

Original Article

Sporting Rank, Public Audience Scale and Profile Signalling: A Comparative Instagram Audit of the Top Ten Clubs in Europe's Big Five Leagues, 2025/2026

Maximilian Mfaume

Department of Marketing, University of Dar es Salaam Business School, University of Dar es Salaam, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

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Abstract - Football clubs occupy a settled place on Instagram, yet the account record itself is rarely treated as evidence. This study audits the frozen profile records of 50 primary official club accounts, belonging to the final top ten clubs in each of the Premier League, Serie A, Bundesliga, La Liga and Ligue 1 for the 2025/2026 season. Data were captured manually on 5 and 6 August 2026 from the profile header, the account-information panel and the canonical account address. Medians, ranges, concentration shares, rank gaps and descriptive Spearman correlations between final league rank and within-league follower rank are reported alongside a binary coding of profile cues. Median displayed followers reach 1.9 million, spanning 212,000 to 180 million. Two Spanish accounts hold 37.21 per cent of the sample's gross displayed follower scale. Sporting rank and within-league follower rank agree substantially without coinciding: league coefficients run from 0.539 to 0.794, the pooled value is 0.678, and the mean absolute gap is 1.80 places. Club-selected cues combine officiality, place, organisational breadth and commercial access in configurations that differ by league. An integrated framework separates platform architecture, club-selected cues, platform-disclosed traces and sporting context. Displayed counters record accumulated audience scale only.

Keywords - Digital Traces, Football Clubs, Instagram, Platform Indicators, Profile Signalling.

1. Introduction

Sport-management scholarship has moved steadily from documenting that clubs adopted social media towards asking how they organise, staff and evaluate those channels. [1] Within football, interview-based work has traced how practitioners describe the strategic weight of the medium, and a single-club case study records how one English club localised its content for audiences in different markets. [2,3] Instagram drew early attention because its visual grammar suits a product that is already highly visual, and content analyses have mapped how product and non-product attributes are distributed across club feeds. [4,5] More recent comparative designs place several clubs, or whole leagues, alongside one another. [6,7]

Almost all of that evidence is drawn from posts. Researchers count them, classify their content and model the likes and comments they attract. [8-10] A companion literature asks why audiences interact at all, drawing on motivational and relational accounts of engagement. [11-13] Useful as both streams are, neither examines the account record itself: the handle, the biography, the linked accounts, the counters and the account-information panel that sit above and behind any feed. That record repays attention because it mixes two kinds of evidence that are easy to conflate. Some of it the club writes. The biography, the associated accounts it mentions, the category it selects and the destination of its external link are all editorial choices. The rest comes from the platform. No one at the club enters the verification badge, the account country, the creation date or the follower and post counters, since Instagram generates and formats them. Signalling theory gives vocabulary for the first kind, describing how an informed party communicates otherwise unobservable qualities through observable cues. [14,15] Work on platform affordances gives vocabulary for the second, describing how interface architecture shapes what becomes visible and comparable. [16,17]



This study audits the visible account records of the final top ten clubs in each of Europe's Big Five leagues for the 2025/2026 season, a balanced criterion-based frame of 50 accounts. Its contribution lies not in showing that football clubs use Instagram, which is well established, but in a transparent account-level comparison that keeps sporting context, club-selected cues and platform-disclosed traces apart and states what each can support. Four questions follow. RQ1 asks how the displayed indicators are distributed and how far audience scale is concentrated. RQ2 asks how within-league displayed-follower rank compares with final domestic league rank. RQ3 asks how often seven club-selected profile cues appear, namely explicit officiality claims, heritage or founding-year references, achievement or championship references, geographical or place references, organisational-ecosystem linkages, commercial calls to action and multilingual biographies, together with English-language use by clubs in non-English leagues. RQ4 asks where the five leagues converge and diverge across these layers.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

2.1. Football Clubs and Social-Media Strategy

Research on football clubs and social media has followed a recognisable arc. Early descriptive studies established that clubs had adopted the major platforms; later work asked how that adoption was organised and resourced. Practitioners at English clubs describe social media as a settled strategic channel and stress the trust they must maintain with a large and vocal following. [2] Interactivity has itself been treated as an outcome worth measuring, with one study relating club website and Facebook interactivity to spectator interest across European competition entrants. [18] Comparative analyses have since widened the lens from single clubs to sets of clubs and to entire leagues, contrasting posting volumes and audience response across geographies and platforms. [6,7] Below the elite tier, professionalised practice depends on resources that smaller clubs simply lack. [19]

The present design responds to two features of this work. Its unit of analysis is almost always the post, so it describes club behaviour over a period rather than the state of an account at a moment. The same literature is geographically uneven. English cases predominate and Spanish and Italian ones have grown more common, but few designs hold the number of clubs equal across the major leagues. [7]

2.2. Public Audience Scale and Visible Platform Indicators

Sport-management research draws on follower counts constantly, though usually as a control variable or as the denominator of an engagement rate. [8,9] The counter itself attracts little direct scrutiny, and that neglect matters, because the measure has an unusual temporal character. The displayed figure is a stock accumulated across many seasons, not a flow observed within one. The present design does not test whether club history, sporting performance, star players, geographic reach, media exposure, language, ownership or commercial investment bears on the displayed count. Instagram also renders large values in abbreviated form, so the figure on screen carries far less precision than its digits imply.

Studies that model engagement from public counters have flagged the fragility of the underlying measures, particularly the difficulty of separating audience size from audience behaviour. [10,13] A follower is not a unique person across accounts, since one individual may follow several clubs, and a follow persists without any further action, so the counter records no attention. Calling followers reach, engagement, fans, supporters or customers therefore imports meanings the number does not carry. Throughout this article the counter is called displayed followers or public audience scale, and any summed value is labelled a gross displayed follower scale with its non-uniqueness stated.

