FOOTBALL
IN THE AGE
OF SOCIAL MEDIA

IS THERE A RELATION BETWEEN FOOTBALL PLAYERS' WORLD CUP AND INSTAGRAM PERFORMANCE?

Prepared by

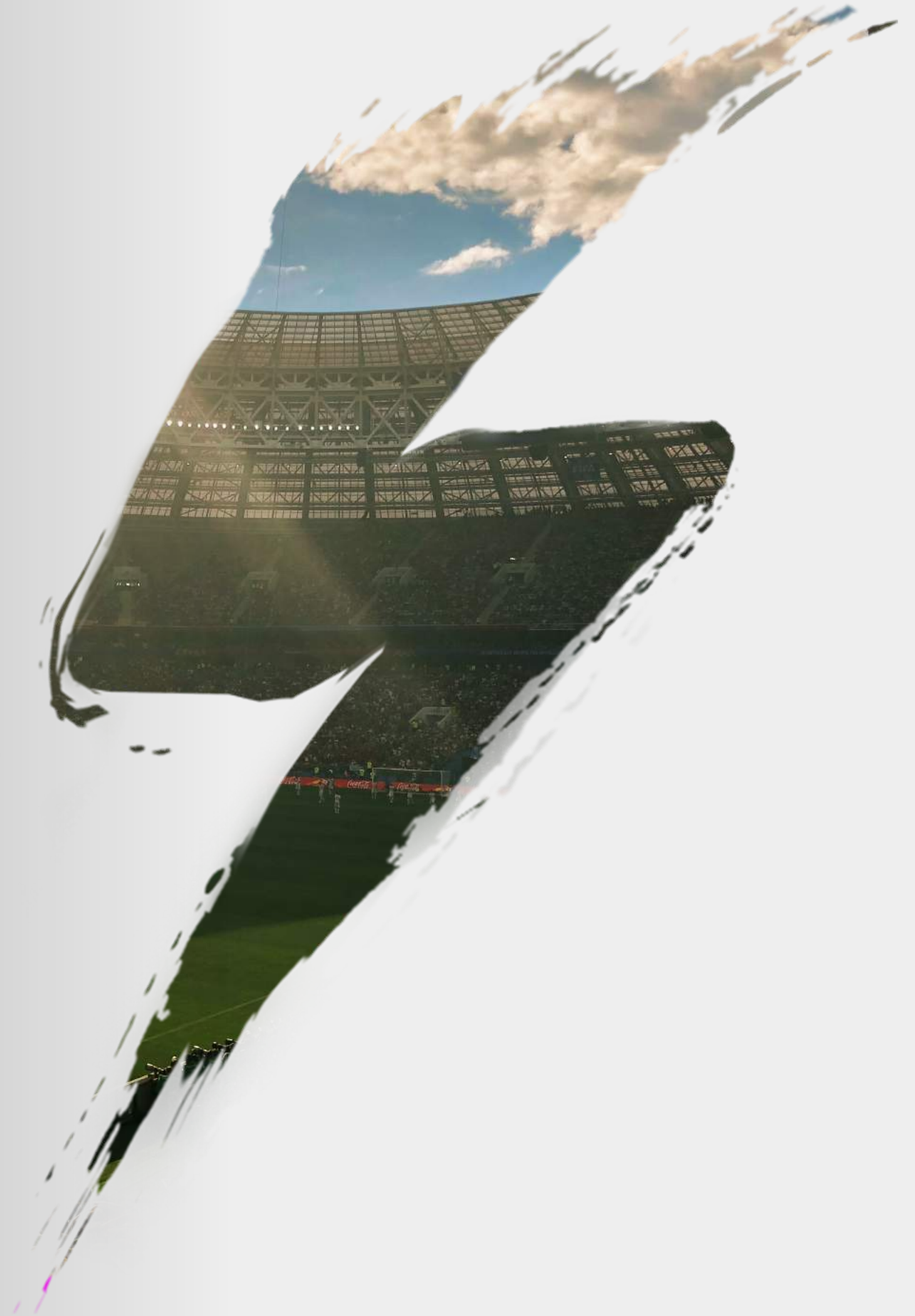**SOCIALLY POWERFUL MEDIA**

September 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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During the 2018 World Cup it was not just the players with the highest initial following whose base grew the most (Ronaldo, Messi and Neymar), but also those linked to an excellent tournament performance (Modric).

To maximise follower growth and post engagement on a given day, players had to upload content at critical emotional turning points (e.g. scandals, injuries, victories), but especially on days suffering critical match losses.

This paper inspects other reasons that may affect player following and engagement (e.g. post rate) finding results inconclusive or with little correlation - the underlying theme connecting top posts and top follower days is the highly emotional response they elicit from their fan bases.

INTRODUCTION

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(I of II)

In 1930, the first Football World Cup was held in Uruguay. Since then, many changes have occurred bringing new excitement every four years - be it new teams, new rules or new technologies. In that sense, the 2018 World Cup in Russia was no different: it was the first held in Eastern Europe, Panama and Iceland joined for the first time, and it was the first to use the video assistant referee (VAR) system. But there are many contextual factors that have changed since the first World Cup in 1930, and perhaps most noticeably is the increasing role played by social media in these tournaments. In 2014, the tragic Brazil-Germany match that ended in a 7-1 defeat for the hosts was tweeted about 35.6 million times, making it the most discussed sporting event in history.

This year, we saw a number of controversies covered by traditional media, but with the explosion of user generated content (UGC), we also witnessed topics that would have gone by fairly unnoticed in the past, transcribed and shared as memes (e.g. Robbie William's middle finger in the opening ceremony, Neymar's dive against Switzerland, etc.).
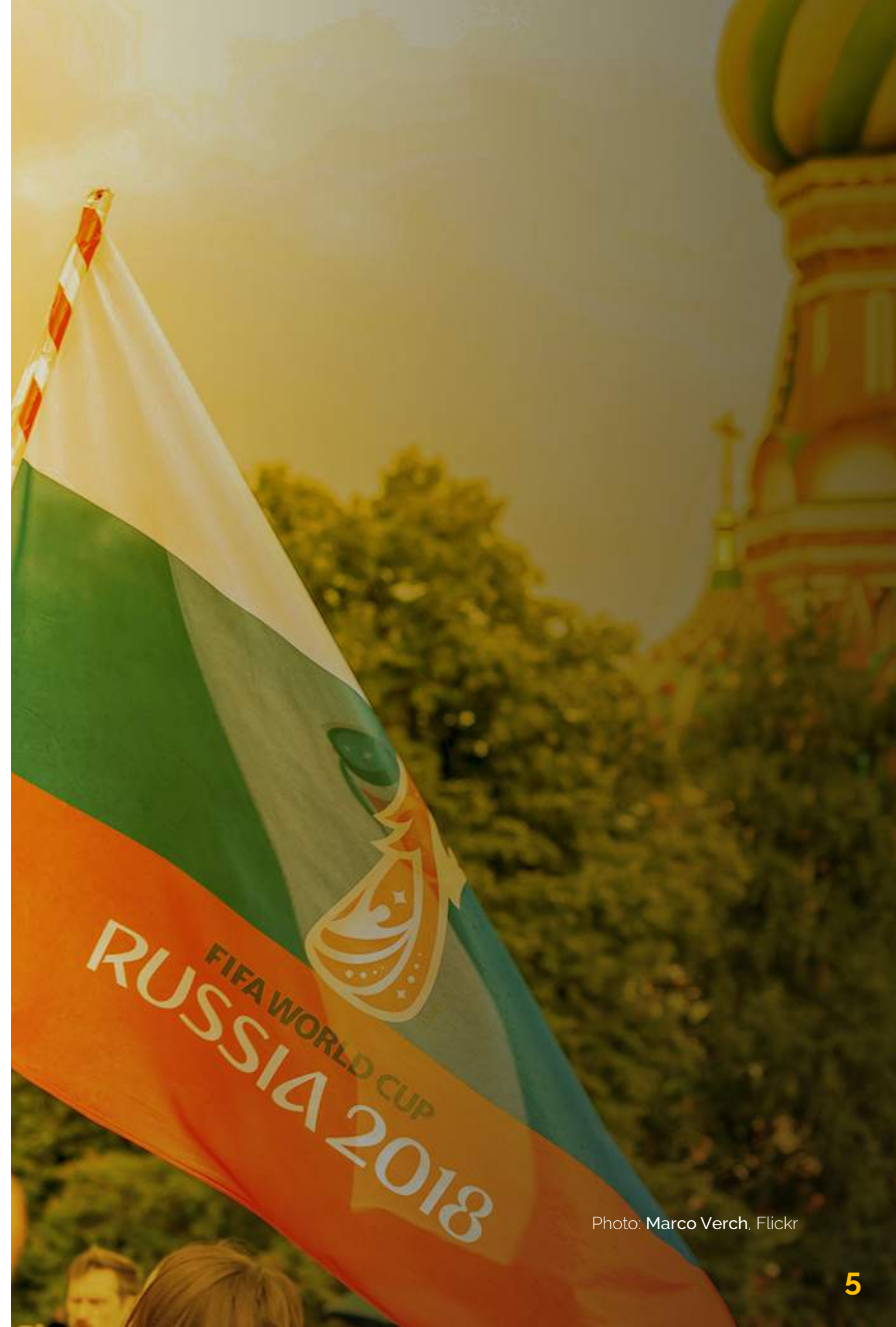
Photo: **Marco Verch**, Flickr

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms, with their ever-expanding reach into our everyday lives, can therefore have significant effects on the performance of players, their brand identity and thus ultimately their careers. This white paper will therefore analyse the 2018 World Cup through the lens of social media.

