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Digital Leadership on Twitter: The Digital Leadership Roles of Sports Journalists on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to demonstrate the digital leadership roles of Turkish sports journalists on Twitter individually and institutionally. During the Post Covid-19 pandemic process, journalists from institutional newspapers gained more active visibility, particularly on Twitter. Unlike traditional leadership roles, digital leadership is measured more within the context of interconnected relationships with followers and interactions on Twitter. Along with engaging followers on Twitter and attempting to address their interests and needs, sports journalists also compile their institutional and personal opinions and post them on Twitter. For this reason, in the present study, we analyzed the Twitter accounts of five well-known sports journalists actively engaged in Turkey and their institutional newspapers for one month. Then, we compared their followers, interactions, and contents. Accordingly, although online posts of sports journalists were less ($n = 922$) than the institutions they were employed in, they contrarily received more online interaction (e.g., retweet, mention, like). While 51.82% of Twitter posts shared by sports journalists reflected their own opinions and comments, the remaining 48.18% were typically in the form of mentions and retweets. The interactions of the sports journalists with their followers, at a rate of 28.83% in particular, were a significant rate for satisfying their followers' informational, enquiring, and practical needs. Indeed, such an attempt plays a critical role in the adoption of digital leadership roles by the followers of sports journalists. Contrary to traditional leadership roles, the number of followers and interaction rate were the main factors to signify digital leadership; however, aspects such as institution, age, and economic and social statuses were insignificant in the adoption of sports journalists as digital leaders on Twitter.

Upon the progress and widespread internet usage, the leadership notion has undergone a transition, changing itself over the digital environment. Because virtual teams generated in an online environment require a digital (virtual) leader just like they would in the real-world setting. Social media platforms also offer numerous opportunities for digital leaders, such as sending-round larger audiences instantly. Digital leaders have the potential to engage in public debates on Twitter by forming an interaction with their followers. As typically in traditional leadership, authority underlies the core of digital leadership. The offline and online statuses of digital leaders depend on fulfilling obligations, inspiring trust, and satisfying the interests and needs of their followers (Narbona, 2016). Erhan et al. (2022), according to the results of the study conducted by employees, leaders with high digital skills who gain competence are perceived positively by the employees. Employees tend to adapt to innovative behaviors when they have leaders with digital skills. On the other hand, in the study conducted by the company, it is concluded that the digital leader improves the innovation performance of the company by digitizing the company's platform (Benitez et al., 2022).

Unlike traditional leaders, digital leaders also play a new agenda-setting role on Twitter independently of their social, economic, and political positions and limitations (Park & Kaye, 2017). Twitter has become an essential tool for digital leaders due to features such as the sizeable follower mass and the capacity to interact with followers instantly (Demir & Ayhan, 2020). Journalists are the leading individuals standing out as digital leaders on Twitter. Fusing their gatekeeper (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Parmelee, 2013; Xu & Billings, 2021; Xu & Feng, 2014) and opinion leadership (Ayhan & Şeker, 2021; Park, 2013; Park & Kaye, 2017) with digital leadership, journalists have gained considerable power and authority on Twitter. Concurrently, they have attained the potential to engage and share their ideas on contemporary developments and public discussions with their followers. Typically, the hashtags used on current issues allow journalists to participate in online public debates (Enli & Simonsen, 2017). In addition to hashtag usage, organizing public debates is also conceivable through the aid of tweet replies. In this sense, journalists have arisen as digital leaders and a viable alternative to conventional media platforms.

Sports journalists are the ones who stand out the most as digital leaders on Twitter among all other types of journalists. The status of sports journalists is indispensable in a country like Turkey, where football is an influential sports branch (Demir & Ayhan, 2022), where fans start criticizing games weeks in advance, and where transfer news occupies the agenda. In particular, the fact that Twitter delivers a convenient environment for sports journalism (Demir & Baloğlu, 2019), the instantaneous sharing of feelings, opinions, personal views, and information (Frandsen, 2012), and sports journalists' ability to interact directly with their followers and meet their interests and needs elevates the position of sports journalists in this network (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010).

