Evaluating Fan Engagement

Analysing the Glocal Landscape and an Appraisal of Novel Approaches

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UD7006 – Football Fan Engagement

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Executive Summary

- The aim of this report is to assess the current state of the fan engagement landscape with a particular focus on the use of online and offline techniques in a glocal context.
- Online methods such as social media, podcasts and YouTube are considered with the former being a pertinent aspect of the landscape today. The adaptation to the global market is also explored.
- Offline methods, including in-stadium experience, supporter groups and fan zones are reviewed and how these can complement the online techniques.
- Novel approaches to fan engagement are explored and assessed using theoretical models; specific focus is placed upon apps, eSports, and fan tokens
- Communications and marketing solutions are then presented with a suggestion that social media accounts should be engaging; personalisation of marketing approaches will be suggested; clubs should focus on emerging trends and markets, and finally the offline experience should not be disregarded.

Contents

1. Introduction

This report will examine the contemporary fan engagement landscape with particular focus on online and offline approaches and how these can be part of a glocal strategy. Key theoretical models will be used throughout, particularly to assess the potential success of some novel approaches that are being used. Based on the findings, recommendations will be presented.

1.1. Defining Fan Engagement

Fan engagement can be defined as a specific form of customer engagement in the sport context. Customer engagement is defined as a customer's spontaneous, interactive, and co-creative behaviours primarily in non-transactional consumer-company exchanges to achieve his or her individual and social purposes (Biscaia, Gordon, Nakazawa and Yoshida, 2014). The importance of engagement for sport brands is outlined in research by (Pronschinske, Groza & Walker, 2012; Biscaia et al., 2014; Previati, 2020).

1.2. Theoretical Models

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) will be referred to within this report as it regards stages of engagement (Funk & James, 2001). However, there are limitations to the model,

Figure 1: The Psychological Continuum Model (Funk and James, 2001)
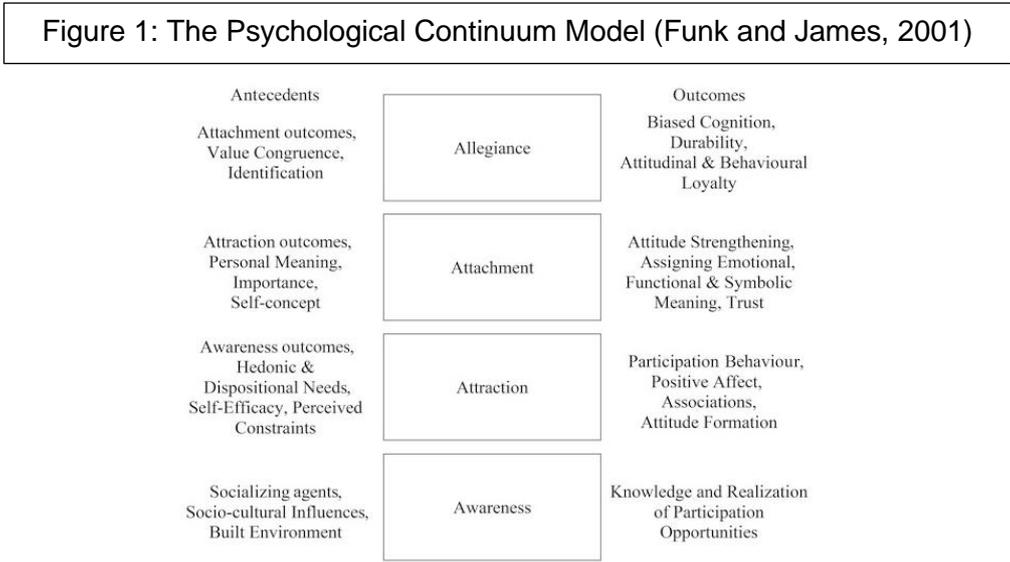
such as the movement between stages not being fully understood (Funk and James, 2001). See appendix A for further details.

Wilson & Fowler's (2020) engagement model is a holistic approach to show where and when clubs can engage fans. Appendix B expands on this.

