

African Basketball in Photographs: Framing an Emerging Continental Sports League via Instagram

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Abstract: The purpose of this research was to examine how the BAL utilizes Instagram in presenting the league and promoting its players. The researchers used a content analysis method to examine the posts on the account. They found that the BAL primarily used Instagram to post-game highlights and league news rather than post about sponsors or corporate social responsibility activities. It appeared that the BAL featured athletes based on success, rather than nationality, as leading scorers and game MVPs from top teams were the most heavily featured. Statistical analysis of both seasons indicated that African players were featured less often than expected in Instagram posts, while non-African players were featured more often than expected. Therefore, on Instagram, the league was framed more internationally than the roster rules of the league would suggest. Additional implications related to how nationality is framed on Instagram as well as how nationality is evaluated using athletic designation are discussed.

Keywords: social media, African sport, framing, regional sport

The President of the Basketball Africa League (BAL), Amadou Gallo Fall, has stressed the importance of developing African basketball on the continent as well as showcasing this talent at home and abroad through broadcast and social media channels. The BAL has ensured it remains a showcase of African talent through roster rules, as 11 of each team's 13 players must be citizens of African countries. Considering these roster limits and that the BAL incorporates foreign-born players to increase international media attention may affect how the BAL promotes the league, teams, and players on social media.

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Investment into domestic and continental leagues, like the BAL, could be a way to reverse the “talent drain” as currently, so much athletic talent leaves the continent to participate in leagues in Europe or the United States.¹ Many scholars have investigated this export of talent as it relates to association football, but few have expanded this research into other sports.² Basketball, although under-researched within current sports research in Africa, is growing in popularity on the continent and as such is positioned for further scholarly examination.

In 2004, the National Basketball Association (NBA) began to work on increasing its global footprint in Africa through its Basketball Without Borders (BWB) program.³ The NBA continued to sponsor BWB camps throughout the world including the African cities of Johannesburg, South Africa, and Dakar, Senegal. The investment into the continent continued with the first NBA Africa game, an exhibition game featuring Team Africa made up of current NBA players and alumni who were born in or had parents born in Africa versus Team World, which included players from outside the African continent. The influence of the NBA on African basketball continued in 2018 with the opening of the NBA Academy Africa in Sale, Senegal. This youth development academy not only focuses on elite basketball participation but also encourages the academic and leadership development of boys and girls from across the continent.⁴ The most recent development occurred in 2019 when the NBA joined forces with the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) to form the BAL.

The BAL is a continental professional basketball league featuring 12 teams from 12 different African countries.⁵ During the first season, Zamalek (from Egypt) took the championship with a defeat of US Monastir from Tunisia in the finals. The other 10 countries that had teams competing in the first season of the BAL included Algeria, Angola, Cameroon, Mali, Madagascar, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Senegal.⁶ For the 2022 season, US Monastir defeated Petro de Luanda from Angola in the final.⁷ In addition to the final two teams, clubs from Egypt, Morocco, Rwanda, and Senegal were granted automatic qualifications by winning their country’s national championship. The remaining six teams from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Mozambique, South Africa, and South Sudan qualified through the “Road to the BAL” tournament hosted across the continent from October to December 2021.⁸ This structure allows the BAL to showcase a diverse group of teams and players from different countries each season, as four new countries were represented in 2022. This is why the BAL marks an important step for basketball in Africa. As an intercontinental league with 12 different countries represented each season, the BAL can encourage mutual cooperation and showcase local sporting success to the African people.⁹ However, it is unknown whether the league is using social media to frame itself as primarily an African sports league, or as an international competition.

