

Determinants of users' engagement with official military Instagram accounts

Condicionantes de la interacción de los usuarios con cuentas militares en Instagram



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Abstract

Modern militaries seek to increase their audience using metrics such as engagement to capture the success and popularity of their posts. This article follows on from previous research about the content of Instagram accounts, studying the main determinants of users' engagement with official military accounts on Instagram. For this purpose, a sample has been sourced from the French, Israeli, Spanish, Australian and United States armies in 2021 (n=1922). The results provide evidence of a statistical correlation between engagement and the structure and themes of the posts, with posts related to consequences of military praxis, such as casualties or participation in conflicts, generating high levels of engagement. In contrast, users are least engaged with informative posts about non-military activities. The conclusions drawn point to some policy recommendations on how to improve public communication on Instagram and future research lines about the military's public diplomacy.

Keywords

Social media; military; instagram; engagement; armies.

Resumen

Los ejércitos modernos buscan incrementar sus audiencias empleando métricas como la interacción para determinar el éxito y popularidad de sus publicaciones. Este artículo continúa con investigaciones previas sobre el contenido de las cuentas oficiales de los ejércitos en Instagram, estudiando los principales condicionantes de la interacción de los usuarios con las cuentas militares. Siguiendo este propósito, se ha seleccionado una muestra procedente de los ejércitos de Francia, Israel, España, Australia y EEUU en 2021 (n=1922). Los resultados proporcionan pruebas de una correlación estadística entre los niveles de interacción y la estructura y temas de la publicación. Aquellas publicaciones referentes a las consecuencias de la práctica militar, como víctimas mortales o la participación en conflictos, generan altos niveles de interacción. Sin embargo, los usuarios tienden a interactuar menos con aquellas publicaciones informativas o relativas a actividades no militares. La conclusión señala algunas recomendaciones para mejorar la comunicación pública en Instagram y plantea futuras líneas de investigación con la diplomacia pública de los militares.

Palabras clave

Redes sociales; militares; instagram; participación; ejércitos.

1. Introduction

Just like any other public organization, the military's communication on social media is based on the ability of institutional accounts to provoke reactions in their followers. Military forces should adapt their official narratives to suit their audiences, seeking to broaden the scope of their message (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014). This can help improve social perceptions of the institution, as well as boost recruitment and retention for professional armies that are no longer conscription-based (Raitasalo, 2014). However, militaries differ from other public institutions in their professional monopoly on violence, which sometimes entails fatal casualties (Smith, 2008). In light of these factors, it is important to understand the determinants of users' engagement with social media to improve public communication, especially regarding the consequences of military praxis.

Previous studies have identified trends in the institutional communications of European armies (Olson *et al.*, 2016), the Swedish Armed Forces (Deverell, 2015) and Israel Defense Forces (Cunningham, 2015; Golan and Ben-Ari, 2018). Other research has examined the activity of military organizations on Twitter, focusing on the British Army (Leightley, 2020) and the IDF (Stern & Ben-Shalom, 2021). YouTube has been another arena of military communication, which has been exploited by both the US Army (Christensen, 2008) and the Canadian Armed Forces (Mirrles, 2015). In contrast with other social media, there are relatively few studies about military accounts on Facebook (Smolicz, 2018), with an increasing emphasis on studies related to Instagram. Examples of the latter include analyses of the US Army (Cedillo, 2014) as well as visual interpretations of the IDF account (Kohn, 2017).

This research follows on from previous comparative studies, with a focus on understanding the main determinants of engagement with the institutional accounts of military organizations. The following research question is posed: How do contextual and structural determinants influence military account followers' engagement on Instagram? In order to answer it, the specific research objectives are (1) to study the structural characteristics of posts as determinants of engagement, (2) to analyze the least and most rated posts to understand users' behavior and (3) to identify how users have engaged with posts related to the consequences of military praxis.