In particular, it will focus on follower growth and engagement of player's Instagram platforms: does it reflect their performance? What factors influenced high growth/engagement? Does growth stop once teams are eliminated? In so doing, this paper will shed an insight into the dynamic relationship between players' brand identity and the World Cup as an event to boost their influence on Instagram.
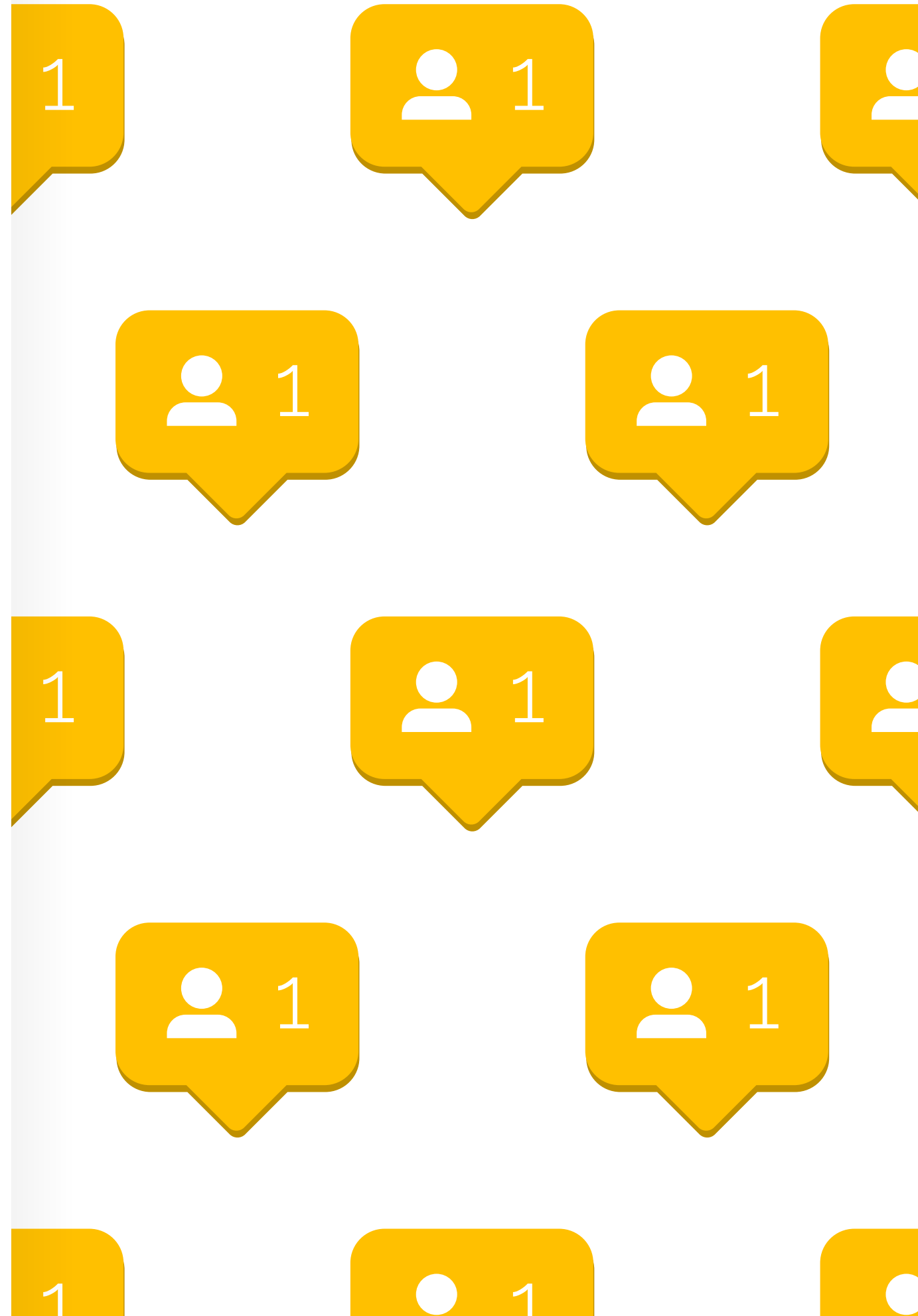
DETAILED ANALYSIS

SAMPLE SPECIFICATION

The sample size consists of 32 players. The star player was chosen from each team based on multiple lists created by the BBC, Daily Mail and Sky Sports (outlined in the table below). Follower data was collected from the 14th of June until the 22nd of July and engagement data consists of content posted during a given team's WC run as well as any WC-related material posted outside that period.

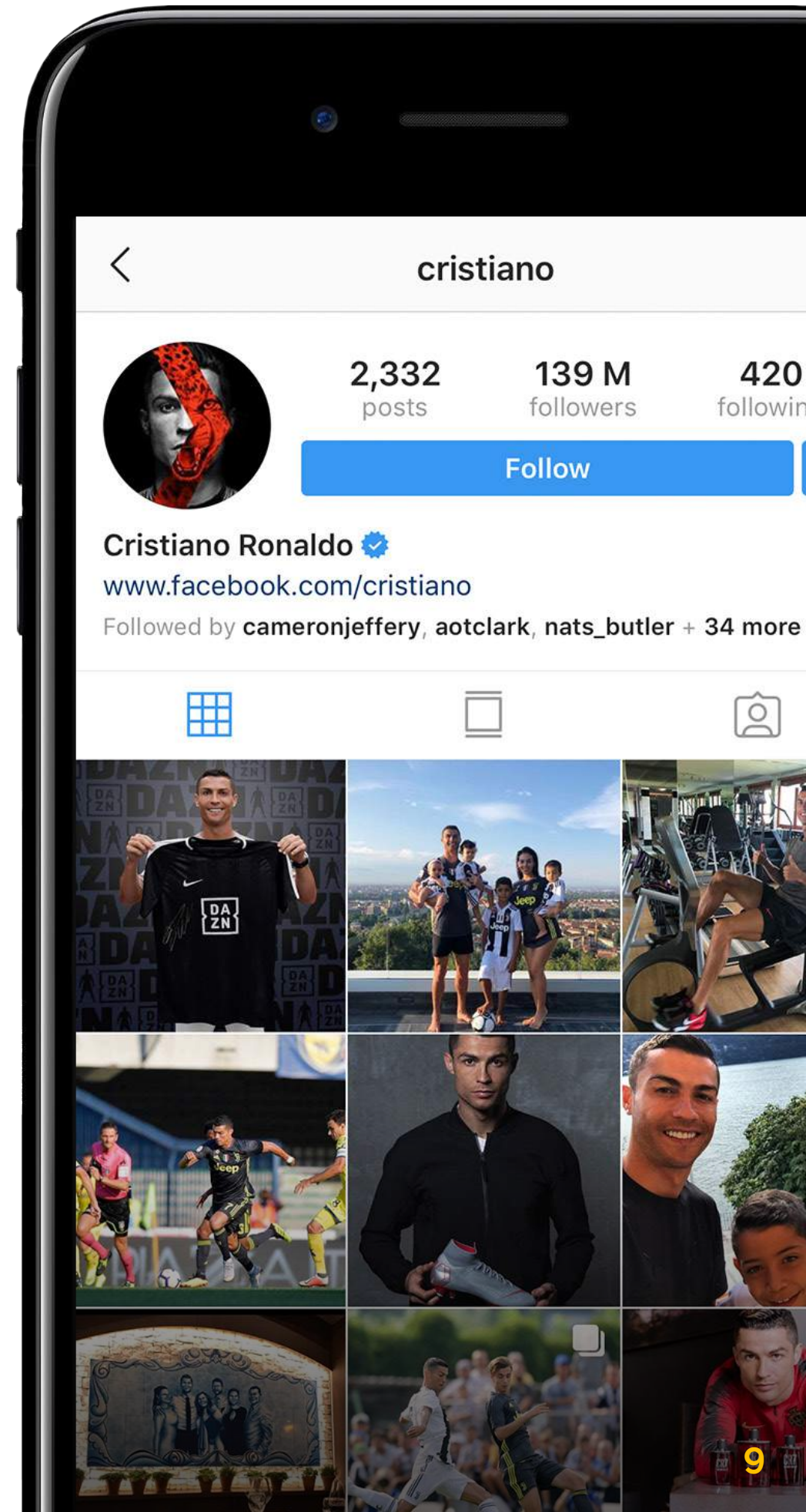| Group	Player	Total Growth during WC period	Average Follower Growth Rate during WC period	Average Engagement Rate during WC period
Argentina	Lionel Messi	3,990,921	0.20%	6.72%
Australia	Tim Cahill	29,145	0.31%	3.84%
Belgium	Hazard	1,887,997	0.38%	3.87%
Brazil	Neymar	5,710,001	0.23%	3.65%
Colombia	James	2,230,006	0.20%	6.74%
Costa Rica	Brian Ruiz	30,691	0.25%	7.32%
Croatia	Luka Modric	2,372,387	0.62%	7.62%
Denmark	Christian Eriksen	133,372	0.37%	9.71%
Egypt	Salah	1,588,607	0.32%	15.01%
England	Harry Kane	1,378,245	0.84%	7.30%
France	Antoine Griezmann	2,874,624	0.48%	9.81%
Germany	Toni Kroos	1,277,950	0.47%	6.88%
Iceland	Gylfi Sigurdsson	50,144	1.23%	14.37%
Iran	Sardar Azmoun	386,452	1.41%	22.88%
Japan	Keisuke Honda	140,094	0.77%	33.42%
Mexico	Javier Hernandez	763,420	0.84%	10.90%
Morocco	Mehdi Benatia	381,135	0.75%	14.26%
Nigeria	Victor Moses	58,034	0.53%	12.69%
Panama	Blas Perez	17,312	0.30%	4.31%
Peru	Jefferson Farfan	150,260	0.36%	9.87%
Poland	Robert Lewandowski	297,895	0.12%	3.50%
Portugal	Ronaldo	7,799,348	0.16%	4.78%
Russia	Denis Cheryshev	484,738	1.80%	14.80%
Saudi Arabia	Salem Al Dawsari	17,235	0.08%	2.20%
Senegal	Sadio Mane	120,938	0.26%	12.40%
Serbia	Sergej Savic	49,286	0.83%	32.40%
South Korea	Heung Son Min	396,957	3.04%	44.81%
Spain	Sergio Ramos	1,449,294	0.18%	3.98%
Sweden	Andreas Granqvist	54,170	6.72%	56.53%
Switzerland	Shaqiri	402,238	1.33%	9.88%
Tunisia	Wahbi Khazri	18,042	1.63%	14.72%
Uruguay	Luis Suarez	1,277,123	0.17%	2.88%

WHICH PLAYER'S FANBASE GREW THE MOST AND WHY?

