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Title	COVID-19 and Soccer Teams on Instagram: The Case of Corporate Social Responsibility
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/34647/
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2020-0230
Date	2020
Citation	Anagnostopoulos, Christos and López-Carril, Samuel (2020) COVID-19 and Soccer Teams on Instagram: The Case of Corporate Social Responsibility. <i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i> . pp. 1-11. ISSN 1936-3915
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It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2020-0230>

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**COVID-19 and soccer teams on Instagram:
The case of corporate social responsibility**

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Abstract

COVID-19 has given greater importance to the role of social media in sport, making it an essential way for fans to stay “in touch” with their teams. At the same time, the pandemic triggered additional actions from sport entities with the view to prove their commitment to society in an unprecedented moment of crisis. Professional team sport organizations (PTSOs) have indeed initiated corporate social responsibility (CSR) actions to collaborate in the fight against COVID-19. To explore these actions, we analyzed 3,906 posts on the official Instagram profiles of PTSOs of La Liga (soccer, Spain), from March 11th to May 11th, 2020, classifying them as philanthropic, sponsorship, or personnel engagement actions. The role of CSR in a time of crisis and the potential of social media as a CSR communication channel are all discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19; Sports; CSR; Instagram; social media; soccer; football; La Liga

COVID-19 and soccer teams on Instagram:

The case of corporate social responsibility

Sport's social and commercial value is indisputable, as is its communicative power.

Common denominators and facilitators for all this within the organizational field of sport seem to be the ever-increasing practice of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Kolyperas, Anagnostopoulos, Chadwick, & Sparks, 2016) and the utilization of social media (Schmidt, 2018). The former practice relates to a range of initiatives that seem to contribute to some social good, not required by law, that goes beyond the specific economic interests of the company (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). However, the COVID-19 outbreak has paralyzed the sports industry, not just in terms of the competition part of sport at the elite level, but also current sponsorship deals and broadcasting rights, employees' salaries (athletes and administrators alike), insurance companies, and a host of other stakeholders.

Every crisis offers opportunities to redefine (organizational) priorities, possibly by "seeking to investigate the positive processes, outcomes, and interpretations embedded in negative phenomena" (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2013, p.8). This is precisely what positive organizational scholarship puts forward by providing an organizing frame for research activity on positive states, outcomes, and generative mechanisms in individuals, dyads, groups, organizations, and societies (Anagnostopoulos & Papadimitriou, 2017). So, when sports organizations – and, for that matter, professional team sports organizations (PTSOs) – are severely affected by a 'disaster' like COVID-19, one may wonder what these PTSOs can do to turn such a "disaster" into something positive?

With this research-based scholarly commentary, we suggest that PTSOs can transform "bad" into "good" by using CSR's protective and deflective abilities, but also the abilities that

1 collect, incorporate and restore goodwill (Kolyperas et al., 2016). Moreover, Tilcsik and Marquis
2 (2013) empirically demonstrated that “disasters” (natural ones in their case) led to a punctuated
3 increase of corporate philanthropy. At the same time, during the pandemic, social media have
4 reinforced the spread presence they had in society. Social distancing has made people more (e-
5)connected. According to Statista (2020), time spent consuming social media outlets such as
6 Facebook or WhatsApp increased by more than 40 percent worldwide during the COVID-19
7 outbreak. During this crisis, therefore, with hundreds of thousands of deaths, mental illnesses,
8 job losses, and other associated to the pandemic negative issues, PTSOs can have an influential
9 role in society, carrying out and communicating CSR actions towards the fight against COVID-
10 19. As such, through social media, PTSOs’ CSR becomes the mechanism by which public
11 demands, expectations, and the confines of social acceptance and prestige can be detected,
12 gathered, scanned, and fulfilled (Kolyperas et al., 2016).

