

## Is marketing missing in the Liga F? Generation Z perceptions towards the Spanish professional women's soccer league

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**Annotation.** Women's soccer in Spain has captured global attention, propelled by Spain's victory in the World Cup (2023) and the global scandal involving the President of the Federation. Nonetheless, this competition remains modest in terms of revenue. Although support for and concern about feminism vary among Generation Z, they remain notably strong in Spain (Hernández-Arriaza *et al.*, 2023, p.1; Vilanova, 2019, p.43) and beyond (Twenge, 2023). This article examines Generation Z's perception of the Spanish women's soccer league to assess their interest and verify whether it is driven by the hypotheses in the theoretical framework of feminism and gender equality or by the appeal of sportainment and communication. To achieve this, a quantitative survey was conducted with 203 students to carry out an exploratory analysis and hypothesis testing. The results confirm the influence of sportainment and communication ( $p < 0.05$ ), but do not provide statistical support for the gender equality hypothesis ( $p > 0.05$ ). The study concludes that while members of Gen Z acknowledge and support gender equality, their interest in following a competition such as Liga F would require a major dose of sportainment through gamification, free access, which is the opposite of what Liga F offers.

**Keywords:** sportainment, sport marketing, soccer, Liga F, Generation Z, women.

**JEL classification:** C18, C38, M31, M37, M14.

## Introduction

Professional women's soccer in Spain is gaining traction, catalyzed by two recent events. The national team's World Cup victory in 2023, whose final match achieved the highest viewership in the history of women's soccer in Spain, attracting 5.6 million viewers and 65.7 percent market share (Llanos, 2023a).

Moreover, the President of the Federation, Luis Rubiales, non-consensually kissed one of the players, Jenny Hermoso, sparking a global outcry and leading to Rubiales' resignation (Bubola, Chaundler, 2023). As a result, Jenny Hermoso has become a global cultural icon. The Financial Times recognized her as the world's second most influential woman in 2023 (Ensor, 2023). Hermoso was also invited to the Twelve Grapes ceremony on New Year's Eve, broadcast on public television. This coveted event signified her popularity (Llanos, 2023b). These events had an immediate impact on Liga F, the name given to the women's soccer league in Spain. Liga F almost tripled its audience at the beginning of the 2023/2024 season (Palco23, 2023). The league also forecasts a 16.7 percent increase in revenue, from €12 million to €14 million, driven primarily by new audiovisual rights contracts with broadcasters such as DAZN, Mediapro, and LaLiga (García, 2024).

Despite this momentum, growth remains slow, especially considering the league's low starting point. If landmark successes, politicization, and intense public discourse on women's rights are not enough to drive change, then what is? Demographic data suggest that targeting Generation Z could be effective. Born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, Generation Z is often referred to as iGen or Post-Millennials (Twenge, 2018). They are the most feminist generation in history (Twenge, 2023). Yet gender plays a crucial role in discussions of feminism within this generation. While 61% of Generation Z women identify as feminists (Cox *et al.*, 2023), the gender gap within this generation is wider than in others, at around 10 percentage points. In contrast, only 43% of Generation Z men identify as feminists.

The situation in Spain reflects this trend. A survey by El País confirms a similar gender divide, with two-thirds of young girls and 45.9% of young men explicitly identifying as feminists (2019). Research, however, indicates notable polarization within this generation, ranging from highly activist and concerned to highly disengaged (Hernández-Arriaza *et al.*, 2023; Vilanova, 2019, p. 43). With 8 million people in Spain belonging to Generation Z (INE, 2023), representing around 20 percent of the population, this equates to a potential market of around 5 million Gen Zers who prioritize feminism. Consequently, women's soccer can be viewed as a powerful vehicle for promoting feminist and gender-equality values, making this segment a strategically appropriate target (Muñoz-Céspedes, 2024, p. 364). This article aims to analyze Generation Z's perceptions in Spain toward the Liga F, assessing their interest in women's soccer and whether values such as feminism and gender equality, alongside the influence of sportainment and communication strategies (Gallego, 2024), translate into greater commitment to the league. To achieve this, a quantitative survey incorporating both closed and open-ended questions was administered to 203 Gen Z students in Spain. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data and identify patterns of preference and disinterest. Furthermore, the hypotheses established in the theoretical framework were tested using a Chi-squared test and an analysis of adjusted residuals.

The article is structured as follows: first, it discusses the cultural and media positioning of women's soccer and Generation Z's values. Next, it outlines the methodology and survey instruments. The subsequent section presents and analyzes the results through the lens of sport communication theory and gender theory, particularly the concepts of sportainment and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, p. 829). The conclusion offers strategic recommendations for Liga F to engage better and retain Gen Z audiences.

The findings reveal a paradox: while over 80% of Gen Z respondents support gender equality and nearly half identify as feminists, their interest in the Liga F is extremely low (only 3% follow it). Respondents cited a lack of entertainment, insufficient media visibility, and paywalled access as key barriers. Statistical analysis confirms that a more innovative communication strategy and a focus on sportainment are the most significant variables in driving interest. Respondents strongly favour formats that integrate

gamification, emotional engagement, and free-access features, which are more prevalent in emerging men's leagues like the Kings League, rather than in Liga F.

## 1. Theoretical Framework

Despite the growing professionalism of women's sports, research on marketing and communication strategies for women's sport organizations remains limited (Morgan, 2019). Yet, unlike men's sports, consumers tend to associate women's professional teams with distinctive values such as diversity, inclusion, and empowerment. These factors provide strategic insights for more effective promotion (Doyle *et al.*, 2021). For instance, fan engagement in England's Women's Super League is driven by a strong community ethos, international talent, and the quality of play (Leslie-Walker, Mulvenna, 2022, p.314).

One reason for this academic lag is the relatively recent emergence of professional women's leagues, many of which were established only after the national teams achieved success. Even then, sponsorship and financial investment have been slow to follow. Spain's Liga F is no exception. During the 2015–16 season, Germany's Frauen-Bundesliga averaged just 1,076 spectators per match (Kaelberer, 2019, p.342), while attendance in Sweden and Denmark, remained similarly low at around 1,000, despite these nations having progressive gender norms (Kjaer, Agergaard, 2013, p.816). In the U.S., women's sports receive only 4% of media coverage and 2% of total sponsorship (Guilfoyle, 2022), while the National Women's Soccer League endured nearly a decade of low salaries and financial hardship (Kassouf, 2021). Likewise, Liga F reported a €20 million deficit in the 2021/2022 season, which was partially covered by public institutions or cross-subsidized by the men's sections of major clubs (Izquierdo, 2023).