On the 14th of June, the day before the World Cup started, the largest followings were held by Ronaldo (129,038,278), Neymar (94,556,786), Messi (93,129,387) and James (37,066,082). Considering these are the most popular players on Social Media, one would expect to find them at the top of absolute follower growth over the World Cup (WC) period. However, as can be seen in the table below, Modric increased his fanbase significantly more than James, who did not even place in the top five greatest growths.

Rank	Player	Following at start of WC	Following on last WC day	Growth during WC
1	Ronaldo	128,038,278	132,432,995	4,394,717
2	Neymar	94,556,786	98,642,890	4,086,104
3	Messi	93,139,387	95,739,554	2,600,167
4	Modric	10,972,624	12,495,431	1,522,807
5	James	37,066,082	37,970,796	904,714

cristiano

2,332 posts **139 M** followers **420** followin

Follow

Cristiano Ronaldo ✓
www.facebook.com/cristiano
Followed by cameronjeffery, aotclark, nats_butler + 34 more

9

WHICH PLAYER'S FANBASE GREW THE MOST AND WHY?

This means that Modric's follower growth rate must have been a lot higher, undoubtedly due to Croatia's success in the tournament and his individual performance, which was frequently rewarded with Man of the Match status and ultimately won him Player of the Tournament. During Portugal's WC run, Ronaldo was involved in several news-worthy events namely his tax fraud case and rumours surrounding his transfer to Juventus. Surprisingly, there is no significant deviation from his average follower growth on the days of either of those events, however it is likely that the ongoing conversation of him will have helped in maintaining his average follower growth rate.

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3	Messi	93,139,387	95,739,554	2,600,167
4	Modric	10,972,624	12,495,431	1,522,807
9	James	37,066,082	37,970,796	904,714

The same applies to Neymar, although his new haircut and outrageous dives left a more marked record on his follower growth and the social media sphere more generally. Both events coincided with days of relatively higher follower growth as images/videos of his haircut and dives became memes with people replicating these moments and making fun of him. The viral nature of memes meant his name and face were plastered across the digital sphere, yet it did not affect his engagement which remained average on those and successive days.

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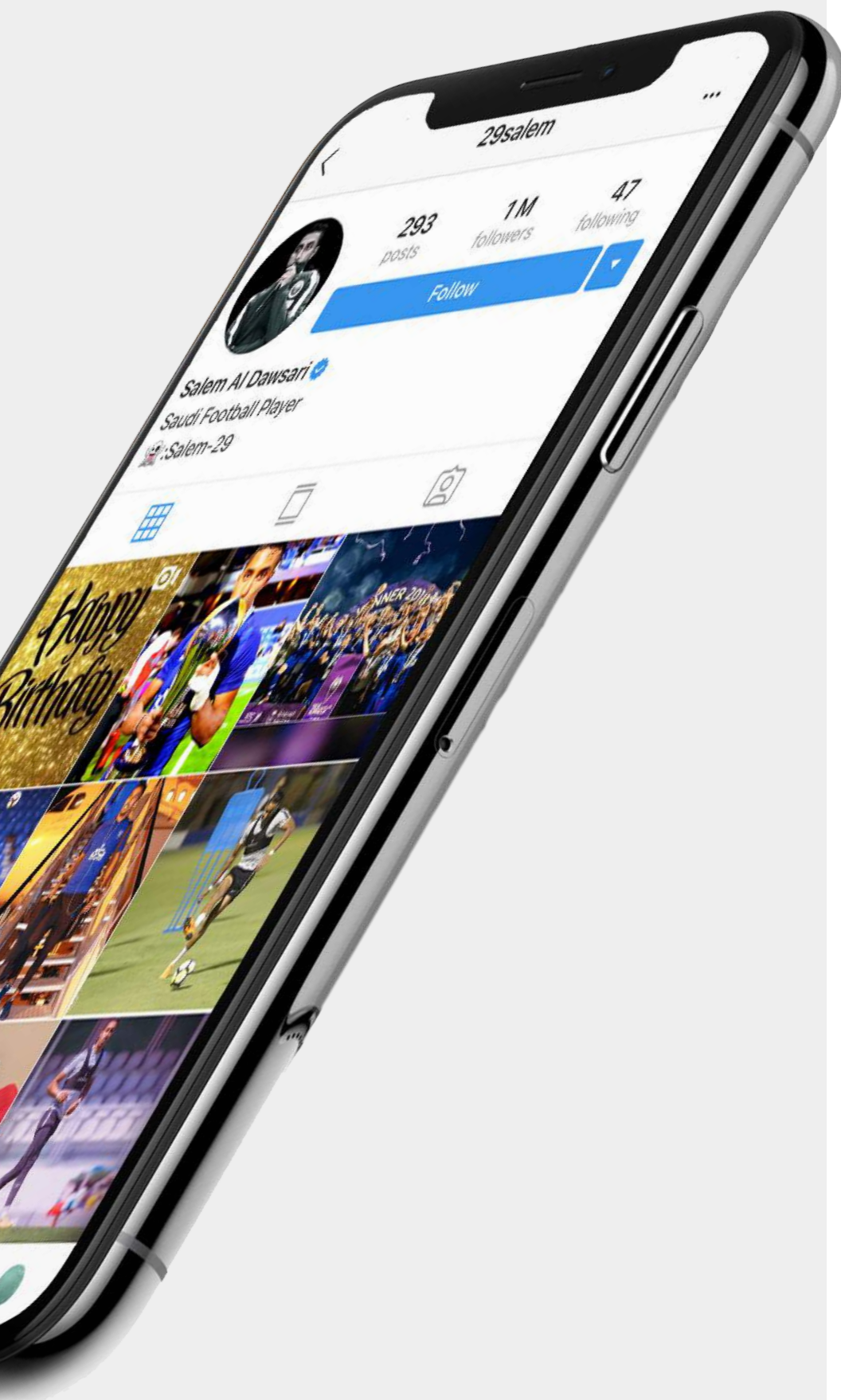
WHICH PLAYER'S FANBASE GREW THE MOST AND WHY?

On the other end of the scale, the four lowest follower growths are shown in the table below.

Rank	Player	Following at start of WC	Following on last WC day	Growth during WC
29	**Wahbi Khazri**	57,144	68,552	11,408
30	**Blas Perez**	207,951	216,007	8,056
31	Brian Ruiz	229,029	234717	5,688
32	Salem Al Dawsari	1,035,383	1,040,195	4,812

Only two of the lowest follower growths during the WC coincided with the four players with the smallest initial followings – Granqvist (18,441), Khazri (57,144), Sigurdsson (160,055), Perez (207,951). The four players above did not have abnormal post rates nor was their engagement usually low.

THE IMPACTS OF TEAM PERFORMANCE

A more telling factor for such low growth appears to be team performance, considering that all four countries were eliminated after the group stages of the tournament. However, an important contextual factor that (also applies to this whole study) cannot be overlooked is the amount of Instagram users there are in each country.

This is accounted for in the diagram below.

TOTAL FOLLOWER GROWTH BY RATIO OF INSTAGRAM USERS WITHIN GIVEN COUNTRY

Y-axis: FOLLOWER GROWTH DURING WC (0, 1m, 2m, 3m, 4m, 5m)

X-axis: PERCENTAGE OF INSTAGRAM USERS WITHIN POPULATION (%) (0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50)
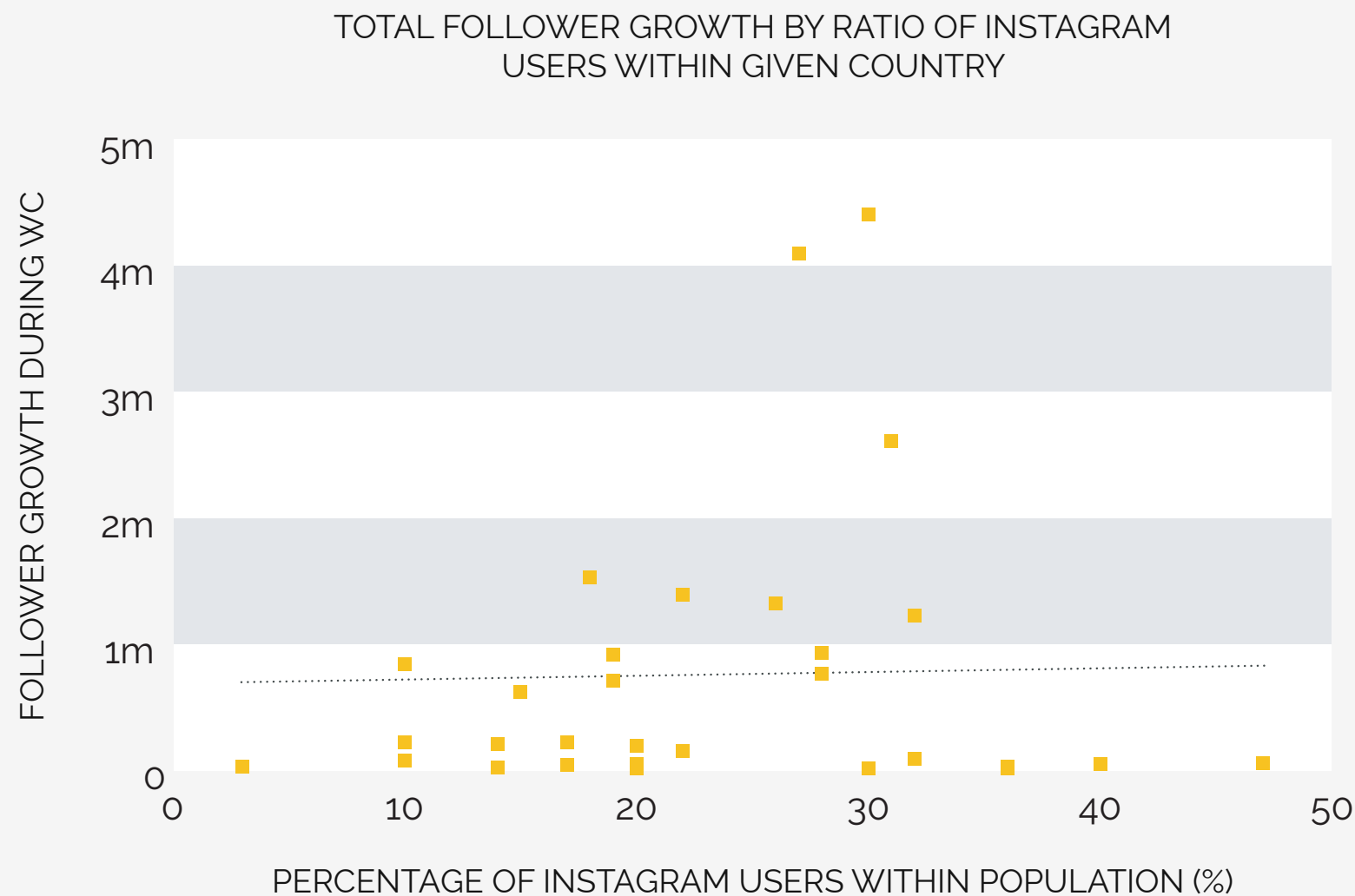
As can be seen, there is no significant correlation between WC follower growth and the ratio of Instagram users there are in each country. Interestingly, Modric's growth in followers surpasses the amount of active Croatian Instagram accounts, which means his World Cup performance was well-received internationally.

