming certain content and their personal characteristics. Thus, the more general elements included for this gratification are individual highlights, team-oriented and group highlights, positive emotion, negative emotion, positive tone, and negative tone (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). Looking back to the results, ESPN mostly presents team-oriented and group highlights, positive emotion, and positive tone with several posts displaying individual highlights. Bleacher Report dominantly presents individual highlights, team-oriented and group highlights, positive emotion, and positive tone with several posts expressing negative emotion and negative tone. In this way, similar to entertainment, ESPN seems to exude moderate emotional connectedness while Bleacher Report highly exhibits emotional connectedness.

Moreover, information sharing is achieved through the receival of exploratory and descriptive content, which constitutes the elements news and neutral tone (O'Carroll & Rooney, 2020; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Based on the results of the analysis, ESPN publishes many posts with news and neutral tone whereas Bleacher Report only incorporates them in some posts. These findings indicate that ESPN communicates information sharing to a high degree and Bleacher Report presents moderate information sharing. To conclude, combining the insights and interpretations of these three gratifications, ESPN seems to have an overall user experience of moderate entertainment, moderate emotional connectedness, and high information sharing while Bleacher Report's seems to embody an overall user experience of high entertainment, high emotional connectedness, and moderate information sharing.

Finally, this discussion of the three research objectives leads to answering the main research question: How does the user experience of sports media companies on Instagram in the United States appeal to Generation Z? The appeal of Gen Z depends on the user experience and the degree to which the various gratifications from social media are present (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019). Firstly, Gen Z largely seeks entertainment from social media to have an escape from reality, satisfy their curiosity for all the moments that occur around sports-related events, and endure a pleasurable, engaging experience (Cho & Youn, 2020;

Kamble et al., 2021; Sheldon & Newman, 2019; Soerakoesoemah, 2021). Secondly, Gen Z highly value emotional connectedness through social media as a result of their desire to self-identify with the content they consume (Cho et al., 2021). Thirdly, Gen Z is less satisfied with the display of information sharing but rather more gratified with simplicity as they prefer content that is not over-informative or lengthy (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021).

Thus, with the support of previous research, a U.S. Gen Z audience might moderately appeal to ESPN's user experience and communication on Instagram as they have some elements that the generation prefers and is engaged by. Conversely, the aforementioned insights suggest that this audience is likely to highly appeal to the user experience of Bleacher Report's Instagram. To conclude, a recent survey on Bleacher Report revealed that nearly 80% of their audience is below the age of 35, thus, a big portion consisting of Gen Z (Lidsky, 2020). To follow, ESPN's audience between the ages of 18 and 34 amounts to about 46% (Smith, 2022). In this way, the conclusions made herein are further consistent with the existing audience distribution of both companies in terms of age demographics.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The theoretical contribution of this study is associated with exploring existing research and literature regarding sports media companies, Instagram communication, and Gen Z, subsequently, making connections across them. This led the research towards providing new insights with two specific cases, namely, ESPN and Bleacher Report, on how they communicate through Instagram and the user experience that creates. The research also presents an adjusted framework of organizational Instagram communication in a sports context and demonstrates its potential to expand to other industries. Furthermore, this study provides more distinct knowledge on the user experience constructed by ESPN and Bleacher Report and its appeal to a U.S. Gen Z audience. Previous research have focused on the communication of sports networks and its connection to general audience engagement (Romney & Johnson, 2020). Based on this analysis herein, it became evident that engagement varies between individuals, particularly in terms of generations whereas Gen Z on many occasions do not appeal to the same things as past generations. These are significant contributions that not only indicate the relevance of findings

uncovered in this study to existing research but also offering a particular way of understanding how sports media companies like ESPN and Bleacher Report communicate on Instagram.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The results and interpretation yield several practical implications for managers of sports media companies and their communication on Instagram. Generally, sports have long had a powerful influence on society and culture. As such, this presents sports media managers with a plethora of opportunities to engage and interact with younger audiences like Gen Z, especially through social media platforms (Silverman, 2020b; Soerakoesoemah, 2021).