Despite its potential to challenge gender norms, women's soccer operates within a landscape of cultural tensions. Hyperfeminized representations are often rejected by fans (Sveinson, Allison, 2022, p.446), while the sport itself remains symbolically tied to masculinity (Clément-Guillot *et al.*, 2011, p.67). The limited interest in women's soccer, despite widespread support for gender equality among Gen Z, is consistent with the theory of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that certain masculinized practices dominate and marginalize other gender expressions (Connell, 1987; Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005, p.829). The authors argue that sports like soccer are culturally coded as masculine, perpetuating the exclusion or devaluation of women's participation even among self-proclaimed feminists. This coding is reinforced by the gendered perception of sport as a domain of aggression, endurance, and strength—traits associated with masculine-coded disciplines such as soccer (Koivula, 2001, p.337; Klomsten *et al.*, 2005, p.625). Conversely, sports such as gymnastics or tennis have historically been framed in terms of grace and aesthetics, traits often coded as feminine (Metheny, 1965, p.43; Koivula, 1995, p.543; Klomsten *et al.*, 2004, p.119). Hofstede's cultural taxonomy further reinforces this dichotomy, associating masculine cultures with achievement and competition, and feminine cultures with empathy and quality of life (Hofstede, 2005, 2012). Within this framework, soccer aligns more readily with masculine-coded values.

Generation Z, however, may help reconfigure this narrative. While a significant segment of this cohort embraces feminist and egalitarian ideals (Hernández-Arriaza *et al.*, 2023, p.1; Vilanova, 2019, p.43); their expectations regarding sports consumption diverge from those of previous generations. Research suggests that Gen Z seeks novel, emotionally engaging formats that traditional broadcasters fail to provide (Carrero *et al.*, 2024, p.63). The Kings League, an online, gamified soccer format, exemplifies this demand. Carrero *et al.* (2024) use the term sportainment (Webb, Richelieu, 2021, p.473) to capture Gen Z's appetite for both spectacle and gameplay. The integration of sport and entertainment is becoming increasingly central to strategic branding (Desbordes, Richelieu, 2019; Richelieu, 2021, p.1; Richelieu, Webb, 2021, p.473), especially in contexts where gamification, emotional storytelling, and social media engagement

are key to capturing the attention of young people (López Vidales, Gómez Rubio, 2021, p.543; Valderrama Santomé, Crespo-Pereira, 2021). Participatory formats further enhance engagement (Moreno-Albarracín, 2024). In this context, women's soccer has untapped potential to offer a unique emotional narrative that aligns with Gen Z values. However, it must adapt its format and delivery to fully engage this audience.

Data shows that Liga F has yet to fulfill its potential. Meanwhile, Generation Z, with its interest in entertainment and widespread commitment to feminism, represents a key demographic for growth. We contend that Liga F has not done enough to engage this cohort in Spain. This failure to connect is further complicated by a saturated soccer market that includes LaLiga, the Kings League, the Queens League, and other foreign championships, such as the English Premier League and the Saudi Pro League. Florentino Pérez, President of Real Madrid and leader of the European Super League project, has frequently cited traditional men's soccer's failure to resonate with Generation Z (Calonge, 2021). The King's League rapid success among younger audiences demonstrates the validity of this concern.

This dynamic can be better understood through the lens of hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell, 1987; Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005, p.829). Traditional soccer, and by extension, Liga F's mimetic alignment with it, largely operates within this paradigm. Rather than establishing itself as a culturally distinct space for alternative gender narratives and values, Liga F has largely replicated the communicative patterns, aesthetics, and organizational structures of men's soccer. Consequently, it inadvertently reinforces the masculine-coded representation of soccer, making it harder for young audiences, especially those seeking inclusive, progressive, and emotionally engaging content, to view Liga F as distinct and relevant.

Conversely, the growing popularity of formats such as the Kings League reflects a generational shift toward sportainment (Desbordes, Richelieu, 2019; Richelieu, Webb, 2021, p.1). Generation Z favours interactivity, gamified structures, behind-the-scenes access, and fast-paced audiovisual content, which traditional formats struggle to provide (Carrero *et al.*, 2024, p.63). From a sports communication standpoint, Liga F's reluctance to embrace sportainment mechanisms represents a missed opportunity to differentiate itself from both men's soccer and competing entertainment options.

By overlooking the evolving media and cultural landscape, Liga F risks remaining marginalized, caught between an outdated sporting model shaped by hegemonic masculinity and its untapped potential to promote gender equality, visibility, and sportainment. Rather than seeking parity through imitation, Liga F should be reconceptualized as a space of transformation through strategic divergence. This would enable the league to cultivate a new form of symbolic capital in which sport and feminism coalesce to create a compelling communicative product tailored to the digital generation.

This article addresses the question: What does the Liga F need to do to appeal to Generation Z in Spain? To explore this question, two hypotheses are put forward. The first posits that La Liga F must incorporate elements of sportainment into its championship model to attract new, tech-savvy audiences and develop communication channels that can compete with men's soccer's traditional media presence. The second hypothesis, derived from the theoretical framework, suggests that Generation Z is the ideal target audience for Liga F, due to its members' strong commitment to gender equality, feminist values, and support for civil rights.

## **2. Methodology**

This study analyses the perceptions and knowledge that Generation Z in Spain has of the Liga F, focusing particularly on the emotional factors that influence their engagement with the sports league- a cohort often characterized as being highly emotionally driven. To explore these issues, an initial exploratory analysis

was conducted using a survey administered in April 2024. The questionnaire, which was distributed via Google Forms, was completed by a sample of 203 Generation Z participants, primarily university students from various colleges in Madrid. The survey combined multiple-choice, ranking, and Likert-scale items with demographic and open-ended questions. Including open-ended questions allowed for deeper insight into complex or poorly understood aspects of the topic (Walliman, 2011). Although open-ended questions pose challenges for subsequent coding, they yield rich textual and non-textual data revealing respondents' opinions, attitudes, and spontaneous reflections, thereby enhancing our understanding of the subject (Pope, 2012). Additionally, the survey results were used to test the hypotheses formulated within the sportainment and gender equality framework using a Chi-square test and residual analysis.

### 3. Questionnaire Design

To develop a profile of Generation Z participants, the following data were collected: gender, age, place of residence, and educational level. The survey consisted of 5 dichotomous items (Yes/No/NA), 3 Likert-scale items, and 4 open-ended questions. *Table 1* presents the four question blocks (Demographic, Gender, Women's soccer, and Liga F) alongside the variable name for each item. These four blocks were created by grouping related questions to facilitate analysis and interpretation.

