

## EXPLORING THE FACTORS THAT CAN STIMULATE FAN ENGAGEMENT IN CONDITIONS OF LOW SPORTS PERFORMANCE

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### **Abstract**

*In the digital age we live in today, fan engagement is more important than ever. With so many distractions competing for people's attention online, teams and athletes must find ways to capture the attention of their fans. Professional sports would not exist without engaged fans as we know it today.*

*In the paper "Exploring the factors that can stimulate fan engagement in conditions of low sports performance" we begin with a brief description of this phenomenon of fan engagement and its importance within any sports organization, and how fans have had to keep up with the digital age. In the end, a small study is presented on the factors that contribute to maintaining the relationship with the fans even when the team or the athlete has a period with lower performances.*

**Keywords:** *fan engagement, sport, digital age, social media, performance.*

**JEL classification:** *M30, M31, M37.*

### **1. Introduction**

Sport possesses a dynamic influence in the world, uniting individuals from diverse backgrounds while reducing racism and fostering international business opportunities. Organizations, companies, and individuals are increasingly harnessing the power of sport to achieve their goals and objectives. It has the potential to transform societies, inspiring and bringing people together on a global scale, and it is rapidly becoming integrated into the business landscape [15]-[4].

Many enthusiasts travel from their countries or cities to attend significant sporting events, reflecting the deep passion and affection people have for sports. Sports play a vital role in the daily lives of individuals worldwide, whether they participate actively or simply support their favorite

teams and athletes [3]. It has evolved into a widespread pastime, profession, lifestyle, and even a lucrative business venture. Today, sport is interconnected in a global network of interdependence, facilitating cross-border transactions, such as the consumption of sporting events.

The advancement of technology has ushered us into the digital age, where fan engagement is more crucial than ever. Fans now have unprecedented access to information and content about their beloved teams and athletes [1]-[8]. A myriad of social networks, online forums, and other digital platforms has strengthened connections between fans and their favorite teams and athletes. This shift has prompted organizations to invest in innovative technologies and strategies to enhance fan engagement.

However, building and maintaining fan engagement is not always easy. Sports clubs have to overcome a series of challenges, from declining attendance or fan loyalty to the impact of technology and changing consumer preferences [5]. That's why understanding this process of fan engagement in sports is so important, especially for sports organizations that want to build a strong and loyal fan base.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Understanding sports fan engagement**

Today sport has become more than a physical activity or a form of entertainment; all kinds of sporting events not only bring people together but also promote that sense of community and help create a community of passionate and loyal fans [6]-[16]. Whether we're talking about the cheers of the crowd at a live game or the excitement of a comeback at the end of the game, the degree of engagement of sports fans is a critical factor in the success of any sports organization. Fans are important apart from driving attendance, merchandise sales, and media coverage because they support their favorite team or favorite athlete for years to come.

Fans with greater team alignment experience higher levels of positive emotions such as satisfaction and joy.

Sports broadcasters need to identify the driving motives behind fans to promote their team and develop a loyal fan base [11]. To effectively accomplish this task, sports marketers need data that provides insight into the specific sports fan motives associated with the various fan groups that make up their fan base.

An understanding of the type of fan is also important. This type of information can allow marketers to target specific segments with promotional methods that match the fan motives associated with that segment. The purpose of this research was to study fan motivations at different levels of team identity and team loyalty among fans of college football teams.

This fan engagement encompasses not only the emotional connection between fans and their favorite teams or athletes but also the level of involvement and commitment fans have to their favorite teams, players, and leagues [2]. Here we can discuss a wide range of factors, including behavior and activity, from attending live games and watching televised games to purchasing merchandise and interacting with the social media team.

Fan engagement is an important indicator of the health of a sports organization because it can affect a wide range of critical metrics, including attendance, merchandise sales, and media.

The success of a team or an athlete depends not only on good results or the number of competitions won, but also on the importance of fan involvement, which is why a variety of strategies and technologies have appeared to develop the fan experience. These strategies range from creating the in-game experience through state-of-the-art stadiums and advanced technology to creating engaging social media content and developing programs for loyal fans.

In modern sports, analytics is beginning to play an increasingly important role, transforming not only how teams and coaches plan strategies, but also how fans interact with their favorite sport. From football and basketball to tennis and cricket, sophisticated data and statistics aren't just for the experience, they're becoming part of the fans' daily experience.