13 **A Brief Background**

14 **CSR, sport and social media**

15 Society recognizes that sport, in many ways, has a powerful sense of social legitimacy (Bason &
16 Anagnostopoulos, 2015). The commercialization of sport has brought and pushed CSR to the
17 soccer agenda as an instrumental medium, where social and environmental actions are performed
18 as a means of reaching organizational goals (Schmidt, 2018). Several PTSOs have started taking
19 social responsibility initiatives as a means of managing, organizing, and controlling the non-
20 sporting dimensions of soccer (Pedersen & Rosati, 2019). PTSOs do view such actions as an
21 opportunity to strengthen their reputation and build trust among their community (Winand, Belot,
22 Merten, & Kolyperas, 2019). It is difficult to think of any other moment in the modern era of
23 sport when PTSOs could do just that. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 constitutes one of

1 those rare moments that the core product (that is, playing and competing on the field) is being
2 replenished almost exclusively by all other social, symbolic, and powerful abilities that PTSOs
3 possess in the communities where they exist and operate.

4 The importance of disclosing these actions, however, should not be understated. In this
5 regard, social media have emerged as a wide range of tools (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram,
6 Twitter, etc.) that facilitate interactivity and co-creation, enabling the development and sharing
7 of content among and between organizations and individuals (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015).
8 Organizations rely on social media to communicate their CSR initiatives (Dunn & Harness,
9 2018).

10 PTSOs have been early adopters of social media tools, aiming to enhance their awareness
11 and build relationships with their fans (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2017). In the
12 context of CSR actions, this broad scope, and the possibility of interaction, reinforce the
13 perception of organizational entities as transparent, open, and committed to their CSR initiatives
14 (Dunn & Harness, 2018). In addition, CSR messaging on social media can facilitate a halo effect
15 that benefits sports entities in times of crisis (Kim, Ott, Hull, & Choi, 2017). However, the extant
16 literature has found that PTSOs' social media strategies have largely focused on product-related
17 brand attributes (team success, players, coaches, etc.) rather than on non-product ones (values,
18 image, sponsors, etc.) (see Anagnostopoulos, Parganas, Chadwick, & Fenton, 2018; Parganas et
19 al., 2015; 2017). Indeed, since PTSOs' CSR activities are considered a non-product-related brand
20 attribute, research has shown that only a small proportion of Instagram posts reflect community
21 service activities such as promoting social initiatives (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Thus, with
22 the exception of the works of Hull and Kim (2016) and Kim et al. (2017), little is known about
23 how PTSOs communicate their CSR actions through Instagram. Therefore, we ask the following

1 question: How and to what extent do PTSOs use Instagram as a communication tool to disclose
2 their CSR-COVID-19 actions?

3 In addressing the abovementioned question, this commentary offers a two-pronged set of
4 insights. First, it explores, for the first time, the CSR-COVID-19 nexus in the context of PTSOs,
5 thus shedding light on how sport contributes to society during an unprecedented time of crisis in
6 the modern era of sport. Second, it shifts the focus of how PTSOs' social media can be used for
7 non-product related brand attributes that are concretely centered around philanthropic-based
8 initiatives.

9 **Methods**

10 This exploratory study uses both quantitative and qualitative content analysis techniques to
11 answer its research question. According to Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005), this type of analysis
12 follows a systematic and reproducible method to analyze written and visual content. Content
13 analysis has been widely employed in CSR research in sports settings (Bason &
14 Anagnostopoulos, 2015) and in studies focused on Instagram (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018;
15 Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016).

16 **Research setting and sample selection**

17 The study draws on PTSOs of La Liga (Spain), which is probably the most prominent soccer
18 league in the world along with the Premier League (England). Moreover, given the detrimental
19 effects of COVID-19 in Spain, the authors assumed that PTSOs would be likely to undertake and
20 then communicate CSR actions linked to the COVID-19.

21 The sample of this study is composed of the 3,906 posts collected from the official
22 Instagram accounts of these PTSOs published for a period of two months (March 11- May 11,

1 2020; see Table 1). Each of La Liga's PTSOs published an average of 195.5 posts, with an
2 average of 390 comments and 65,437 likes per post.