**Table 1 - Questions of the survey**

BLOCK NAME	SURVEY QUESTIONS	VARIABLE NAME	QUESTION TYPE
DEMO. BLOCK	Gender	D1	Demographic
	Age	D2	
	Academic Level	D3	
	Place of residence	D4	
GENDER BLOCK	Do you believe in gender equality?	G1	Yes/No/NA
	Are you feminist?	G2	
	Do you consider that your generation is more aware of gender equality than previous ones?	G3	
WOMEN'S SOCCER BLOCK	Are you interested in men's soccer?	W1	Likert scale
	Are you interested in women's soccer?	W2	
	If you have seen a women's soccer match, how would you describe it ?	W3	Multiple answer
	Why are you not interested in women's soccer?	W4	
	If you prefer to follow another women's sport instead of soccer, what is that sport?	W5	
LIGA F BLOCK	Do you know the "Liga F" (the women's soccer league in Spain)?	L1	Yes/No/NA
	Do you follow the "Liga F"?	L2	
	Reason why you follow the "Liga F"	L3	Multiple answer
	How do you think the popularity of women's soccer could be increased?	L4	

Source: created by authors.

#### 3.1. Sample and Participants

The investigation was conducted using an online survey targeting a sample of 203 students from various colleges in Madrid, yielding 203 valid responses. Table 2 summarizes the responses to the items related to the students. The sample of 203 students is representative, as participants were randomly selected from multiple universities, and all belong to Generation Z. Furthermore, both the Chi-square test and the residual analysis are non-parametric, which ensures that the questionnaire is valid and robust for a sample of this size (McHugh, 2013, p.143).

#### 4. Data Analysis

The data analysis falls within the scope of descriptive research, employing a quantitative methodology to measure these attitudes in the digital age (Heere, 2018, p.21). To this end, a survey was designed to identify patterns in Generation Z's content preferences, specifically by comparing their consumption of Liga F with that of traditional soccer leagues, such as La Liga.

This exploratory analysis provides a foundational understanding of the subject, laying the groundwork for future research. This methodology offers several key advantages for this type of research. Among them, we can highlight the following: a) a concise data synthesis; b) clear data visualization; c) the identification of unknown trends and patterns; and d) a comparative analysis of the data to facilitate the identification of differences or similarities across variables or categories.

In the multiple-choice question, the responses were categorized to test the hypotheses using a Chi-squared test and an analysis of adjusted residuals (Agresti, 2007). The Chi-square test is a statistical procedure used to determine whether a significant relationship exists between categorical variables. It compares the observed frequencies in each category with the expected frequencies under the null hypothesis, which assumes there is no association between the variables. When the Chi-squared statistics are sufficiently large and exceed the critical value, the null hypothesis can be rejected, indicating that the differences between the observed and expected frequencies are unlikely to be due to chance. This technique is particularly valuable in survey-based research where the aim is to assess whether participants' responses are uniformly distributed or if distinct patterns emerge across groups. The analysis of adjusted residuals complements the Chi-squared test by showing which specific category pairs contribute most to the overall Chi-squared value (Anscombe, Tukey, 1963, p.141). Adjusted residuals represent the standardized differences between observed and expected frequencies, helping to identify unusually high or low counts. Large positive or negative residuals indicate that a given combination of categories significantly deviates from statistical expectations. This approach establishes not only whether a meaningful relationship exists but also highlights where the most substantive differences occur within the data. The Chi-squared test was also applied to examine the association between two specific variables: participants' views on gender equality (G1) and their interest in the Liga F (L2).

#### 5. Results

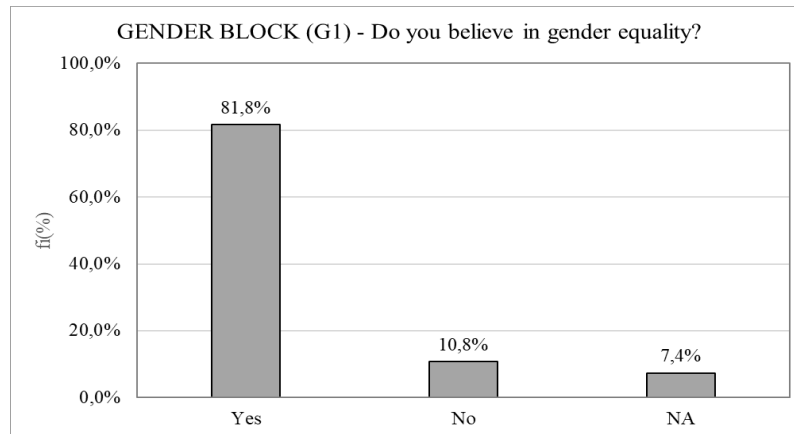
The results for the demographic section are summarized in *Table 2*. Subsequently, the gender block, which posed three questions on feminism and gender equality, is detailed in *Figures 1, 2, and 3*, respectively.

**Table 2 – DEMOGRAPHIC BLOCK results**

Gender	Female	49,3%
	Male	48,3%
Age	[18-24)	94,4%
	Others	5,6%
Academic Level	University	88,8%
	Others	11,2%
Place of residence	Madrid	91,1%
	Others	8,9%

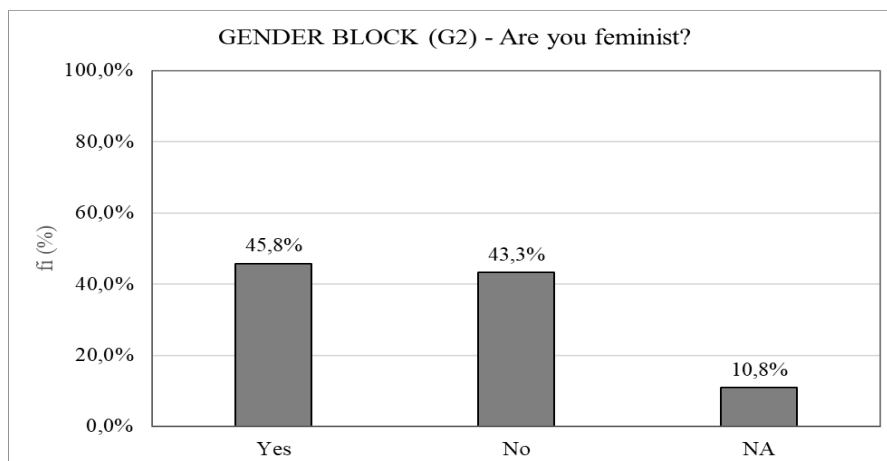
Source: created by authors.