The remaining visible elements have attracted still less attention. A creation date records when the account was opened. Verification records a platform judgement about authenticity. Account country reports the location Instagram associates with the account and displays in its account-information panel. A post counter records the size of the visible archive at the moment of viewing, which differs from posting frequency because deletion and archiving both reduce it. Because the platform formats each of these identically wherever it displays them, they can be compared across accounts in a way that free-text fields cannot.

2.3. Profile Cues and Organisational Identity

Signalling theory addresses situations in which one party holds information the other lacks and may choose to communicate part of it through observable cues. [14] Later syntheses set out the signalling environment, distinguishing signaller, signal, receiver and the feedback that follows. [15] Sport applications include athlete brand image, where source credibility carries the signalling work, and the framework sits comfortably beside the brand-image tradition. [20-22]

This article borrows that vocabulary without its measurement apparatus. An Instagram biography is short, editable and read early, and its contents are chosen. A club stating that the account is official addresses a visitor who cannot otherwise tell an authorised channel from an imitation. A founding year invokes continuity. An address or stadium anchors a widely accessible channel in a particular place, an act with its own literature in the geography of football venues. [23] Naming a women's team, an academy, a foundation or a language-specific account presents an organisation with breadth, which connects to work on how sport bodies communicate with stakeholders beyond the first team. [24] Directing visitors to kits, tickets or memberships opens a transaction path, and studies of brand relationships in football suggest such framing sits beside affective appeals rather than replacing them. [25,26]

These cues are club-authored claims: a biography naming a championship shows that the club chose to name it, not that the championship occurred. And the audit observes only whether a cue is present. Signal cost, credibility, fit, receiver interpretation and any downstream effect lie outside its reach, because a frozen profile record carries no evidence about them.

2.4. Platform Affordances and Mediation

The affordance concept, imported into media research from ecological psychology, describes the action possibilities a technology presents. [27] Applied to social media, it directs attention to how interface architecture shapes what users can do and what others can see. [16] Refinements stress that affordances are perceived as well as material, that the concept needs careful explication to stay analytically useful, and that its use across the literature has been uneven. [17,28,29] Related work examines how platform companies present their own infrastructures, and affordance reasoning has been applied empirically to brand presence on Instagram. [30,31] At league level, comparative work on European competitions as complementors to a video platform shows architecture shaping organisational practice. [32]

Instagram sets which fields exist, how long a biography may be, how counters are formatted and which account-information entries appear. It does not determine what a club writes inside those fields. Where a field is available and formatted identically across the sampled accounts, comparison is possible; where a field is absent, conditional or abbreviated, the comparison narrows accordingly.

2.5. Integrated Conceptual Framework: Platform-Conditioned Profile Signalling

The framework separates five layers that a frozen profile record brings together. It organises a cross-sectional description rather than modelling influence, and it carries no hypotheses and no consumer-behaviour theory.

Instagram sets field availability, character limits, counter formatting and the rules under which account-information entries such as former usernames or active advertising appear at all. Architecture conditions what can be observed and compared before any club writes anything.

Club-selected profile cues form the second layer, covering biography wording, mentions of associated accounts, the category a club selects and the content behind its external link. These are editable and chosen, and they are the material coded in this study.

Platform-disclosed account traces form the third layer, covering displayed followers, posts and following, the verification badge, the date joined, the account country and the conditional disclosures. Because Instagram supplies and formats them, they report account status and history rather than editorial intent.

External sporting context forms the fourth layer and is represented by one variable, the final domestic league position for 2025/2026. It originates entirely outside the platform.

Unmeasured receiver outcomes form the fifth layer and are named so that they can be excluded explicitly. Interpretation, engagement, loyalty, attention, consumer behaviour and commercial effects are absent from this dataset. No indicator reported below stands in for any of them.

The research questions map onto these layers directly. RQ1 concerns the third layer, describing the distribution and concentration of displayed indicators. RQ2 places the fourth layer beside the third, comparing sporting rank with within-league displayed-follower rank. RQ3 concerns the second layer, recording how often each club-selected cue appears. RQ4 asks how the leagues converge and diverge across the layers, distinguishing uniformity that follows from architecture from variation that follows from club choice. **Figure 1** sets the layers out.

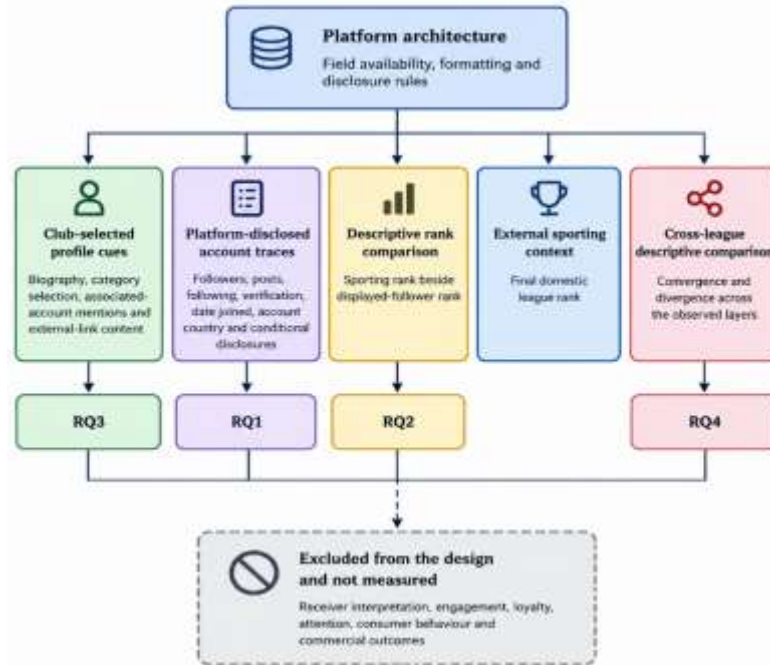


Fig. 1 Platform-Conditioned Profile-Signalling Framework for the Comparative Account Audit

Note: Solid borders show organising and descriptive relationships, not causal paths. The dashed boundary separates unmeasured receiver and commercial outcomes from the observed framework.