This study focused on the digital leadership concept, which poses a distinct model and traits from traditional leadership roles. The Covid-19 pandemic and its after-effect impediments further increased the need for digital leaders of institutions. The current study additionally focused on journalists' Twitter leadership roles inside their media organizations after the Covid-19 pandemic. The study sought to define sports journalists' Twitter performances regarding how they stand out as digital leaders and what roles they play on Twitter, how they execute institutional goals as digital leaders, how they forge an institutional image, and why they

outperform their institutions on Twitter. The findings revealed that sports journalists stood out as digital leaders, especially in a platform such as sports actively using Twitter and having considerably mass mutual stakeholders. Analysis of the follower mass and interaction rates parameters indicated that the follower-interaction equation of sports journalists is directly proportional. Therefore, the primary study objective was to assess the digital leadership roles of sports journalists on Twitter. In this reference, digital leadership roles were studied individually and institutionally, in addition to the elements being effective in the digital leadership roles of sports journalists.

Conceptualization of Digital Leadership

Digital leadership mandates additional leadership styles at various points in time. Although the leadership concept depends on several historical patterns such as hierarchy, power, authority, and personal abilities, the existence of social organizations is also required for leaders to be efficacious. The recent technological advancements also shape the leadership concept (Narbona, 2016). In this context, digital technologies alter the nature of teamwork, significantly impacting the leadership notion (Larson & DeChurch, 2020). As Chieffi (2010) stated, digital tools are essential for new leaders in the internet's 'tribal structure.' Even if each user is merely a person in the network, the reticular architecture makes it easier for groups to form in search of a common reference point. While analyzing new movements and social revolutions, Castells (2012) posits a symbiotic relationship between the idea of leadership and technology and contends that there is a direct correlation between the utilization of new technologies and the impact of leaders on the mass population.

Digital leadership differs from traditional physical leadership in particular ways. Indeed, a person may have authority in a given profession; however, users' online presence will not satisfactorily increase their influence in digital environments. Thus, digital leaders also need to become proficient in using digital technology that would make them capable of developing their interventions practically (Narbona, 2016). There are also strict expectations from digital leaders. That is to say: digital leaders are anticipated to have the potential for distance (remote) communication, diversity, et cetera via digital tools to enhance the functional, emotional, and cognitive statuses of virtual teams and design team processes. Digital leaders should also overcome and compensate for the challenges posed by virtual collaboration (Larson & DeChurch, 2020). For this, speed becomes an important success factor. Companies need qualified digital leaders to stay ahead (Doye, 2022).

Narbona (2016) underlined that achieving digital leadership required not only reproducing the characteristics of offline leadership but also adhering to the regulations set out by new technology. Some of the highlighted features are as follows: a) Appropriateness; The subject in which the leader will convey their opinions should be appropriate and related to the leader's area of expertise. Athletes talking about politics, artists giving economics lectures, and other such mismatches are some instances of common mistakes made here. b) Timeliness; One distinguishing feature that sets knowledge-based social networks apart is timeliness. A good leader must find the right words at the right time. It is particularly crucial in contemporary debates. c) Technical specializations; Each social media network has its self-language and technological specifications. For instance, the character count restriction, hashtag usage, et cetera. Refusing to interact with others and failing to use hashtags on Twitter or Facebook while

leaders use social media platforms, for instance, will eventuate an adverse effect. d) Relationships; Various social media networks improve interpersonal relationships. The key objective in this attempt is to establish ties digitally. Digital leaders must have followers and interactively communicate with them.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic at the end of 2019 had a substantial impact on popularizing the notion of a virtual team and digital leadership. The devastating consequences of this pandemic led to a process yielding sociocultural and socioeconomic effects globally. As a result, the Covid-19 pandemic has created an unforeseen worldwide demand for an adjustment to operating in a virtual environment. In this new period, digital leadership has taken center stage in supervising traditional and physically coexisting teams that necessarily transition to virtual teams (Chamakiotis et al., 2021).