Figure 1 shows that most respondents (over 80%) support gender equality (G1). Regarding question G2, on feminist sentiment among Gen Z respondents, there is a nearly even split: around 45% identify as feminists, while a similar proportion do not. The discrepancy between support for gender equality and identification with feminism may stem from the tendency to associate the term 'feminist' with politics. In contrast, gender equality is often more closely associated with a universal value. This outcome is consistent with the findings of other public surveys on feminism among Generation Z, which have shown that men are less likely to identify as feminists than women (El País, 2019).



Source: created by authors.

Figure 1. GENDER BLOCK QUESTION (G1) - Do you believe in gender equality?

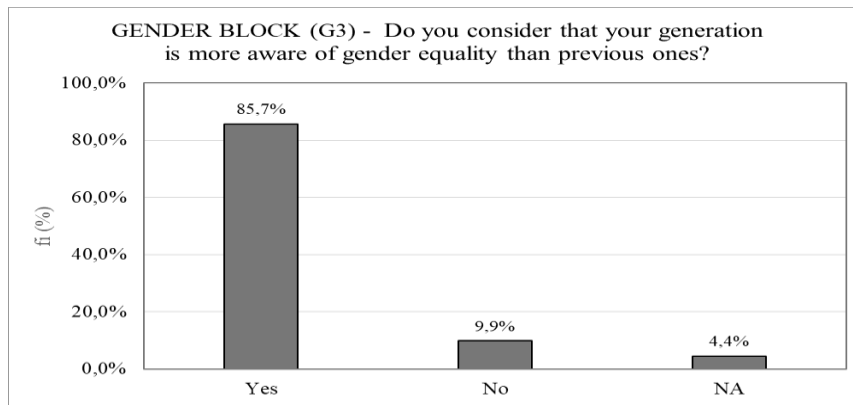


Source: created by authors.

Figure 2. GENDER BLOCK QUESTION (G2) - Are you a feminist?

Finally, in response to the question of whether they believe their generation is more aware of gender equality than previous generations, Figure 3 shows that an overwhelming majority considered Generation Z significantly more aware of these issues.

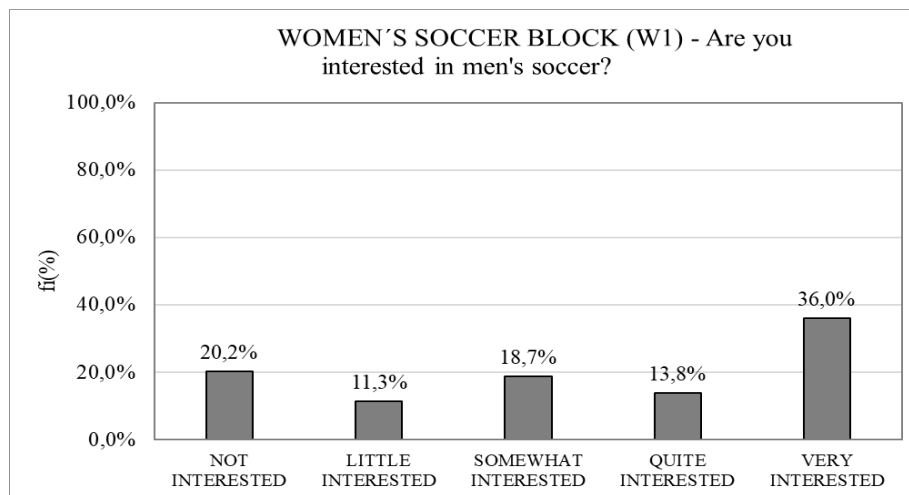
The Gender Block outcomes suggest that, in theory, this generation should be more inclined than others to consume women's soccer, given the political dimension of their sociocultural profile and current public discourse.



Source: created by authors.

Figure 3. **GENDER BLOCK QUESTION (G3)- Do you consider that your generation is more aware of gender equality than previous ones?**

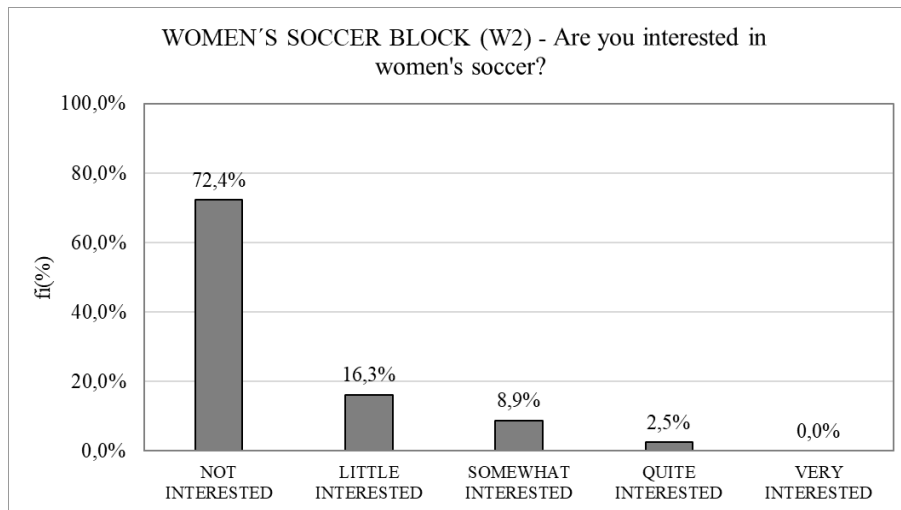
The next section, the Women's Soccer Block, contains questions designed to measure and compare respondents' interest in men's and women's soccer, as shown in *Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8*, respectively.



Source: created by authors.