2.6. Research Gap

Post-level designs dominate, leaving the account record itself little examined. Follower counts are used instrumentally and seldom described, so their distribution and concentration across comparable clubs are poorly documented. Designs that balance the leagues are rare, which leaves league-level claims resting on unequal or opportunistic samples. [7] An audit that freezes 50 comparable accounts at a single moment, codes the wording clubs chose and records what the platform displayed addresses all three gaps, provided its limits are stated openly.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

Descriptive by design, this is a cross-sectional comparative digital-trace audit of organisational Instagram accounts. It involves no intervention, no time series and no outcome variable, and it estimates no causal relationship. The layers set out in Section 2.5 coexist in the frozen record, and the comparison drawn between them is descriptive.

3.2. Sampling Frame and Unit of Analysis

Sampling was confined to the clubs finishing in the top ten of the Premier League, Serie A, Bundesliga, La Liga and Ligue 1 in 2025/2026, a total of 50 clubs. Selection was criterion-based and purposive rather than probabilistic, and the design balanced the frame at exactly ten clubs per league. A fixed top-ten cut taken from each final table supplies the

criterion. Twenty clubs contest the Premier League, Serie A and La Liga, and eighteen contest the Bundesliga and Ligue 1, so the ten sampled clubs amount to half of the twenty-club leagues and to a little over half of the eighteen-club leagues. The top-ten rule, not a half-league share, defines the frame. Any club below tenth place lies outside it.

All 50 positions were checked against the published final tables for the season. [33-38] Each source reports a complete final classification, and every sampled position was confirmed against it.

The unit of analysis is each club's primary official Instagram account, defined as the account the club presents as its main verified presence. The audit did not determine whether that account carries first-team material only, and it makes no such assumption. The unit of observation is the frozen account-profile record captured by the profile screenshot and the account-information screenshot together. Where the source document abbreviated or misspelled a club label, the label was corrected without any change of identity, and every correction appears in the retained audit register.

3.3. Data Sources and Capture Protocol

The researcher audited the 50 accounts by hand on 5 and 6 August 2026 under a structured protocol. For every club the researcher captured the visible profile header, the profile QR code, the account-information panel and the canonical account address. Because collection ran across two consecutive days, the observations sit close together in time. Counters were transcribed exactly as Instagram displayed them, and they may have changed since. Because the source document does not identify the day on which each club was captured, the capture period is recorded at account level as 5 to 6 August 2026 rather than as an exact date.

The screenshots are the primary source for both counters and cue content. A typed address recorded beside each screenshot cross-checks the handle, and all 50 matched. Share and tracking parameters were removed, so analytical addresses are held in canonical form as <https://www.instagram.com/HANDLE/>. A reader can follow those addresses to each account as it stands at the time of viewing, but not as it stood in August 2026. Counters and biography text change, and Instagram offers no archive of earlier profile versions. QR codes were recorded as part of the collection routine, but they are not variables and carry no evidence about the accounts.

3.4. Variable Construction

The screenshots fed directly into a structured master dataset holding one record for each club. Fields cover league and final rank, corrected club name, canonical handle and address, the three counters both as displayed and as approximate numeric values, category-label presence and wording, transcribed biography, external-link presence and visible link text, the coded cues described in Section 3.5, principal biography language, creation date, account country, former-username and active-advertising disclosure, verification status and date, capture metadata, transcription confidence and an audit note. Displayed strings and numeric conversions occupy separate fields, so neither overwrites the other.

Abbreviated K and M values are treated as approximate and their display precision preserved, so 32.3M becomes approximately 32,300,000 with no unit-level precision manufactured. Post counters measure the visible archive at capture and carry no reading as posting frequency. The shared-follower entry varies with whoever is logged in and is excluded from every calculation. Fields not shown are coded as not displayed, which records the absence of a display and not the absence of the underlying condition. An active-advertising entry shows only that advertising was visible through the interface at capture, and says nothing about expenditure, intensity or strategy.

3.5. Profile-Cue Coding

The coded material is broader than biography text alone, since commercial, ecosystem and some place decisions rest on linked-account mentions or on visible link text. The scheme is therefore described as profile-cue coding. Seven binary cues were defined before coding began. Officiality requires an explicit linguistic equivalent of official, and the verification badge is never accepted in its place. Heritage requires a four-digit founding year or an explicit continuity or anniversary statement. Achievement requires a title, championship, trophy, tournament win or formal distinction

expressed in words, so emoji-only cues do not qualify. Place requires a city, stadium, address, region, territorial identity or place-based slogan, though place names confined to a club's registered name are excluded. Organisational ecosystem requires the profile to link or name a women's, academy, youth, foundation, community, international, language-specific or esports account. Commercial call to action requires the biography or the visible link text to direct a visitor towards kits, stores, tickets, hospitality, memberships, subscriptions or another identifiable transaction. Multilingual requires more than one language to be used substantively in club-authored text, and the platform's translation prompt never counts.

An eighth code, English-language use, registers whether a club playing in a non-English domestic league writes wholly or partly in English. It records the language observed and permits no inference about international strategy, target markets or intent. For the ten Premier League clubs it is coded as not applicable. The complete codebook, including the decision rules that settle borderline cases, appears in Appendix A.

All coding was carried out by one coder. No inter-coder reliability statistic is reported, since no independent or repeat coding was undertaken and such a figure would have no basis without it. Instead, the researcher carried out a documented verification pass. After the first round every screenshot was re-examined against its coded record, each borderline decision was set down in an audit note, and the rule governing it was entered in the codebook so that a second coder could reproduce or contest it.