3 INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

4 **Data collection and coding procedures**

5 Data were extracted using Phantombuster, a tool for obtaining data via APIs from social
6 media and websites. All data were downloaded on May 13th through a CVS file and then
7 processed and refined manually to create an Excel database, which was used to calculate
8 descriptive statistics. All photographs, videos, and text (but not Instagram's features such as
9 'stories' and 'lives') of each post from the studied period were analyzed manually. This was done
10 because although Instagram is a platform where images and videos prevail, some posts did not
11 clearly "picture" CSR actions. Therefore, the text of each post was an important complementary
12 element to identify the CSR-COVID-19 actions.

13 The data analysis followed a deductive reasoning by using the predefined categories of
14 the CSR-sport framework developed by Bason and Anagnostopoulos (2015) (see Figure 1). A
15 random sample of 20 identified Instagram posts were analyzed by both authors. Given the
16 language barrier of the second coder, and despite the use of a free translation website
17 (deepl.com/translator) intercoder reliability, assessed using Cohen's κ , was 0.577, which can be
18 assessed as a moderate level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). As this figure was below 0.7,
19 the coders discussed discrepancies to ensure consistency of understanding and interpretation.
20 Another 10 randomly chosen posts were then coded again by both authors, leading to an
21 acceptable intercoder reliability score of 0.878. The rest of the coding was conducted by the first
22 author. As mentioned, the categorization of the data was done based on the employed CSR-Sport
23 conceptual framework, as CSR-COVID-19-oriented initiatives were assigned under first-order

1 themes before proceeding to position them under second-order themes. Finally, the
2 “beneficiaries” and “outcomes” were identified for each CSR-COVID-19 action identified.

3 INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

4 During the sample coding process, three changes were made to the employed conceptual
5 framework. The first one concerned changing the philanthropy sub-category “work with a sports
6 charity” to “work with a charity,” as PTSOs collaborated with charity entities from outside the
7 sporting context. The second change was to create the new personnel engagement sub-category
8 “employees’ in-kind donations” as in many cases players themselves carried out these actions
9 and not through the official channels of their PTSOs. Finally, a new “beneficiaries” sub-category
10 named “COVID-19 fighters” was deemed necessary, as most CSR-COVID-19 actions were
11 explicitly focused on public servants and volunteers (such as nurses, doctors, and police) who
12 were “fighting” COVID-19 on the front lines. When CSR-COVID-19 actions fit into more than
13 one theme, they were counted in each theme. For example, Real Betis Balompié produced
14 medical equipment to help in the fight against COVID-19, thanks to the volunteering of workers
15 from that PTSO. This action was categorized under “philanthropy” (within “in-kind donations”)
16 as well as under “personnel engagement” (within “employees’ volunteering”).

17 Results

18 A total of 85 CSR-COVID-19 initiatives were disclosed through PTSOs’ official Instagram
19 accounts (see Table 1). All 20 PTSOs reported at least one CSR-COVID-19 action. Real Betis
20 Balompié (11) and Real Celta de Vigo (nine) disclosed the most cases, whereas Sevilla Fútbol
21 Club, Fútbol Club Barcelona, and Getafe Club de Fútbol disclosed just three in total. No posts
22 fall into the “sponsorships” stream, probably because all PTSOs’ competitions and associated
23 activities (such as trainings) ceased during the studied period. Therefore, PTSOs and their

1 sponsors have failed to orchestrate and then communicate sponsorship activations associated
2 with COVID-19. One may expect these PTSOs' CSR-COVID-19 actions to appear in this stream
3 once restrictions are removed.

4 By contrast, "philanthropic" CSR-COVID-19 actions stand out, with 71 cases,
5 representing 84 percent of all identified cases. This finding seems to be in line with Tilcsik and
6 Marquis's (2013) observation that, in times of "disasters," a punctuated increase of corporate
7 philanthropy occurs. Thus, in times of crisis there is a need for a rapid philanthropic response, so
8 financial or in-kind donations can be the most effective CSR initiatives in the short term. On the
9 other hand, in the case of the "personnel engagement" stream, 14 cases were identified,
10 representing 16 percent of all cases. Understandably, this number is not high, given the
11 restrictive limitation on movement since the majority of Spanish citizens were confined in their
12 homes during the examined period.