Nonetheless, other factors must be affecting whether players are achieving high growth on certain days and this is explored in the following section.

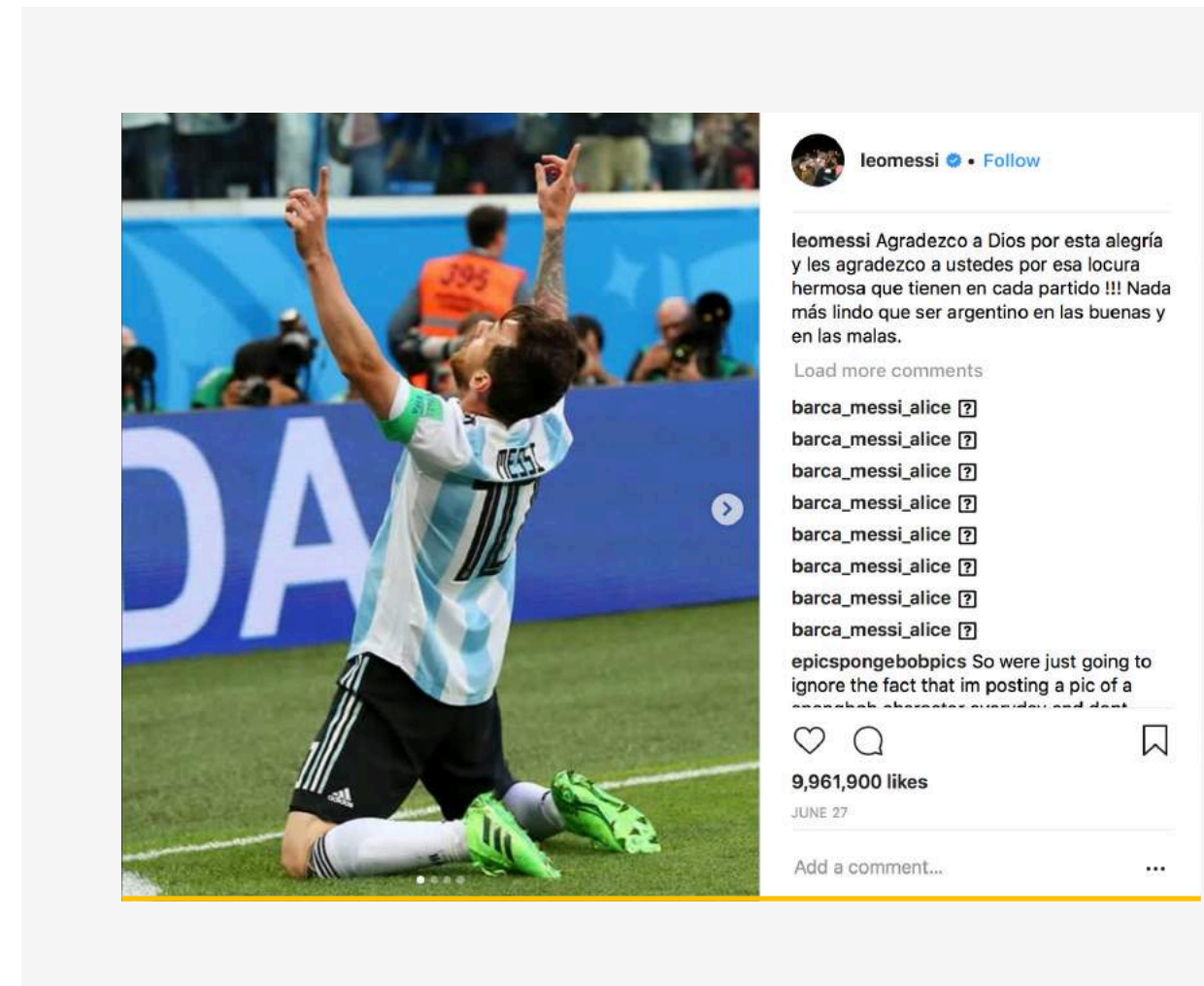# MOST COMMON FACTORS COINCIDING WITH DAYS OF TOP GROWTH

As is shown on the diagram, days of top growth tended to coincide with match days. However, the outcome of those matches did not have a significant effect, as both wins and losses were rewarded with high growth regardless - neither does it matter if a player scores. The second most important factor affecting top growth is whether a player posts or not. With half the top growth days coinciding with most engaged posts and two other top growth days coinciding with rallying posts, it seems that players must post to break follower growth rate records.

On the other hand, more traditional media outlets and news-worthy stories seem to have little effect on increasing players' followings as only five top growth days were related to highly-reported issues. Five of the top growth days fell on days in which players were affected by scandals. For example, when Neymar's dive against Mexico hit social media, it quickly became reposted as a meme, mocking the player's exaggerated actions. The scandal even became a challenge where people would mimic the player's action in the most absurd of situations. Essentially this meant Neymar's name was shared widely on social media, causing people who do not even follow football or the WC to become aware of the player's name and his actions, resulting in increased following.

MOST COMMON REASONS FOR TOP FOLLOWER GROWTH

Category	Value
Day of a Rallying post	2
News/Scandal related	5
Man of the match	6
Last match played	7
Goal	12
Match win	12
Match loss	13
Day of most engaged post	16
On match day	25
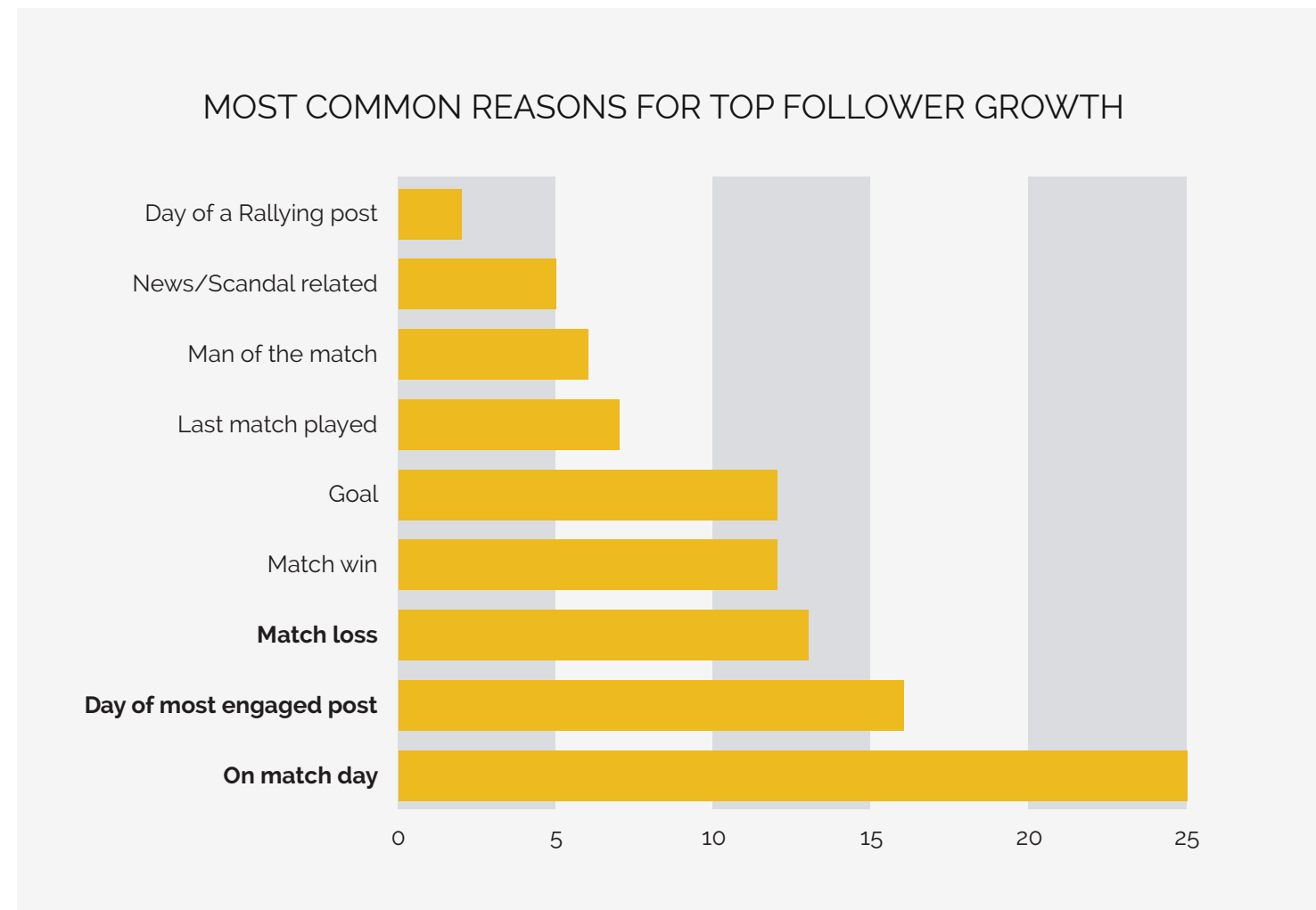
THE MOST ENGAGED PIECES OF CONTENT DURING THE 2018 WORLD CUP

Unsurprisingly the most engaged pieces of content in absolute terms came from the players with the highest following: Ronaldo, Neymar, Messi and James (from largest to smallest total engagement). Ronaldo's post came after Portugal's first match draw with Spain, in which he scored a hattrick and won man of the match and which was seen in some eyes as a redeeming performance on the backdrop of his tax fraud scandal – whether the latter was an influencing factor is hard to tell. Messi's carousel post came after Argentina's only win against Nigeria in which he scored a beautiful goal and also won man of the match. At this point in time Argentina were unlikely to qualify and Messi had been met with criticism about his WC performance often being compared to Ronaldo who was seen as a saviour for the Portuguese team. This win, performance, and post therefore came at a critical time.