The Relationship between Twitter and Digital Leadership

Among social media networks, Twitter is the most popular microblogging platform for information dissemination (Narbona, 2016; Toriumi et al., 2013; Veletsianos, 2012; Zhao & Rosson, 2009). Twitter is a relatively easy platform for users to connect with other users (Karakuş, 2021). Users readily post or download short texts accessible from several devices and can be accompanied by multimedia sources. Twitter also retains features such as instant connection, conversation in progress, user interactions, vast resources, and quick content sharing. Naturally, followers anticipate digital leaders to maintain an online connection with them. Twitter provides an ideal setting for such a connection. When other online users display their support for the leader during such an interaction, the leader's digital leadership is verified. Likes, retweets, supportive comments (mentions), et cetera on the digital leaders' sharing are the potential indicators proving followers' authentication (Narbona, 2016). In this sense, the number of likes, mentions, and retweets from the followers to the shared content is a measure of the digital leader's influence on Twitter.

Journalists adapt themselves to technological developments to sustain their profession. Consequently, they actively utilize social media platforms to meet the readers' expectations and extend their readership. Sports journalists specifically prefer the Twitter application for instant news and updates. According to Reed (2013), most sportswriters in professional sports use the app for professional intents, with more than half of respondents accessing their Twitter accounts more than five times a day. Sherwood and Nicholson (2012) also discovered that most sports journalists use this technology within the limits of traditional journalistic practices and norms, albeit they use it differently to report information, identify sources, search for news, and interact with readers. O'Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) also found that journalists from 11 European nations used online platforms as their primary search tool. Regardless of the news institution to which they are attached, the assessment of the options Twitter enabled to journalists revealed that it serves them with more visibility than other social media networks (Bruns, 2012).

The proliferating and extending social media phenomenon have constructed an environment where journalists routinely utilize personal accounts to publicize information rendered by employer organizations (English, 2017). Neuberger et al. (2010) reported that professional journalists predominantly use the Twitter app for self-promotion, real-time news sharing, and reviews. They also found that the online activities of Twitter and the news media are broadly interconnected. Reed (2011) asserted that sports journalists had the potential to produce news

content through the shares of the athletes with the growth of social media in general and Twitter in particular. Indeed, journalists do not abstain from using content shared on Twitter as a source as it is an open source to the public (Sherwood & Nicholson, 2012). For Kindred (2010), it is revolutionary to produce news content available on social media networks more quickly than ever. Journalists, as digital leaders, occupy a critical position in the complex connection networks for their followers (Hwang, 2015). To journalists, Twitter is pivotal for accessing last-minute developments and promoting their publications in different media (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Sheffer and Schultz (2010) reported that journalists also use Twitter to express ideas and commentaries rather than keeping up with breaking news and promotion. In this sense, sports journalists continue to hold the role of gatekeepers as digital leaders by disseminating content that they 'deem suitable (appropriate)' (Lasorsa et al., 2012), whether through objective reporting or subjective opinions based on professional issues. Similarly, English (2017) emphasized that journalists are digital leaders as gatekeepers.

After meeting with several journalists, Reed (2011) reported that the employer institution allegedly urged one of the participating journalists to use Twitter and Facebook. The main reason for such a request was that the followers frequently accessed Twitter and Facebook to update themselves about the developments instead of visiting the institutional website. English (2016) identified three main motivations for journalists' Twitter usage. While the first was to reference sources, the second was to promote content and interact with readers, and the third was organizational structures or directives. However, Journalists assert that the gatekeeper is a fundamental professional role for separating the fact (truth) from opinion and reporting from advocacy to maintain objectivity (Singer, 2005). Scientists also acknowledge that gatekeeping is essential for accurate and newsworthy content production (English, 2017). Similarly, Molyneux (2014) contended that the responsibility of the gatekeeping still involves deciding which information to publish. Both writers proclaim that, much like conventional media tools, journalists continue to serve as gatekeepers in social media networks.