The article is structured as follows: After this introduction, Section 2 provides a theoretical approach to the relevance of engagement metrics on Instagram. Section 3 describes the methods and techniques used in this study, defines the main hypotheses and explains the key variables employed to conduct the analysis. On the basis of this theoretical and methodological approach, the analysis focuses on the different characteristics of engagement and users' reactions to the posts. The results of this first analysis allow the identification of relevant temporal, structural and thematic determinants that can offer an understanding of users' behavior in relation to posted content. Then, an analysis of the most and least popular posts is conducted to identify their characteristics and understand their relation to the consequences of military praxis. Lastly, the conclusions drawn point to policy recommendations for selected armies, as well as further research related to users' behavior on Instagram.

2. Engagement and military communication on Instagram

2.1. Military communication in the digital era

The evolution of operating environments in recent decades has transformed not only military activities (Raitasalo, 2014), but also how armies provide information about them (Edmunds, 2012). In this regard, the eruption of social media into the communication arena has changed the military's public diplomacy (Moreno-Mercado & Calatrava-Garcia, 2022). Social media allows armies to control the narrative and the flow of information, replacing traditional media as a mediator, and playing an especially relevant role when it comes to consequences of operations such as casualties or accidents (Forster, 2006). In addition to informational purposes, armies also use social media to increase recruitment and retention (Leightley *et al.*, 2020), as well as for justifying military operations in national territory and expeditionary deployments (Dandeker, 2009).

Military forces have a presence on various different social media, and are especially active on Twitter and Facebook (Leightley, 2020; Smolicz, 2018), as well as YouTube (Christensen, 2008, Mirrles, 2015). The recent evolution of social media has seen Instagram become one of the most popular social media applications, with more users than Twitter and users spending more time using the app. This is why armies have also focused on communicating on Instagram, but so far little research has been conducted about the military's use of this social media (López-Rodríguez & Castillo-Eslava, 2023). Instagram users share pictures and videos, express opinions about various topics and attempt to engage other users; indeed, the power of this social network lies in the high degree of interconnection among users (Bakhsi *et al.*, 2014; Aramendia-Muneta *et al.*, 2020). For most users of Instagram, the main purpose of posting is gaining the highest number of likes possible (Tifentale & Manovich, 2018), as this is considered an indicator of the popularity of both the user and the post (Souza *et al.*, 2015).

2.2. Engagement as a metric to capture users' participation

Engagement represents the level of involvement between users and posts to the accounts on social media. The activities that indicate engagement include likes, comments and sharing, analyzed with reference to the number of followers (Chan *et al.*, 2020). According to previous literature, there are multiple formulae that can be used to analyze participation, requiring the use of standardized rates to compare likes and comments (Swani *et al.*, 2017). Engagement is captured using the formula $[(\text{Likes} + \text{Comments}) / \text{Followers}] * 100$ (Mousse, 2020). This measure is the essence of social media, as the number of likes shows the level of acceptance of content and the number of comments quantifies the level of discussion around the topic (Bakhsi *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, comments are evidence that a post has had a bigger impact, as leaving a comment requires users spending more time on the post (Sabate *et al.*, 2014), implying a deeper level of engagement (Yu & Sun, 2019).

In commercial marketing, popular posts increase purchase intention (Lin *et al.*, 2017), implying a higher level of brand awareness and boosting business profits (Aramendia-Muneta *et al.*, 2020). In order to gain high rates of engagement, marketers have worked to improve captions in terms of length and content, as well as the clarity of visual elements (Lin *et al.*, 2017; Yu & Egger, 2021). Some studies have shown that selfies are a positive way of catching users' attention, tripling likes and comments relative to other posts (Souza *et al.*, 2015). At the same, there is a call effect, as when some pictures have large numbers of comments and likes, users tend to react accordingly (Souza-Arajo *et al.*, 2014). Engagement is influenced by the interactivity of the post, understood as many-to-many communications (Godfarb & Tucker, 2011). This is the most crucial characteristic of effective posts: question-and-answers, promotions or voting can all be used to increase consumer action, thus boosting engagement (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Lin *et al.*, 2017). However, publications posted early in the morning tend to be less popular (Mariani *et al.*, 2016) than those posted in the hours of the individual consumer (Lin *et al.*, 2017), while accounts with a higher frequency of posting tend to have higher levels of engagement (Mariani *et al.*, 2016; Yu & Sun, 2019).