Figure 2: The Timing and Location Model (Wilson and Fowler, 2020)
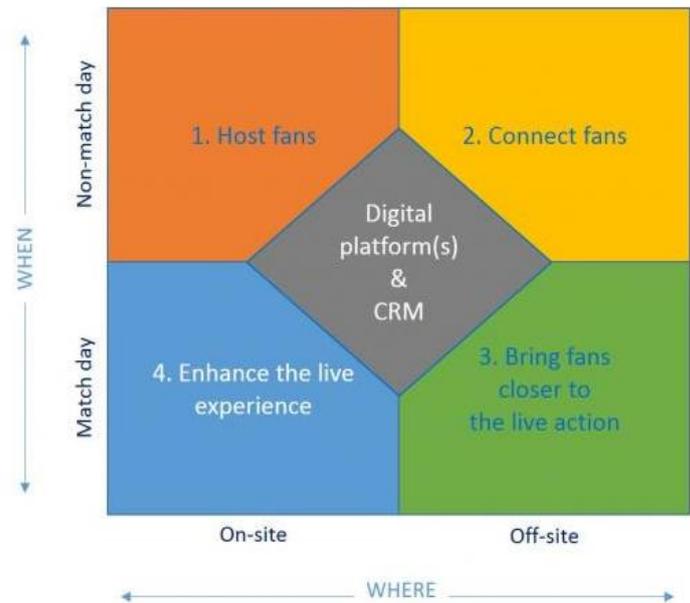
This report regards engagement in a glocal context. This has been defined by Andrews & Ritzer (2007) as follows: "the idea of glocal (and the process of glocalization) involves the integration of the local and global". It can be described as the tempering effects of local conditions on global pressures (Dumitrescu & Vineran, 2010). In this report, fan engagement techniques are evaluated in both global and local contexts.

1.3. The Impact of COVID-19 on Fan Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted companies including the sport industry and the digitalisation that has arrived as a result has led to fundamental changes in the fan engagement market (Almeida, Duarte Santos & Augusto Monteiro, 2020). Live fan engagement was impacted by the pandemic, "it called for all live matches to be stopped,

halting both in-person and televised consumption of live EPL football" (Manoli, 2020). However, the interruption provided clubs with a unique opportunity to establish new strategies to effectively engage with fans (Mastromartino, Naraine, Ross and Wear, 2020).

2. Online Engagement Techniques

Kuzma, Bell & Logue, (2014) underline how social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, have enabled clubs to have a 'two-way relationship with fans', and have stimulated more communication between fans(McLean & Wainwright, 2009; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). It is likely that 'allegiant' fans will be using these sites and interacting with other fans, and Funk and James (2001) suggest that these fans in the latter stages of the PCM can act as socialising agents to encourage fans to transition between earlier phases which is beneficial to clubs. A study by Vale and Fernandes (2018) concluded that the need for information, empowerment, and brand love are the main drivers of engagement behaviour.

This creation and empowerment element is becoming more present in fan engagement and has led to the rise of mediums such as content on YouTube and fan made podcasts become a central part of the fan engagement landscape.

The power of football fan content can be seen in the rise of channels such as Arsenal Fan TV (AFTV) who have amassed over 1 million subscribers (Rivers & Ross, 2021). MacInnes (2017) describes AFTV as a pioneer in the elevation of the genre of football fan channels. The engagement itself has previously been seen to be very limited, however the increase in popularity of digital methods has seen a diversification in the options a fan has when looking to obtain football news. For example, football podcasts have seen a meteoric rise in popularity, with some fans even going as far as to produce, edit and publish this content themselves (Lawrence & Crawford, 2018). The Anfield Wrap, is a Liverpool themed podcast, focusing on similar topics as mainstream news outlets but as the podcast became more successful, even the creators did not predict how well things were going to go for the podcast (Glendenning,

2016). This further signifies the unpredictable growth online methods of fan engagement has had over recent times.

As much as the positives are evident with the digitalisation of engagement, the transition has come under some scrutiny in recent years too. Some literature suggests that the digital work of fan engagement gives destructive fans, known as ultras, to have the ability to interact, with real world repercussions (Pipini, 2018).

In the current landscape, the growth of social media and the numbers of fans engaging through the most popular sites, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (Drahošová & Balco, 2017), presents a challenge to clubs who need to dedicate resources to successfully managing these platforms. Without investing in a service to manage these sites, clubs will 'find it difficult to compete' (Nadaraja and Yazdanifard, 2013). It is important that clubs have 'tight brand control' to ensure the brand of the club is consistent and that any threat of tarnishing the club's reputation is minimised (Worrall, 2013).