Previous research has examined the experiences of African athletes leaving the African continent to pursue sporting careers in other countries.¹⁰ However, one of the main pillars of the BAL is keeping African talent on the continent. In an interview, the President of the BAL stressed the importance of displaying African basketball on an international stage, noting, “You have an incredible amount of talent on the continent that, until now, only gets exported. Now we want to make sure that we create a platform that allows this talent to be showcased, nurtured, and developed at home.”¹¹

In the BAL, teams are required to roster at least eight players from their home country and are allowed four imported players. Of those four, only two can be players from outside of the African continent.¹² For the 2022 season, the final roster spot on each team included an African prospect from the NBA Academy Africa through the BAL Elevate program.¹³ Therefore, of the 156 players in the BAL, a minimum of 132 or 85% of all players must represent an African country. Previous research has found when a league utilizes a strategy that limits foreign player roster spots, the foreign stars can bring positive attention to the league overall even while maintaining a focus on growth and the promotion of domestic athletes.¹⁴ As the BAL utilizes a similar strategy of roster limits but also incorporates foreign-born players to increase international attention, that may affect how the BAL promotes the league, teams, and players on social media. Therefore, we seek to examine how the BAL utilizes Instagram to present the league and promote its players.

Framing Sport Organizations on Social Media

The current research is guided by framing theory. This theory suggests that social frameworks supply information and aid the audience in how they interpret concepts.¹⁵ Frames highlight pieces of information making them more memorable, noticeable, or salient to the consumer. The increase in salience is important because when information is more noticeable, there is a greater likelihood that the audience will receive and process the information. Framing theory is typically associated with media organizations that can choose which specific issues or concepts to emphasize which impacts the content their audiences are exposed to in print, on television, and online.¹⁶ Sports organizations like the BAL can also act like media organizations by their use of social and digital media platforms to communicate with the public.¹⁷ This is especially important for more niche organizations like the BAL, which may not receive the same mainstream media attention that is common in more established leagues.¹⁸

Previous research has utilized framing theory to understand how sports organizations portray athletes on collegiate athletic departments' Instagram accounts.¹⁹ In addition, scholars have utilized framing theory to understand how the media portrays athletes' race, nationality, ethnicity, and gender on television. Choices made by media organizations, or in this case, sports organizations' social media accounts, can introduce bias to their respective audiences by showing certain aspects of the sports league or organization.²⁰ For example, scholars examined the racial framing of athletes on the Instagram accounts of American sports networks. They found that black athletes were more likely to be highlighted for their athletic abilities and accomplishments rather than their off-the-field achievements when compared to their white counterparts.²¹ These distinct choices made by social media managers that affect how athletes are highlighted based on race, ethnicity, or gender demonstrate a need to evaluate how social media is used to display sports information to audiences.²² The BAL's unique status as a home-grown African sports league creates an opportunity for social media managers to showcase the African talent participating in the league, fulfilling the intent of the league as a platform for developing and displaying elite African basketball to the world. However, the BAL experiences significant international influence from the NBA and FIBA which may influence the frames that are utilized for visual storytelling via Instagram.

Media as a Vehicle for African Sport Promotion

This research is focused on the official Instagram feed of the BAL. Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing social networking site that has more than 1.4 billion monthly active users.²³ In Africa, Instagram is primarily used via the app on smartphones. Although the medium is popular on the continent, there are challenges related to affordability and internet penetration in many locations.²⁴ This could influence the target audience of the BAL Instagram feed, and therefore the content that the league chooses to display online.

Instagram is an appropriate medium on which to examine how the BAL uses social media to frame the league and promote its athletes, as visual media is a powerful tool for sports organizations to connect with fans and bring brands to life.²⁵ In addition, social media is an important tool for rising sports leagues in emerging markets, as fledgling leagues can utilize cost-effective platforms to increase fan involvement and community engagement.²⁶ To the authors' knowledge, no study exists regarding the use of Instagram by an African professional sports league. Not only does this research seek to fill the gaps related to the framing of African sports leagues on social media, but it also looks to increase the amount of research on topics that are not related to association football (soccer), which has been the most explored subject within African sports.²⁷ To examine how Instagram is utilized by the BAL to shape perception and promote the league, we developed the following research questions: What types of content does the BAL Instagram account post (RQ1)? Did the type of posts change between the first and second seasons (RQ2)?