To maximize Gen Z's consumption of sports on Instagram, these managers should consider putting more emphasis on increasing the presence of important Gen Z personal values such as diversity and family as from the findings these were the most lacking. To demonstrate, they can communicate more personal highlights of athletes from the minority races that are less dominant in the industry, namely, Hispanic individuals and Asian individuals. Additionally, managers can also give spotlight to athletes of different sexual orientations as these individuals are also underrepresented in the industry and Gen Z would likely appeal more to sports media companies that include this in their Instagram communication.

To further increase engagement, sports media managers can also consider incorporating Gen Z consumption needs to a greater extent, for example, entertainment in terms of interactive visual and textual elements such as polls and questions on Instagram, which was another result that was considerably lacking. Given that Gen Z have a short attention span, it vital to maximize on these interactive elements to maintain their interest (Cho & Youn, 2020; Kamble et al., 2021). As such, these elements can improve Gen Z's enthusiasm for sport-related content and, as a result, strengthen the two-way engagement between companies and this young audience (Soerakoesoemah, 2021). These are merely a few examples that indicate how understanding the characteristics, personal values, and consumption needs of Gen Z can foster a more impactful and engaging user experience.

5.4 Limitations and Further Research

This study also has some limitations accompanied by suggestions for future research. First, the one-week date range of the data achieved saturation for a certain time period, however, it is only a small portion of ESPN's and Bleacher Report's Instagram page as they post roughly anywhere from ten to 25 times a day. In this way, the analysis herein is merely a glimpse of how the two companies communicate on Instagram. Thus, further investigation can incorporate additional week-long collections of data from more recent dates and compare those results, which can contribute to pinpointing evolving or static behavior in terms of the Instagram communication of sports media companies.

Next, content analyses, in this case thematic analysis, cannot determine actual motives or intended behavior of audiences to engage with certain content nor can it determine for what purpose companies communicate specific content on social media. Accordingly, the insights developed from this study can only infer the kind of user experience that ESPN and Bleacher Report exhibit and imply a U.S. Gen Z audience's appeal to those user experiences on Instagram. Further research can, thus, take a mixed methods approach combining the research design of this study with, for instance, a survey distributed to Gen Z members alongside a statistical analysis and examine whether those results are consistent with the findings from the thematic analysis.

Moreover, this research solely focused on the visuals of Instagram posts, however gives no attention to textual data beyond what is present in the visuals. Though this study aimed to highlight the visual communication of Instagram, future investigations can incorporate captions, looking further into their textual components and sentiment, alongside examining their respective image or video. Lastly, a meaningful direction for further research is exploring feminism within sports media companies' Instagram and the continuing over-representation of male athletes in media, which was previously highlighted in this study.

To conclude, this research demonstrates a significant contribution to investigating how sports media companies are engaging one of the most crucial audiences of the future, Gen Z, on Instagram. Given the significance and growth of sports over the past decades, they will likely still remain a part of the lives of young individuals, regardless of generational and digital shifts. It is thus essential for sport media companies to deepen their understanding of Gen Z and continue to adjust and improve their Instagram communication strategy to achieve optimal engagement and long-term success.

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Appendix A

Adjusted Codebook

Variable	Sub-variable	Category	Code(s)
Perception	Perspective	Official context	official photo/video, professional collage
		Unofficial context	snapshot, snap-video, casual collage
	Broadcasting	Broadcasting	stats, news, or quotes
		Not broadcasting	polls, questions, quizzes
	Composition	Simple	simple
		Creative	creative
Image Management	Personalization	Personal context	individualization
		Non-personal context	non-personalized
	Privatization	Professional context	game, press
		Private context	leisure
	Sport	Professional/unprofessional	American football, baseball, basketball, etc.
	People	Gender	female, male
		Race	Asian, Black, Hispanic, White
		Athlete vs. non-athlete	athlete, celebrity, child, family, fan, sports personnel
Integration	Hybridity	Traditional media reference	tv series, tv network
		New media reference	podcast, social media, website
		No explicit reference	*no code*