Li et al. (2015) indicated that news-gathering is the primary reason for social media use among sports journalists. Numerous sports journalists have opined that social media capacity to serve as a gatekeeper has been deteriorating due to the rising number of citizen journalists and the proliferation of channels and media sources available for users to access news and information. The recognition of journalists as opinion leaders by their followers is another area in which they excel as digital leaders. Because opinion leaders occupy an esteemed status in the social media networks flow (Karlsen, 2015). Thanks to social media networks such as Twitter, journalists have also found the opportunity to express their opinions on various issues, raise awareness on particular issues, and provide their followers with links to media content, regardless of location and instantaneously. Social media networks rose to prominence in this context as a particularly crucial component of the digital leadership position for journalists acting as opinion leaders. Choi (2015) also claimed that Twitter opinion leaders were influential in public opinion as digital leaders. Bergström and Belfrage (2018) stated that journalists had the ability to access momentous and noteworthy news in the social media flow through the sharing of opinion leaders. In this sense, opinion leaders are considered equal to digital leaders holding a prominent position. Because opinion leaders regularly discuss the links between news about politics and current events. They assist in interpreting and contextualizing the news for their followers (Karlsen, 2015). In this sense, Social media platforms offer several opportunities

for opinion leaders at the point of news sharing (Winter & Neubaum, 2016). Studies proved that Twitter had the potential to be used as an online public space (Lee et al., 2015). Thus, opinion leaders have a key role in the information flow both within and between social media platforms (Karlsen, 2015). Turcotte et al. (2015) claimed that through opinion leaders, citizens might reconnect with journalism organizations and improve their readiness to participate in a conscious democracy. As a result, journalists acting as digital leaders serve as a point of reference for public debates on social media platforms. Turcotte et al. (2015) revealed that while people sense less trust in traditional media tools, they feel more faith in the content posted on social media networks. Additionally, they emphasized that people would follow content on social media platforms. Therefore, Twitter and social media networks stand out as crucial information sources about news for their followers (Bruns, 2012).

Method

The study explores the digital leadership roles of sports journalists on Twitter after the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the study sought to define sports journalists' Twitter performances regarding how they stand out as digital leaders and what roles they play on Twitter (RQ1), how they execute institutional goals as digital leaders (RQ2), how they forge an institutional image (RQ3), and why they outperform their institutions on Twitter (RQ4). Finally, the study covered the individual digital leadership of the sports writers in detail.

In Turkey, sports journalism has evolved into a form of football reporting since football dominates the broadcasts of traditional and digital sports content producers. The suspension of football leagues during the Covid-19 pandemic eventuated difficulties for journalists in terms of materializing new and updated sports content. Sports journalists utilize Twitter to promote their work and to convey their personal views in their professional lives (Uzunoğlu & Karaca, 2021). While sports journalists endeavor to fulfill their duties on Twitter, on the one hand, they, on other hand, attempt to generate original content with utmost effort. Upon the upsurge in institutional burdens, journalists have also increased their digital leadership roles on Twitter in this period. Followers endorse their support to digital leaders on Twitter by taking action to increase the number of retweets, likes, and mentions (comments). Most of the efforts that users take on social media aim toward a mutual agreement with a piece of content or a particular user, identifying them and making them stand out more than others via attaining more mentions, retweets, likes, and verifications (Narbona, 2016).

Transfer seasons are the most hectic period when sports journalists work the most. Hence, the scope of the study also covered an analysis of the sports journalists' Twitter posts throughout the first month of the Turkey summer transfer window (17 June-17 July 2022). The study sample comprised five participant journalists. The first reason to consider retaining these journalists in the study was their follower masses on Twitter. Because Twitter is an innovative environment with open and horizontal networks, providing access to a sizable follower mass (Park & Kaye, 2017). As a result, the study sample included five journalists with the highest Twitter follower mass in Turkey. The second reason to select these sports journalists as participants were their experiences as television and digital content producers. The Twitter accounts of the institutions where selected sports journalists work were formally examined in the designated period to assess the individual and institutional digital leadership roles of sports

journalists and to define and comprehend their impact on their followers. Table 1 illustrates the Twitter accounts and follower counts of sports journalists and institutions they were affiliated.