The aforementioned methods are useful for domestic fans but might not be as useful for targeting valuable global markets, for instance China. Due to the Chinese government's internet censorship, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites are blocked (Statista, 2021). Clubs have had to adapt to this obstacle and be proactive with their engagement strategies in these regions. The Premier League partnered with Tencent Sports, China's principal sport media platform, allowing fans in China to watch all 372 PL matches (Premier League, 2020). Chelsea were the first club to partner with Weibo to bring Chinese fans closer to the club (Chelsea FC, 2020). Weibo is a microblogging application based on user relationships to share, disseminate, and get information (Hu, 2020). Other clubs have followed suit with Manchester United now having 9.3 million followers on the platform, as shown in figure 3 (Statista, 2020) and this underlines how elite clubs are accounting for the glocal intricacies that the digital age can bring.

Figure 3: Most popular European football clubs in China as of 2019, by number of followers on Weibo (Statista, 2020)
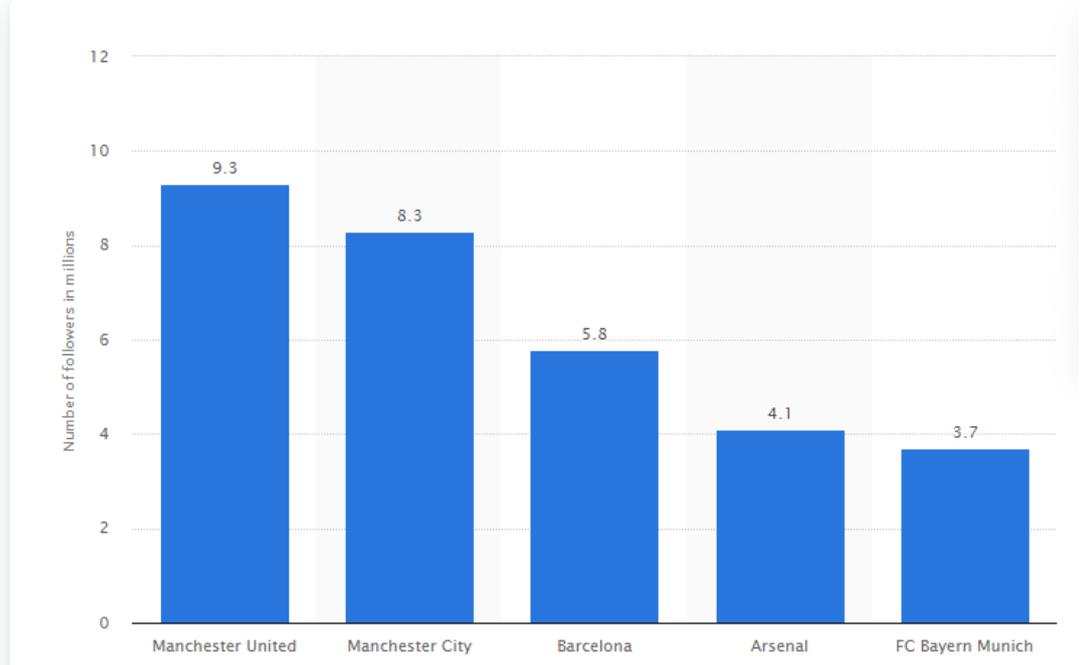
3. Offline Engagement Techniques

It is important for clubs to recognise the effectiveness of offline engagement methods. Deweese, Ebb, Giorgio and Reichheld (2018) have suggested that the stadium experience is one of the most important factors a club must get right when it comes to offline engagement.

By providing the best stadium experience possible, it entices the fan to partake in other events in and around the stadium that are associated with the club. This could be anything from eating at in-house restaurants to stadium tours. This in turn then provides extra income for the club, while simultaneously providing fan satisfaction. This is further supported by Wilson & Fowler (2020), "this must remain the cornerstone of a clubs fan engagement activities."

Allison (2013) implies that providing a positive match day experience for fans is something that clubs on a glocal scale can expand on. Fan engagement can have different meanings for different clubs. For some it is "primarily a brand extending exercise", whereas for others it can

be about creating a genuine connection and loyalty between club and fan. Allison expands by explaining that football goes far beyond the game itself and that it is "imperative for clubs to become more fan-centric". By providing a first-class experience, the fan is more likely to spend money at the stadium in addition to their match day ticket. This is something that clubs in the lower divisions could implement to generate further income.