One of the most obvious benefits of advanced analytics is the ability to better understand the game. Detailed statistics about player performance, such as the number of successful passes, the

distance traveled on the field, or the percentage of successful throws, are now at the fingertips of fans. This data not only helps fans appreciate the skill and effort of players but also gives them a new level of depth in discussions about game strategies.

Through mobile apps and online platforms, fans can access various real-time statistics and analytics that help them follow the progress of their favorite team and players[13]. This means that the experience of watching a match changes, becoming much more interactive and informative.

Finally, one of the biggest benefits of advanced analytics is how it can increase fan engagement.

Through interactive games, prediction competitions, and fantasy sports platforms, fans can use the data to compete with friends and other fans around the world. These activities not only enhance the viewing experience but also strengthen the fan community, creating bonds based on a shared passion for sports.

Advanced analytics in sports is radically transforming the way fans interact with their favorite games, bringing an extra dimension of understanding and engagement. In an age dominated by technology, the ability to integrate this data into the everyday supporter experience is critical to maintaining and increasing fan engagement. Thus, sport becomes not just a spectacle to watch, but an ongoing adventure to explore and understand.

Maintaining and growing fan loyalty is the primary factor in the success of any sports organization, as it creates a dedicated and passionate fan base that can drive attendance, merchandise sales, and media coverage.

Below are three elements directly influenced by sports fans:

- Increasing presence at sports competitions
- Increase sales of merchandise associated with your favorite team or athlete
- Increasing presence on social networks

In conclusion, sports fan engagement is a critical factor in the success of any sports organization, as it drives attendance, merchandise sales, and media coverage[14]. To build and maintain fan engagement, organizations must understand the key drivers of fan engagement and measure the effectiveness of their strategies[7]. By focusing on building strong relationships with fans, organizations can create a passionate and loyal fanbase that will drive their success for years to come[10].

## ***2.2 The importance of fan engagement in the digital age***

In the digital age we live in today, fan engagement is more important than ever. With so many distractions competing for people's attention online, teams and athletes must find ways to capture the attention of their fans. Professional sports would not exist without engaged fans as we know it today. It is the fans who support ticket sales, merchandise purchases, sponsorship opportunities, and ultimately revenue generation for the teams. Moreover, engagement is necessary because it creates a community among fans, which enhances their emotional connection with their favorite sport or team.

This connection causes them to stay involved for the long term, instead of just being supporters who only show up when things are going well on the court or basketball court [9]. Fan involvement is an essential aspect of sports fanaticism today, which has been facilitated by technological advancements in recent decades.

In the past, watching sports was a completely different experience. Before the advent of cable television, Romanians had to rely on a few channels that broadcast sporadic events. The only way fans could watch their favorite teams or athletes was by attending live events. If you were lucky enough to live nearby or had enough money to travel, you could see a few matches in person. Otherwise, you had to wait for occasional radio broadcasts or taped TV coverage. Televised sports events began in Romania around 1965 with the launch of Romanian Television (TVR), which was owned by the state at that time. At first, broadcasts were limited to major events such as football matches and the Olympic Games. It was not until the 1980s that the sports program expanded with the launch of specialist broadcasts and more frequent coverage.

Television and radio have transformed the way fans engage with sports, bringing them closer than ever. Suddenly, people who couldn't attend live events could watch their favorite teams or athletes from home. Broadcasts not only allowed more people to access sports content but also created new opportunities for advertising and sponsorships to reach audiences through commercial breaks and sponsorships.

These sources of income helped fund sports organizations and allowed them to invest in better facilities and training programs. However, there was a downside to this accessibility - fans were becoming passive spectators instead of active participants in sports culture. Without the ability to interact with other fans outside of live events or local fan clubs, it was difficult for enthusiasts to form communities around their interests. This lack of engagement led to a disconnect between fans and athletes, which ultimately affected how much they cared about the results on the field.

Social media has revolutionized the way fans engage with sports. We are no longer limited to passive observation while sitting on the sofa or in the stands. We now have access to behind-the-scenes content, real-time updates, and direct interaction with players and teams. Social media has given us a sense of ownership over our favorite sports and allowed us to actively participate in creating the narrative. One of the biggest ways social media has impacted fan engagement is its ability to break down barriers between athletes and their supporters. Now, fans can communicate directly with their idols through platforms like Twitter or Instagram. While this can lead to awkward interactions (think oversharing or too much familiarity), it also allows for a unique insight into athletes' personalities and lives outside of their sport. Fans feel more connected than ever, leading to greater loyalty and engagement with their favorite teams.

