

Interaction Hegemony in Soccer Diplomacy: Social Media Communication Strategies of Four AFC Champions League Two Clubs

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Keywords:

Digital Communication; Football;
Social Media; Fan Engagement;
Dialogical Communication

Abstract

This research analyzes the social media communication strategies of four Southeast Asian football clubs in the AFC Champions League Two Group G competition, namely Persib Bandung (Indonesia), Selangor FC (Malaysia), True Bangkok United (Thailand), and Lion City Sailors (Singapore). The study used a content analysis method on 1,349 uploads during the period of November 27-December 10, 2025. The results of the study found "97% Anomaly", which is a condition when Persib Bandung controls 97.64% of the group's total digital interactions. The findings show that digital interaction is not linearly correlated with the number of followers, but rather is the result of systemic management of four pillars, namely corporate identity alignment, dialogical relational structure, integrated content balance, and cross-platform coordination. Dialogical-participatory communication was shown to produce a 526-fold higher engagement multiplier than the monological-institutional pattern. In addition, video formats were found to be 70% more effective at triggering audience engagement than static images. Strategic positioning analysis shows that the effectiveness of digital communication is determined more by the quality of the strategy than the scale of the audience. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on sports communication in Southeast Asia. In practical terms, these findings offer a strategic design for professional football clubs to build relational, adaptive and sustainable social media communications.

INTRODUCTION

Modern football has undergone a fundamental transformation, from a mere 90-minute match to a digital content ecosystem that demands the sustainable management of sports organizations (Paul et al., 2024). According to Widjanarko (2020), this transformation reflects a shift towards the era of cyberspace, when digital communication technology not only mediates interactions, but also forms a symbolic power structure between institutions and their public. In this context, the social media activities of football clubs have evolved into instruments of modern public diplomacy. As stated by Dubinsky (2023), digital interaction on social media platforms serves as a form of persuasive attraction to build and maintain a global image and influence. As a result, football clubs no longer only function as sporting entities, but have also transformed into professional media producers that are required to adopt scalable digital communication strategies (Parganas et al., 2017; Sherwood et al., 2017; Tickell et al., 2024).

The AFC Champions League Two 2025-2026 season Group G provides a relevant realm to study these dynamics. This group brings together four clubs with diverse institutional characteristics, namely Persib Bandung (Indonesia), Selangor FC (Malaysia), True Bangkok United (Thailand), and Lion City Sailors (Singapore). The observation period of 14 days, namely November 27-December 10, 2025, was used to capture communication dynamics

throughout one competition cycle. Preliminary findings show that Persib controls 97.64% of the group's total digital interactions, while the other three clubs only account for 2.61% collectively. This disparity indicates that the dominance of digital interaction cannot be explained solely by the size of the follower base, but is closely related to the implementation of planned, measurable, and integrated communication strategies (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Men et al., 2018; Ologunbe & Taiwo, 2025).

However, empirical studies on the digital communication practices of football clubs in the Southeast Asian region are still relatively limited (Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2019; Quyet & Minh, 2025). Most previous research has focused on European and North American countries, while the dynamics of digital communication in Southeast Asia have not received commensurate academic attention. In fact, professional sports organizations are now required to adopt a holistic view of digital strategic management (Naraine & Wanless, 2023). Brand management on social media no longer depends on quantity, but rather on the quality and consistency of the strategies implemented (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2015).

Recent research by Anagnostopoulos et al. (2024) found that content quality is significantly more powerful in driving engagement than the frequency of uploads. In Southeast Asia, brand communication strategies on sports social media can build significant brand awareness (Najwandari, Ichsan, & Dewi, 2025), while consistently maintained emotional connectedness is key to the sustainability of fan engagement (Oparaugo, 2025). Departing from the literature gap, this study proposes the perspective that the dominance of digital interaction is the result of integrated alignment between corporate identity, relational communication patterns, content strategies and formats, and cross-platform management distribution (Umoren et al., 2022; Zhou & Jia, 2026).

This study reveals a new phenomenon of "97% Anomaly" as a form of hegemony of digital interaction in sports communication in Southeast Asia. Different from the previous partial study, this study integrates the four pillars of simultaneous digital communication of corporate identity, dialogical relational patterns, content balance, and cross-platform coordination and proves that the dominance of digital interaction is determined by the quality of systemic integration of the four pillars, not by the number of followers or the frequency of uploads.