3.6. Analytical Procedure

Displayed follower distributions are heavily skewed, so medians, ranges and interquartile ranges carry the description in place of means and standard deviations. Quartiles are Tukey hinges, taking the median of the lower half and of the upper half of the ordered values with the overall median excluded when the count is odd. Concentration is reported as the share of a league's gross displayed follower scale held by its two largest accounts.

Two rank variables are compared. One is the club's final league rank, from one to ten. The other is its displayed-follower rank inside its own league, also from one to ten, where one marks the largest count. Since one denotes the better or larger value on both, agreement yields a positive coefficient. The difference between the two ranks is reported per club as a rank gap. Spearman correlations are computed within each league and across the pooled 50. The pooled coefficient uses within-league follower rank in place of raw counts, so that it summarises rank agreement inside leagues without absorbing differences in absolute audience scale between them.

Criterion-based selection makes the sample the defined top-ten frame itself, so no population-wide inference is drawn. The coefficients are descriptive summaries of rank agreement within the observed frame. No p-values are reported, since ten deliberately chosen observations per league would make a random-sampling test statistic describe a sampling process that never took place. Interpretation is based on effect size, rank pattern and the descriptive evidence.

3.7. Ethics, Provenance and Reproducibility

The audit examined publicly visible official organisational profiles maintained by football clubs, together with the standard account-information fields that Instagram displays beside them. It did not examine private messages, follower lists or individual user accounts, and it required no access beyond ordinary public viewing. One account-information field varies with the viewer. That field, the shared-follower entry, was identified and removed from every calculation. No individual person is a subject of the analysis. No formal ethics-exemption determination was sought or issued, and none is claimed.

As part of the audit trail, the evidentiary source file remains unaltered. In the retained audit register the capture period is entered as 5 to 6 August 2026, the collection method as a manual profile audit and the collector as the researcher.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Account Coverage and Disclosure

Each of the 50 clubs maintains an identifiable primary official Instagram account, and all 50 display the verification badge. Every account shows at least one external link. Creation dates span January 2011 to April 2019, the median year

is 2013, and 34 accounts were opened in 2012 or 2013. These figures describe the accounts' history on the platform, not when the clubs took up social media.

The account-country field appears for 49 accounts and agrees with the league country in every one of them. Olympique de Marseille is the exception, its panel reading Not shared. That value is recorded exactly as displayed, and it is treated neither as missing data nor as evidence of where the account is administered. Category labels appear on 25 accounts in four distinct wordings, so half the sample carries one. Seven accounts show a former-username entry, four an active-advertising entry and 19 an explicit verification date. Instagram determines whether these conditional entries appear at all, so their frequencies describe patterns of disclosure and not club behaviour. The sample construction and measurement framework is set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample construction and measurement framework.

Design element	Specification	Evidential note
Design	Cross-sectional comparative digital-trace audit	Descriptive; no intervention, series or outcome variable
Sampling frame	Final top 10 clubs in each of the Big Five leagues, 2025/2026	Criterion-based and purposive; balanced at 10 clubs per league
Accounts audited	50 primary official club accounts	Fixed top-ten criterion per league; clubs below tenth are outside the frame
Unit of analysis	Primary official club Instagram account	One account per club; each club appears once
Unit of observation	Frozen account-profile record	Profile header screenshot plus account-information screenshot
Capture period	5 to 6 August 2026	Near-synchronous snapshot; club-level dates not documented in the source
Collection method	Manual profile audit by the researcher	Profile header, account-information panel, QR code and canonical address
External sporting context	Final 2025/2026 league rank	All 50 positions verified against published final tables
Club-selected cues	Biography, associated-account mentions, category, external link	Coded on seven binary cues plus an English-language code
Platform-disclosed traces	Followers, posts, following, verification, date joined, account country	Generated and formatted by Instagram, not entered by the club
Excluded from analysis	Shared-follower entry; QR code	Viewer-specific; captured in the routine but not a variable
Analytical statistics	Medians, ranges, Tukey hinges, concentration shares, Spearman rho	Descriptive only; no population-wide inference

4.2. Cross-League Follower Distributions

Across the 50 accounts the median displayed follower value is 1.9 million, the interquartile range runs from 757,000 to 17.9 million, and observed values span 212,000 to 180 million. The largest sampled account exceeds the smallest by a ratio close to 850 to 1, within a frame drawn entirely from clubs that finished in the top ten. Median posts stand at 16,750, with an interquartile range of 11,600 to 22,100 and observed values from 4,866 to 43,300. Median following is 172, ranging from 54 to 1,046 with an interquartile range of 114 to 258.

Which summary is chosen changes the league ordering, a shift that is one of the study's central descriptive findings. By median displayed followers the order runs Premier League 18.450 million, Serie A 3.700 million, La Liga 1.550 million, Bundesliga 1.038 million and Ligue 1 0.933 million. By gross displayed follower scale it changes: La Liga leads on 354.192 million, ahead of the Premier League on 257.603 million, Serie A on 109.576 million, Ligue 1 on 81.081 million and the Bundesliga on 76.439 million. La Liga thus records the largest gross total in the frame while its typical

club ranks third. Each summary answers a different question, and quoting only one would misdescribe the comparison. **Table 2** records the league-level indicators and **Figure 2** plots the underlying distributions logarithmically.