Instagram Use by Sports Organizations

Although researchers have not examined the Instagram use of sports organizations in an African context, scholars have investigated how athletes, teams, and other sports organizations use Instagram. Social media provides athletes and teams the opportunity to share information with fans. Athletes use the platform to display information about their personal lives more often than their athletic careers.²⁸ However, when examining consumer engagement, scholars found that posts related to an athlete's performance were more likely to receive comments and likes compared to posts that were not related to their core brand as an athlete. Scholars suggested that emerging athletes, especially in new leagues, should focus on crafting content that focuses on their athletic performance and include pictures with more established teammates to encourage greater authenticity.²⁹ This could affect how the BAL posts on Instagram and how it chooses to promote the league with more established players to increase engagement with fans.

Although scholars have primarily examined individual athletes and teams rather than sports leagues' Instagram accounts, previous research has shown that Instagram specifically provides sports organizations the opportunity to showcase their brand and increase fans' brand loyalty. Researchers found that teams in England's Premier League focused mainly on displaying product-related attributes via Instagram including team success, star players, and the coach.³⁰ In an examination of Major League Baseball (MLB) teams, researchers found that teams primarily used Instagram to highlight the teams' sporting accomplishments and objectives. In addition, posts that had a specific sports objective received more engagement from fans. Fans were most likely to comment on posts that featured game previews or results

that provided an opportunity for fans to discuss lineups and statistics.³¹ Based on this research, it is likely that the BAL Instagram feed will also focus on sports products like the game, players, and coaches compared to sponsors, fans, or stadiums.

Additional research on the Spanish-language MLB teams' Instagram accounts found similar results where the most posts were related to team news. Although results showed that there was not a large difference in post type between the English and Spanish-language Instagram accounts, the Spanish-language accounts featured a greater percentage of Hispanic players.³² This is related to the current study, as the BAL may choose to feature African players more often than non-African players to frame the league as an African sports league. This would support the main pillar of the league, to showcase and develop African talent at home.³³

Traditional and Social Media Displays of African Sport

Coverage of African news by traditional Western media has been limited.³⁴ However, modern developments in technology—including the shift to Internet-based broadcasting—have created more opportunities to showcase African news stories via social media and provided greater access to sports programming across Africa.³⁵ Even with the increase in media presentation and access to sports on the African continent, only a few scholars have examined social media related to African sports events and organizations.³⁶ However, more scholars have focused on African sports in print and broadcast media.³⁷

Although few scholars have researched the social media use of African sports organizations, researchers have examined the relationship between Nigerian association football and online media.³⁸ Nigerian professional association football leagues are often underrepresented in traditional media compared to major European leagues, and social media can provide an avenue for the promotion of individual clubs as well as the entire league.³⁹ As the BAL does not receive the same attention from traditional media compared to leagues like the NBA, social media provides an opportunity to promote the players, teams, and the league as a whole. In addition to professional sports organizations, previous researchers studied an East Africa-based sport-for-development organization and found that it used social media to share information about the organization and educate their followers about sport-for-development work. However, scholars observed that the organization focused on the utilization of text-based social media and that visual-based media including Instagram and YouTube could be used to incorporate more creative visual storytelling into their social media strategy.⁴⁰ Previous research on the social media use of African sports organizations is important to the current study, as the use of Instagram can be a valuable branding tool for the BAL.

Slater et al. examined the traditional broadcast of the BAL by investigating how commentators talked about players on television. They found that while an American athlete was the most mentioned individual by the commentators, of the top 20 athletes mentioned only three were athletes who were not from an African country, which was consistent with the league's athlete population. Non-African athletes who were frequently mentioned included the league MVP and the league scoring champion, suggesting that on-the-court performance is a greater indicator of the frequency with which athletes are discussed by sports commentators.⁴¹ This could influence how the league is framed on social media, as the BAL may choose to highlight athletes based on athletic performance rather than focusing on solely African athletes.