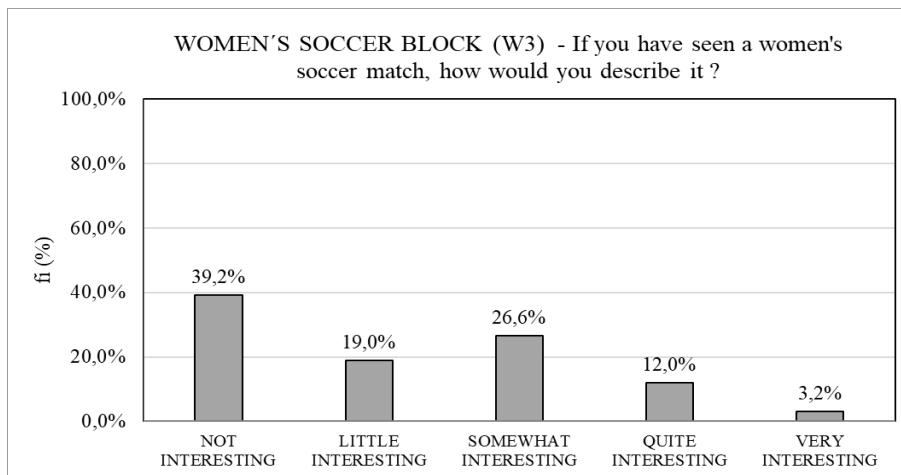
Figure 4. **WOMEN'S SOCCER BLOCK (W1) - Are you interested in men's soccer?**

The first two questions revealed a stark disparity in interest between men's and women's soccer. While the majority (70%) of those surveyed followed men's soccer, only 10% expressed interest in women's soccer. Of particular interest to the researchers was the finding that nearly three-quarters of Gen Z respondents reported no interest in women's soccer whatsoever. Question 3 confirms these perceptions, with fewer than 15% of participants reporting any level of interest in women's matches.



Source: created by authors.

Figure 5. **WOMEN ´S SOCCER BLOCK (W2) - Are you interested in women's soccer?**

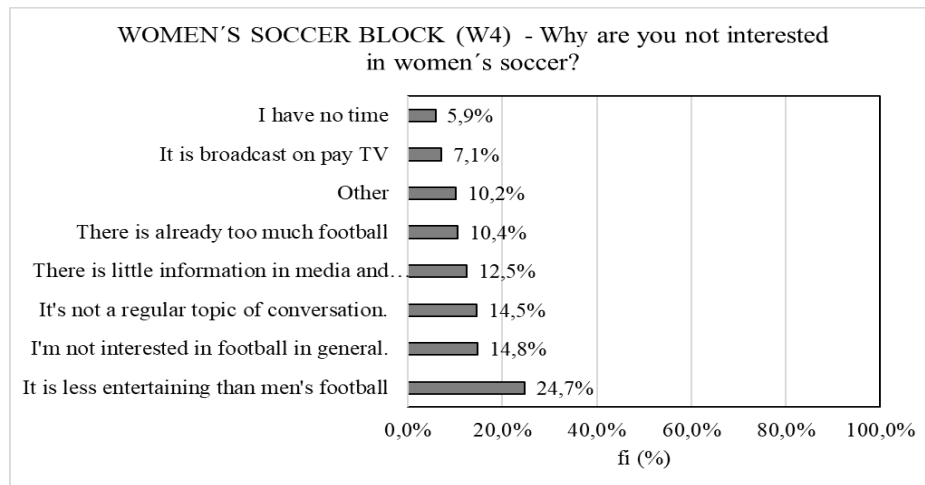


Source: created by authors.

Figure 6. **WOMEN ´S SOCCER QUESTION (W3) – “If you have seen a women's soccer match, how would you describe it?”**

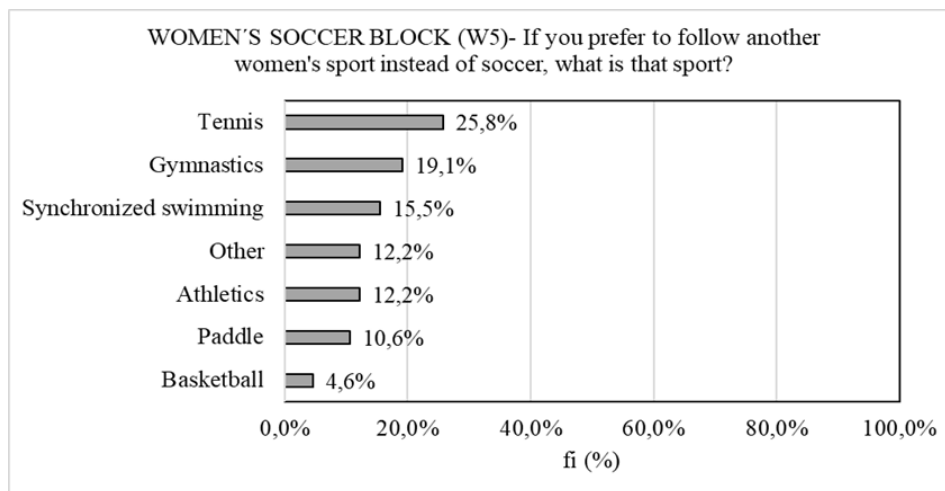
Multiple-choice question W4, “Why are you not interested in women's soccer?”, was used to elicit specific reasons for this apparent lack of interest (Figure 7).

Particularly noteworthy are the responses from over 30% of participants: “It is not a usual topic of conversation,” “There is little information in the media,” and “Pay TV.” These responses highlight a perceived lack of communication and entertainment coverage. These answers will be grouped into categories for further quantitative analysis.



Source: created by authors.

Figure 7. WOMEN'S SOCCER QUESTION (W4) – “Why are you not interested in women's soccer?”

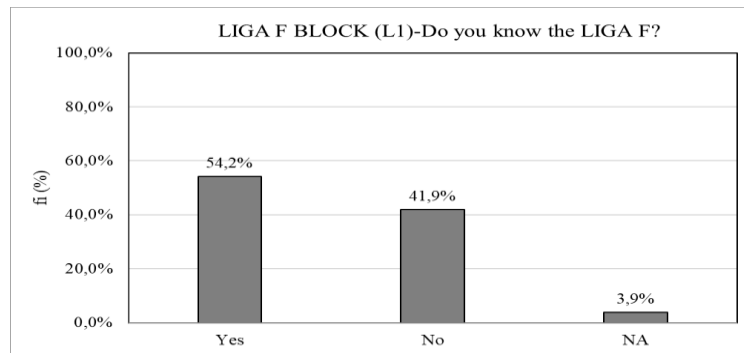


Source: created by authors.

Figure 8. WOMEN'S SOCCER QUESTION (W5) - "If you prefer to follow another women's sport instead of soccer, what is that sport?"