Table 2: League-Level Descriptive Instagram Indicators

Indicator	Premier League	Serie A	Bundesliga	La Liga	Ligue 1	Overall
Accounts audited	10	10	10	10	10	50
Median displayed followers (millions)	18.450	3.700	1.038	1.550	0.933	1.900
Interquartile range (millions)	1.400 to 48.100	1.100 to 14.500	0.538 to 4.600	0.710 to 17.900	0.577 to 3.200	0.757 to 17.900
Minimum displayed followers (millions)	0.903	0.437	0.311	0.408	0.212	0.212
Maximum displayed followers (millions)	65.900	59.000	45.100	180.000	67.100	180.000
Gross displayed follower scale (millions)	257.603	109.576	76.439	354.192	81.081	878.891
Median posts	24,150	16,850	13,400	21,600	9,981	16,750
Median following	270	140	116	109	264	172
Verified accounts	10	10	10	10	10	50
Accounts displaying a country consistent with the league country	10	10	10	10	9	49
Accounts displaying a category label	7	3	8	2	5	25

On a linear axis 44 of the 50 accounts would collapse into the left margin. The plot also shows the Premier League as the only league whose accounts spread across the upper part of the range instead of clustering low with a few separated outliers.

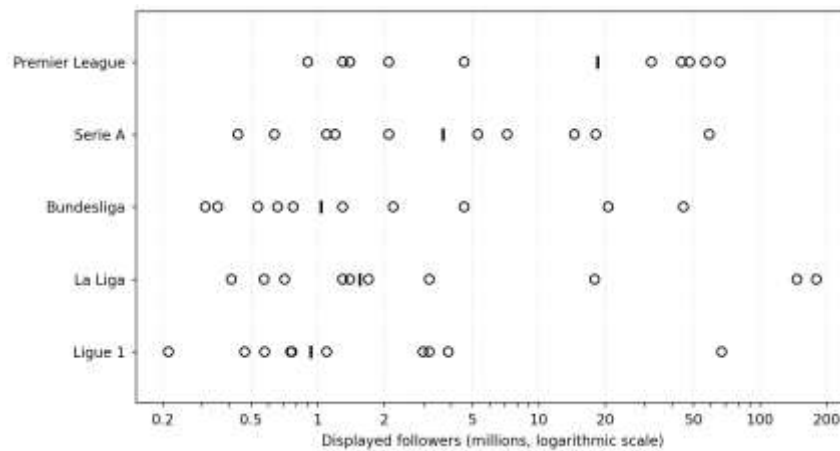


Fig. 2 Displayed Follower Scale of Each Sampled Club, By League, on a Logarithmic Scale. Open Circles Denote Clubs and the Vertical Stroke Denotes the League Median

4.3. Concentration of Public Audience Scale

Every league shows concentration, though its degree varies widely. The two largest accounts hold between 47.63 per cent of their league's gross displayed follower scale in the Premier League and 92.32 per cent in La Liga, with Serie A at 70.36 per cent, the Bundesliga at 85.95 per cent and Ligue 1 at 87.57 per cent. Taking the sample as a whole, Real

Madrid and Barcelona together hold 37.21 per cent of the gross displayed follower scale of all 50 accounts. Two clubs from one country thus account for more than a third of a balanced frame spanning five.

The Premier League is the least concentrated league by a wide margin, which mirrors its high median. Four of its accounts exceed 40 million displayed followers, spreading the league's gross across several rather than banking it in two. The other four leagues each rest on one or two very large accounts, and their medians fall accordingly. Any summed value quoted here is a gross displayed follower scale rather than an audience total, since individuals may follow several clubs and the sum contains an unknown and unmeasurable amount of duplication. **Table 3** records the concentration measures beside the rank comparison discussed next.

Table 3: Concentration Of Public Audience Scale and Rank Comparison, By League

League	Gross displayed follower scale (millions)	Two largest accounts (millions)	Two largest as share of league gross (%)	Spearman rho, final league rank and within-league follower rank	Mean absolute rank gap (places)	Largest single divergence
Premier League	257.603	122.700	47.63	0.539	2.20	Chelsea, 10th on the table and 4th by followers
Serie A	109.576	77.100	70.36	0.648	2.00	Juventus, 6th on the table and 1st by followers
Bundesliga	76.439	65.700	85.95	0.794	1.40	Hoffenheim, 5th on the table and 8th by followers
La Liga	354.192	327.000	92.32	0.770	1.80	Valencia, 9th on the table and 6th by followers
Ligue 1	81.081	71.000	87.57	0.636	1.60	Lens, 2nd on the table and 8th by followers
Pooled sample (n = 50)	878.891	327.000	37.21	0.678	1.80	Chelsea and Lens, six places each

4.4. Sporting Rank and Within-League Follower Rank

Spearman coefficients between them are 0.539 in the Premier League, 0.648 in Serie A, 0.794 in the Bundesliga, 0.770 in La Liga and 0.636 in Ligue 1, with a pooled value of 0.678 across all 50 clubs. Rank one marks both the better sporting outcome and the larger displayed follower count, so these positive values record agreement between the orderings, and none approaches the value equivalence would produce.

Set each club's final league rank against its displayed-follower rank within its own league and the mean absolute gap is 1.80 places, with a maximum of six. Nine clubs occupy identical positions on both measures. The two widest divergences run in opposite directions. Chelsea finished tenth in the Premier League while holding the fourth-largest displayed follower count in that league. Lens finished second in Ligue 1 while holding only the eighth-largest. Juventus diverges by five places in the same direction as Chelsea, finishing sixth in Serie A while holding the largest count in its league.

The two variables are measured over different spans, which is worth stating plainly. A league position summarises one season. A follower count is a cumulative total that the account has carried forward across many seasons, and the

dataset measures none of the factors that might bear on it, among them club history, star players, geographic reach, media exposure, language, ownership and commercial investment. The audit records the degree of agreement between the two orderings and nothing about why they agree or diverge. No causal claim is made in either direction, and none is supported by these data.

4.5. Profile-Cue Configurations

Clubs use the same small editable space very differently. Across the 50 accounts a place cue appears 30 times, an explicit officiality claim 25 times, an organisational-ecosystem linkage 17 times, a commercial call to action 15 times, a heritage cue 11 times, a multilingual biography nine times and an explicit achievement claim eight times. Place is thus the most common cue in the frame and achievement the least, which cuts against an intuition that elite clubs would foreground trophies in the space a visitor reads early.