Taking into consideration the findings of previous research regarding the promotion of African and non-African athletes during broadcast commentary of the BAL's first season, and the limited coverage of African news in traditional forms of Western media, the following research questions are posed: Which players were featured on the BAL Instagram account (RQ3)? Does the BAL Instagram feature African players more often than it features non-African players (RQ4)?

Methods: Sample and Coding

Posts ($n = 1035$) were collected from the official BAL Instagram during the first and second seasons of the league. Posts from the first season ($n = 345$) were manually collected and downloaded from May 16 to May 30, 2021, and posts from the second season ($n = 690$) were manually collected and saved from March 5 to May 28, 2022. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first season was played in a bubble format and was restricted to a single location with play lasting only two weeks. However, the second season saw an expansion of the league as teams competed in three locations for three months.⁴²

The researchers used a content analysis method to examine the posts on the account. Previous research on sports organizations' Instagram accounts was used to guide the coding schema.⁴³ Multiple variables were assessed including type of post (i.e., photograph, video), season (i.e., season 1, season 2), post type, number of players featured, and number of African players featured. Post-type categories included: league news, behind-the-scenes, game action, league promotion, fans, special events, location, charity, celebration, league employees, historical photographs, or videos, commercial, and other, which were modified from previous research.⁴⁴ As with previous research, each post was also coded to include the nationality of the players featured. This only included clearly identifiable players, for example, if players are out of focus or have their backs to the camera then nationality would not be included.⁴⁵ Player nationalities were coded based on their FIBA designation (the country they represent in international basketball competitions) and were determined by downloading the rosters of the 2021 and 2022 seasons of BAL teams which included player name, jersey number, and official FIBA nationality.⁴⁶

Intercoder reliability was established before the coding of the complete data set. According to previous research, 10-20% of the sample should be used to demonstrate intercoder reliability, therefore 104 posts were randomly selected and given to each coder.⁴⁷ The two coders independently coded the posts and then Cohen's kappa was used to assess reliability.⁴⁸ The two coders' kappa figures exceeded the acceptable range of .70 or above on all variables including photo/video (kappa = 1.00), season (kappa = 1.00), post type (kappa = .90), number of players featured (kappa = .88), and number of African players featured (kappa = .82) After intercoder reliability was established, the two coders divided the remaining 934 posts in the sample for analysis.

Methods: Data Analysis

To answer the four research questions, frequency statistics were gathered and analyzed about the type of posts and players featured in posts, as well as posts made during the first and

second seasons. First, descriptive statistics were performed, as well as chi-square tests to examine differences between the observed and expected frequencies of post types. To facilitate research question two, which examined differences between post-type frequency between the first and second seasons, chi-square tests were performed to determine if a statistically significant difference between post-types occurred.

Results

As noted above, a total of 1,035 Instagram posts were posted by the BAL across the two-season timeframe of analysis. Descriptive statistics revealed that in season 1, the BAL posted 345 ($n = 345$, 33%) posts, and in season 2 increased the number of Instagram posts to 690 ($n = 690$, 67%). Additional analysis employing a chi-square goodness of fit test to examine whether differences existed between the number of observed and expected frequencies for the total number of posts in each season. Analysis revealed statistically higher utilization of Instagram by the BAL in terms of the number of posts in season 2 ($X^2(1, N = 1,035) = 114.334, p < 0.001$). More videos were employed ($n = 640$, 62%) than photos ($n = 393$, 38%) across the two seasons cumulatively, and a chi-square goodness of fit test indicated that statistically more videos were utilized by the BAL on Instagram than expected ($X^2(1, N = 1,033) = 58.583, p < 0.001$). Within the total sample ($N = 1,035$), the average number of players featured in a photo or video was 2.5 ($M = 2.5, SD = 4.1$), with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 35. Examining the number of African-born players included in Instagram posts, the average number of players featured in a photo or video was 2.0 ($M = 2.0, SD = 3.3$), with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 31, while the average number of non-African players were 0.6 ($M = 0.6, SD = 1.7$), with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 11. A two-sample t-test of independence was performed to examine differences in the mean number of African players compared to non-African players featured in BAL Instagram posts and indicated statistically more African players appeared in BAL Instagram posts than non-African players ($t(2,672) = 10.0268, p < .0001$).