Conversely, Dellea, Schmid & Zahn, (2014) argue that stadium experience and engagement is still "like that of 20 years ago". Manchester United and Barcelona have two of the most famous stadiums in football, yet both are completely outdated and in need of infrastructural work. Compare these stadiums with the new Tottenham Hotspur stadium and the differences in experiences are stark.

Fan zones have become a huge attraction for fans for important events. In relation to the lack of outside stadium activity, as implied by Dellea, et al. (2014), the popularity of fan zones is something that could be encouraged more by clubs. Most notably, the European Championships and Champions League finals have all had large fan zones for fans to watch the game without being at the game directly. This is an example of how clubs and firms within the football industry are exploring ways to engage the fans that are overseas and unable to regularly attend the stadium.

Global supporters' clubs can be a huge factor in creating communities around the world for fans who cannot regularly attend games. Manchester United have 262 officially recognised supporters' clubs, in 89 countries (Man Utd, 2021). Clubs send a variety of club ambassadors, often ex-players, to these events for 'big' games to build up the hype, discussion, and excitement for these fans. This is perhaps more imperative for those in countries that cannot always access the various social media channels. Thus, clubs may choose to put more focus

into events for supporter groups from these countries as they need to adapt to ensure they are maximising the engagement benefits from this segment.

4. Novel Approaches to Fan Engagement

Clubs and those within the sport industry have begun implementing novel approaches to engagement with a focus on digitalisation being earmarked as one of the way forwards in the industry (Allison, 2013; Cleland, 2016; Lefebvre, Djaballah & Chanavat, 2020).

The rise of cryptocurrencies has been a theme of recent years and some clubs have identified this as a route to engage fans. Inter have introduced a fan token, *'$INTER',* which allows fans to 'influence the club in a range of important polls' (Inter.it, 2021). According to Wilson and Fowler's (2020) model, clubs should focus on 'connecting fans' and these tokens present an opportunity to do that. This use of the blockchain and fan tokens could help move fans into the highest stage of the PCM: allegiance. As they are actively involved in club decisions, fans will feel more inclined to adopt the club as part of their overall identity which is a key tenet of the allegiance stage (Funk & James, 2004). If clubs break the trust of the fans by allowing reckless decisions to be made or going back on promises over decisions, this could negatively impact fans in the attachment stage as trust is vital at this stage (Funk and James, 2001).

Clubs must be responsive to changes in fan preferences and developments in 'technology and popular culture', and one growing market that clubs have utilised to engage fans is e-Sports (Cleland, 2016). Schmidt & Holzmayer (2018) suggested that e-Sports is one of the most sought-after strategies for growth within football clubs. Lefebvre et al., (2020) outline how FC Shalke 04 identified e-Sports as a method of targeting the younger age group as they felt other strategies were not able to sufficiently engage this potential market segment. Appendix C elaborates on segmentation.

The effectiveness of e-Sports as an engagement technique has been widely assessed with positive impacts on in-stadium attendance and TV viewership found in South Korea (Lim &

Pyun, 2018). However, Lefebvre et al., (2020) recognise potential weaknesses in this approach that could evolve into a threat to the club. The personality of e-Sports players is more prominent than those of club's football players due to the communication needed in e-Sports. Thus, if the personality or actions of the player do not match well with the brand of the club, this could damage reputation and make it difficult to attract fans to the engaging with the club and move past the initial awareness stage of the PCM.

Fans can be considered to be 'hyper-digitalised' and mobile applications (apps) offer a unique opportunity to engage these fans (Lawrence & Crawford, 2018a; Fenton, Cooper-Ryan & Vasilica, 2019). Tu, Hsieh & Feng (2019), identify a recent growth in the digital fitness industry, and coupled with the notion that apps can be a useful digital channel to increase engagement (Fenton & Helleu, 2019), a company called Fan Fit have developed a fitness tracker app in partnerships with clubs as a novel approach to engage fans (Fenton et al., 2019). The app allows fans to compete in leaderboards against their friends and for their clubs. This approach to combine fitness with club apps has the capability to make individuals aware of the club and enter the first stage of the PCM. Socialising agents are central tenets of the inputs at this stage and fans may get friends involved due to the competitive element. It can help transition fans to the attraction stage as partaking in fitness may help to fulfil the needs and wants of individuals and this is an input of this stage. However, beyond this stage the influence of external forces weaken thus the impact of social agents and the competitive element, will not be as significant; therefore, the aim to move fans to the attachment stage may prove problematic (Funk and James, 2001).