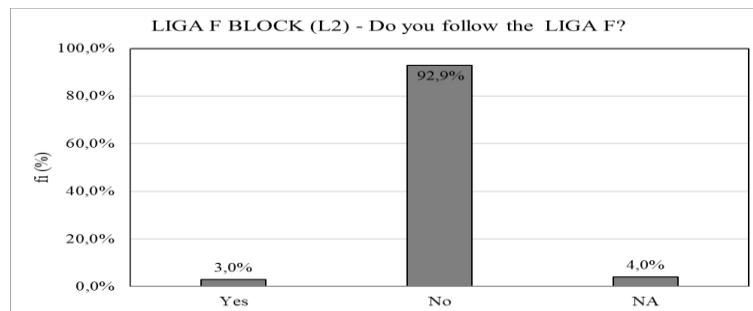
To conclude this section, question W5 investigated interest in other sports. As shown in *Figure 8*, tennis emerged as the most popular sport, accounting for over 25% of responses. Unlike women's soccer, which is pay-per-view, tennis is widely broadcast on free-to-air channels. As we noted in our theoretical framework, this is a potential driver of engagement. The others are Olympic sports, all broadcast free-to-air and presented through sportainment and traditionally associated with female athletes.

To complete this study, a block of four questions (the Liga F, LIGA F BLOCK) gauged awareness and engagement. The results shown in *Figures 9, 10, 11, and 12* reveal a discrepancy. While *Figure 9* shows that over 50% of respondents are aware of Liga F (*Figure 9*), *Figure 10* demonstrates that only 3% actively follow it, underscoring low levels of interest.



Source: created by authors.

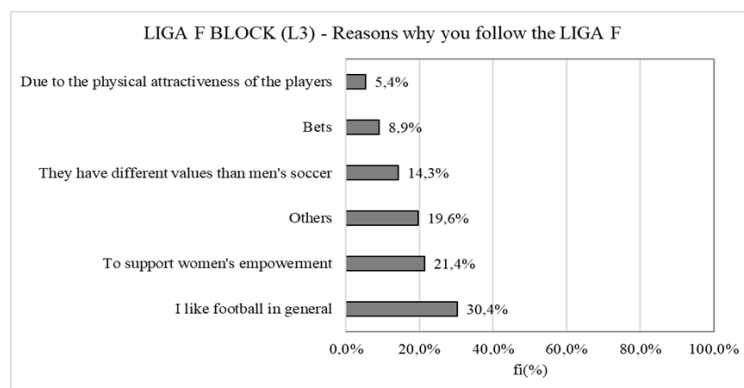
Figure 9. LIGA F BLOCK QUESTION (L1) - Do you know the LIGA F?



Source: created by authors.

Figure 10. LIGA F BLOCK QUESTION (L2) - Do you follow the LIGA F?

The most relevant findings are shown in *Figure 11*. These are: 30.4% of respondents said they like soccer in general, 21.4% indicated that they follow it because of women's empowerment, and 14.3% stated that they follow the Liga F because they believe it embodies values that are different from those of men's soccer. This multiple-choice question will help us gather new information about interest in the Liga F.

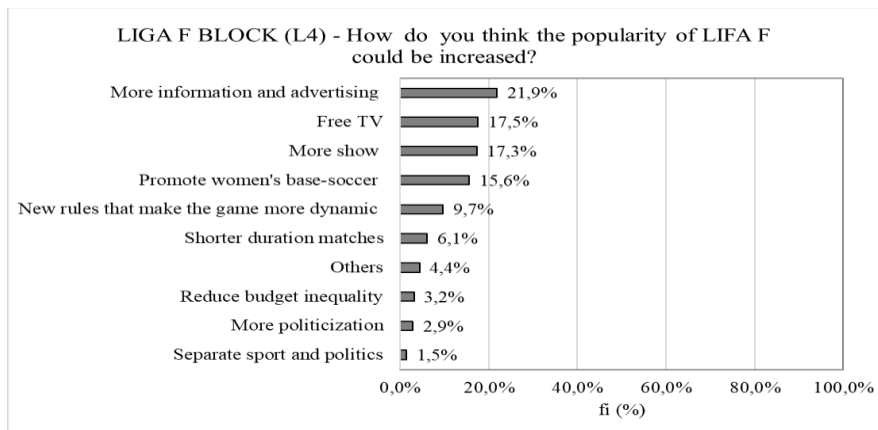


Source: created by authors.

Figure 11. LIGA F BLOCK (L3) - Reasons why you follow the LIGA F?

The second multiple-choice question in the LIGA F BLOCK, L4, asks: "How do you think the popularity of the LIGA F could be increased?" The question and the corresponding results are shown in *Figure 12*. This

question helps us gain further insights into how Liga F's popularity has increased. The highest-scoring responses relate to communication, sports, and gender-equality, accounting for 70% of the total.



Source: created by authors.

Figure 12. LIGA F BLOCK (L4) - How do you think the popularity of LIGA F could be increased?

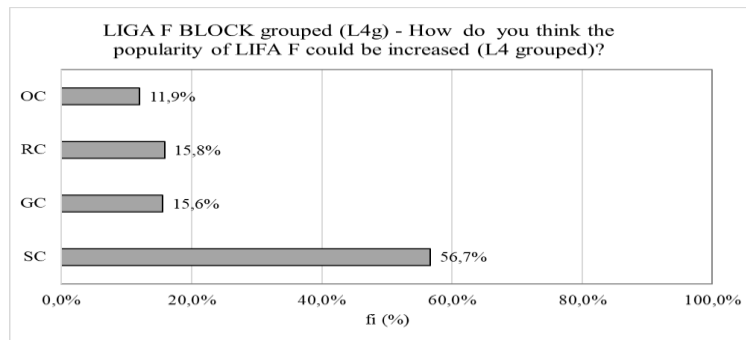
The data from question L4 (“How do you think the popularity of LIGA F could be increased?”), shown in Figure 12, have been grouped into new categories or dimensions: the SPORTAINMENT AND COMMUNICATION CATEGORY (SC), the GENDER CATEGORY (GC), the RULES CATEGORY (RC), and the OTHERS CATEGORY (OC). This reclassification enables us to perform a Chi-squared test and residual analysis to test the sportainment hypothesis. All options related to sportainment, and communication were included in the same category (SC).

Table 3. L4g Categories (L4 answers grouped)

L4g CATEGORIES (Figure 12 grouped)				TOTAL
SPORTAINMENT AND COMMUNICATION CATEGORY	SC	More information and advertising	21,9%	56,7%
		Free TV	17,5%	
		More show	17,3%	
GENDER CATEGORY	GC	Promote women's base-soccer	15,6%	15,6%
RULES CATEGORY	RC	New rules that make the game more dynamic	9,7%	15,8%
		Shorter duration matches	6,1%	
OTHERS CATEGORY	OC	Others	4,4%	11,9%
		Reduce budget inequality	3,2%	
		More politicization	2,9%	
		Separate sport and politics	1,5%	

Source: created by authors.