Table 1

General Information of Sports Journalists and their Institutions

Journalist Name	Twitter Username	Number of Followers	Employed Institution	Institutional Scope	Twitter Username	Number of Followers
Sercan Dikme	@sercan_dikme	177 T	Aspor	TV	@aspor	1 M
Yağız Sabuncuoğlu	@yagosabuncuoglu	732 T	Vole	Social Media	@VOLEapp	209 T
Firat Günayer	@firatgunayer	450 T	TRTSpor	TV	@trtspor	2,1 M
Onur Tuğrul	@tugrulonur	214 T	Vole	Social Media	@VOLEapp	209 T
Ahmet Selim Kul	@ahmetseimkul	151 T	Aspor	TV	@aspor	1 M

Note. *T: Thousand; *M: Million

The Twitter accounts included in the study sample were analyzed by the content analysis technique, one of the quantitative research methods. A coding scale derived from previous conceptualizations and literature was developed to ensure objectivity in the content analysis. The developed coding scale was used on the text created to determine the shared points (topics) to evaluate the acquired data through the categorical statistical methods. The coding measure consisted of two components. First, the formal features of Twitter account for journalists and their institutions, such as followers, tweets, likes, retweets, and mentions; however, the second component was the signification of the contextual aspects of the posts on Twitter accounts.

The data was coded by two separate researchers through the assistance of the coding scale and processed electronically via the SPSS 20 statistical program. The coding process comprised the following variables: the content of the tweets (posts), the tweet types, the institutional name, the number of followers, and the total number of likes, mentions, and retweets received by the tweets. While the study sample size for Twitter shares of sports journalists was $n = 992$, it was $n = 5025$ for the institutions they worked.

Findings

Formal Analysis of Twitter Accounts

The current study analyzed the sports accounts of popularly followed Turkish sports institutions and journalists producing sports content on television and social media in recent years. While institutions had a sizable follower mass ranging from 209,000 to 2.1 million, sports journalists' follower mass was relatively less, ranging from 151,000 to 732 thousand. Analysis of the number of followers of sports journalists revealed that they successfully represented their institutions on Twitter. According to Table 2, sports journalists had 992 posts (mention, retweet, and tweet), and their institutions shared a total of 5,025 posts on Twitter throughout the designated period. Sportswriters received more likes ($n = 366986$), retweets ($n = 222963$), and mentions ($n = 193807$) despite sharing fewer posts ($n = 922$) per month than the organizations for which they worked.

Table 2

Formal Feature Counts of Sports Journalists' Twitter Accounts and their Institutions

	Tweets	Likes	Retweets	Mentions		Tweets	Likes	Retweets	Mentions
	Journalists					Institutions			
	992	366,986	222,963	193,807		5,025	323,167	28,726	19,044

These findings verified the assertion made in earlier Turkish literature that journalists enjoy more interaction on Twitter, albeit they share fewer posts than their affiliated media organizations. Such an outcome also proves that sports journalists have outperformed their organizations and advanced to an indispensable leadership role on Twitter. The sincere manners of sports journalists, such as undertaking the reporters of a particular team and setting successive dialogues with their users, results in sports journalists standing out as digital leaders. Even if there is no physical communication, sports journalists' genuine attitudes assist their followers to unite for a similar goal and interest and feel like they have a true community and leader (Asadnezhad et al., 2021). However, institutional accounts consistently share daily news and information, failing to engage in dialogue with their followers. As potentially observed from a rigorous analysis of sports journalists' Twitter accounts and the institutions for which they worked, achieving digital leadership does not require copying the traits of offline leadership; it instead transpires by adhering to the rules imposed by new technologies (such as mentioning based on mutual interaction, sharing information instantly) (Narbona, 2016).

Analysis of Table 3 revealed that the age of the sports journalists ranged from 31 to 42. These journalists had been Twitter users for at least seven consecutive years. Sports journalists appeared to have an average of 344.8 thousand followers, given their prominence as the representatives of their institutions and digital leaders on Twitter. All sports journalists stated the name of their affiliated institution; however, only one journalist had the blue tick signifying 'official approval' from Twitter. Sports journalists with a blue tick conceivably position themselves as a source of information, typically provide transparency, and gain trust (Çaba & Alemdar, 2018). Analysis of this data also indicated that these sports journalists have emerged as digital leaders by providing their followers on Twitter with content that appeals to them beyond their socioeconomic status, age, and other personal traits (Park & Kaye, 2017).