Fantasy sports are a relatively new phenomenon that has taken the world by storm. For those unfamiliar with fantasy sports, it is a game where participants create their imaginary team made up of real players. These players are awarded points based on their actual performance on the court or basketball court. The goal is to have the team with the most points and beat other participants in your league. This allows fans to get more involved with individual players and teams outside of match day. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for fans to connect with others who share the same interests and compete with them in a friendly way. One way fantasy sports have increased fan engagement is by allowing them to learn more about individual players. When picking their team, fans need to research the stats and performances of different players over time to make informed decisions about who to pick for their team. This process allows them to gain more knowledge about individual athletes, which can lead to increased interest in watching matches in which these players participate. In addition, fantasy sports provide another incentive for fans to watch games they might not otherwise watch. If a fan has one or more players from a specific team on their fantasy team, they are more likely to watch that game instead of just checking the score afterward. This means that teams can gain the trust of new viewers as a result of the popularity of fantasy sports. Overall, we think fantasy sports have been a great addition to fan engagement strategies. They provide an exciting way for fans to connect with their favourite sports and teams while learning more about individual players. The rise of fantasy sports has undoubtedly changed the way fans engage with sports and is a trend that WE believe will continue to grow in popularity.

It's not difficult to imagine how virtual reality could completely revolutionize fan engagement in sports. With VR, fans would no longer be limited by their physical location when it comes to attending matches and experiencing them as close and personal as possible [12]. This would open up a whole new world of opportunities for teams and leagues looking to expand their fan base beyond their local market. But perhaps even more interesting is how RV could change our understanding of what it means to be a "fan." We would no longer limit ourselves to being passive observers looking on from afar; instead, we would become active participants, immersed in the action like never before. Imagine being able to step onto the field with your favorite soccer team and see exactly what they see as they head for the goal. Or how about being able to practice your

tennis strokes against a virtual opponent who reacts to your every move? The possibilities are truly endless, and I'm excited to see what the future holds for virtual reality in fan engagement in sports.

### 3. Findings and discussions:

To carry out this study, we surveyed the Romanian population, between 20.09.2024 and 05.11.2024, through a questionnaire on Google Form that was completed by 250 respondents. The questionnaire was created to fulfill the objectives of this research. It contains 22 items with several 120 variables.

At the beginning, the questions followed the description of the respondents, thus analyzing the data regarding the respondents we noticed that a percentage of 74% are male, and 26% are female, which means that men are more interested in sports than women.

Regarding the marital status of the respondents, the majority of 48.8% is represented by married people, with the lowest share of 4.8% of respondents with the status of widower/widow.

The number of respondents aged between 20-30 years 94 people, equivalent to 37.6%, 101 respondents were aged 30-40 years, respectively 40.4%, 36 respondents, equivalent to 14.4%, were aged between 40 - 50 years old, and 19 respondents, the equivalent of 7.6%, are over 50 years old.

The ranking of respondents according to their last absolute education highlighted the fact that 97 respondents (38.8%) have higher education, and 67 respondents (26.8%) have postgraduate education.

The analysis of the jobs highlighted the fact that 33 clients have the status of businessmen, respectively 13.2%, a percentage of 4% work as government officials, 12 respondents (4.8%) have other occupations than those presented, 77 prospects (30.8%) are students, 15 are retired, 34 (13.6%) have activities as a teacher, doctor, engineer, economist, 47 prospects (18.8%) are civil servants with secondary education, and 22 (8.8%) are employers.

To the question Do you periodically perform a physical exercise program? the vast majority of people who are part of this research answered positively in a proportion of 90%, which indicates that they have become more aware of the importance of sport.

When they were asked to evoke some of the feelings they experience when attending a match of their favorite team, joy, excitement, excitement, or pride are listed among the most common feelings.