The research questions that are the focus of this study are: (1) how is the brand identity of football clubs represented in daily communication practices on social media? and (2) how does the content format strategy affect audience engagement rates? Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the social media communication of the four AFC Champions League Two Group G clubs through the dimensions of content, relational, identity, and cross-platform integration. This study is expected to provide an implementation model for football clubs in designing effective and sustainable digital communication strategies.

METHOD

This research used a descriptive qualitative research approach with a content analysis method. The research type is exploratory-descriptive, which aims to describe in depth the social media communication strategies of four Southeast Asian football clubs without manipulating variables. The objects of this study are 1,349 uploads published by the official accounts of Persib Bandung, Selangor FC, True Bangkok United, and Lion City Sailors on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, X/Twitter, and YouTube platforms during November 27–December 10, 2025, which includes pre-match, match, and post-match phases. Primary data is obtained through systematic documentation of public uploads, then recorded in a coding sheet that contains the identity of the upload, platform, content format, content pillar, message function, brand identity representation, and interaction metrics such as likes, comments, and shares according to the availability of features on each platform. The analysis was carried out

descriptively to map total followers, total uploads, total interactions, average interactions per upload, engagement rate, and interaction share, and interpreted categorically to identify dialogical communication patterns, brand identity representation, and tendencies of club communication strategies based on the dialogic communication framework (Kent & Taylor, 2002). consumer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998), and emotional connectivity (Oparaugo, 2025). This approach was chosen because it allows the study to explain in an integrated manner the distribution of content, identity representation, and the tendencies of the club's digital communication strategy based on the documentation of official social media accounts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Performance Map and Anomalous Dynamics 97%

Based on Table 1, there is a very sharp disparity in digital interaction between clubs participating in AFC Champions League Two Group G. Persib Bandung dominates almost all performance indicators by controlling 97.64% of the group's total digital interactions, while the other three clubs collectively only account for 2.61%. The condition, which in this study is referred to as the "97% Anomaly" is an extreme and disproportionate form of dominance of interactions, and cannot be explained solely by the size of the follower base. Persib Bandung recorded an engagement rate of 87.93%, more than double the average of the other three clubs (43.13%), with an average of 70,679 interactions per upload, far exceeding the achievements of other clubs which are in the range of 358-1,498 interactions per upload. These findings confirm that the effectiveness of digital communication is more determined by the quality of communication and relational strategies than by the scale of the audience.

Table 1. ACL Two Group G Digital Performance Matrix

Metrics	Bangkok	Selangor	Lion City	Persib
Total Followers	1.028.800	1.029.100	176.555	33.320.000
Total Uploads	290	400	241	418
Total Interaction	434.305	273.479	8.316	29.543.663
Average Interactions/Uploads	1.498	684	358	70.679
Engagement Rate (%)	48,73	17,03	63,62	87,93
Proportion of Interactions (%)	1,43	0,90	0,28	97,64

Source: Primary data from official social media accounts (Nov 27–Dec 10, 2025)

To understand the relationship between content volume, engagement effectiveness, and audience scale in an integrated manner, visual analysis was performed through the visualization of the bubble spread in Figure 1. This visualization maps the strategic positioning of each club, with the X-axis representing the volume of uploads over 14 days, the Y-axis showing the average engagement per upload, and the size of the bubble reflecting the total followers. Persib Bandung occupies the upper right quadrant with the most dominant position. On the other hand, Selangor FC showed a paradox of inefficiency, namely the volume of uploads that was almost equivalent to Persib Bandung, but only produced an average of 684 interactions per upload. The differentiating factor lies in the efficiency of engagement resulting from consistent relational responsiveness.



Figure 1. ACL Two Group G Football Club Strategic Positioning Map 2025/2026
 Source: Visualization of primary data

Note: X Axis = upload volume (total uploads 14 days); Y-axis = average interactions per upload; Bubble size = total followers.

Content Dimensions: Pillars of Narrative and Strategy

Based on Table 2, there is a significant difference in the distribution of content pillars between AFC Champions League Two Group G clubs. Selangor FC places the highest emphasis on match performance content (73%), which causes engagement to decrease in non-match periods. On the other hand, Persib Bandung implements a more balanced distribution, with a portion of non-match content reaching 49%. The involvement of Persib Bandung fans (23%) was the highest, showing a strategic commitment to encouraging audience participation and co-creation. This strategy is in line with the concept of emotional connectedness, when personal narratives strengthen the bond between club and fans (Oparaugo, 2025).