	Format	Media type	audio/text/video, graphic, graphic/text
		Music	music
Interactivity	Emotion	Positive emotion	excitement, happiness
		Negative emotion	anger, disappointment
		Neutral emotion	neutral emotion
	Tone	Positive tone	comedic, optimistic, triumphant
		Negative tone	defeated, tension
		Neutral tone	neutral tone

Appendix B

Themes of Dataset

Theme	Description	Frequency
Perception of Design and Informativeness	how a user perceives an Instagram post when they initially come across it in terms of appearance and display of information	657
Image Management of People and Activities	how sports media companies are constructing self-presentation and portraying the sports industry on Instagram through the display of certain people and activities	1,739
Integration of Various Media Types	how additional media channels are integrated and what media components are being incorporated into Instagram posts	359
Interactivity through Emotion and Overall Feeling	how sports companies engage and create a connection with their audience on Instagram through the emotions and feelings displayed in their posts	501

Appendix C

Coding Table for ESPN

Theme	Sub-theme	Code	Frequency
Perception of Design and Informativeness	Official Context	official photo	2
		official video	9
		professional collage	75
	Unofficial Context	casual collage	14
		snap-video	30
		snapshot	2
	Broadcasting	news	44
		quote	22
		stats	16
	Not Broadcasting	polls and questions	1
	Composition	creative	49
		simple	83
Image Management of People and Activities	Professional Context	game setting	89
		press	28
	Private Context	behind the scenes	6
		leisure	9
	Personal vs Non-Personal	individualization	35
		non-personalized	97
	Sport	American football	14
		baseball	19
		basketball	83

		boxing	2
		fitness	1
		golf	2
		gymnastics	4
		hockey	4
		martial arts	2
		softball	2
		track & field	1
	Gender	female	22
		male	119
	Race	Asian	4
		Black	98
		Hispanic	7
		White	77
	Athlete vs Non-Athlete	athlete	126
		celebrity	2
		child	5
		family	5
		fan	6
		sports personnel	48
Integration of Various Media Types	Traditional Media	tv network	15
		tv series	6
	New Media	social media	29
	Media Format	audio, text, video	63
		graphic	15
		graphic, text	54

		music	7
Interactivity through Emotion and Overall Feeling	Positive Emotion	excitement	25
		happiness	40
	Negative Emotion	anger	4
		disappointment	5
	Neutral Emotion	neutral emotion	60
	Positive Tone	comedic	15
		optimistic	35
		triumphant	42
	Negative Tone	defeated	2
		tension	13
	Neutral Tone	neutral tone	25

Appendix D

Coding Table for Bleacher Report

Theme	Sub-theme	Code	Frequency
Perception of Design and Informativeness	Official Context	official photo	2
		official video	2
		professional collage	41
	Unofficial Context	casual collage	28
		snap-video	33
		snapshot	10
	Broadcasting	news	17
		quote	24
		stats	32
	Not broadcasting	polls and questions	4
	Composition	creative	74
		simple	42
Image Management of People and Activities	Professional Context	game setting	59
		press	18
	Private Context	behind the scenes	22
		leisure	18
	Personal vs Non-Personal	individualization	48
		non-personalized	68
	Sport	American football	2
		baseball	7
		basketball	97

		betting	4
		hockey	2
		martial arts	1
		soccer	7
		wrestling	1
	Gender	female	22
		male	110
	Race	Asian	6
		Black	98
		Hispanic	13
		White	56
	Athlete vs Non-Athlete	athlete	109
		celebrity	4
		child	2
		family	4
		fan	12
		sports personnel	32
Integration of Various Media Types	Traditional Media	tv network	14
	New Media	podcast	2
		social media	21
		website	6
	Media Format	audio, text, video	43
		graphic	17
		graphic, text	56
		music	11
Interactivity	Positive Emotion	excitement	34

through Emotion and Overall Feeling		happiness	35
	Negative Emotion	anger	8
		disappointment	16
	Neutral Emotion	neutral emotion	25
	Positive Tone	comedic	24
		optimistic	26
		triumphant	29
	Negative Tone	failure	10
		tension	18
	Neutral Tone	neutral tone	10