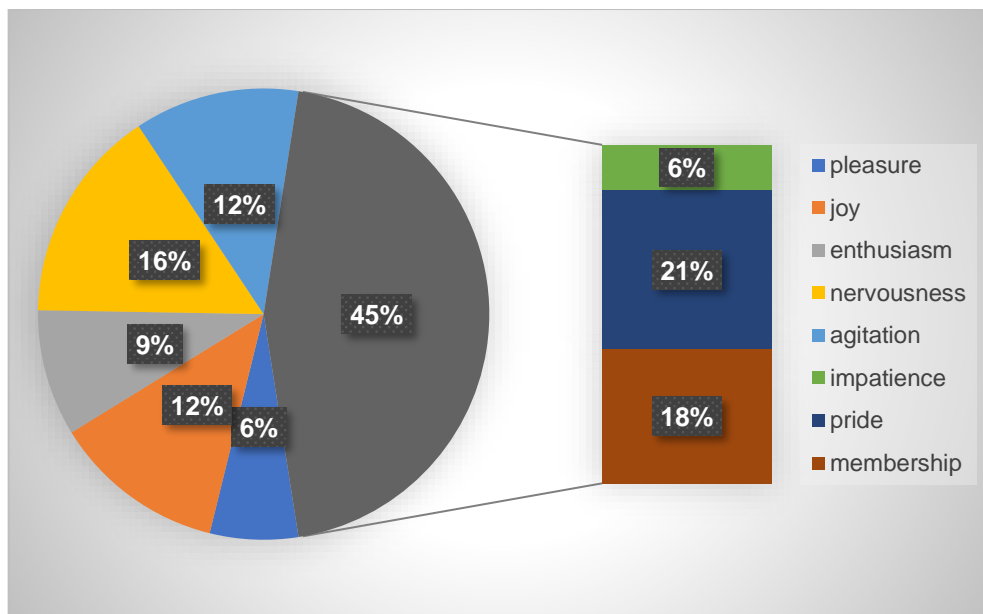


Fig. 1 Distribution of the sample according to the feelings experienced

Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

The main reasons listed by the respondents for participating in sports events are primarily because they like sports games, because they want to get away from problems and the daily routine, or because they want to spend more time with friends and family.

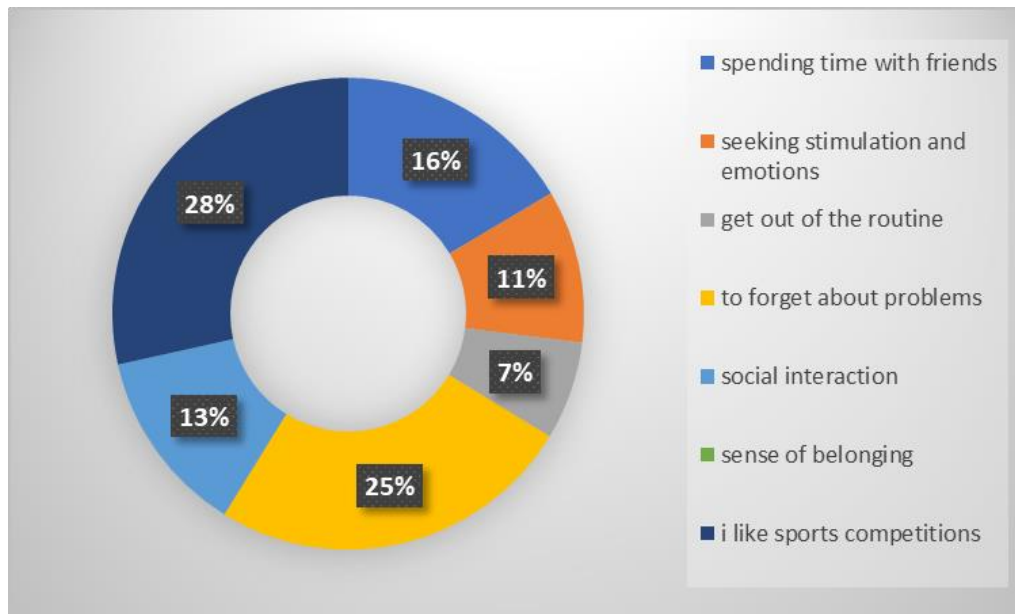


Fig. 2 Sample distribution by reasons for attending matches

Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

The vast majority of people surveyed consider themselves fans of sports games, stating that they have always had the same favorite teams, but a good part of respondents does not consider themselves fans, and a third are only temporary fans.