The results for the categories, questions, and variables are presented in Table 3. Figure 13 illustrates the grouped categories for question L4g.



Source: created by authors.

Figure 13. LIGA F BLOCK grouped (W4g)

A clear majority falls into the SC category, accounting for over 56% of responses. A Chi-squared test was conducted, followed by a residual analysis to test the hypothesis. The results are presented in Table 4. The p-value is below  $< 0.05$ , and the residual value for the SC category is greater than 2. This indicates significant differences and verifies the sportainment hypothesis.

Table 4. Test Chi-Square test and Residual Analysis for Contrasting the sportainment hypothesis

		fi	ni		CHISQ_DIST	residues
<b>Sportainment category</b>	<b>SC</b>	<b>56,7%</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>50,75</b>	<b>81,551</b>	<b>9,0</b>
Gender Category	GC	15,6%	32	50,75	7,218	-2,7
Rules Category	RC	15,8%	32	50,75	6,850	-2,6
Others category	OC	11,9%	24	50,75	13,888	-3,7
					109,507	
				p value	<b>1,4E-23</b>	

Source: created by authors.

Finally, to evaluate the gender-equality hypothesis, the categorical variables G1 ("Do you believe in gender equality?") and L2 ("Do you follow Liga F?") were compared to identify a potential relationship between attitudes toward gender equality and engagement with Liga F. A Chi-squared test was conducted on these two variables to test this hypothesis, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Test Chi-Square test for contrasting the gender hypothesis

	G1 ("Do you believe in gender equality?")			
	YES	NO		
L2 ("Do you follow Liga F?")	YES	7	0	7
	NO	159	22	181
		166	22	
			<b>p-value</b>	<b>0,33</b>

Source: created by authors.

It is observed that the p-value is  $> 0.05$ , indicating no significant difference, and that the gender hypothesis is not supported.

## 6. Discussion

Our survey indicates that interest in women's soccer is low. As shown in *Figures 5 and 6*, 72.4% of respondents reported no interest, while 16.3% expressed only minimal interest. These findings emphasize the need to analyse why Gen Z is not interested in women's soccer, especially when compared to men's soccer, which generates strong interest (68.6%) in question 3. This stark contrast is surprising, as researchers initially expected support for gender equality and feminism to be connected to interest in women's soccer. However, this does not seem to be the case. Despite the low level of interest in Liga F, belief in gender equality remains widespread, and a significant proportion of Gen Z identifies as feminist (El País, 2019). Beyond the descriptive results, the hypothesis test on gender equality (*Table 5*) also indicates no correlation between believing in gender equality and following Liga F.

Given Liga F's still modest revenue (García, 2024), the first objective- that La Liga F should implement sportainment strategies to attract new audiences and strengthen communication across traditional and social media- is supported by our results. *Figure 7* shows that at least 50% of respondents consider women's soccer less entertaining or not a mainstream sport. This perception is consistent with the findings of Cooky *et al.* (2021), whose recent studies on sports media coverage demonstrate that men's sports dominate televised news, highlight shows, and even newer platforms such as online newsletters and social media. By making women's soccer more accessible and engaging, media coverage may also begin to shift, helping to build a loyal fanbase for the women's league (Cooky *et al.*, 2021). *Figure 8* also provides similar insights into the need for entertainment and communication. All these sports (such as tennis and gymnastics) share the distinction of being Olympic sports with broad, established audiences. Their popularity is largely driven by a sense of tradition associated with the Olympic Games. *Figure 12*, which relates to question L4 "How do you think the popularity of LIGA F could be increased?", reinforces this point, showing that 21.9% of respondents indicated a need for more communication and information, while 17.3% suggested greater sportainment. Previous studies on Barcelona FC and the King's League in Spain by Webb and Richelieu (2021) and Carrero *et al.* (2024) have also highlighted the significance of sportainment in contemporary soccer. Their research, particularly the study on the King's League (Carrero *et al.*, 2024), which focused on Generation Z, highlights the need for new formats and sports communication strategies to engage younger generations. This research underscores the importance of personalization, gamification, and innovation in captivating young audiences who demand immediacy.

Another finding, somewhat related to the concept of sportainment, is the importance of open access. TV channel DAZN charges 9.99 euros per month, which seems to be a barrier for young people. Interviewees acknowledge that they would be more interested in Liga F if matches were broadcast on TV. The success of the King's League, a new soccer format in Spain that combines sport and entertainment, is partly due to free access to games on Twitch (Carrero *et al.*, 2024). This supports the hypothesis that a strong communication strategy is essential, as paid access limits the universal exposure that would otherwise generate broader attention. *Figure 12* shows that 17.5% of respondents indicate that free access would help increase Liga F's popularity. *Figure 8* reinforces this point, as other women's sports that attract attention, such as gymnastics at the Olympic Games or professional women's tennis (WTA), are openly broadcast. These insights, drawn from the literature review and descriptive analysis, are further supported by the analytical results shown in *Figure 14* and *Tables 3 and 4*, where the SC (56.7%) shows significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) and residual values greater than 2. The results indicate significant differences between the sportainment and communication categories and the others, supporting the initial hypothesis that La Liga F should incorporate sportainment elements into the championship to attract technologically savvy audiences and develop a comprehensive communication strategy. This strategy should include

open access to matches to compete with men's soccer in traditional media. These findings highlight the relevance of this sportainment and communication category within the context of this study.

The survey also reveals a striking discrepancy between the values espoused by Generation Z, such as support for gender equality and feminism, and their actual engagement with women's soccer. Although 81.8% of respondents affirm belief in gender equality and 45.8% identify as feminists, only around 11% express genuine interest in following women's soccer (see *Figure 8*). This paradox illustrates a persistent cultural barrier: egalitarian attitudes at the ideological level do not automatically translate into inclusive media consumption or fan practices. This discrepancy can be understood in the context of hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell, 1987), which emphasizes the culturally dominant ideal of manhood that legitimizes male dominance and the subordination of women to men's ideals. In the context of sport, this ideal is expressed through the glorification of attributes such as physicality, speed, and competitiveness, traits deeply embedded in the institutional and symbolic structures of mainstream soccer. The enduring perception of soccer as inherently "masculine" is not merely anecdotal; it is reinforced structurally through media coverage, coaching practices, fan discourse, and even sports marketing.