The image itself is a relevant source of engagement, as a single image can include a wide range of primary information (Aramendia-Muneta *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, pictures shared on Instagram generally include people and humanizing images to capture attention (Carah & Saul, 2016). Some studies indicate that human faces are more engaging in social media (Bakhsi *et al.*, 2014), and are more likely to attract likes and comments (Aramendia-Muneta *et al.*, 2020). The inclusion of human elements in advertising increases individual levels of empathy with the shared content. In some cases, the appeal of posts to individual senses is defined as vividness (Lin *et al.*, 2017). Community managers and publicists can achieve vividness by including dynamic animations and attractive colors, with some studies suggesting that such pictures can improve the salience or prominence of the posts (De Vries *et al.*, 2012).

3. Methodological approach

The sample was composed of 1922 posts that included photographs, as in many of the videos it was not possible to analyze the likes and comments. These posts were contributed from 1 January to 31 December 2021 by the US Army (n=473), Spanish Army (n=331), French Army (n=316), Australian Army (n=334) and the IDF (n=468). These cases were selected to compare the communication of 4 professional expeditionary armies with one based on conscription and national defense. Data were collected by applying a codebook to build a matrix based on the absence/presence of the different elements selected (0/1), grouped into the main categories content, format and visual analysis. Following up on the future research lines identified in previous research, the purpose of this article is to identify the determinants of users' engagement with the different accounts. The engagement metric standardizes users' participation by means of the formula $([Likes+Comments]/$

Followers)*100. It has been used as the dependent variable, with Spearman's rho applied to determine the statistical correlations with other variables.¹

Table I. Research sample.

Accounts	Engagement	
	Account average ²	2021 sample
@australianarmy	2,99	3,12
@usarmy	0,66	1,43
@armee2terre	2,98	5,52
@ejercitodetierra	2,36	4,48
@idf	0,89	3,08

The analysis is structured to answer the research question: How do contextual and structural determinants influence military account followers' engagement on Instagram? In order to answer it, the following hypotheses have been proposed:

- H1.** The use of interactive strategies generates higher engagement levels than informative posts.
- H2.** The posts that are not related to military affairs have lower levels of engagement.
- H3.** The posts on the consequences of military praxis, such as casualties or participation in conflict, generate higher engagement levels.

In line with the proposed hypotheses, the general aim of this research is to analyze the relevance of contextual and structural determinants of the levels of engagement with the selected Instagram accounts. To that end, the following specific objectives have been set:

- O1.** To describe the main characteristics of posts, such as time, structure and themes, as determinants of engagement levels.
- O2.** To analyze the least and most rated posts to understand users' behavior on Instagram during 2021.
- O3.** To identify how users have engaged with posts related to the consequences derived of military praxis.

1. Confidence levels of the correlation coefficients: * indicates 90% confidence, while ** indicates 95% confidence.

2. Data from the online calculator Phlanx Influencer Auditor for Instagram.

Table II. Research Strategy.

Independent Variables	Intervening variables	Dependent Variable
Time determinants	Anniversaries Month Day of the week Time-frame of the day	Engagement
Structural determinants	Includes text Number of pictures per post Quiz	
Thematic determinants	Recruitment Military capabilities Organizational culture Personal stories Honor the fallen Adversary	

In order to understand users' behavior on social media, the research strategy seeks to analyze how the main determinants influence the engagement level. For this purpose, we have identified time, structural and thematic determinants as the independent variables, while the dependent variable is engagement. As the independent variables have to be operationalized, each of them has been broken down into several intervening variables, for which correlations with the level of engagement have been calculated. In addition to the general analysis of the variables, the analysis is complemented by the selection of the least and most engaging pictures, to gain a qualitative understanding of the relevance of determinants of users' engagement. For the present study, we have chosen the three least and the three most popular posts. The selected pictures are justified as they present notable higher engagement than the average for the entire account.