5. Solutions

Clubs should tailor marketing approaches to be personal to each fan using segmentation methods formed through the collection of digital data. This approach is more likely to retain the interests of fans over more generic communications so will be an effective marketing strategy (Postma & Brokke, 2002).

Despite the growth within online engagement methods, it is essential that clubs continue to enhance the match experience. The research analysed has suggested that top level clubs, especially in the Premier League, have a long way to go when it comes to match day experiences (Wilson and Fowler, 2016).

Club's social media should be actively engaging fans, not merely just present and passive on these sites, by replying to fans. Allison (2013) highlights the significance of this and with the PCM model in mind, this solution will help to strengthen the 'emotional and symbolic meaning' that supporters place upon a club which is a central element in the movement between the attraction and sought-after attachment stage (Funk and James, 2001).

Clubs should be alert and aware of emerging markets and trends that can be utilised to expand engagement efforts to underrepresented segments (Cleland, 2016). For instance, growth of viewers and revenue in eSports is shown in figures 4 and 5 (Statista, 2021a, 2021b). This outlines the growing interest in a new field and is an example of why clubs should always lookout for how they can amalgamate novel approaches into their engagement plan.

Figure 4: Number of eSports viewers in Europe from 2018 to 2020 (Statista, 2021b)
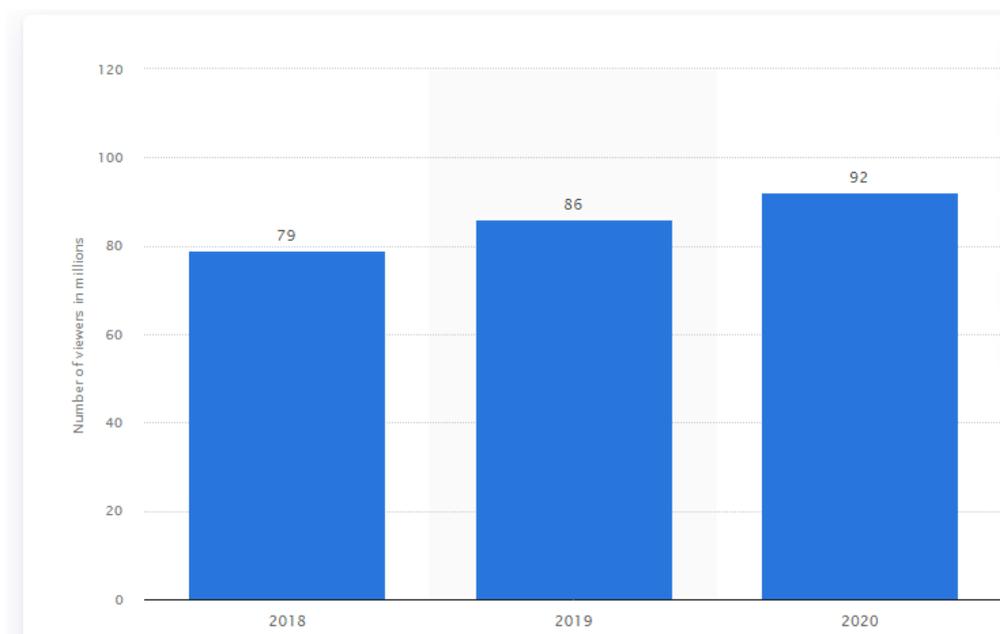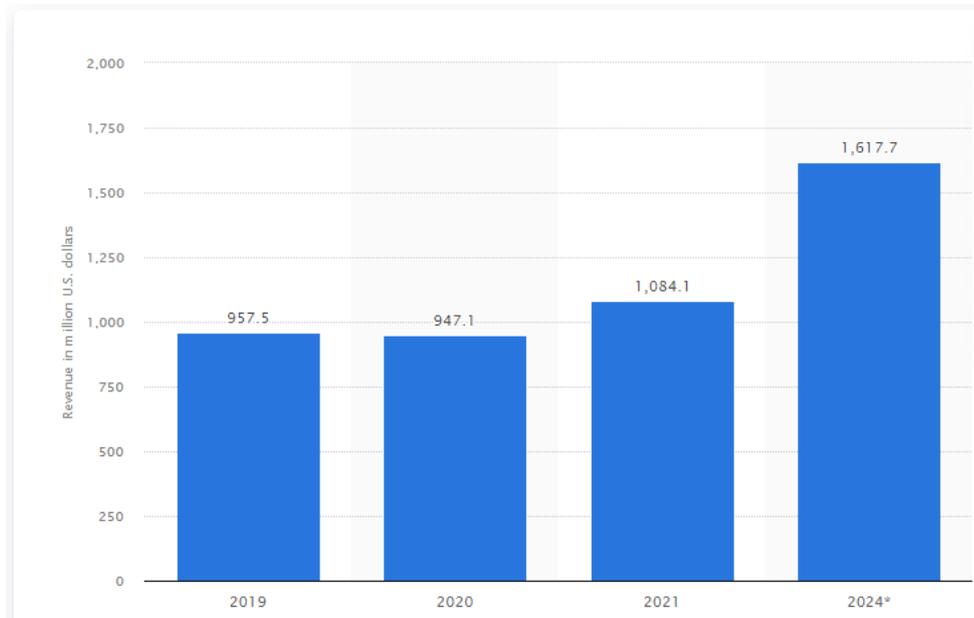
Figure 5: eSports market revenue worldwide from 2019 to 2024 (Statista, 2021a)