Research question one examined the types of content contained on the BAL Instagram account. Descriptive and frequency statistics performed on the dataset are provided in Table 1. The BAL's most frequently employed post type was game action posts, followed by league news, behind-the-scenes information, and league promotion. These four types of content represented 90.4% of all posts within the dataset.

Research question two asked if the type of posts changed between the first and second seasons. Table 2 contains the frequencies, percentages, and cumulative percentages of post types from seasons one and two of the BAL.

The top four types of post content including game action, league news, behind-the-scenes information, and league promotion were consistent across both seasons with game action representing the most frequent post-type in season one ($n = 153$, 44.3%) and season two ($n = 306$, 44.3%), respectively. Together, these four types of content represented approximately 90% of the total post content in both seasons of the BAL indicating a similar, consistent framing and promotion strategy across both seasons.

Table 1*Frequency, Percent, and Cumulative Percent of Instagram Post Types*

Post Type	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Game Action	459	44.3%	44.3%
League News	324	31.3%	75.7%
Behind the Scenes	87	8.4%	84.1%
League Promotion	66	6.4%	90.4%
Corporate Social Responsibility	19	1.8%	92.3%
Special Events (Non-Games)	18	1.7%	94.0%
League Employees	16	1.5%	95.6%
Other	11	1.1%	96.6%
Commercial	9	0.9%	97.5%
Stadium or Location	8	0.8%	98.3%
Historical Photos/Video	7	0.7%	98.9%
Fans	6	0.6%	99.5%
Celebration	5	0.5%	100.0%

The third research question asked which players were featured on the BAL Instagram account. Again, descriptive statistics were performed to answer this research question. The frequencies and percentages for the top 20 most featured players in season one are included in Table 3, and Table 4 shows the top 20 most featured players in season two. As highlighted in Tables 3 and 4, the top five featured players in season one were Walter Hodge, Kenneth Gasana, Jone Pedro, Anas Mahmoud, and Alter Majok. All individuals were featured in more than 2% of the total Instagram posts by the BAL and except for Walter Hodge, were African players. In season two, the top five most featured players were Anas Mahmoud, Ater Majok, Carlos Morais, Deshaun Morman, and Jone Pedro with all individuals featuring in more than 1.8% of posts. Anas Mahmoud, Ater Majok, and Jone Pedro were in the top five featured athletes across both seasons. Similar to season one, only one non-African player (i.e., Deshaun Morman) was featured in the top five in season two.

Table 2.*Top 20 most featured players on Instagram during season one by team and nationality*

Rank	Player Name	Team	FIBA Nationality	N	%
T1	Walter Hodge*	Zamalek	United States	22	2.3
T1	Kenneth Gasana	Patriots B.B. C.	Rwanda	22	2.3
T3	Jone Pedro	Petro de Luanda	Angola	21	2.2
T3	Anas Mahmoud*	Zamalek	Egypt	21	2.2
5	Ater Majok	U.S. Monastir	Sudan	20	2.1
6	Prince Ibeh	Patriots B.B.C.	Rwanda	19	2
T7	Ben Romdhane*	U.S. Monastir	Tunisia	18	1.9
T7	Wael Arakji*	U.S. Monastir	Lebanon	18	1.9
T7	Chinemelu Elonu	Zamalek	Nigeria	18	1.9
T10	Amadou Harouna	FAP	Niger	16	1.7
T10	Radhouane Slimane	U.S. Monastir	Tunisia	16	1.7
T10	Mohab Yasser	Zamalek	Egypt	16	1.7
13	Omar Abada*	U.S. Monastir	Tunisia	15	1.6
T14	Terrel Stoglin	AS Sale	United States	14	1.5
T14	Aristide Mugabe	Patriots B.B.C.	Rwanda	14	1.5
T14	Gerson Gonçalves	Petro de Luanda	Angola	14	1.5
T17	Álvaro Masa	Ferrováriario de Maputo	Spain	13	1.4
T17	Ryan Richards	Petro de Luanda	United Kingdom	13	1.4
T17	Leonel Paulo	Petro de Luanda	Angola	13	1.4
T17	Moustafa Elmekawi	Zamalek	Egypt	13	1.4