Table 3

Individual and Institutional Digital Leadership Roles of Sports Journalists

Journalist Name	Age	Twitter Username	Number of Followers	Total Tweets	Blue Tick	Institution Name	Affiliation to Institution	Year Joined
Sercan Dikme	34	@sercan_dikme	177 T	16,100	No	Yes	Yes	2015
Yağız Sabuncuoğlu	31	@yagosabuncuoglu	732 T	25,200	Yes	Yes	Yes	2009
Fırat Günayer	42	@firatgunayer	450 T	29,600	Yes	Yes	Yes	2011
Onur Tuğrul	35	@tugrulonur	214 T	16,900	Yes	Yes	Yes	2010
Ahmet Selim Kul	34	@ahmetseimkul	151 T	13,100	Yes	Yes	No	2014

Contextual Features of Twitter Posts

Twitter is not only a practical tool to extend interpersonal communication but also a means of exchanging and debating current subjects in society. Twitter digital leaders are likely to participate in knowledge acquisition and information dissemination or commenting (Park, 2013). Table 4 displays that sports journalists shared an average of 33,06 posts per day on Twitter throughout the analyzed month. This data proved that sports journalists devoted substantial daytime hours to their social media network operations for journalism practices. Analysis of sports journalists' post distributions also revealed that 51,82% of the shares were in the form of personal views and information, while 28,83% appeared to be typical dialogues with other Twitter users. The fact that sports journalists are in a respective exchange with other users and reply to their inquiries, views, or requests depicts that Twitter seems to adopt the role

of digital leadership. Subsequently, sports journalists sharing their followers' likes, mentions, and tweets with other users via retweets is a significant indicator that sports journalists play an essential role as digital leaders on Twitter. Supporting a person as a digital leader on platforms such as Twitter is directly proportional to the counts of likes, retweets, and mentions their posts receive (Narbona, 2016). Therefore, as demonstrated in this study, the high number of likes (n = 366986), mentions (n = 193807), and retweets (n = 222963) of the sports journalists' followers to the respective posts signified that their opinions and views were adopted as digital leaders by their followers.

Table 4

General Distribution and Interaction Rates of Sports Journalists' Posts

General Distribution of Posts	N (%)		Like N (%)	Mention N (%)	Retweet N (%)
Tweet	514 (51.82%)	Interaction	285,116 (77.69%)	138,004 (71.20%)	186,002 (83.43%)
Mention	286 (28.83%)		27,485 (7.49%)	3,255 (1.69%)	4,287 (1.92%)
Retweet	192 (19.35%)		54,385 (14.82%)	52,548 (27.11%)	32,674 (14.65%)
N	992		366,986	193,807	222,963
(%)	(100%)		(100%)	(100%)	(100%)

Sports journalists, who have become digital leaders on Twitter, may solidify their role as digital leaders by delivering content that will engage their followers in an authentic, transparent (Yue et al., 2021) and instantaneous manner (Canter & Brookes, 2016). Table 5 depicts that sports journalists pay considerable attention to transfer news (87,52%) to please the informational and emotional follower demands for their teams supported throughout the study period. Yet, while sports journalists devoted much room to team players (8,61%) and teams supported (2,91%), they had much less preference for sharing personal information (0,96%). Such a state might also be considered one of the digital leadership strategies for sports journalists on Twitter. Sports journalists, who pursue the claims and demands of their followers, furnish information in this direction. The number of likes (n = 285116), mentions (n = 138004), and retweets (n = 186002) initially received by sports journalists for their original posts also implies satisfaction with this situation. The immense number of followers on Twitter, in particular, facilitates digital leaders to strengthen their digital leadership roles by retweeting unique information from other users (Park & Kaye, 2017).