4. Determinants of user's engagement with official Instagram accounts

4.1. Characteristics of posts as a determinant of engagement

4.1.1. Time determinants

The data analysis yields different results regarding the time of posting. Regarding the anniversaries, the Spanish Army account is the only one that presents a correlation with engagement, albeit with a low level of significance, of 0,207**. Something similar happens with the day of the week, as there are no high levels of correlation in the sample, except for the French Army, which shows correlations between posts on Saturday and engagement (0,484**). This can be explained by the photo quiz on Saturday, which seeks to increase followers' engagement by encouraging voting (López-Rodríguez & Castillo-Eslava, 2023). However, the time of day of the posts (morning, afternoon and night) presents significant correlations in all the accounts except the US

Army profile. The values of these correlation coefficients are high, with users tending to interact more with content posted in the morning, as can be seen in the case of France (0,232**) and Australia (0,424**), although negative correlations are found in the cases of Spain (-0,339**) and the IDF (-0,316**). In the latter two cases, users interact more actively with both accounts when responding to nighttime posts (Spain, 0,169**; IDF, 0,223**). These data contrast with the literature that stated that morning posts are less popular (Mariani *et al.*, 2016) than those posted in the individual consumer time-frame (Lin *et al.*, 2017).

When calculating correlations between month and engagement, the French Army presents similar values as before (0,255**), while the US Army presents a negative correlation (-0,161**). As identified in previous research using this sample, the IDF shows distinct values conditioned by contextual factors. This can be seen in the value of the correlation between month and engagement (0,320**), which in turn is higher for comments (0,367**) than for likes (0,310**). According to previous research, comments indicate that the post has had a bigger impact, as commenting requires users to spend more time with the post (Sabate *et al.*, 2014), showing a deeper level of engagement (Yu & Sun, 2019). In the case of the IDF, it is worth noting the presence of both an active community of users, as well as the activity of bots operated by non-state actors to counter the IDF narrative.

4.1.2. Structural determinants

In contrast with timing determinants, the structure of posts can offer more relevant insights. When analyzing the structure of posts, the presence or absence of text does not yield significant results in any account, except for the negative correlation in the French sample (-0,151**). Similarly, no significant results are found for the use of hashtag. In the case of mentions, it is only significant in the Spanish Army sample, which presents correlations between mentions and likes (0,207**), comments (0,148**) and engagement (0,207**). The analysis shows a clearer correlation between engagement and the number of elements contained in the posts; in this case, the only account without significant values is the IDF one. The use of photo carousels is a positive strategy used by the other four accounts, as it increases users' engagement. The lowest correlations are found for Australia (0,317**) and the US (0,333**), and they show a higher correlation with likes than with comments. The two accounts with the highest engagement levels in carousels are clearly Spain (0,403**) and France (0,581**), with Spain showing lower values for comments (0,167**) than France (0,478**), a finding which is clearly related to the use of interactive communication strategies. As noted in the literature, some community managers adapt captions and content, as well as the visual elements to improve engagement rates (Lin *et al.*, 2017; Yu & Egger, 2021). Regarding the use of quizzes, the Spanish and the US armies do not present significant values, while Australia and the IDF register negative values (-0,157** and -0,151** respectively). However, the French Army presents a high correlation between quiz and engagement (0,403**), and higher still when related to comments (0,549**). This finding is consistent with other studies that show interaction as an effective element in posts: through questions-and-answers,

promotions or voting, users can be encouraged to participate, leading to higher engagement (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Lin *et al.*, 2017).