Table 2. Distribution of ACL Two Group G Content Pillar (%)

Content Pillar	Bangkok	Selangor	Lion City	Persib
Match Performance	68	73	63	51
Player Profile	15	9	17	18
Fan Engagement	8	9	6	23
Commercial	7	7	12	5
Community/Social Responsibility	2	1	1	2
Entertainment	0	1	1	1

Source: Content categorization of 1,349 uploads (Nov 27–Dec 10, 2025)

The data in Table 3 shows that video content consistently generates 50-150% higher engagement rates than non-video formats. This advantage is influenced by the platform's algorithm priority as well as the characteristics of short-form videos that are able to build marketing relationships between athletes and fans instantly and massively (Su et al., 2023). In line with the findings of Anagnostopoulos et al. (2024), Persib Bandung's selective but high-quality content allocation, with a proportion of video content of 62%, reflects the focus on a

medium that prioritizes algorithms. Meanwhile, 48% of non-match content selection indicates strategic diversification designed to maintain continuity of engagement across competition cycles.

Table 3. Video Format Proportion and Average Engagement

Clubs	% Video Content	Average Interaction(Video)	Average Interaction(Nonvideo)	Multiplier(Video/Nonvideo)
Persib Bandung	62%	89.500	42.300	2.12x
Bangkok United	58%	2.100	840	2.50x
Lion City Sailors	51%	520	280	1.86x
Selangor FC	48%	890	420	2.12x

Source: Comparative analysis of video vs. non-video formats from 1,349 uploads

Relational Dimension: Transforming Audiences into Active Communities

Through dialogical communication theory, the analysis reveals the difference between two relational communication models, namely: (1) a dialogical-participatory model that activates the audience as a co-creator, and (2) a monological-institutional model that positions the audience as a passive recipient. Persib Bandung consistently implements dialogical-participatory communication, which encourages the formation of fan participatory collectivism, which is a condition when the audience functions as a collective actor in the production of brand meaning and identity (Bridgewater & Martindale, 2024). Based on Table 4, the average comments per Persib Bandung upload are recorded 526 times higher than Selangor FC. This disparity reflects the effectiveness of relational communication patterns in building cohesive digital communities.

Table 4. Comparison of Communication Patterns

Aspects	Persib Bandung	Selangor FC	Bangkok United	Lion City Sailors
Audience Positioning	co-owner, 12th player	passive recipient	ActiveAudience	Strategic Stakeholders
Average Comments/Uploads	14.200	27	1.498	358
Engagement Rate (%)	16,1	1,3	4,8	12,7
Multiplier Effect	BasicComparison	-91,9%	-70,2%	-21,1%

Source: Analysis based on Kent & Taylor (2002) and Fournier (1998)

Identity Dimensions: Brand Manifestation and Corporate Identity

Based on Table 5, there is a strong correlation between engagement levels and brand identity alignment. Persib Bandung shows consistent alignment between the identity of "The People's Club" and digital execution in social media management, resulting in a high level of perception of brand authenticity. On the other hand, Selangor FC showed an insynchronization between the identity of the "Heritage Guardian" and the digital execution which tended to be too formal, thus reducing affective resonance with the audience.

Table 5. Identity Confluence Matrix and Engagement Performance

Clubs	Identity	Authenticity	Digital Implementation	EngagementRate (%)
Persib Bandung	<i>"The People's Club"</i> people's club	Height	Perfect	87,93
Bangkok United	modern entertainers; Aspirational Club	Height	Good	48,73
Lion City Sailors	technology innovators; data-driven	Height	Good	63,62
Selangor FC	guardian of the heritage; Historical	Height	Low	17,03

Source: Brand identity analysis from club websites and digital practices

Cross-Platform Management Strategy

Based on Table 6 and Table 7, Persib Bandung implements an adaptive omnichannel strategy with balanced distribution and the highest level of content adaptation to the characteristics of each platform. In contrast, Selangor FC shows the risk of centralization of the platform, with Twitter/X dominance of 41% and a very limited presence on TikTok of 1%, thus limiting the reach of young audiences who demand high cultural context relevance and visual consistency.