Note: *players on BAL 1st team

Table 3.***Top 20 most featured players on Instagram during season two by team and nationality***

Rank	Player Name	Team	FIBA Nationality	N	%
1	Anas Mahmoud	Zamalek	Egypt	47	2.9
2	Ater Majok*	U.S. Monastir	Sudan	42	2.6
3	Carlos Morais*	Petro de Luanda	Angola	32	1.9
T4	Deshaun Morman	FAP	United States	30	1.8
T4	Jone Pedro	Petro de Luanda	Angola	30	1.8
T6	Evans Ganapamo	Cape Town Tigers	Central African Republic	29	1.8
T6	Firas Lahyani	U.S. Monastir	Tunisia	29	1.8
T8	Chris Obekpa	SLAC	Nigeria	28	1.7
T8	Michael Dixon	U.S. Monastir	United States	28	1.7
10	Edgar Sosa*	Zamalek	United States	27	1.6
T11	Terrel Stoglin*	AS Sale	United States	26	1.6
T11	Ulrich Chomche	FAP	Cameroon	26	1.6
T11	Radhouane Slimane*	U.S. Monastir	Tunisia	26	1.6
T14	Amadou Harouna	AS Sale	Niger	24	1.5
T14	Mikhael McKinney	Zamalek	United States	24	1.5
16	Yanick Moreira	Petro de Luanda	Angola	23	1.4
17	Moustafa Elmekawi	Zamalek	Egypt	22	1.3
T18	Billy Preston	Cape Town Tigers	United States	21	1.3
T18	Padiet Wang	Cobra Sport	South Sudan	21	1.3
T18	Joel Almeida	FAP	Cape Verde	21	1.3
T18	Gerson Gonçalves	Petro de Luanda	Angola	21	1.3
T18	Anthony Walker	REG	United States	21	1.3

Note: *players on BAL 1st team

Table 4.***Total mentions of players by nationality***

Nationality	Season 1		Season 2		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
African	747	79.55%	1289	74.29	2036	76.14%
Non-African	192	20.45%	446	25.71	638	23.86%

Research question four examined differences in the number of posts between African and non-African players featured on the BAL Instagram account. The frequencies for posts featuring African and non-African players in seasons one, two, and cumulatively have been provided in Table 5. Frequency statistics indicated that African players were featured more predominately than non-African players across both seasons and cumulatively.

Table 5

Frequency, Percent, and Cumulative Percent of Instagram Post In Each Season

Season One	Post Type	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Game Action	153	44.3%	44.3%
	League News	131	38.0%	82.3%
	League Promotion	20	5.8%	88.1%
	Behind the Scenes	16	4.6%	92.8%
	League Employees	9	2.6%	95.4%
	Corporate Social Responsibility	6	1.7%	97.1%
	Special Events (Non-Games)	3	0.9%	98.0%
	Celebration	2	0.6%	98.6%
	Historical Photos/Videos	2	0.6%	99.1%
	Commercial	2	0.6%	99.7%
	Fans	1	0.3%	100.0%
	Stadium or Location	0	0.0%	100.0%
	Other	0	0.0%	100.0%
Season Two	Post Type	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Game Action	306	44.3%	44.3%
	League News	193	28.0%	72.3%
	Behind the Scenes	71	10.3%	82.6%
	League Promotion	46	6.7%	89.3%
	Special Events (Non-Games)	15	2.2%	91.4%
	Corporate Social Responsibility	13	1.9%	93.3%
	Other	11	1.6%	94.9%
	Stadium or Location	8	1.2%	96.1%
	League Employees	7	1.0%	97.1%
	Commercial	7	1.0%	98.1%
	Fans	5	0.7%	98.8%
	Historical Photos/Videos	5	0.7%	99.6%
	Celebration	3	0.4%	100.0%