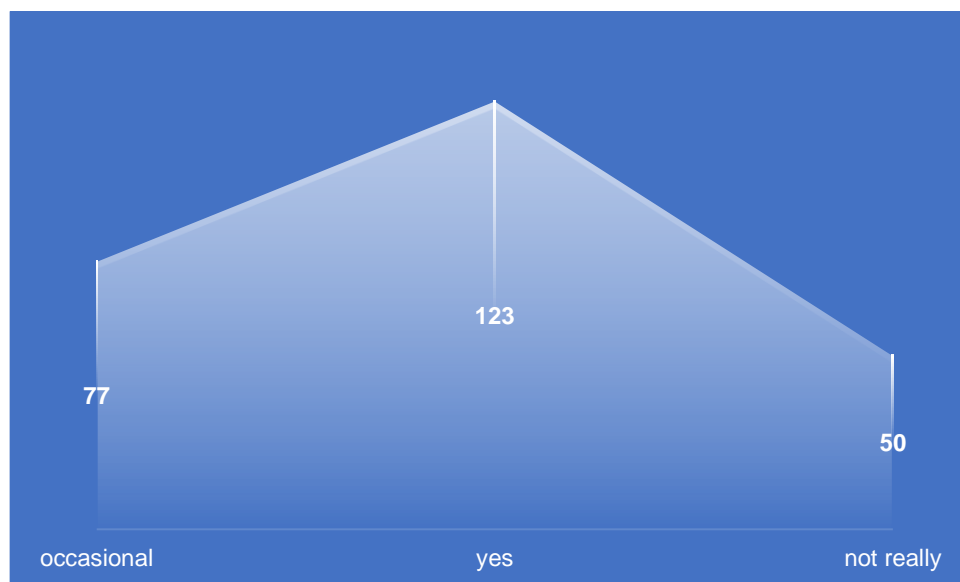


Fig. 3 Sample distribution by fan category membership

Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

The next question wanted to know what factors can stimulate the relationship between fans and athletes, when they have periods of poor performance.

As you will see in the graph below, among the listed factors is authenticity, even if they have worse periods, the athletes must recognize their mistakes and learn from them and continue to develop from the challenges they face. A second factor is the commitment, but this time of the athlete or the team towards the fans, and it refers to the frequent and regular communication with the fans, the narration of the various situations they go through to make the fans feel connected and involved. Taking responsibility for actions and mistakes and the transparency and morality that athletes can offer to avoid various scandals or controversies will make fans stay close.

Respondents also suggested generosity, athletes and sportsmen can be generous by offering rewards, discounts or opportunities to loyal fans and express your gratitude and appreciation, during those difficult periods with poor performances. Adaptability is a factor that fans want to see in those they admire, to rise from their ashes and move on, to be open to new ideas and suggestions from fans to face various challenges.