6. Conclusion

The fan engagement industry has developed and changed drastically in recent times with the growth of digitalisation across society, and as Allison (2013) states, there has been a 'genuine awakening' in football that the sport is not just about succeeding on the pitch, but successfully engaging with fans off it.

The impact of COVID-19 on engagement practices may have played a key role in this disruption of traditional approaches and whilst this report considers techniques that were present before the pandemic, novel approaches are appraised with the use of theoretical models.

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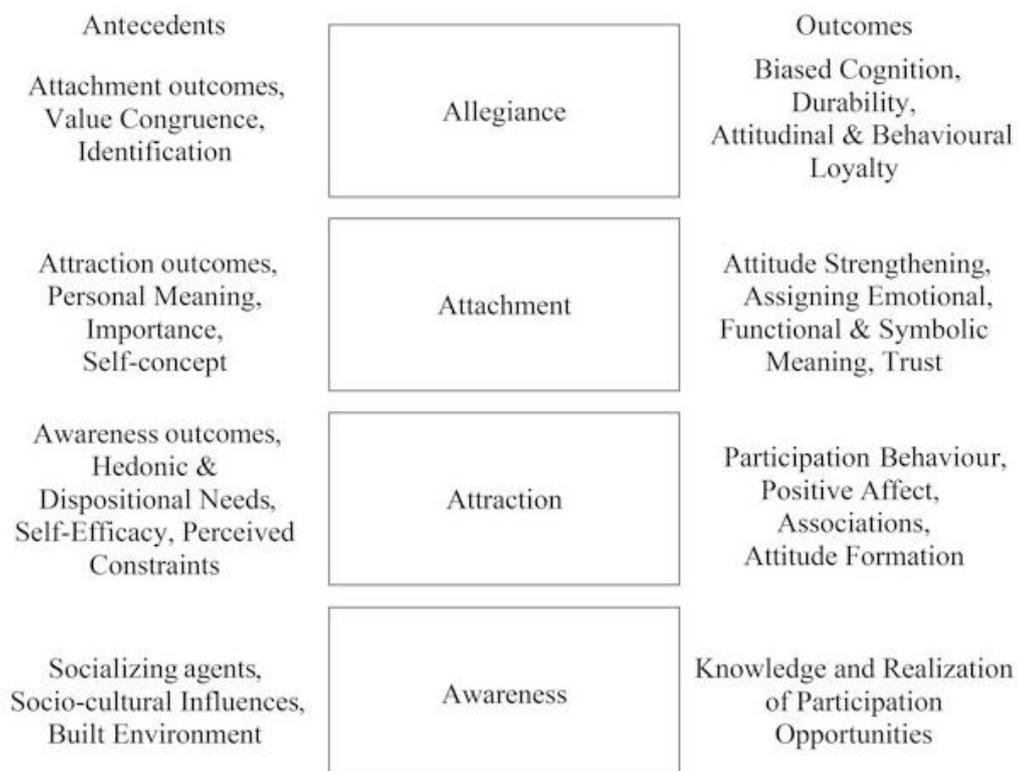
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Appendices