Table 5

Contextual Distribution and Interaction Rates of Original Tweets

Tweet Content	N (%)		Like N (%)	Mention N (%)	Retweet N (%)
Transfer News	452 (87.52%)	Interaction	256,466 (89.95%)	121,257(87.86%)	164,345 (88.35%)
Sportsmen Information	43 (8.61%)		16,165 (5.66%)	12,235 (8.86%)	16,965 (9.12%)
Team Information	14 (2.91%)		12,004 (4.21%)	4,023 (2.91%)	3,848(2.08%)
Personal Information	5 (0.96%)		45 (0.18%)	489 (0.37%)	844(0.45%)
N (%)	514 (100%)		285,116 (100%)	138,004 (100%)	186,002 (100%)

While sports journalists try to safeguard and amplify their digital leadership roles on Twitter, they also profit from the employer institutions' positive social media reputations (social image). As depicted in Table 6, sports journalists preferred retweeting content such as program promotion and institutional information (83,85%) on Twitter, and they shared messages without

editing and embedding their opinions into the tweets (Lasorsa et al., 2012). Digital leadership by itself may not always be sufficient in networks like Twitter, necessitating potentially additional assistance from other platforms. Consequently, sports journalists support the digital leadership role individually and institutionally by disseminating information about other individuals and institutions on Twitter. The high number of likes ($n = 54385$), mentions ($n = 52548$), and retweets ($n = 32674$) for Twitter messages are indicators that the followers are content with the current circumstances.

Retweet refers to directly sharing tweets (messages) generated by other users without editorial control over the text (Barnard, 2014). On Twitter, digital leaders reveal their influence over other users by retweeting news reports, facts, details, or other individuals' posts (Park & Kaye, 2017). Sports journalists are also in favor of sharing the texts that they have no input more carefully and retweeting the tweets of the institution they work for (83,86%) due to institutional responsibility (Molyneux, 2014) (See Table 6). While sports journalists retweet, they also consolidate their digital leadership roles on Twitter, capitalizing on the institutional image.

Table 6

Retweet Content, Interaction, and Retweeted Persons/Institutions

Retweet Content	N (%)	Like N (%)	Mention N (%)	Retweet N (%)		N (%)
Institution/Program	161 (83.85%)	45,437 (83.54%)	42,369 (80.62%)	28,102 (86.01%)	Employed Institution	161 (83.86%)
Transfer Information	14 (7.29%)	4,876 (8.96%)	5,342 (10.17%)	2,155 (6.59%)	Journalists	27 (%14.06%)
Team Information	13 (6.78%)	3,894 (7.18%)	4,762 (9.06%)	2,142 (6.55%)	Followers	4(2.08%)
None-sport	4 (2.08%)	177 (0.32%)	75 (0.15%)	275 (0.85%)	N (%)	
N	192	54,385	52,548	32,674	192	
(%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	

Table 7

Mention Content, Interaction, and Mentioned Persons/Institutions

Mention Content	N (%)	Like N (%)	Mention N (%)	Retweet N (%)		N (%)
Sports-related	260 (90.92%)	24,363 (88.64%)	2,771 (85.13%)	3,378 (78.80%)	Follower	254 (88.82%)
Current Events	20 (6.99%)	3,002 (10.93%)	406 (12.48%)	885 (20.64%)	Journalist	23 (8.04%)
Personal Information	6 (2.09%)	120 (0.43%)	78 (2.39%)	24 (0.56%)	Employed Institution	9 (3.14%)
N	286	27,485	3,255	4,287	N (%)	
(%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	286 (100%)

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic eventuated tremendous discrepancies in individual and organizational leadership roles. In particular, the new post-Covid-19 social regime has led to the rise of individually digital leadership roles in social media. This study focused on assessing the digital leadership roles of Turkish sports journalists on Twitter after the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the study also examined the football transfer period, the most hectic time for sports journalists, following the complete removal of the pandemic restrictions in Turkey.

Sports journalists employed various strategies while fulfilling their digital leadership roles on Twitter. A daily average of 33,06 tweets were posted, with 51,82% of those being personal

thoughts and information and 28,83% being typical dialogues with other Twitter users. Along with expressing their personal opinions and ideas, engaging in conversation with their followers fostered an authentic atmosphere in spaces where interaction was prominent, like Twitter; hence, it aided in the adoption of their followers as digital leaders (RQ1). Furthermore, official approval of the Twitter accounts of sports journalists, the sharing of the name and social media links of the institution for which they worked, and the retweeting of the institutional posts served to establish a more robust organizational leadership image (RQ2).

