

THE IMPACT OF SPORTING EVENTS ON FAN EXPERIENCE AND LOYALTY

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Abstract

In recent years, sporting events have evolved into complex experiences that extend well beyond the competition itself, bringing together entertainment, community interaction, and brand engagement. In this context, understanding how such events shape the fan experience has become increasingly relevant for sports organizations. This study explores the role of special events organized by sports clubs and organizations in enhancing fan experience, with a focus on emotional connection, engagement, and loyalty. The research is based on a survey conducted among 112 sports fans, using a structured questionnaire designed to capture patterns of participation, perceptions of fan influence, and expectations regarding event quality. The findings indicate that fans attribute significant importance to the atmosphere created during live events and to their own role in supporting athletes. At the same time, results suggest a clear openness among participants to invest more in the event experience, provided that improvements in infrastructure and services are visible. The study also highlights the growing importance of digital interaction and the potential benefits of involving fans more directly in the design and organization of events. The paper suggests that special sporting events can strengthen long-term relationships between fans and sports organizations when they are designed as integrated experiences that combine emotional, social, and digital dimensions.

Keywords: fans, sport, special events, experience, community

JEL classification: M30, M31, M37.

1. Introduction

Sport remains a global phenomenon, and technology makes it more accessible than ever. Sporting events continue to inspire, unite and provoke intense emotions.

At the same time, technology is transforming the way we can interact with this global phenomenon no matter where we are. With a balanced approach, sport can be not only a source of adrenaline and joy, but also an opportunity for learning and for personal development.

The media has contributed to turning sport into a global social phenomenon. The way sporting events are perceived and understood is strongly influenced by media structures and narratives [17]. Journalists are not only intermediaries of information, but often become participants in the symbolic

construction of sport, sometimes acting as supporters themselves. Through continuous coverage, storytelling, and visual representation, the media contributes to shaping memorable sporting moments and maintaining a permanent connection between audiences and their favourite teams, athletes, and competitions.

The relationship between the media and sports is a very close one. In the modern era, for a sporting event to be truly major, it needs to have adequate media coverage. Sports that receive limited media attention struggle to reach wider audiences, while others have evolved in direct relation to broadcasting requirements, adapting their format to fit television and digital platforms [8]. At the same time, the media itself depends heavily on sport as a source of content, narratives, and emotional engagement.

Sport and media have become tightly interwoven. It is hard to talk about one without, sooner or later, arriving at the other. A match is no longer received only as a sporting contest. It reaches the public through commentary, camera work, edited highlights, reactions, reposts, and discussion. Because of that, the meaning of an event is shaped not only by play itself, but also by the way it circulates after the whistle.

Audience size matters here, but not only in the obvious sense. The crowd in the stadium still counts, of course. Yet a large part of the event now unfolds elsewhere: on television, on mobile screens, in clips, in short reactions, in fragments consumed hours later. People do not all follow sport in the same way anymore. Some watch the full event. Others catch only moments. Still, these repeated encounters build familiarity. Over time, they also build attachment. Fans begin to form habits, preferences, and patterns of attention that tie them to certain teams, athletes, or competitions.

This growing visibility has also changed the economic logic of sport. Sponsors no longer invest only in exposure during the event itself. They are interested in the wider circulation of sport, especially where fan attention continues after the match. Social media has made that especially valuable, since it allows brands and sports organizations to stay in contact with audiences in a more direct and ongoing way [4]. Under these conditions, the strength of a sports organization depends not just on results, but also on how visible, active, and engaged its public is.

The same pattern can be seen clearly in the biggest international competitions. Events such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games draw audiences on a scale that goes well beyond traditional sport publics. Their influence spills into culture, economics, tourism, and public image, which helps explain why they are commonly discussed as mega-events [1]. Still, sport does not live only through exceptional moments of that magnitude. Its longer-term stability depends, much more quietly, on whether organizations manage to keep audiences close over time.