4.1.3. Thematic determinants

Correlations between engagement and the topics featured in the posts present homogeneous values in most of the accounts. Regarding recruitment, none of the accounts present significant values, despite this relationship being reported in the literature (Leightley *et al.*, 2020); in fact the armies analyzed posted almost no explicit information encouraging recruitment. Despite the fact that most of the posts in the sample were about military activities (79,3%), correlations are only significant in the case of Australia (0,207**) and France (0,192**). Similarly, when analyzing the posts showing military capabilities, the only significant correlations found are the one for the Australian Army (0,228**) and the negative one for the Spanish sample (-0,186). Analyzing the behavior of followers of the Spanish and French armies, they have similar characteristics, showing negative correlations between engagement and organizational culture posts (-0,199** and -0,149** respectively), and positive correlations with personal stories of soldiers (0,215** and 0,183** respectively). Something similar can be seen regarding the posts honoring the fallen, some of them including personal stories of the deceased servicemen: Spain presents significant correlations with engagement (0,173**) and comments (0,204**), while France presents similar values in likes (0,233**), comments (0,205**) and engagement (0,232**).

The followers of the IDF show a similar level of interaction regarding honoring the fallen in terms of engagement (0,195**), likes (0,193**) and comments (0,166**). However, the IDF account reveals different behavior than the others regarding how they represent their adversary on social media (19,3% of the posts from the IDF sample). This is a key topic for increasing engagement with users as the correlation between the variable adversary and engagement is fairly high (0,432**), as it is for both likes (0,245**) and comments (0,450**). Similar results are found for the IDF's military operations, which show high correlation coefficients with engagement (0,407**), likes (0,401**) and comments (0,425**). The IDF's values for military operations are higher than the Spanish Army's (0,148** in comments) and the French Army's (0,289** in engagement, 0,313** in comments and 0,287** in likes).

4.2. Visual and thematic determinants of the least engaging posts

4.2.1. Event advertisement: Australian and US Army

Some of the selected armies have used Instagram as a platform to transmit information about events and commemorations. However, these type of posts have lower rates of engagement in all of the selected accounts. The two most representative cases are Australia and the US, as their engagement rates are under 1 in all cases, indicating followers' lack of interest in this kind of post. The three selected posts from the Australian Army are infographics, one of which is a poster for a blood donation campaign, with an engagement rate of

0.46 (AUS121, 1 September). The other two posts with the lowest engagement rates are related to the recognition of aboriginal populations' rights in Australia. These informational posts are about social events; the first one registers a rate of 0,57 (AUS229, 27 May) while the other has a rate of 0,7 (AUS185, 5 July). The first one is about the national reconciliation week and the second one is about NAIDOC week. Both pictures include explanatory texts about the need to be aware about the relevance of multiculturalism in the Australian Army and to respect aboriginal culture.

The engagement rates of US Army posts are even lower than the Australian ones; in fact, none of them register over 0,31. The account promotes three events with low engagement rates: 0,23 (US154, 11 October), 0,26 (US547, 20 February) and 0,31 (US445, 22 April). The themes of the posts are quite different, as one of them is about Earth Day and the other two are about events for military personnel. One of them is an advertisement for an event about the importance of vaccination for the US Army's servicepeople. Compulsory vaccination against Covid-19 has been a polemical issue in the US, particularly in the Armed Forces, where there has been a divergence opinions about it (Steinhauer, 14th September 2021).

4.2.2. Low engagement for the account, not for the sample: Spain and France

Aside from the selected posts, French and Spanish armies generally have higher engagement rates compared to the other accounts of the sample, as well as in comparison to commercial brands. As part of the Spanish communication strategy, a calendar is posted on the first day of each month. However this is a regular post, and two of the posts registering the lowest engagement are pictures of the calendar. This is the case with the calendar of September 2021, showing a picture of a groups of soldiers manufacturing facemasks during the pandemic, which has an engagement rate of 1,58 (SP208, 1 September). Similarly, the calendar of December 2021, showing a picture of soldiers during the pandemic, registers a rate of 2.13 (SP50, 1 December).