Table 6. Platform Distribution and Platform-Specific Strategy

Platform	BangkokUnited (%)	SelangorFC (%)	Lion CitySailors (%)	PersibBandung (%)
Posted on Instagram	34	26	25	28
TikTok	8	1	2	8
Posted on Facebook	46	31	27	28
Twitter/X	9	41	45	32
YouTube	3	2	1	5

Source: Distribution analysis of 1,349 uploads across five platforms

Table 7. Platform-Specific Content Adaptation

Platform	Format Optimal	Persib	Selangor	Bangkok	Lion City
TikTok	short videos, following the trend	Video-oriented, casual	minimal, formal	Video-oriented, entertaining	Video-oriented, engaging
Posted on Instagram	Visual Storytelling, Community	Visual Aesthetics, Focus Interaction	formal, player-centred	Entertainment -Focused	aesthetic minimalist
Posted on Facebook	Discussions, Long Format	Encouragement to build community	Information Match, Formal	A Mix of Info and Entertainment	Strategic content
Twitter/X	Real-time, tactical	Live Comments, Instant Reactions	Discussion	Fast, instant news	NewsQuick

YouTube	Long formats, monetization	Behind the Scenes, Interviews	ReviewsMatch	Entertainment Serial	Content Limited
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Source: Qualitative content analysis of platform-specific adaptation strategies

Integrated Synthesis: A 97% Anomaly Conceptual Model

Cross-dimensional analysis of content, relational communication patterns, identity, and cross-platform management shows that the "97% anomaly" is not a statistical coincidence, but rather the result of the systemic integration of the four pillars of digital communication. First, identity alignment, i.e. the alignment between a claimed brand identity and everyday digital practices, has been shown to create a perception of authenticity and emotional resonance. At Persib Bandung, the claim as *"The People's Club"* or a people-owned club is consistently realized through open language, framing the audience as co-owners, and the celebration of the grassroots community. Second, a relational dialogical pattern that opens up a two-way communication space allows the transformation of audiences from mere passive followers to an active community that serves as co-creators of content. Third, content balance, which is the proportional distribution between match and non-match content, functions to maintain continuity of engagement outside of the match schedule. Fourth, an adaptive cross-platform strategy ensures that each message is tailored to the characteristics of each platform, maximizing reach across demographics.

The successful integration of these four pillars results in a significant engagement multiplier effect. In contrast, failures on one or more pillars, such as monological relational patterns or over-reliance on match content, have an impact on low digital engagement despite a relatively large follower base.

This overarching framework is in line with the model of Razi et al. (2025) that places social media as a mediator between fan attachment and engagement output. Although this study provides a comprehensive overview, some limitations need to be noted. The observation period, which is limited to 14 days in the 2025 competition season, may not fully represent the dynamics of long-term communication. In addition, the absence of microscopic qualitative sentiment analysis of each comment opens up space for further research to deepen understanding of sentiment orientation in audience interaction.

CONCLUSION

This research showed that the hegemony of digital interaction in the modern football ecosystem is not determined by the frequency of uploads or the size of the follower base, but rather by the quality of the relationship between the football club and the fan community through the ability to listen, respond, and create dialogue space. The finding of "97.64% anomaly" in Persib Bandung's digital interaction is the result of a dialogical-participatory communication pattern that results in a very high engagement multiplier. This confirms that the attachment built through social media has a direct impact on the loyalty and engagement of professional fans. Brand identity authenticity is only effective if it is supported by consistent digital practices and execution and specific adaptations to platform characteristics, including optimization of short video formats for young audiences. The practice of co-creation through user-generated content, interactive polls, and symbolic recognition has been proven to shift engagement from transactional to relational and sustainable. This creates a dual benefit, namely that fans gain a sense of belonging, while clubs gain access to authentic content that resonates more with the community. This research enriches the literature on digital sports communication by demonstrating that interaction hegemony is the result of an integrated ecosystem that aligns identity, relational, and cross-platform dimensions. On the practical side, the findings of this study offer a roadmap for football clubs in designing sustainable digital communication

strategies. Despite its limitations on short observation periods and the absence of microscopic sentiment analysis, this study paves the way for future research. Further research is recommended to conduct a full-season longitudinal study, using Natural Language Processing for sentiment analysis, and conduct a cross-regional comparative study to validate the "97% Anomaly" model on a global scale.

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