13 **Philanthropy stream**

14 Within the "philanthropic" stream specifically, the majority of CSR-COVID-19 actions (28, or
15 39 percent) fell into the "raises money" category. For example, Atlético de Madrid, in
16 collaboration with the Red Cross, launched the "#LoDamosTodo" campaign that aimed to raise
17 money with the purpose of purchasing medical equipment. In addition, most of the PTSOs
18 participated in eSports FIFA20 competitions to raise funds. The most prominent was the
19 "#LaLigaSantanderChallenge" organized by La Liga in collaboration with (mainly) league
20 sponsors. In this case, eSport, and for that matter the FIFA20 soccer game, expectedly became
21 one of the easiest means for PTSOs to interact with fans during the lockdown and get CSR-
22 related messages across.

1 “Work with a charity” (19 cases, 27 percent of the total) and “in-kind donations” (16
2 cases, 22 percent) were the second and third most representative sub-streams, respectively. For
3 the former, PTSOs collaborated with charitable organizations that were responsible for
4 channeling all the support received. For example, Valencia Club de Fútbol and its players
5 contributed financially to help the “Casa Caridad Valencia,” a charity dedicated to housing and
6 feeding people. Another example was Real Sociedad de Fútbol, which collaborated with the
7 Hurkoa Foundation to help elderly people at home, or persons with mental illnesses, by
8 providing them with various essential materials. As for the latter sub-stream, Club Deportivo
9 Leganés donated a new ambulance to the Spanish Civil Protection to help in the fight against
10 COVID-19. Villarreal Club de Fútbol served more than 200 meals daily for hospital centers, to
11 the military unit UME, and to religious organizations that support those in need. Finally, a total
12 of four cases in “financial donations” (6 percent of the total), three cases of “built facilities” (4
13 percent), and one case of “donated” equipment (1 percent) were identified.

14 **Personnel engagement stream**

15 Regarding the “personnel engagement” stream, six cases of “employees’ sporting activity” (43
16 percent of the total) were identified. For instance, through the staff of its foundation, Athletic
17 Club conducted online exercise programs to motivate at-risk groups – the young, and/or disabled
18 – to undertake physical activity at home during the COVID-19 lockdown. The second most
19 reported sub-theme within this category has been “employees volunteering,” with four cases (29
20 percent). For instance, Real Club Deportivo Español’s employees created a phone service calling
21 all disabled people and over 75-year-old season-ticket-holders to check that they were in good
22 health and whether they needed any psychological or other support. This action also included
23 having club employees voluntarily visit these people to provide food or medical supplies.

1 The added sub-stream “employees’ in-kind donations” that was put forward during the
2 sampled phase of the coding process reported three cases (21 percent). These cases concern
3 players who voluntarily made in-kind donations to a specific group of people or entity. For
4 example, Emerson Aparecido, a Real Betis Balompié player, donated 150 food baskets to the
5 families in the favelas of Sao Paulo, where he had grown up. Another example was Denis Suárez,
6 a Real Club Celta de Vigo player, who supported the fight against COVID-19 with a donation of
7 food and medical equipment to his hometown social services and to a hospital in Vigo. The last
8 sub-stream was “employees raising money,” with the only one case (7 percent) being Joel Robles
9 of Real Betis Balompié, together with David Soria from Getafe Club de Fútbol. These players
10 launched a crowdfunding campaign whose proceeds were used to support Getafe Hospital.

11 **Beneficiaries and outcomes**

12 Naturally, the “beneficiaries” category was largely filled with the newly established sub-stream
13 of “COVID-19 fighters” (49 cases, 73 percent). This sub-stream included sanitary equipment,
14 funding, food, and other resources that facilitated and/or reassured that this group of people
15 performs their difficult tasks with as much support as possible. Other beneficiary groups, albeit
16 to a lesser extent, have been the focus of PTSO’s CSR-COVID-19 initiatives communicated via
17 their Instagram accounts. More specifically, the “under-privileged” and “elderly” sub-streams
18 constitute two groups that are vulnerable to COVID-19, having been both the target of six related
19 initiatives (nine percent for each group). For example, Club Atlético Osasuna acquired 5,000
20 face masks that were later donated to club affiliates over the age of 65, as well as to residents of
21 the senior centers El Solera Asistencia and the Residencia San Jerónimo de Estella. Athletic Club
22 donated material and equipment for homeless people who have to spend their quarantine period
23 at several municipal sports halls.