This post is highly symbolic, in recognition of those who have participated in the domestic deployment during the pandemic. In contrast with other posts, they do not display a high level of technical or artistic sophistication. As seen in other posts with higher engagement, in the Spanish Army's account, the content is given precedence over the type of picture. This can be also seen in the post SP53 (29 November), presenting a tank backlit by the sunset, which registers an engagement rate of 2,08. Similarly, some of the French Army's posts are aimed at improving communication with the users, but they are not successful. Two of the posts include quizzes, with rates of 1,74 (FR137, 7 March) and 2.05 (FR330, 24 February). The first one consists of four pictures, and users are asked to identify the content, while the second one showcases sports clothing, and asks users if they used it during their military experience. Conversely, the post with the lowest engagement is the one promoting radio @skyrockplm (FR344, 13 February) with a rate of 0,8.

4.3. Consequences of military praxis as a determinant of the most engaging posts

In contrast with the results regarding the lowest rated posts, the posts with the highest engagement are directly or indirectly linked with military praxis. The analysis shows users have a tendency to like and comment on posts honoring the fallen, as well as those related to active military operations.

4.3.1. Honor the fallen: A common trend in military accounts

4.3.1.1. *Building national identity from the First World War: Australia and France*

One of the most influential topics for engagement levels are the posts regarding the national identity of the selected countries. These foundational narratives contribute to the creation of collective beliefs (Schwartz, 2008), which helps explain the high levels of engagement in Australia and France. In the Australian Army sample, the most popular post is the ANZAC Day tribute (AUS264, 24 April) with an engagement rate of 8,68, compared to the average of 1,59. The image depicts a composition of shadows in a tribute to the fallen at Gallipoli, symbolizing the heroic dimension of the Australian national identity (Donoghue & Tranter, 2015; Day, 1998). The symbolism of ANZAC in the Australian culture reflects its relevant influence on how many Australians perceive themselves (Tranter & Donoghue, 2007).

In contrast with the photograph posted by the Australian Army, the French Army posted a cartoon to honor all the French soldiers throughout their national history (FR48, 11 November). As in the Australian post, this is a commemoration of the 1918 Armistice that ended WWI. The selected post registers an engagement rate of 13,93, compared to the average of 5,89. The cartoon depicts a modern soldier shaking hands with a WWI soldier and thanking him for his service to France. This picture has a symbolism for French society, as the Allies won out over the German Empire in 1918. The end of an event as traumatic as WWI contributed to the creation of a new French identity around the end of the war. In contrast with the defeat of Gallipoli, for French people the focus was on the end of a harrowing event in their recent history.

4.3.1.2. *Ceremonial approach to honor the fallen: Spain and France*

Within the different selected accounts, France and Spain have similarities in how they approach honoring their fallen soldiers. In both cases, there is a picture of the soldier against the national flag. The French Army presents a tribute to an officer that registers an engagement rate of 30,65 (FR85, 24 September). Combined with the image, the text tells the personal story of a serviceman killed in a counter-terrorist operation in Mali. According to additional information, the story prompted an emotional response from French society, generating substantial media coverage about the soldier. Another French Army post that generates an engagement rate of 17,48 (FR72, 13 October) tells the personal story of serviceman fallen in Mali. In both cases, the text includes the unit to which the deceased belonged, which coincides with the information provided about the sample in previous research.

The Spanish Army's most engaging posts relate to tributes to fallen servicemen. In contrast with the French case, the three deceased lost their lives in training courses (parachute and diving). The images use the same composition as those posted by the French Army, with individual portraits of the soldiers against the national flag, and have high rates of engagement. The most engaging post is related to a fallen soldier with previous experience in military operations, generating a rate of 20,57 (SP348, 10 June), while the other two have rates of 19,51 (SP122, 16 October) and 12,34 (SP121, 16 October). The description of the posts is shorter, explaining the unit and the specialty. In contrast with France which mentions the unit's accounts, the Spanish Army just references the units by using geographical hashtags. The inclusion of human elements in the posts increases individual empathy with the content shared, and this vividness can help users feel identified with the deceased soldiers, as in other cases