The sports journalist with the highest follower mass ($n = 732$) appeared to work as a producer of digital sports material (VOLE). Journalists dealing with digital sports content production also posed a traditional media background in the study sample. Such a state is a typical indication of how the follower mass accumulated in the mainstream media is capitalized into the digital environment by sports writers. Yet, the fact that traditional media outlets have more followers than digital sports content producers proves that social capital impacts potential follower mass on social media platforms (Uzunoğlu & Karaca, 2021).

Digital leadership roles and traditional leadership roles distinctly vary from each other. On social media platforms like Twitter, responses to user posts through likes, mentions, and retweets, are recognized as signs of digital leadership (Narbona, 2016). While sports journalists in this study shared $n = 992$ posts (tweet, mention, and retweet) on Twitter throughout the study period, it was $n = 5025$ for the employer institutions. However, sports journalists received far more likes, retweets, and mentions than their employer organizations (Bilgin, 2022). This finding indicated that followers authenticated with sports journalists' opinions, ideas, and data and adopted their digital leadership roles (RQ3).

Leadership image on Twitter resides on the value of user-generated original messages as sources of information (Narbona, 2016). Sports journalists have transformed into essential digital leaders on Twitter by sharing information instantaneously, interacting with users, and using the prestige of their employer institution in society, in addition to taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the Twitter app. It is well-established that sports journalists engaged in social media interactions with followers, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic-related restrictions and played an active role in this process by disseminating diverse information. Moreover, the digital leadership roles that sports journalists acquired during the pandemic appeared to continue in the post-Covid-19 period. Indeed, sports journalists even popularized and became dominant actors in networks by surpassing their institutions' visibility. In this network structure, where social status and sociodemographic characteristics of sports journalists are trivial, the primary factor for followers to define digital leaders seemed to be the information provided and interaction intensity (Park & Kaye, 2017).

In conclusion, this study proved that the individual digital leadership roles of the Turkish sports journalists surpassed institutional leadership roles on Twitter, coming into prominence as new digital leaders in the new order in the post-Covid-19 period. Twitter gained more popularity as a platform where the digital leadership roles of sports journalists became more prominent than their employer institutions, eventuating more interaction individually (Bilgin, 2022). While the boost in the number of followers and the responses to the posts (tweet, mention, and retweet) indicated sports journalists' recognition as new digital leaders, they have also benefited from interactions such as mentions and retweets while carrying out their digital leadership obligations on Twitter. Sports journalists also profited from the institutional image

through having their legally approved Twitter accounts and affiliating the names of the employer organizations. As a result, sports writers have emerged as digital leaders on Twitter by fusing their professional and personal identities. In addition to sharing information and news, sports journalists had the potential to reflect their perspectives, generate new ideas, interact with followers on Twitter, and eventually become the master 'node' of this communication and play digital leadership roles (Narbona, 2016).

It is important to determine the digital leadership roles of Twitter, which is frequently used by sports journalists like Turkey. This study is one of the rare studies that explain the relationship between Twitter and digital leadership. The study is important in terms of addressing both individual and corporate digital leadership roles. In this respect, it makes significant contributions to the literature and has the potential to lead. This study analyzed the accounts of five sports journalists possessing a sizable follower mass on Twitter, covering June 17-July 17, 2022, the first month of Turkey's football transfer season. The institutions for which these sports journalists worked have operated in television and digital media. Yet, this study had some limitations, as it only retained male sports journalists. In future studies, assessing more numbers for time and sample parameters may eventuate conceivable outcomes. Studies focused on the digital leadership roles of female sports journalists on several platforms, including Twitter, may also generate significant results. Future studies may further concentrate on the Twitter accounts of sports journalists who work on more diverse media outlets, including social media, radio, television, magazines, newspapers, and the internet. Such attempts will aid in demarcating whether the digital leadership roles vary depending on the institution's area of expertise.

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