Within the ecosystem cue, women's-team accounts are named most often, appearing in 16 biographies, followed by academy or youth accounts in 12, international or language-specific accounts in six, esports accounts in five and foundation or community accounts in four. Naming several such accounts presents an organisation with breadth rather than a first team alone, extending into the profile field the stakeholder-facing communication documented in club-adjacent bodies. [24]

Read through signalling vocabulary, these configurations answer different uncertainties, though the audit sees only which cues are present. An officiality claim speaks to a visitor who cannot verify authorisation from content alone, and 25 clubs make that claim in words while all 50 carry the badge Instagram supplies. The verbal officiality claim and the platform badge are not interchangeable, although they co-occur on those 25 accounts. Heritage and achievement claims speak to standing. A place cue speaks to where a widely accessible account belongs, and its frequency fits the weight football attaches to venue and locality. [23] A commercial call to action converts the same space into an entry point for a transaction. [25] Whether any cue is costly, credible or correctly read cannot be assessed here, since the data contain no independent measure of the underlying qualities and no measure of receiver response. [15]

English is the principal biography language for 26 accounts, followed by German and French with eight each, Spanish with five, and Italian, Galician and Basque with one apiece. Setting aside the ten Premier League clubs, for which the code does not apply, 21 of the remaining 40 write wholly or partly in English, at rates differing sharply by league: nine of ten in Serie A, six of ten in La Liga, four of ten in the Bundesliga and two of ten in Ligue 1. Nine biographies are substantively multilingual, five of them in La Liga, where Catalan, Valencian, Galician and Basque appear beside Spanish and English. **Table 4** records the cue frequencies by league.

Table 4: Profile-cue frequencies by league

Profile cue (count of 10 clubs per league)	Premier League	Serie A	Bundesliga	La Liga	Ligue 1	Overall (n = 50)
Explicit officiality claim	4	4	5	6	6	25
Heritage or founding-year cue	1	4	3	1	2	11
Achievement or championship cue	2	2	2	1	1	8
Geographical or place cue	5	6	8	6	5	30
Organisational-ecosystem linkage	4	2	6	2	3	17
Women's-team linkage	4	2	6	1	3	16
Academy or youth linkage	4	1	4	2	1	12
Esports linkage	0	0	4	0	1	5
Foundation or community linkage	1	0	1	1	1	4
International or language-	2	0	3	1	0	6

specific linkage						
Commercial call to action	3	5	2	3	2	15
Multilingual biography	0	2	2	5	0	9
Category label selected	7	3	8	2	5	25
English-language use (non-English leagues only)	not applicable	9	4	6	2	21 of 40 non-English-league clubs

4.6. Cross-League Convergence and Divergence

Uniformity appears in different layers for different reasons, and the layers should not be conflated. Verification is universal, consistent with the study's selection of each club's main verified account. Join dates are displayed in a common format, while most sampled accounts show 2012 or 2013. Instagram sets a common standard for disclosing these traces, though the values themselves describe account status and history and say nothing about the rules that surface them. All 50 accounts likewise show an external link, but the link field belongs with the club-selected cues, because Instagram provides it while each club decides whether to fill it. The uniformity there records a shared editorial choice, not a constraint imposed by the platform.

The clubs diverge in what they wrote. Place is coded for eight of ten Bundesliga clubs and organisational ecosystem for six of ten, the highest counts in the frame, and the league holds four of the five esports linkages in the sample. La Liga records the highest multilingual count at five of ten, reflecting the co-official languages of several of its regions, alongside the lowest category-label rate at two of ten. Serie A records the highest commercial count at five of ten, with biographies or link fields pointing towards kit, membership or season-ticket campaigns. Ligue 1 and La Liga tie on officiality at six of ten each. No Premier League biography is multilingual, and the league records the highest category-label rate at seven of ten.

Concentration diverges differently. The Premier League pairs the highest median with the lowest concentration, while La Liga pairs a mid-ranking median with the highest concentration in the frame. A single number would obscure either. The pattern is consistent with comparative work reporting league-level differences in how digital audiences are distributed, though the present evidence is account-level and frozen and says nothing about the posting behaviour such studies measure. [6,7,32]

4.7. Implications

A signalling reading and a platform-affordance reading address different parts of the same record. Architecture accounts for why 50 accounts across five countries can be compared at all, while signalling vocabulary describes how the editable space is used. Together they also fix the study's evidential boundary, since a field the platform does not display cannot be compared and an abbreviated counter cannot be compared precisely.

For managers, audience rank and sporting rank agree only partly, so a club assessing its visible standing should read both rather than let one stand in for the other. Median and gross summaries of the same league produce different orderings, so any benchmarking exercise should state which it uses before drawing a conclusion. A third observation calls for more caution. Half the sample makes no officiality claim and four fifths make no achievement claim. Both figures describe current practice, and neither recommends a change. Nothing in these data suggests that rewriting a biography would shift a follower count or any commercial outcome.

4.8. Limitations

The audit rests on one capture period, and because public counters change continuously, every value reported here belongs to 5 and 6 August 2026 alone. Two days is a narrow window but not an instantaneous one, so counters may have shifted slightly between the first and the last observations. The K and M abbreviations make displayed values approximate, and that approximation carries into every derived statistic, so no figure should be read as exact.

Because the frame is a purposive top-ten selection and not a probability sample, clubs finishing eleventh or lower fall outside it, and nothing here describes those clubs or the leagues as a whole. The same followers may appear on several accounts, so no summed value amounts to an audience total. None of those constructs is examined, because the dataset holds no post-level engagement data, no audience demographics, no sentiment or fan-motivation measures and no revenue, sponsorship or commercial-outcome data. Visible profile fields provide no measure of algorithmic visibility, and no causal identification is attempted.