A Chi-square test of goodness of fit was employed to examine if differences existed in observed utilization compared to what would be expected. Due to the BAL's governance structure, 85% of all players within the BAL must represent an African country. Thus, this 85% figure was employed as the expected frequency of posts featuring an African player within the chi-square analysis to reflect league composition. The chi-square test revealed a significant difference between the observed and expected frequencies between African and non-African

players featured in BAL Instagram posts across both seasons, with African players featured less than expected, while non-African players were featured more than expected ($X^2(1, N=2,674) = 164.78, p < 0.001$). Along similar lines, chi-square goodness of fit tests were employed to determine differences between African and non-African players represented in Instagram posts in season one and season two, respectively. Chi-square goodness of fit tests for season one revealed similar patterns, with African players featuring less than expected in Instagram posts, while non-African players featured more than expected ($X^2(1, N=939) = 21.706, p < 0.001$). Examination of the observed and expected values for African and non-African players featured in BAL Instagram posts during season two followed the same pattern with African players appearing less than expected and non-African players appearing more than expected ($X^2(1, N=1,735) = 156.51, p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to determine how the BAL—as an emerging professional sports league in Africa—utilized Instagram to promote the league and its players. In response to the first research question, the researchers found that most posts focused on providing followers with information regarding the league, including game action and league news. This supports previous research on Instagram use by professional sports organizations which utilized the platform to provide information on games, teams, and individual athletes.⁴⁹ This is a sensible action for the BAL which is an emerging professional sports league in an emerging sport media market. Any new or developing sports organization would seek to save money on promotion, and social media platforms like Instagram provide an opportunity to disseminate information in a manner that can potentially reach a large audience. The first aim of any new sports organization, and especially a new league, would be to raise the knowledge levels among its potential fanbase. Therefore, it was not unexpected that the BAL would focus on promoting league awareness and information sharing within the community to establish fans before attempting to utilize social media to achieve other goals.⁵⁰

Related to the second research question which inquired whether the types of posts differed between the examined seasons, the BAL utilized consistent framing and promotional strategies across both seasons. However, there were some differences. This included an increase in the number of posts from the first to the second season, which can be explained by the increase in the total number of games and the length of the season from the first season (2021) to the second (2022). The second season of the BAL took place over three months and was hosted in three different venues. This is in comparison to the first season, which followed a bubble format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵¹ The pandemic also limited fan attendance and the inclusion of special events, which explains an increase in both of those post categories from season 1 to season 2. Other than the increase in post activity, the strategies in terms of providing information on the BAL Instagram did not differ significantly. Though the league had expanded its number of games and the length of the season, the BAL in its second season was still very much in its infancy, and increasing awareness would still be paramount to any social media strategy.

Related to the third research question, there was a tie for the most featured player on Instagram during the first season of the BAL, between Walter Hodge from the United States

(2021 BAL MVP) and Kenneth Gasana from Rwanda. However, during the second season the most-featured player was Anas Mahmoud from Egypt—the BAL sportsmanship award winner as well as the Defensive Player of the Year. As seen in Tables 2 and 3, there was a notable number of players who were regularly featured across both seasons. For example, Ater Majok, Anas Mahmoud, and Jone Pedro were in the top five of the most featured players in seasons 1 and 2. This indicates that BAL Instagram utilized images and videos featuring the same players during the seasons examined for this research. One reason could be that the use of familiar faces might provide an image of continuity to the league, even considering the fact several new teams were participating in the second season. This is not unlike previous research on the NBC-TV primetime broadcasts of the Winter Olympic Games. Scholars found when examining those Games, that athletes such as Bode Miller, Shaun White, and Apolo Anton Ohno were consistently in the Top 10 of mentions.⁵² This suggests that star athletes—regardless of origin—are more likely to be featured by media or sports organizations, and the star players will continue to receive that media attention during their careers.⁵³ However, unlike the Olympic Games, the BAL is still in its infancy with the second season only having been played in 2022. As the BAL continues, further longitudinal examination should be conducted to better understand how star players of the BAL are framed and featured on social media.