4.3.1.3. Informal approach to honor the fallen: the US Army and the IDF

In contrast with the accounts of France and Spain, both the IDF and the US Army take a different approach to the tributes to their fallen soldiers. Within the selected posts, the US Army presents two tributes: the first one is for a serviceman who died in Afghanistan, with a rate of 8,23 (US222, 30 August); and the second one is for actress Betty White (*The Golden Girls*), who served in WWII, with an engagement rate of 7,07 (US01, 31 December). In the case of the tribute to Betty White, the image features an old black and white picture of her during the war, along with a recent picture. However, the first tribute shows a group of soldiers lifting a coffin out of a military plane, recalling those images from the Vietnam War as part of the institutional imaginary of the US Army. Those pictures include humanized images to capture more attention, which directly translates into higher engagement levels (Carah & Shaul, 2016).

The IDF account also presents a tribute to a fallen serviceman, which has an engagement rate of 16.76 (IL265, 12 May). In this case, the text provides information about the NCO, his age and his military unit. The written information tells how he was attacked, accusing Hamas of killing him during the attacks of May 2021. The Israeli post takes a different visual approach than the other four accounts, showing the deceased in uniform during military service, presented in a more natural way without the institutional elements featured in Spanish and French tributes. The IDF's post may create a greater visual impact, due to the natural approach, a specific description and accusing a terrorist of killing him, features which are not present in the other accounts. The image itself is a source of engagement as it includes a wide range of primary information (Aramendia-Muneta *et al.*, 2020). In this case, engagement can be explained by thematic elements such as honoring the fallen, as well as contextual factors relating to the terrorist bombings of Hamas in 2021.

4.3.2. Contextual factors: Operation Guardian of the Walls

Within the analyzed sample, the reactions to the IDF's posts are conditioned by the Israeli political context. The most engaging posts are directly related to the events that formed part of Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021.

The intensity of the attacks and the constant tensions with Palestinian terror groups condition how the IDF communicates in social media; the content it shares tends to identify causes and attribute responsibilities to terror organizations (Moreno-Mercado & Calatrava-García, 2022). The two posts with the highest engagement are an infographic about the Arab-Israeli conflict, with a rate of 23,92 (IL258, 13th May) and a photograph of the Influencer Corrin Gideon, with a rate of 17,51 (IL267, 12th May). The same happens as with the previously analyzed post (IL265, 12 May), which is related to honoring the fallen as well as contextual factors. The dataset evidences a high concentration of high-rated posts on 12 and 13 May 2021, the days with the highest levels of terrorist activity from Hamas.

The first post (IL258, 13 May) explains the motivations of terrorists groups, as well as telling a narrative about the conflict. In the picture, we can see a cartoon with a young girl talking to an Israeli soldier about the conflict. She asks «What's going on between Gaza and Israel?» and the situation is explained from an objective perspective. The second post (IL267, 12 May) addresses bigger problems stemming from the moral dimensions of social media logic. The picture shows the influencer crying and hugging her baby while another person takes the picture. The communication of the IDF is conducted in accordance with communication crisis parameters, but the Israeli military does not define the attacks as an isolated event (Coombs, 2015) but more as a crisis forming part of a long-term process (Shrivastava, 1993; Roux-Dufort, 2007). Analyzing the communication during Guardian of the Walls, the communication seeks to instruct people on how they should react, as well as to generate an emotional response to the crisis and an internalized positive image of the military during the crisis (Sturges, 1994).