Biographies can be edited at any point after capture, so the coded text records a moment rather than a settled property of the club. One coder performed the analysis. A documented verification pass followed it, but no independent coding check was conducted, and for that reason no reliability statistic is reported. Language and translation call for judgement, above all where a biography combines a co-official regional language with a national one. Appendix A sets out the rules that settled such cases, for inspection and challenge. Public follower counts establish nothing about attention, loyalty or commercial value, and no claim of that kind is made anywhere in this article.

5. Conclusion

The audit examined the frozen Instagram profile records of the final top ten clubs in each of Europe's Big Five leagues for 2025/2026, a balanced frame of 50 accounts captured on 5 and 6 August 2026. The distribution of displayed follower counts is heavily skewed, with public audience scale concentrated in a small number of very large accounts. Final sporting rank and within-league displayed-follower rank move together substantially without coinciding. Gross and typical-club summaries order the same league differently, so its position depends on which summary is used. Club-selected profile cues combine officiality, heritage, place, organisational breadth and commercial access in configurations that vary by league. Instagram, meanwhile, standardises the fields and formats through which those differences become visible.

The study's contribution is a transparent account-level comparison that keeps sporting context, club-selected cues and platform-disclosed traces separate and states what visible account evidence supports. Instagram's architecture makes the comparison of 50 clubs across five countries possible, and it sets the limits of that comparison. Later work could widen the frame to full league tables, repeat the audit at intervals so that a frozen record becomes a series, or combine profile records with post-level and commercial data held by clubs. Any extension would need the discipline applied here: a displayed counter records accumulated audience scale and nothing more.

Data Availability

The author-created structured account register and computation register, comprising the master dataset, the codebook, all recalculated statistics, the rank comparison, the cue frequencies and the audit notes, are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. The underlying interface images are screenshots of Instagram profile pages and remain the intellectual property of Meta Platforms and of the respective clubs, so they are not redistributed with this article. Every account analysed is public and can be inspected at the canonical addresses listed in Table A1, though such inspection shows each account as it stands at the time of viewing and cannot reproduce the state recorded on 5 and 6 August 2026.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, M.M.; Methodology, M.M.; Validation, M.M.; Formal Analysis, M.M.; Investigation, M.M.; Data Curation, M.M.; Writing - Original Draft Preparation, M.M.; Writing - Review & Editing, M.M.; Visualization, M.M.; Project Administration, M.M. This is a sole-authored article and the named author performed each of the roles listed.

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Appendix A. Coding Framework and Account Register

A.1. Profile-Cue Codebook and Decision Rules

Officiality. Coded present when the biography contains an explicit linguistic equivalent of official, including official, officiel, offizielle in its inflected forms, oficial, cuenta oficial, compte officiel and ofiziala. The verification badge is never accepted in its place.

Heritage. Coded present under either of two rules. Rule H1 admits an explicit continuity or anniversary statement. Rule H2 admits a four-digit founding year, whether or not that year forms part of the registered club name. Two-digit founding-year elements fail Rule H2; the single borderline case in this sample appears in the register's audit notes.

Achievement. Coded present when a title, championship, trophy, tournament win or formal distinction is expressed in words. Emoji-only cues, including star emoji conventionally denoting titles, do not qualify. Every coded statement is treated as a club-authored claim and is never converted into an independently established fact.

Place. Coded present when the profile shows a city, stadium, address, region, territorial identity or place-based slogan. A place name occurring only within a club's registered name does not qualify. A linked venue account naming both an arena and its city qualifies.

Organisational ecosystem. Coded present when an associated women's, academy, youth, foundation, community, international, language-specific or esports account is linked or named on the profile. Competition accounts under

external ownership and commercial partner accounts do not qualify, and venue accounts are coded under Place.

Commercial call to action. Coded present when kits, stores, tickets, hospitality, memberships, subscriptions or another identifiable transaction is signalled by the biography or by the visible link text. Generic club homepages and undifferentiated link-aggregator addresses do not qualify, and a truncated destination qualifies only where the visible text identifies a transaction.

Multilingual. Coded present when club-authored text makes substantive use of more than one language. The platform's translation prompt is never counted. A second language is not established by proper nouns, addresses or isolated loan words appearing within an otherwise monolingual sentence.

English-language use. Coded present when a club in a non-English domestic league writes in English, wholly or in part, and coded as not applicable for the ten Premier League clubs. It documents the language observed and supports no inference about strategy or intent.

Excluded items. Because the shared-follower entry changes with the viewer, it is kept out of every calculation. QR codes formed part of the collection routine but are not variables. Labels in the source document were corrected without any change of identity as follows: SERIA A to Serie A; BRIGHOTON AND HOVE ALBION to Brighton and Hove Albion; FREIBURB to Freiburg; PARIS SAINT GERMAN to Paris Saint-Germain; DORTMUND to Borussia Dortmund; LEVERKUSEN to Bayer Leverkusen; and FSV MAINZ to 1. FSV Mainz 05.

A.2. Complete Account Register

All 50 accounts are listed in Table A1. The cue codes abbreviate officiality as O, heritage as H, achievement as A, place as P, organisational ecosystem as E, commercial call to action as C, multilingual as M and English-language use as G. An account with no coded cue is marked by a dash.