THE MOST ENGAGED PIECES OF CONTENT DURING THE 2018 WORLD CUP

neymarjr ✔ • Follow

neymarjr Nem todos sabem o que passei pra chegar até aqui, falar até papagaio fala, agora fazer ... poucos fazem!! O choro é de alegria, de superação, de garra e vontade de vencer.
Na minha vida as coisas nunca foram fáceis, não seria agora né !!! O sonho continua, sonho não ... OBJETIVO !
Parabéns pela partida rapaziada, vocês são FODA.
.
.
@nogueirafoto
Load more comments

guilhermechequer_ VAMOOO
falcao12oficial É isso craque!! Carregar uma pressão dessa nas costas, só pra quem é grande !! E você é...

7,781,274 likes
JUNE 22

Add a comment...

Neymar's most engaged post came after the last-minute defeat against Costa Rica in which he scored a goal, but also got booked with a yellow card for his constant diving. At the end of the match he was seen sat on the pitch crying while covering his face with his hands. Similarly, James' most engaged post came after the tragic defeat against England in which he was also seen crying on the bench. The underlining factor connecting these four posts seems to be the high emotional intensity placed on the matches preceding them. Players who wish to maximise their engagement must make sure to strategically post at critical times where they are seen to display an outburst of emotions that is then shared by the fans. However, does this hold true for the most relatively engaged posts?

jamesrodriguez10 ✔ • Follow

jamesrodriguez10
Load more comments

tommyboyspriv We rule u lads
brenoseleguim Vcs fizerao o melhores jogos melhor que o Brasil vc estão de parabéns viu
randomspamsxox @tommyboyspriv you lost to the same team twice in the same tournament massive L
anasophialimada Fuerza

5,125,860 likes
JULY 3

Add a comment...

15

THE TOP RELATIVELY ENGAGED PIECES OF CONTENT

Unlike the above, the four most proportionally engaged pieces of content (i.e. highest engagement in relation to following) do not come from all the players who experienced the highest spikes in follower growth on a given day. The post with the highest engagement rate came from Granqvist with a staggering 74% the same day Sweden suffered their first loss against Germany.

Conversely, this is not Granqvist's most engaged post in absolute terms as his following grew so quickly that by the end of tournament his posts were receiving around 40,000 engagements. The second highest engagement rate during the tournament was achieved by Son's only WC post after the win against Germany in which he scored the goal that knocked his opponents out of the tournament. Similarly, Savic only posted twice during the tournament and his second/last post achieved a 34% engagement rate after Serbia won their first match against Costa Rica – a symbolic defeat due to the political significance attached to the match by Serbia's Foreign Affairs minister. In a similar vein however, Honda also only posted once achieving a 33% engagement rate after Japan's draw against Senegal. However, this high engagement is also likely to be due to it being an official FIFA page repost commemorating Honda being Japan's first player to score in three World Cups.

While in the above section the critical nature of the match preceding the post was the connecting thread, here this is less prevalent. Instead, top engagement is more likely to be achieved on low post counts with smaller number of followers.

HOW DOES PERFORMANCE REFLECT ENGAGEMENT?

The diagram above shows the players' engagement from the top four performing teams throughout the tournament: France, Croatia, Belgium and England. Generally, what can be seen is high engagement at the beginning of the tournament, a lull in the middle and then a continuous rise as the tournament came to an end - Griezmann's and Modric's engagement rate trends particularly reflect this. This is expected because as teams progress further, more people start following and watching the matches which in turn means a larger more engaged audience. Kane's engagement throughout comes in spikes linked to match days with posts uploaded on said days performing much better than those pre-/succeeding them. Yet his engagement performs remarkably low considering he has the smallest following out of the four. Hazard on the other hand is marked by low engagement averaging 3.87% throughout the tournament. This is likely to be due to the high number of sponsored posts that were uploaded to his account during this period. So, while a team's positive performance generally boosts players' engagement, what other reasons affect the engagement of individual posts?

ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT THE WORLD CUP

14 June 2018   15 July 2018

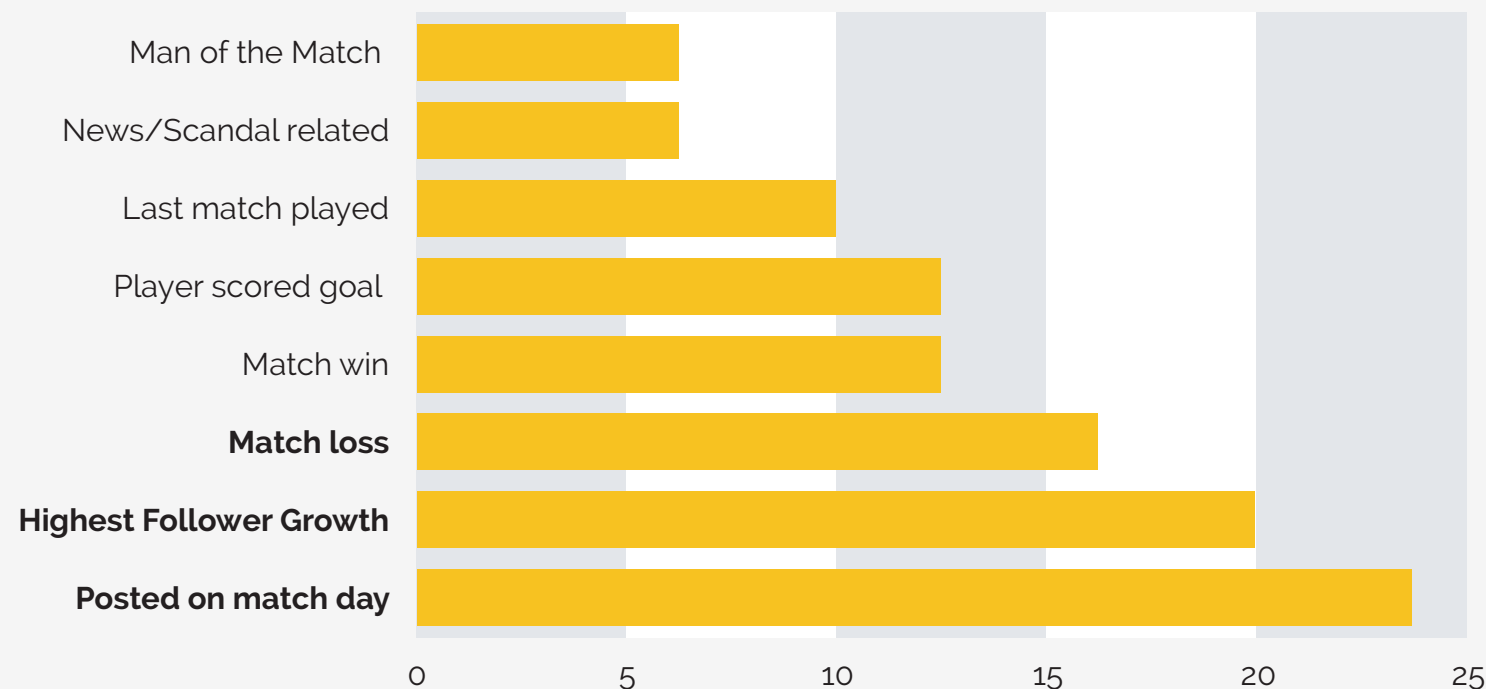■ Hazard   ■ Modric   ■ Kane   ■ Griezman
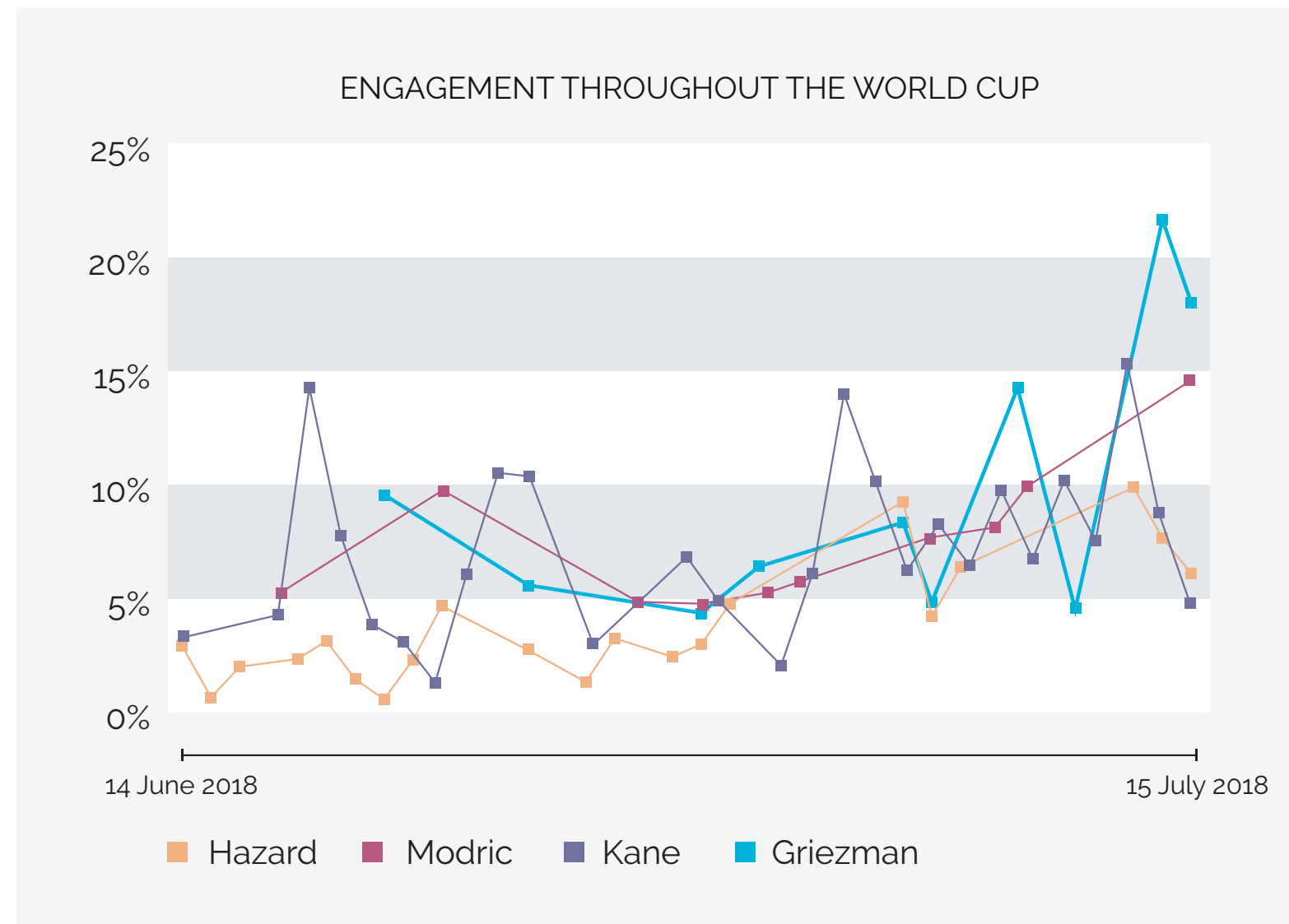
REASONS FOR TOP ENGAGED POSTS