Appendix A: The Psychological Continuum Model

Funk and James (2001) introduced the psychological continuum model (PCM) which outlined a hierarchical set of stages that marketers should aim to progress fans through, with the ultimate aim of converting them to at least the attachment stage, if not the allegiant stage. The model can be seen in figure 1. The model suggests that both internal and external forces will act upon individuals to transition them through the stages with various factors having more influences in certain sections. Marketers should focus on these factors when determining the techniques, they choose to utilise to maximise the effectiveness of the overall engagement strategy. The ultimate goal of marketers should be to transition fans into the attachment stage at the very least, as this is where loyalty develops, and durability is established.

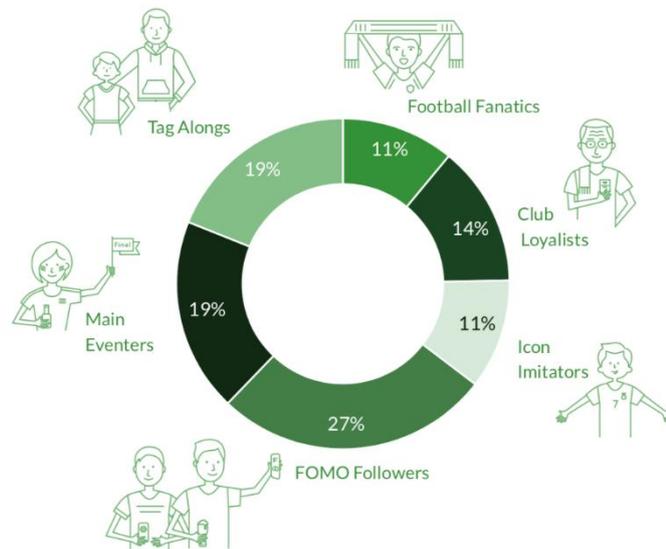| Antecedents		Outcomes
Attachment outcomes, Value Congruence, Identification	Allegiance	Biased Cognition, Durability, Attitudinal & Behavioural Loyalty
Attraction outcomes, Personal Meaning, Importance, Self-concept	Attachment	Attitude Strengthening, Assigning Emotional, Functional & Symbolic Meaning, Trust
Awareness outcomes, Hedonic & Dispositional Needs, Self-Efficacy, Perceived Constraints	Attraction	Participation Behaviour, Positive Affect, Associations, Attitude Formation
Socializing agents, Socio-cultural Influences, Built Environment	Awareness	Knowledge and Realization of Participation Opportunities

Appendix B: The Timing and Location Model

Wilson and Fowler (2020) developed a model to show how sports clubs can go beyond the live match itself to further engage fans, as shown in figure 2. They proposed four different sections that vary in terms timing and location. These should be combined to deliver a complete fan engagement experience.
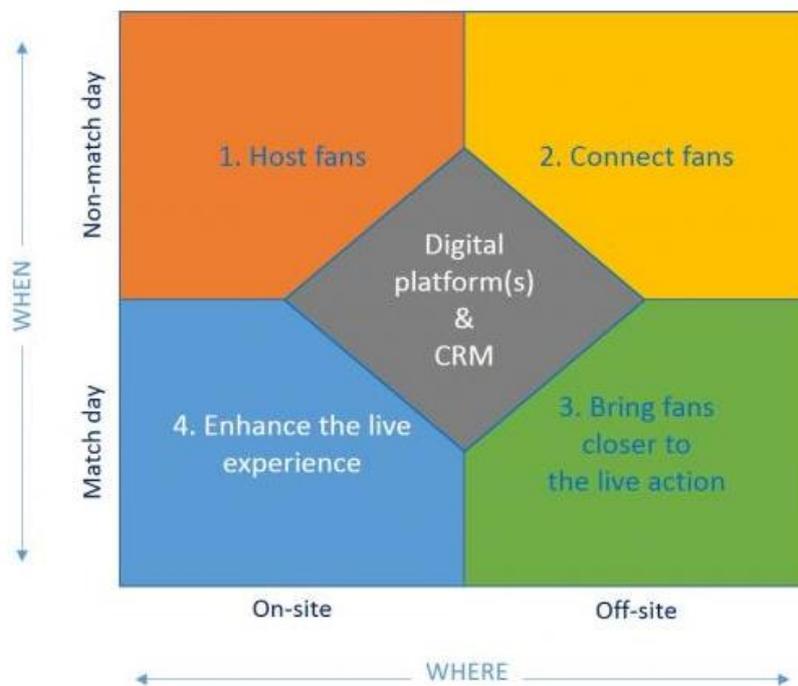
Appendix C: Fan Segmentation