The results further suggest that athletes were primarily featured on the BAL Instagram based on team and individual success. Leading scorers, game MVPs, and season award winners from top teams were heavily featured. Teams that reached the semifinals also played two more games than other teams, so it follows logically that those teams and their players would thus receive more appearances on Instagram. Notably, no players in the top 15 most-featured list during either season were from teams that did not make the playoffs. This is consistent with sports organizations' promotion of individual athletes in the wake of notable or impressive performances as well as team achievements. This result is further supported by previous research on sporting events like the Olympic Games where media mentions were linked to medals and individual athlete success.⁵⁴

There was one aberration in terms of Instagram posts following team and individual success in the case of American player and rapper J. Cole. He was in the top 26 of players featured on the BAL Instagram in season 1. The former walk-on at St. John's University briefly participated in the BAL for the Patriots of Rwanda, scoring five points in three games. His inclusion brought some criticism, including from former University of Maryland player Terrell Stoglin, an AS Sale player and season 1 scoring champion, who argued that Cole took the opportunity from a more deserving professional player.⁵⁵ However, the celebrity status of J. Cole brought commercial and media value to the BAL which is important related to the BAL's status as a fledgling league. Therefore, it was unsurprising that he was featured on Instagram even though he did not score many points and only played in three games.

The fourth research question asked whether the BAL Instagram feed focused more often on African players than non-African players. Season 1 had a greater proportion of African players featured on Instagram compared to season 2. Both seasons were under the expected level of 85% of featured players being from African countries, considering the make-up of the league. Therefore, on Instagram, the league was framed as more of an international league than the roster rules of the league would suggest. However, as indicated in the results for the second

research question, it is also possible that the league was more likely to post about team and individual success without regard to nationality. This could have led to a non-African presence on Instagram which was higher than expected. In both examined seasons, the league MVP was a non-African player, and four of the ten players to receive All-BAL honors were foreign non-African players. Even if the administrator or administrators of the BAL Instagram feed had sought to spotlight the local players more frequently, for credibility reasons the league's media arms could not actively downplay the players who had been earning the league's various accolades.

Limitations and Directions of Future Research

As with any research, there were limitations within this examination. The inconsistent quality of posts, and the presence of often fast-paced clips within videos on Instagram, made it difficult to identify all players with complete accuracy. Secondly, players were coded by appearance in the video and only counted once even if they had multiple clips or highlights in a single post. Therefore, while some players may have appeared in many posts, other players may have been featured more heavily in terms of total clock time in videos featured on social media. An additional limitation related to data collection and analysis was that many posts could fit into multiple categories. For example, while few posts focused purely on commercial or sponsorship themes, many posts depicting game action mentioned league sponsors. This included posts that featured the "Visit Rwanda Player of the Game" or showcased the "Top 5 Plays of the Day brought to you by Shutterwave." While these posts were not commercials or product endorsements, sponsors were still an important factor in many posts. Future research should examine how sponsors are incorporated into the social media posts of sports organizations and leagues.

Related to categorizing individual players' national identity, the authors utilized the official FIBA nationality that was listed for the players on the rosters of each BAL team. However, this did not allow for athletes who are dual citizens, such as Patriots B.B.C. player Kenneth Gasana. Gasana, who tied for the most appearances on Instagram in Season 1, was born in Texas in the United States but competes for Rwanda internationally. He therefore is considered Rwandan for the sake of the BAL competition.⁵⁶ In addition, many citizenship rules of international federations have become more flexible, and allow for players to switch allegiances as long as they have not previously represented another country internationally at the senior level.⁵⁷ Therefore, while the BAL has strict roster rules that limit the number of foreign players, a player's official nationality which is recognized by FIBA may not reflect the only national identity of each player. Future research should examine the instances and motivations of athletes who change their national identification related to participation in international competitions.

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