The comparison between the most and least engaging posts shows the relevance of context in explaining users' behavior regarding the IDF's Instagram account. The most engaging posts were uploaded to Instagram during Hamas' attacks in May 2021, while the ones not from that period have a lower rate. In the case of the selected posts with the lowest rates, the first one is an infographic about the Lebanon conflict with a rate of 0,66 (IL399, 13 January). It can be compared with the highest-rated post as both are infographics talking about the adversary and have similar technical characteristics. However, the two posts with the lowest engagement rates have more elaborate technical characteristics, better suited to the philosophy of Instagram. In this case, the posts have a rate of 0,87 (IL327, 22 March) and 0,81 (IL397, 15 January). The first post shows a soldier talking into a radio and the text reads «Sorry, I cannot hear you, I'm kinda busy... defending Israel» and mentions @ladygaga. The post refers to the song, but the play on words may cause certain problems of understanding. In contrast, the second one is a winning picture from a photography quiz that shows silhouettes with a sunset behind.

The IDF's communication on Instagram is part of a centralized system of public diplomacy, called Hasbarah, which coordinates the communication activities of several security agencies and reports directly to the Prime Minister (Cunningham, 2015). By using social media, the IDF can manage an official public image while fighting on asymmetric conflicts, especially during terror crises (Christensen, 2008; Golan & Ben-Ari, 2018; Stern & Ben-Shalom, 2021). This also serves the purpose of securing the support of online

Israeli communities, setting the agenda and defining perceptions around the conflict (Mayfield, 2011). According to the literature, engagement with the IDF's posts on social media can be understood as support for the ideas it promotes (Kohn, 2017); however, the results associated with comments differ, as the negative content of some remarks require further research to determine the full relevance of comments.

5. Conclusions

Social media has increased its relevance for public organizations, being used by armies as part of their public relations campaigns. This study has focused on the importance of engagement as a metric to seize the popularity of posts, evidencing that interactive communication strategies are more effective than informative ones. The results show that those topics related with the main purpose of the account are more popular, as well as engagement is affected by contextual factors regarding ongoing military operations.

This research helps to identify the main determinants of engagement, providing a better understanding of the behavior of followers of military accounts. The data analysis supports **H1** «The use of interactive strategies generates higher engagement levels than informative posts». The French Army has systematically applied an interactive strategy that encourages users' participation. The statistical analysis has shown this to be a successful strategy to increase engagement levels. Other determinants such as the time or the day of the week are not as relevant as the communication strategy. Most of the armies achieve higher engagement through the structure of the post, with photo carousels being the most engaging format.

The results also support **H2** «The posts that are not related to military affairs have lower levels of engagement», as users tend to engage less with that are posts not linked to military affairs. This is reflected in the analysis of the least engaging posts, such as those promoting events on social media, as can be seen in the Australian and US Army accounts, as well as in the French and Spanish accounts. The support for H1 and H2 is in line with the literature. Various authors have noted the importance of interactive strategies when it comes to increasing engagement (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Lin *et al.*, 2017) and the tendency of users to interact less with posts that are not directly related to the purpose of the account that they are following (Kim & Hull, 2017).

The analysis is more complex regarding **H3** «The posts on the consequences of military praxis, such as casualties or participation in conflict, generate higher engagement levels». Of the analyzed accounts, the IDF is the one which best reflects this behavior. The results show a strong correlation between posts during Operation Guardian of the Walls and engagement levels during this period. This can be identified as a temporal determinant, with May being the month with highest engagement, and the three most engaging posts being related to the Hamas terror attacks. On the other hand, the analysis of the Spanish, French, US and Australian armies shows that users tend

to engage with the posts about consequences such as fatal casualties during operations or training activities. **H3** is thus partially supported, as high engagement levels can be explained not only by contextual factors but also by emotional elements inherent to Instagram logic.

Some limitations can be found concerning **H3**, as engagement increases in response to the consequences of military praxis. However, this research cannot identify the user's support for the information posted. Analyzing likes can show the public support for the organization, but comments could imply either positive engagement supporting the military or negative engagement criticizing the post. In order to determine the direction of engagement and fully understand the results obtained in this article, further research should employ experimental and qualitative approaches. Participants in the focus groups could be asked to evaluate posts, justifying why they consider some posts to be more appealing than others despite having similar content and structural characteristics. The gaps identified in this article can be used to orient future research, in an effort to improve armies' public communication on social media.

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