The survey findings support this theoretical perspective. Respondents who reported low interest in women's soccer often cited a perceived lack of intensity, physicality, and entertainment value, criteria rooted in the masculine-coded standards of performance that dominate soccer culture. These responses are consistent with previous studies, such as Stølen *et al.* (2005), which emphasize the association of elite-level soccer with near-anaerobic athleticism and explosive physical capacity.

Moreover, 15.6% of respondents suggested that fostering interest in women's soccer requires long-term strategies, such as providing girls with early access to and participation in the sport. While these recommendations point toward structural change, they also implicitly acknowledge how deeply gendered expectations around sport are socialized from a young age. Until women's soccer can challenge and reshape the hegemonic masculine framework that defines what "real" soccer looks like, support for gender equality may continue to coexist with a lack of interest in, or even dismissal of, women's sport.

It could be argued that the discrepancy between feminist values and the behaviour of fans is not a failure of individual conviction, but rather a reflection of entrenched cultural scripts that continue to associate soccer with masculinity. Without challenging these gendered norms through new communicative and institutional practices, women's soccer will struggle to transform ideological allies into active audiences.

Overall, the results of this research highlight a discrepancy with recent studies have suggested a link between societies with feminist values and a greater interest in women's soccer (Hernández-Arriaza *et al.*, 2023; Vilanova, 2019). Although media coverage of women's soccer has increased, popular engagement, as measured by revenue and stadium attendance, remains limited (Palco23, 2023; García, 2024).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Despite a strong professed commitment to gender equality and feminism among Generation Z in Spain, this study demonstrates that interest in Liga F and women's soccer in general remains strikingly low. Using descriptive and analytical methodologies, the research confirms that robust communication strategies and sportainment are key to engaging young audiences.

The findings reveal a fundamental paradox. Liga F targets a generation whose ideological profile closely aligns with the values embodied by women's sport, yet the league fails to translate this alignment into active interest. This gap is not due to a lack of feminist commitment *per se*, but rather to the persistence of deep-seated cultural and communicative structures that continue to associate soccer with masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell, 1987; Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005) provides an adequate framework for understanding how ideologically progressive audiences may unconsciously reproduce patterns of exclusion through consumption behaviours that remain tethered to norms of traditional sporting excellence (namely, physical intensity, tradition, and spectacle).

From a media and communication standpoint, Liga F has largely mirrored LaLiga's aesthetic and broadcast strategies, following a traditional sports presentation model that lacks the interactivity, gamification, and accessibility sought by digitally native audiences. In contrast, the King's League demonstrates how a radically different format, featuring live-streamed matches, participatory elements, and audio-visual experimentation, can quickly mobilize large, young audiences. Liga F's adherence to a masculine-coded broadcast and competition logic, despite being a women's league, undermines its ability to establish a distinctive brand identity or foster an emotional connection with its target audience.

The study makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on both gender and sport communication by demonstrating that hegemonic masculinity continues to influence not only men's sports but also how women's competitions are received and framed. At the same time, however, it underscores the growing relevance of sportainment as a strategic tool for engaging fragmented, screen-saturated audiences. Gen Z does not reject women's soccer due to a lack of ideological alignment. Rather, they disengage because the sport is delivered in a format that fails to meet their expectations of immediacy, entertainment, interactivity, and relevance to digital culture.

In practical terms, this suggests that Liga F must undergo a dual transformation. Firstly, it needs to embrace communication strategies that are immersive, visually engaging, and digitally native. It must move beyond conventional match coverage to incorporate influencer-led narratives, behind-the-scenes content, and community-building platforms. Secondly, it should symbolically depart from the dominant masculine logic of soccer by highlighting its own unique values: inclusion, access, empowerment, and emotional storytelling. This approach does not require abandoning competitiveness but rather reimagining it through a lens that resonates with the cultural and technological worldview of Gen Z.

Finally, this paper opens avenues for further research. While the case of Liga F provides valuable insights, it remains important to examine whether these findings hold across other cultural contexts where women's leagues are emerging. Future research should undertake comparative case studies across Europe, Latin America, and North America, particularly in settings where women's leagues are experimenting with new formats and communication ecosystems. Additionally, employing experimental or ethnographic methodologies would be valuable for capturing both stated preferences and actual behaviours in media consumption and fan engagement.

To achieve sustainable growth, Liga F and similar competitions must develop their own identity, rather than simply mirroring male leagues. This means developing their own grammar of sport, which aligns with the values, aesthetics, and attention economy of the new generation.

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## ISPANIJOS „LIGA F“ RINKODARA: Z KARTOS POŽIŪRIS Į PROFESIONALŲ MOTERŲ FUTBOLĄ

María Sierra Flores, César García, Rafael Barberá

**Santrauka.** Moterų futbolas Ispanijoje sulaukė pasaulinio dėmesio, kurį paskatino šalies pergalė pasaulio čempionate 2023 m. ir pasaulinis skandalas, susijęs su Federacijos prezidentu. Vis dėlto ši varžybų sistema vis dar pasižymi nedidelėmis pajamomis. Nors Z kartos požiūris į feminizmą ir lyčių lygybę skiriasi, Ispanijoje šie klausimai išlieka ypač aktualūs ir reikšmingi (Hernández-Arriaza ir kt., 2023; Vilanova, 2019), kaip ir kitose šalyse (Twenge, 2023). Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas Z kartos požiūris į Ispanijos moterų futbolo lygą siekiant įvertinti jos patrauklumą ir nustatyti, ar jis grindžiamas feminizmo ir lyčių lygybės teorinėmis prielaidomis, ar sporto pramogų (angl. *sportainment*) ir komunikacijos patrauklumo veiksniais. Tyrimui atlikta kiekybinė apklausa, kurioje dalyvavo 203 studentai; jos duomenys naudoti tiriamajai analizei ir hipotezių testavimui. Gauti rezultatai patvirtino sporto pramogų ir komunikacijos įtaką, tačiau nepateikė statistinio pagrindo lyčių lygybės hipotezei. Darytina išvada, kad nors Z kartos atstovai pripažįsta ir palaiko lyčių lygybę, jų susidomėjimui „Liga F“ reikalingas stipresnis sporto pramogų elementas, įskaitant žaidybinimą ir nemokamą prieigą, o tai šiuo metu prieštarauja esamai „Liga F“ struktūrai.

*Reikšminiai žodžiai:* sporto pramogos; sporto rinkodara; futbolas; Liga F; Z karta; moterys.