Similar to the reasons affecting top growth and with 19 of the most engaged posts falling within this category, the most common factor affecting player's engagement is whether they post on a match day or not. Equally, top posts coincide with days of top growth. However, unlike days of top growth, if a post is uploaded following a match defeat it is 33% more likely to achieve top engagement than if it is posted after a victory.

granqvistandreas • Follow

granqvistandreas Tyngsta förlusten i hela min karriär men otroligt stolt över alla grabbar i laget. Vi krigar o kämpar för varandra till 100%
Tack för allt stöd nu tar vi Mexico #viärsverige @swemnt

Load more comments

casperwaller @viktornysch gay
johangustavsson1 @jesperlosdal en röding på 3-0 döh...

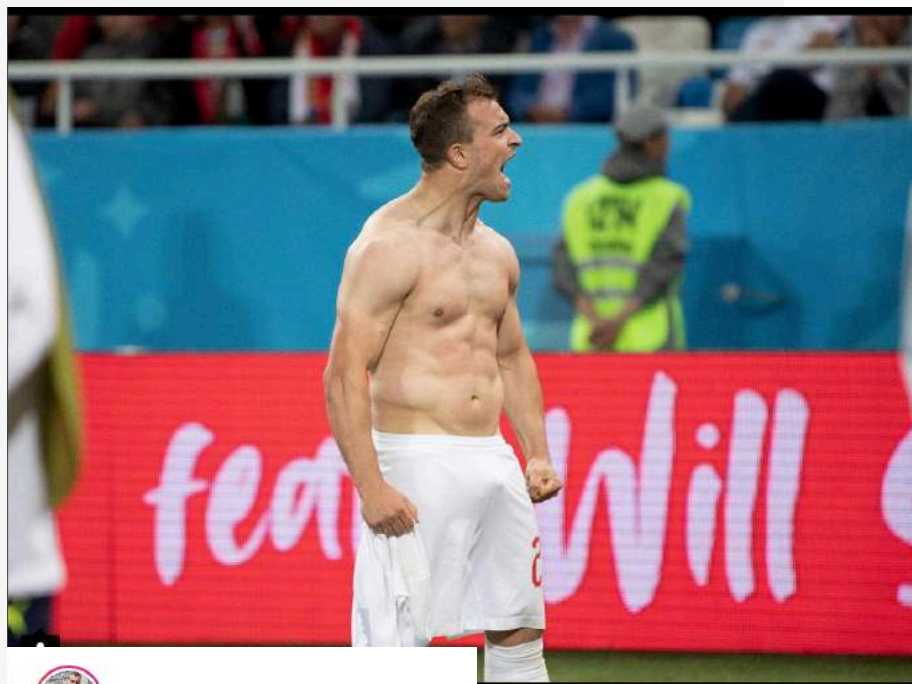17,791 likes
JUNE 23

Add a comment...

MOST COMMON FACTORS AFFECTING TOP ENGAGED POST

Furthermore, players are more likely to receive top engagement on a post upon being rewarded with man of the match than they are to receive top follower growth, which indicates that performance affects engagement more than it does following. It is useful to inspect the post that achieved the highest engagement in relation to a player's average engagement rate to gain a more detailed insight into the myriad factors that may boost engagement.

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HIGHEST DEVIATION FROM AVERAGE ENGAGEMENT RATE

shaqirixherdan ✔ • Follow

shaqirixherdan Great victory tonight! well done boys! 🔲🔲🔲🔲🔲🔲🔲🔲🔲 #elhamdulillah#XS23

Load more comments

atdhe.bordoniqi @ruzzz09 🔲🔲🔲🔲🔲 🔲🔲🔲

twistamatthewss @_zhasofia Looooool

huseyin.ofical3322 Gt

huseyin.ofical3322 Gt

305,161 likes

JUNE 22

Add a comment...

To the left is Shaqiri's most engaged post, drawing in an impressive 29.61% of his followers on Instagram. Throughout the tournament he averaged 9.88% engagement, which means this post alone engaged 299.56% more people, i.e. three times more people. This picture was posted on the 22nd of June after Switzerland's victory against Serbia in which he scored a goal and was awarded the man of the match. However, the match held a much wider significance for both Serbia and three particular Swiss players – Shaqiri, Xhaka and Behrami.
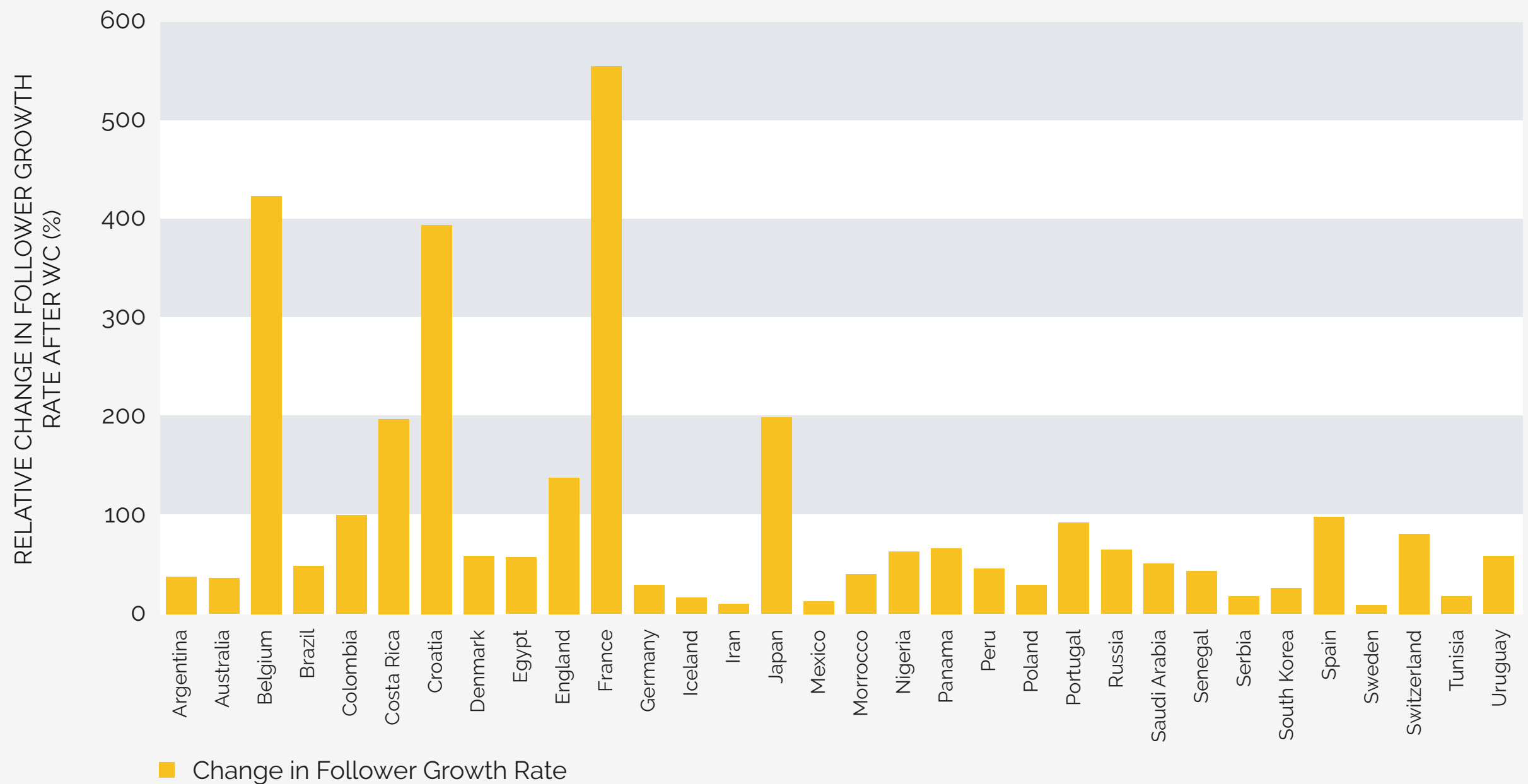
Named as one of the most politicised matches of this year's tournament, the three Swiss Kosovar players were continuously booed by Serbian and Russian fans and met with nationalist chants that claim Kosovo as part of Serbia. The secession of Kosovo is one of the most painful issues in Serbian domestic politics and a handful of comments were made about the upcoming match both by players and politicians alike. Shaqiri, son of an Albanian-Kosovar refugee, wears both the Swiss and Kosovar flags on his boots and decided to celebrate his last-minute match-winning goal by ripping off his shirt and forming the Albanian eagle with his hands in a symbolic defeat against Serbian nationalism (Xhaka also celebrated his goal with the eagle).