1 CSR pyramid) – that is, finding ways to keep the organization viable – rather than exercising
2 their ethical and discretionary responsibilities.

3 While this is understandable, some organizational slack during this ‘crisis’ has been
4 discerned. Interpreting the study’s findings, some (albeit subjective) take-away managerial
5 messages for those administering PTSOs’ CSR agendas and social media accounts are as
6 follows:

- 7 • In moments of severe disruptions and/or ‘disasters’, philanthropy is good. That is,
8 altruistic behavior that does not necessarily align itself with PTSOs’ core
9 product(s). If anything (or if necessary at all), this altruistic behavior can be
10 capitalized in the future through well thought-out follow-up CSR initiatives.
- 11 • If altruism is extremely difficult during such moments, creating a new generation
12 of fans by steering all CSR initiatives towards them and generating social media
13 content that mainly concerns PTSOs’ product-related brand attributes may both be
14 myopic. Carefully crafting CSR actions as well as messages about non-product-
15 related brand attributes that are centered around the elderly may be a smart move;
16 these are often the ones that endorse youngsters’ wishes (such as purchasing new
17 replica kit or a season ticket for the following year).
- 18 • Integrate current sponsors (with one way or another and always with their
19 consent) in all CSR actions and communications. In those moments, it is the
20 PTSOs, not the sponsors, that have the communication power. Once things return
21 to normal, ‘team-player’ behavior is likely to be greatly appreciated.
- 22 • Use the players/athletes as part of philanthropic campaigns, as PTSOs’
23 communication power largely lies with them. Some players – often internationals,

1 but not necessarily high-profile ones (as in the examples reported here) – wish to
2 support certain causes and/or places. As long as their actions do not harm the
3 PTSO’s brand, do not stop them. Endorse and embrace their positive behavior;
4 after all, this is additional content/story for a powerful post through the PTSO’s
5 official Instagram account.

- 6 • During the complete lockdown, eSports have been considered a powerful
7 mechanism to get positive messages across (such as fundraising); not least to
8 reconnect family members by offering them a way of spending time together. A
9 three-pronged approach through which CSR, social media, and eSports reach out
10 to key stakeholder groups may be a smart way for PTSOs to be instrumental in
11 their ethical and discretionary responsibilities.

12 To conclude, and despite its descriptive nature, the present research-based commentary has
13 attempted to offer a positive dimension to this pandemic that has greatly affected the sport
14 ecosystem. The study has certain limitations. The single-case approach on all fronts (one sport, a
15 specific League, one country, a single social media outlet), as well as the cross-sectional research
16 design, do not allow generalizations. Finally, the emphasis was given to the communication of
17 CSR-COVID19 cases; not to *all* CSR-COVID19 actions undertaken by PTSOs and which may
18 not have been part of their Instagram posts. Nevertheless, we hope these empirical insights will
19 keep the dialogue open regarding PTSOs’ social responsibilities in moments of unprecedented
20 crisis, what can be done in an impactful way, and what role social media outlets can play in
21 scaling up such an impact.

22 **Acknowledgements**

23 The first author is grateful to the support received for a pre-doctoral study "FPU15/05670" granted by the Spanish
24 Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities.

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1 **Table 1** La Liga's PTSOs Instagram activities during the examined period