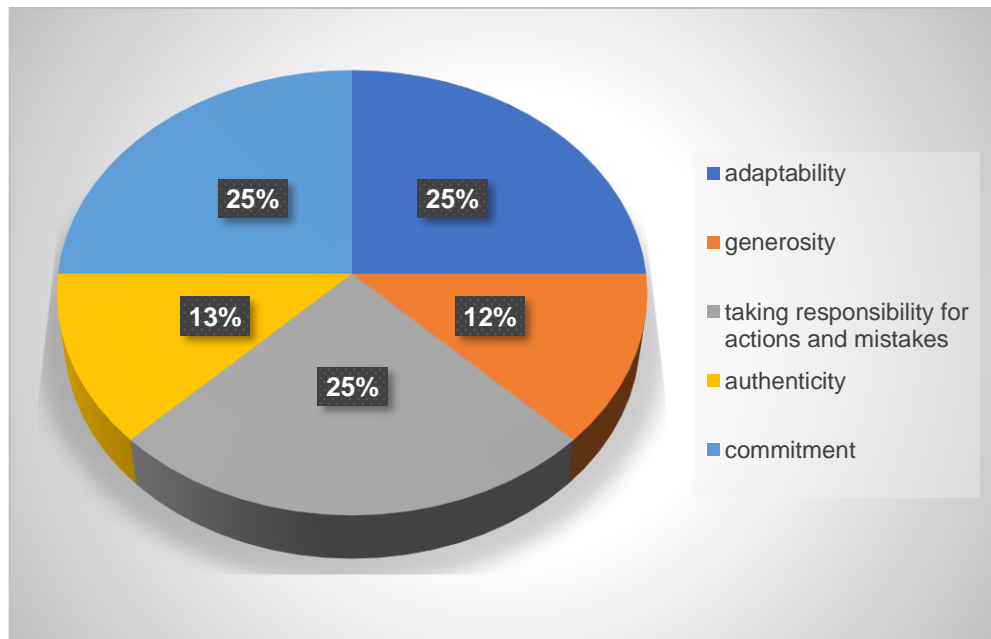


Fig. 4 The factors that can stimulate fan engagement

Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

The last question in this short study concerned the channels through which the engagement of fans in the sports world can be increased.

After finding out what factors are considered important to stimulate the relationship with the fans, we also wanted to see the clear means by which the relationship between fans and athletes can be stimulated when there are periods of poor performance.

Thus, to stimulate the fans' commitment, the respondents proposed the use of various digital channels through which the athletes can get closer to the fans and have better communication. So, you could see social networks, mobile applications, podcasts, or websites.

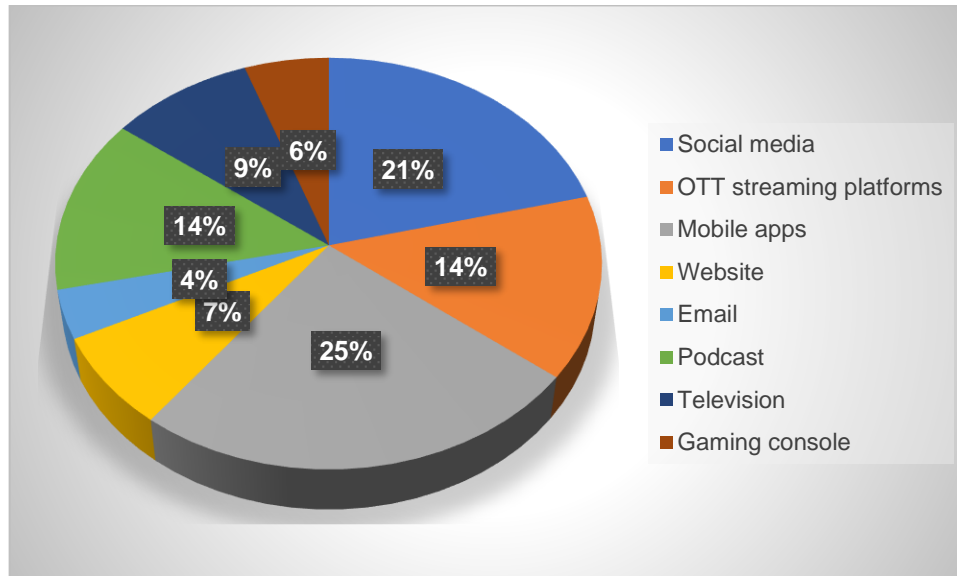


Fig. 5 The channels that can stimulate fan engagement

Source: own interpretation with the help of the Excel program

#### 4. Conclusions

The popularity of sports has grown in recent years, making it more important for marketers to understand the factors involved in building and maintaining a loyal fan base. Not only do loyal fans spend more money supporting their teams than non-loyal fans, but they are more likely to step up their efforts to recruit new fans. One of the biggest ways social media has impacted fan engagement is its ability to break down barriers between athletes and their supporters. Now, fans can communicate directly with their idols through platforms like Twitter or Instagram. While this can lead to awkward interactions (think oversharing or too much familiarity), it also allows for a unique insight into athletes' personalities and lives outside of their sport. Fans feel more connected than ever, leading to greater loyalty and engagement with their favorite teams.

Consumer loyalty also has a greater impact on customer retention, helping to smooth the effort and flow of team participation and support.

Fans with greater team alignment experience higher levels of positive emotions such as satisfaction and joy.

Sports broadcasters need to identify the driving motives behind fans to promote their team and develop a loyal fan base. To effectively accomplish this task, sports marketers need data that provides insight into the specific sports fan motives associated with the various fan groups that make up their fan base.

An understanding of the type of fan is also important. This type of information can allow marketers to target specific segments with promotional methods that match the fan motives associated with that segment.

#### Acknowledgment

All authors contributed equally to this research.

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