This was no doubt a highly emotional moment for the players, as well as Kosovars and Serbians globally, so the high engagement (which includes negative engagement) is understandable and not exclusively linked to his performance. A more accurate way of assessing the relation between performance and a player's individual brand and influence is to compare follower growth during and after the tournament.
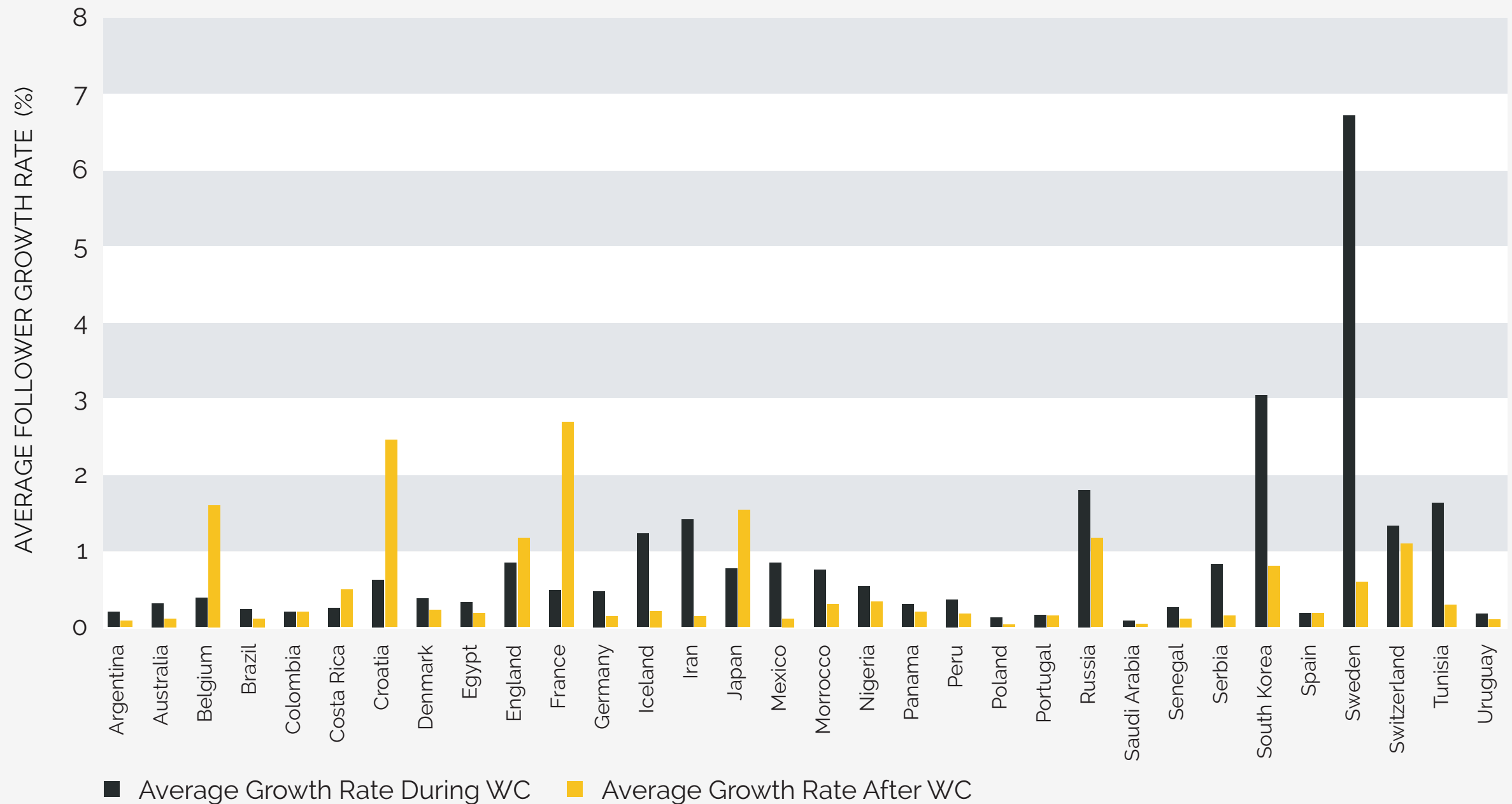
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DOES GROWTH STOP WHEN TEAMS ARE ELIMINATED?

AVERAGE FOLLOWER GROWTH RATE (%)

■ Average Growth Rate During WC   ■ Average Growth Rate After WC

DOES GROWTH STOP WHEN TEAMS ARE ELIMINATED?

RELATIVE CHANGE IN FOLLOWER GROWTH RATE AFTER WC (%)

Countries (x-axis): Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Denmark, Egypt, England, France, Germany, Iceland, Iran, Japan, Mexico, Morrocco, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tunisia, Uruguay

■ Change in Follower Growth Rate

DOES GROWTH STOP WHEN TEAMS ARE ELIMINATED?

Average Follower Growth Rate is the average of the proportion a player's following increased on a given day in relation to the day before. As can be seen from the two diagrams, on average, follower growth is significantly higher during the World Cup than it is after, with the star players from Sweden, South Korea and Iran seeing the most drastic changes. On the second diagram this can be seen more clearly, where the closer a value is to zero the higher the follower growth rate was during the World Cup in relation to after.

Azmoun (Iran) experiences particularly drastic changes in growth rate. However, after playing the full 90 minutes of all three matches poorly and without any goals, Azmoun did not live up to expectations. For this he suffered major backlash from fans whose insults, he claimed, made his mother ill and ultimately caused him to retire early from international football. This move only exacerbated the growing resentment from his fan base resulting in the only sustained negative follower growth (loss of followers) during the WC period.

DOES GROWTH STOP WHEN TEAMS ARE ELIMINATED?

On the other hand, players from Colombia, Spain and Portugal hardly see any changes in follower growth during the World Cup, which is likely to be due to such players already having a large pre-existing following and brand name. In other words, they already are relatively famous compared to Sweden's or Iran's players and so their following continues to increase steadily even after the World Cup ends. On the second diagram this can be seen by the values that are closest to 100%. An exception to this trend is Argentina's Messi, who despite having an already large following, had a significantly higher growth rate during the WC.

The six surprising values come from the star players of Belgium, Costa Rica, Croatia, England, France and Japan as their following seems to have grown more rapidly after the World Cup. This is expected from Belgium, Croatia, England and France as they were in the tournament for the longest and their 'After the WC' data is limited to two days after the tournament where players commonly still experience high growth. Costa Rica's Bryan Ruiz experienced relatively high growth from the 8th to the 11th of July which coincides with the press release announcing his move to Brazilian club Santos. Similarly, Japan's Honda experienced high follower growth from the 2nd to the 7th of July after it was announced he was retiring from international football. Both these players' follower growth was significantly higher during these periods than it was during the World Cup which suggests that while the WC may cause slightly above average follower growth, if a national team does not perform particularly well this growth can be out shadowed by other more player specific events such as signings.

HOW DOES POST RATE AFFECT ENGAGEMENT AND FOLLOWER GROWTH DURING THE WORLD CUP?