2

SPTs of La Liga	Instagram oficial account	Number of post published	Number of comments	Number of likes	Number of disclosed CSR-COVID-19 actions
Athletic Club	instagram.com/athleticclub/	305	17,508	2,961,832	4
Atlético de Madrid	instagram.com/atleticodemadrid/	280	80,220	11,384,716	6
Club Atlético Osasuna	instagram.com/caosasuna/	237	3,065	833,668	4
Club Deportivo Leganés	instagram.com/cdleганes/	154	3,725	295,395	4
Deportivo Alavés	instagram.com/deportivoalaves/	87	1,400	146,479	4
Fútbol Club Barcelona	instagram.com/fcbarcelona/	145	686,321	130,853,332	1
Getafe Club de Fútbol	instagram.com/getafecf/	118	6,969	255,204	1
Granada Club de Fútbol	instagram.com/granadacf/	368	4,134	881,879	6
Levante Unión Deportiva	instagram.com/levanteucl/	184	5,759	322,348	2
Real Betis Balompie	instagram.com/realbetisbalompie/	331	45,182	4,567,877	11
Real Club Celta de Vigo	instagram.com/rccelta/	135	5,941	815,381	9
Real Club Deportivo Español	instagram.com/RCDEspanyol/	122	6,255	351,172	2
Real Club Deportivo Mallorca	instagram.com/rcdmallorcaoficial/	362	9,921	980,670	3
Real Madrid Club de Fútbol	instagram.com/realmadrid/	124	594,694	9,5243,036	6
Real Sociedad de Fútbol	instagram.com/realsociedad/	329	17,103	1,917,835	4
Real Valladolid	instagram.com/realvalladolid/	140	7,463	343,966	2
Sevilla Fútbol Club	instagram.com/sevillafc/	73	5,506	827,711	1
Sociedad Deportiva Eibar	instagram.com/sdeibar/	64	1,027	99,287	5
Valencia Club de Fútbol	instagram.com/valenciacf/	208	15,311	2,177,771	5

Villarreal Club de Fútbol	instagram.com/villarrealcf/	140	5,416	338,718	5
Total		3,906	1,522,920	255,598,277	85

1

2 **Table 2** Illustrative examples from data analysis and categorization

1 st order	2 nd order	<i>n</i>	Illustrative data
Philanthropy	PST raises money	28	Real Club Deportivo Mallorca launches the solidarity campaign to collect money "Guanyarem!", where for every euro donated, both Real Club Deportivo Mallorca and the financial institution CaixaBanc, will donate another one. The raised money will go to the Food Bank of Mallorca.
	In-kind donations	16	Club Atlético Osasuna acquired 5,000 face masks that were later donated to club affiliates over the age of 65, as well as to residents of the elderly centers El Solera Asistencia and the Residencia San Jerónimo de Estella.
	Financial donations	4	Club Deportivo Leganés donated approximately 6,000 euros to contribute to the acquisition of protective suits and KN95 masks for the Emergency Department of the Severo Ochoa Hospital.
	Donated equipment	1	Athletic Club, through its foundation, collaborates with the associations Goiztiri and Bizitegi, who work in favor of people in a situation or risk of social exclusion, together with the Municipal Institute of Sport and the City Councils of Barakaldo and Bilbao. The Athletic Club donates material and equipment for homeless people who have to spend their quarantine at the municipal sports hall.
	Work with a charity	19	Sociedad Deportiva Eibar, in collaboration with the Red Cross, helped families without resources with tablets and modems to enable

			children to attend online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.
	Built facilities	3	Real Betis Balompié decided to put its facilities at the service of the fight against the effects of the COVID-19, building a logistic space for the reception and storage of sanitary material.
Sponsorships	Partners a governing body	0	Not found
	Sponsor a charity event	0	Not found
	Sponsor an event/competition	0	Not found
	Sponsor an individual	0	Not found
	Sponsor a team	0	Not found
Personnel engagement	Employees raising money	1	Joel Robles, goalkeeper of Real Betis Balompié together with David Soria, goalkeeper of Getafe Fútbol Club, launched a crowdfunding campaign whose funds were used to support Getafe Hospital in the fight against COVID-19.
	Employees in-kind donations	3	Emerson Aparecidoa, a Real Betis Balompié player, donated 150 food baskets to the families in the favelas in Sao Paulo, his hometown.
	Employees sporting activity	6	Athletic Club, through the staff of its foundation, carries out online exercise programs to motivate people from at-risk groups, young, disabled and women, in order to do physical activity at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.
	Employees volunteering	4	Real Club Deportivo Español, created a phone service calling all disabled people and over 75-year-old season-ticket-holders to check that they were in good health and whether they needed any psychological or other support. This action also included having club employees voluntarily visit these people to provide food or medical supplies.