Segmentation is portrayed by Lawson, (2020): "when you segment, you are personalising your message to that person and putting something in front of them that makes sense to them". It is also argued by (Davies, 2020) that segmentation will split fans based upon factors such as attendance type, ticket category, age, and location. Clubs should be segmenting your messages based on information you have on your fans (Lawson, 2020). Having more

knowledge about consumers allows marketers to target specific groups with refined products or more effective promotional efforts (Mcdonald, Leckie, Karg, Zubcevic-Basc, and Lock, 2016)

Tag Alongs
19%

Football Fanatics
11%

Club Loyalists
14%

Main Eventers
19%

Icon Imitators
11%

FOMO Followers
27%

Segment characteristics
(% in brackets refer to the size of the segment in European markets only)

FOOTBALL FANATICS
11%

FOOTBALL FOR... THE GAME:
- Follow football in its entirety, with strong emotional engagement – football provides a sense of community which is key to their enjoyment
- Slightly younger than average (37% are under 35), and the most male group (69%)
- Follow a range of sports, and highly engaged with football
- Prefer to go to the stadium to really experience this feeling of togetherness
- Attached to their club but engage widely beyond this, including lower league football

CLUB LOYALISTS
14%

FOOTBALL FOR... THEIR CLUB:
- Oldest segment (70% 35+) and predominantly male (66%)
- Highly engaged, long-term football fans
- Find football interesting/entertaining and follow their club closely
- Emotionally invested in their club, which helps provide their identity
- Watch football regularly and keep fully up to date with news

ICON IMITATORS
11%

FOOTBALL FOR... THE PLAYER:
- Youngest segment (53% 13-34) and 57% male
- Moderate to strong football interest, which is increasing
- Interest in football because they play regularly – generally prefer playing to watching
- Follow specific players and find them relatable
- Not as competition focussed, but enjoy big games featuring the world's biggest and best footballers

FOMO* FOLLOWERS
*'Fear of missing out'
27%

FOOTBALL FOR... THEIR FRIENDS:
- Also relatively young (52% under 35), predominantly male segment (54%)
- Moderate fans – claim to follow the sport closely, but don't identify as "huge" fans
- Follow football for social currency – something to talk about
- Frequently engage with football (news, illegal streaming, sharing stories/memes) but less emotionally engaged
- Prefer to follow the big teams, and prefer European football over domestic for the perceived higher quality of entertainment that it offers

MAIN EVENTERS
19%

FOOTBALL FOR... THE OCCASION:
- Typically older (64% over 35) and slightly more likely to be female (52%)
- Moderate fans – keep up to date with news and watch on TV
- Low engagement frequency which increases around big matches / tournaments
- Less bothered about the result, more interested in the event

TAG ALONGS
19%

FOOTBALL FOR... THEIR LOVED ONES:
- Typically older segment (65% over 35) and more likely to be female (59%)
- Lightest football fans, with low emotional and intellectual engagement
- Interest prompted by friends/family, or national team performance
- Despite lower football interest, most have heard of UCL and UEL and generally become more engaged around big tournaments

Applying the activity of fan segmentation to practise can allow brands communicate and target on segment-level as opposed to publishing for the entire fanbase. Research by Sheridan, (2017)suggests that "as part of personalisation, segmentation is possibly the most important facet to getting it right and this starts by understanding the customer". Each fan segment is different and basing marketing efforts on these differences makes it more personal. The European Club Association (ECA) has even identified 6 football fan segments in their 2020 report, "Football Fanatics, Club Loyalists, Icon Imitators, FOMO Followers, Main Eventers, and Tag Alongs" (European Club Association, 2020) which are outlined in the two infographics above. Personalisation has profound effects, adding that only personalised items seem to continue to attract the interest of fans, and that even greater effects can be expected for better personalised content (Postma & Brokke, 2001). Therefore, personalisation of marketing efforts through segmentation can be considered a marketing solution.