AVERAGE FOLLOWER GROWTH RATE BY POST RATE (%)
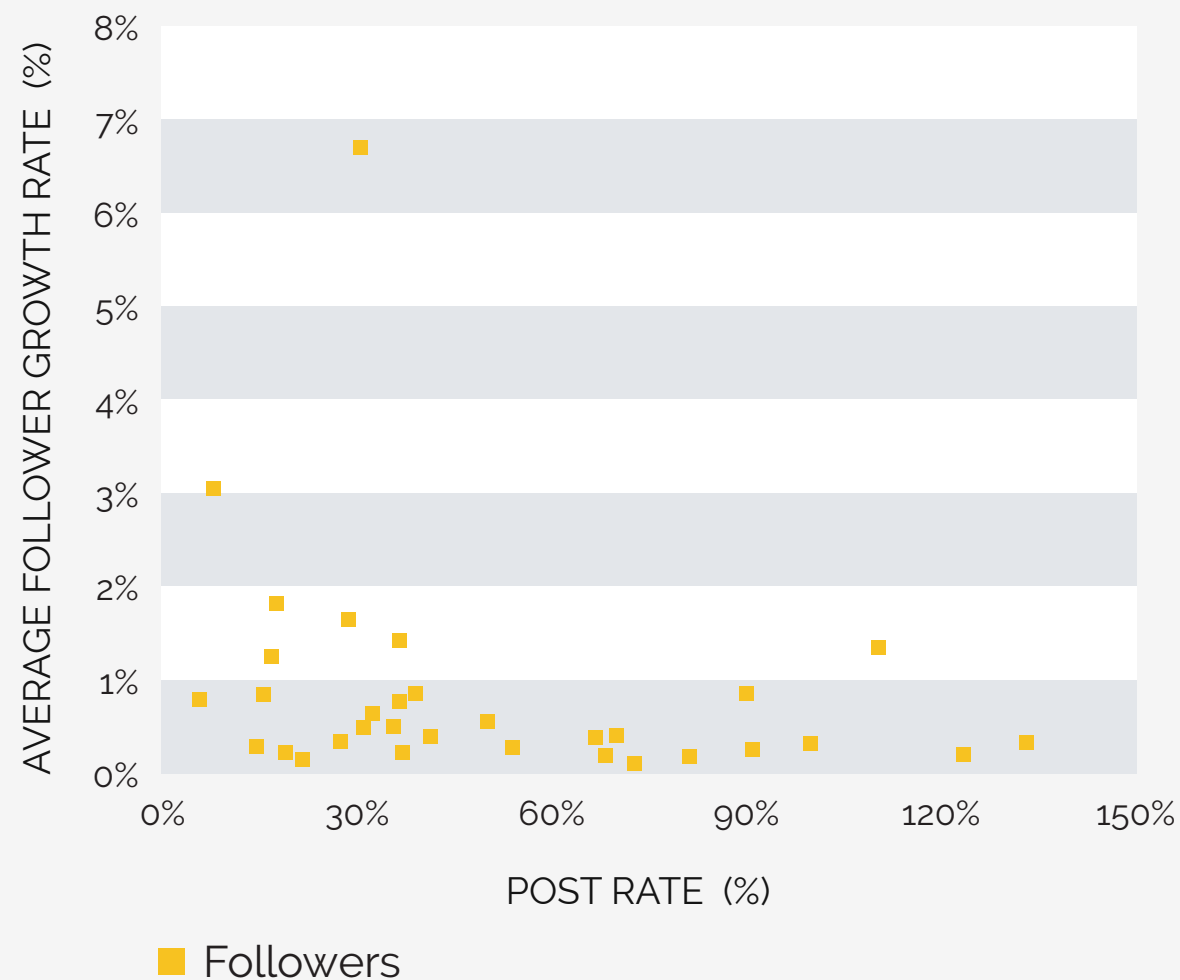
AVERAGE ENGAGEMENT RATE BY POST RATE (%)
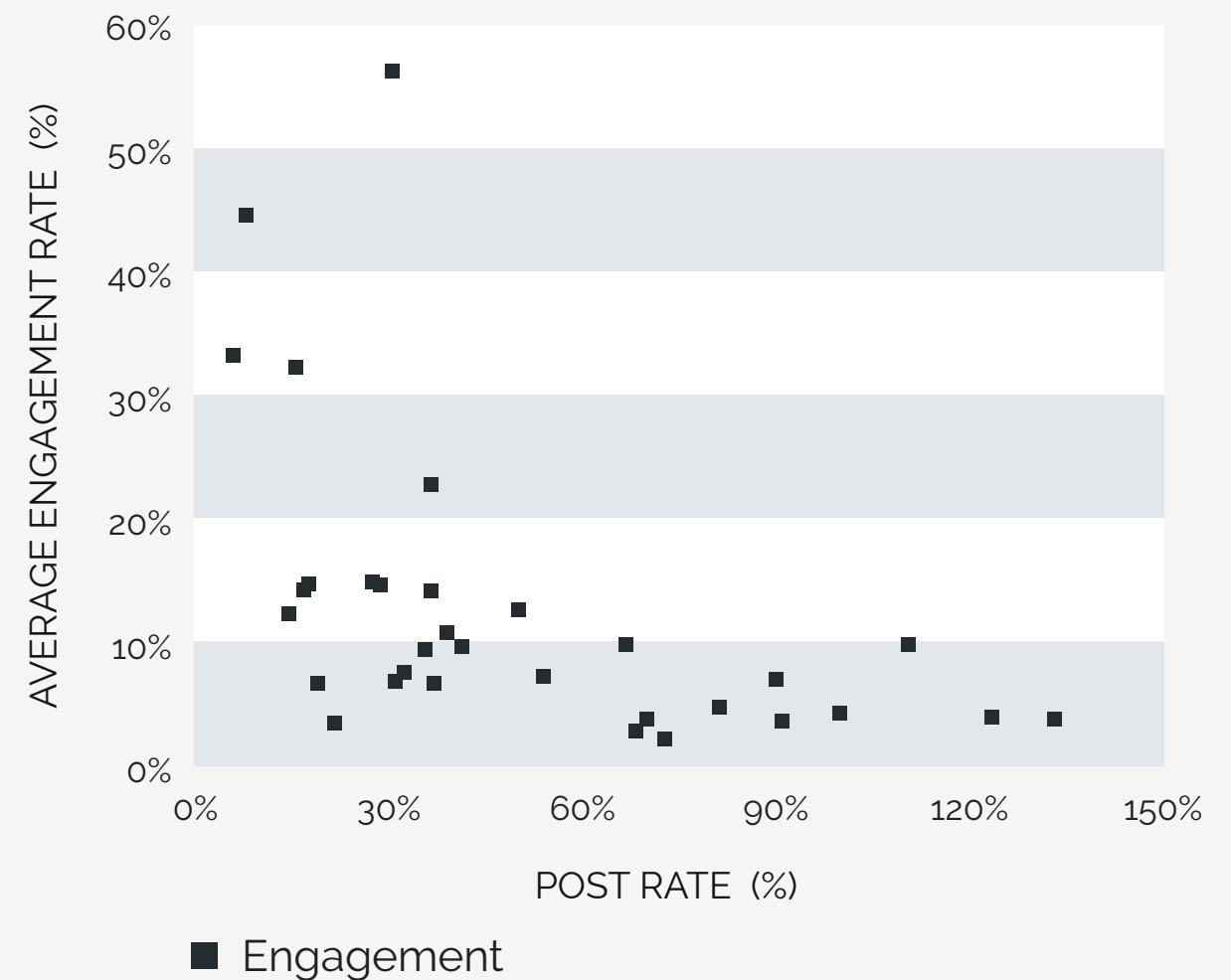
HOW DOES POST RATE AFFECT ENGAGEMENT AND FOLLOWER GROWTH DURING THE WORLD CUP?

As can be seen from the first diagram there is no significant correlation between follower growth rate and post rate. This means that, contrary to what may be expected, if a player posts regularly during the WC it does not mean they are more likely to increase their following. This is particularly noteworthy, as usually, influencers need to post regularly to social to maintain a steady follower increase. While posting too regularly can also have negative effects on following, if that were the case during the WC, one would expect to see a middle ground in the chart which is also lacking.

Much the same can be said about the relation between post rate and engagement. While it may seem that a lower post rate yields higher engagement, the correlation is statistically insignificant. The majority of players uploaded posts between 18%-40% of the World Cup days with varying degrees of engagement, which means that both engagement and follower growth remained unaffected by a player's post rate during the World Cup.
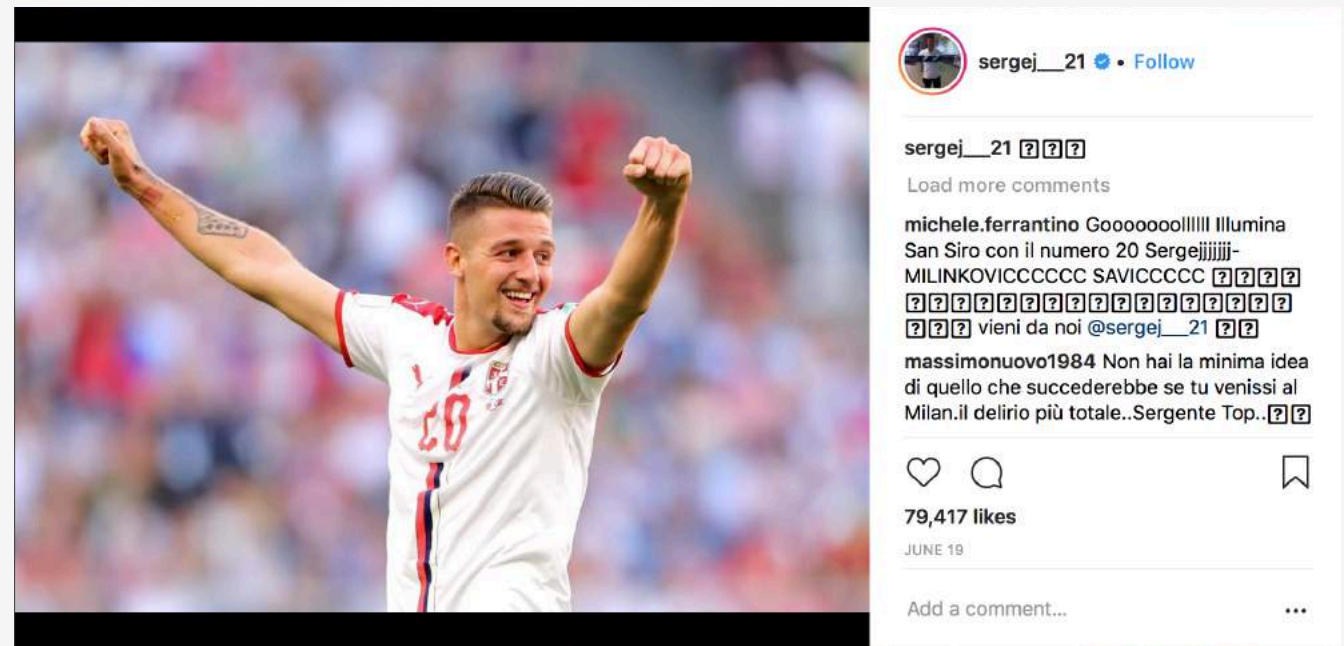
CONCLUSION

To conclude, the World Cup adds a curious dynamic to the way influencers can maximise their social media following and engagement. The 2018 World Cup saw the fanbase of some of the largest Instagram accounts – Ronaldo, Messi, Neymar and Modric – grow the most in absolute terms, while the highest relative follower growth was achieved by a mixture of the smallest accounts and World Cup team surprises, namely Granqvist, Son, Cheryshev and Khazri. Similarly, the most engaged pieces of content in absolute terms came from the four largest accounts (Ronaldo, Neymar, Messi and James), while the highest relatively engaged piece of content came from the player with the smallest following (Granqvist). The posts of the former four were uploaded at critical emotional turning points while the relatively engaged posts commemorated and celebrated players' performance on a given match.

The most common reasons fuelling high follower growth days and most engaged posts across the board were similar, with the top reason being whether it was (posted on) a match day. With regards to follower growth the outcome of a match was irrelevant with 'Match wins' and 'Match losses' affecting equal amounts of posts. On the other hand, with regards to engagement, players are 33% more likely to achieve top engagement if a post is uploaded upon being defeated. This is down to such posts being accompanied by more emotional captions causing an eruption of support by fans. This outpour of fan sympathy and support coupled with an excellent performance also enabled Shaqiri to achieve the biggest relative spike in engagement with his post celebrating Switzerland's victory against Serbia, in which he was met with hostility by Serbian and Russian fans due to the political significance attached to the match.

This paper inspected other reasons that may affect player following and engagement (e.g. post rate,) finding results inconclusive or with little correlation. The underlying theme connecting top posts and top follower days is the highly emotional response they elicit from their fan bases, whether it be a team's last match, a player's exceptional performance or a crucial fixture – important is that an audience feels the need to rally behind a player and show support.

ABOUT SOCIALLY POWERFUL

Socially Powerful Media, founded in September 2016, is a performance improvement social agency who uses data-driven insight to maximise campaign-spend and uplift results against past campaigns. Socially Powerful aims to deliver more than just standard KPI's and has a track record generating growth and results by bringing to life the brand experience across social media platforms.

Socially Powerful plans to conduct further research across multiple industries to create a more representative picture of what social media success looks like, and how brands can utilise best-practice to impact their social media strategy positively.

Enquiries about using the SP Index to analyse specific brands, industries and competitors can be directed to:

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