Table A1: Complete 50-club account register with visible indicators and coded profile cues, captured 5 to 6 August 2026

League	Rank	Club	Handle	Followers	Posts	Following	Joined	Country	Codes
Premier League	1	Arsenal	@arsenal	32.3M	26.3K	241	December 2012	United Kingdom	O,A,P,E
Premier League	2	Manchester City	@mancity	56.8M	43.3K	787	July 2011	United Kingdom	H,P
Premier League	3	Manchester United	@manutd	65.9M	38.7K	139	August 2013	United Kingdom	C
Premier League	4	Aston Villa	@astonvilla	4.6M	22K	196	June 2014	United Kingdom	A
Premier League	5	Liverpool	@liverpoolfc	48.1M	37.6K	359	June 2012	United Kingdom	O,C
Premier League	6	AFC Bournemouth	@afcb	1.3M	9,227	167	June 2013	United Kingdom	O,P,E,C

League	Rank	Club	Handle	Followers	Posts	Following	Joined	Country	Codes
Premier League	7	Sunderland	@sunderlandafc	1.4M	19.7K	472	December 2012	United Kingdom	P
Premier League	8	Brighton and Hove Albion	@officialbhafc	2.1M	14.6K	290	September 2012	United Kingdom	O,E
Premier League	9	Brentford	@brentfordfc	903K	12K	364	August 2012	United Kingdom	-
Premier League	10	Chelsea	@chelseafc	44.2M	29.5K	249	October 2012	United Kingdom	P,E
Serie A	1	Inter	@inter	14.5M	26.8K	141	October 2013	Italy	A,P,M,G
Serie A	2	Napoli	@officialsscnapoli	5.3M	16.5K	156	July 2013	Italy	G
Serie A	3	AS Roma	@officialasroma	7.2M	17.2K	221	July 2014	Italy	C,G
Serie A	4	Como 1907	@comofootball	2.1M	6,456	306	April 2019	Italy	O,H,C,G
Serie A	5	AC Milan	@acmilan	18.1M	18.6K	135	September 2012	Italy	O,P,G
Serie A	6	Juventus	@juventus	59M	24.9K	140	July 2012	Italy	H,P,E,C,G
Serie A	7	Atalanta	@atalantabc	1.1M	18.5K	114	May 2013	Italy	O,A,P,G
Serie A	8	Bologna	@bolognafc1909	639K	8,605	98	September 2014	Italy	E,G
Serie A	9	Lazio	@official_sslazio	1.2M	13K	138	August 2013	Italy	O,H,P,C,M,G
Serie A	10	Udinese	@udinesecalcio	437K	12.6K	252	April 2012	Italy	H,P,C
Bundesliga	1	Bayern Munich	@fcbayern	45.1M	28.1K	76	May 2013	Germany	A,P
Bundesliga	2	Borussia Dortmund	@bvb09	20.6M	17K	98	October 2013	Germany	O,P,E
Bundesliga	3	RB Leipzig	@rbleipzig	2.2M	13.6K	114	April 2014	Germany	O,P,E,G
Bundesliga	4	VfB Stuttgart	@vfb	776K	9,021	83	July 2012	Germany	H,P,E

League	Rank	Club	Handle	Followers	Posts	Following	Joined	Country	Codes
Bundesliga	5	Hoffenheim	@tsghoffenheim	538K	13.2K	152	February 2015	Germany	O,P,G
Bundesliga	6	Bayer Leverkusen	@bayer04fussball	4.6M	18.5K	392	March 2013	Germany	H,A,E,C,M,G
Bundesliga	7	Freiburg	@scfreiburg	660K	9,092	100	June 2016	Germany	O
Bundesliga	8	Eintracht Frankfurt	@eintrachtfrankfurt	1.3M	16K	117	June 2013	Germany	P,E
Bundesliga	9	Augsburg	@fcaugsburg1907	311K	10.3K	163	April 2014	Germany	O,H,P,M,G
Bundesliga	10	1. FSV Mainz 05	@1fsvmainz05	354K	11.6K	177	May 2013	Germany	P,E,C
La Liga	1	Barcelona	@fcbarcelona	147M	27.5K	111	November 2012	Spain	M,G
La Liga	2	Real Madrid	@realmadrid	180M	21K	67	January 2013	Spain	O,A,P,G
La Liga	3	Villarreal	@villarrealcf	1.7M	13.1K	220	January 2011	Spain	P,C,M
La Liga	4	Atletico Madrid	@atleticodemadrid	17.9M	28.2K	206	September 2012	Spain	P,E,G
La Liga	5	Real Betis	@realbetisbalompie	3.2M	29.4K	55	April 2012	Spain	O,E,C
La Liga	6	Celta Vigo	@rcelta	710K	18.9K	109	August 2015	Spain	H
La Liga	7	Getafe	@getafecf	574K	17.1K	54	October 2015	Spain	O,C
La Liga	8	Rayo Vallecano	@rayovallecano	408K	21.1K	109	September 2014	Spain	O,P,M,G
La Liga	9	Valencia	@valenciacf	1.4M	22.1K	155	August 2013	Spain	O,P,M,G
La Liga	10	Real Sociedad	@realsociedad	1.3M	25.1K	74	January 2015	Spain	O,P,M,G
Ligue 1	1	Paris Saint-Germain	@psg	67.1M	21K	191	October 2012	France	A,P,C
Ligue 1	2	Lens	@rclens	577K	7,104	202	July 2015	France	O,H,P
Ligue 1	3	Lille	@losclive	1.1M	11K	241	August 2012	France	P,E
Ligue 1	4	Olympique Lyonnais	@ol	3.2M	12K	316	December 2011	France	O,C
Ligue 1	5	Olympique de Marseille	@olympiquedemarseille	3.9M	13.1K	224	April 2012	Not shared	O,E,G
Ligue 1	6	Stade Rennais	@staderennaisfc	766K	7,198	278	September 2012	France	H,P

League	Rank	Club	Handle	Followers	Posts	Following	Joined	Country	Codes
Ligue 1	7	AS Monaco	@asmonaco	3M	13.6K	274	January 2013	France	O,G
Ligue 1	8	Strasbourg	@rcsa	757K	8,962	271	August 2013	France	O,E
Ligue 1	9	Toulouse	@toulousefc	469K	6,139	1,046	August 2012	France	P
Ligue 1	10	Lorient	@fclorient	212K	4,866	258	June 2013	France	O