In this broader context, the way performance is understood in sport has also changed. Success is no longer defined only by results or rankings. Increasingly, attention is directed towards how organizations are managed, how they relate to their stakeholders, and how they create value over time. This shift reflects a more complex view of sport, where competition remains important, but is no longer the only reference point.

Studies on sports governance highlight the importance of structured management processes and accountability in ensuring long-term organizational stability [3]. Similarly, research on publicly funded sports organizations shows that adaptation to changing economic and social conditions requires more flexible and audience-oriented strategies [2]. These perspectives reinforce the idea that performance in sport can no longer be understood exclusively in competitive terms, but must also include relational and experiential dimensions.

Within this context, technological innovation has played a decisive role in reshaping both the production and consumption of sport. The integration of digital tools, data analytics, and communication platforms has created new opportunities for interaction between sports organizations and their audiences, while also increasing the expectations of fans in terms of accessibility, personalization, and immediacy [20]. As a result, fans are no longer passive spectators, but active participants who seek meaningful experiences and continuous engagement.

These shifts are especially visible in the case of special sporting events. They are not limited to the competition itself and, in many cases, are not meant to be. Their structure usually includes

other layers: fan zones, community activities, sponsor activations, promotional moments, or opportunities for direct contact with athletes. Because of this, people often evaluate such events in a broader way. They remember not only the result, but the atmosphere, the setting, and the way they felt while taking part.

Digital platforms have pushed this even further. A sporting event no longer begins only at kick-off, nor does it end when the match is over. Fans follow announcements in advance, react during the event, and continue the conversation afterwards through clips, comments, reposts, and online exchanges. In that sense, the event stretches in time. It also stretches across media.

This has made communication more important than it used to be. Public relations and audience-focused communication are no longer secondary tools. They are part of how the relationship between organizations and fans is built and maintained. Recent work shows that fan experience grows out of repeated contact, emotional relevance, and a feeling that supporters are not being addressed mechanically, but taken seriously as part of the sporting environment [5]. That matters because loyalty rarely comes from visibility alone. It develops more easily where interaction feels coherent and worth continuing.

There is still a point that deserves closer attention, though. A number of studies discuss media, sponsorship, or digital engagement separately, but fewer look at what happens when these elements meet inside the event experience itself. That question becomes even more relevant in sports contexts where fan-oriented strategies are still developing and where organizations are only beginning to treat experience as a strategic resource rather than an accessory.

This study starts from that point. It examines the role of special events organized by sports clubs and organizations in shaping fan experience, with particular attention to emotional connection, engagement, and loyalty toward teams or brands.

2. Literature review

2.1 Special sporting events as strategic tools

Special sporting events are more than scheduled competitive occasions held in a particular place and time. In the current sports environment, they function as organized spaces where competition, communication, entertainment, and interaction meet, creating value both for sports organizations and for their audiences. Large-scale events, often described as “mega-events”, illustrate this dynamic particularly well, as they combine global visibility with economic, social, and political impact [1]. At a broader level, research shows that the success of sporting events depends not only on operational management, but also on their capacity to generate meaningful experiences for participants and spectators [10]. This shift in perspective reflects a wider transformation in sport, where events are evaluated not only through attendance or results, but through their ability to create engagement and long-term connections with audiences.

From this perspective, special sporting events can be understood as platforms that connect the sporting product with a wider set of social, economic, and symbolic benefits. They bring together athletes, clubs, sponsors, media actors, and local communities in a shared setting where sport is experienced collectively rather than consumed passively. This collective dimension is essential, as fan interaction and shared emotional responses contribute significantly to the overall meaning of the event [13]-[14]. The growing importance of such events is closely linked to the increasing professionalization of sport and to the need for organizations to position themselves more clearly in competitive and media-driven environments.

At the organizational level, the importance of special sporting events becomes even more visible. For sports clubs and nonprofit organizations, events are not isolated activities, but strategic instruments through which visibility, legitimacy, and stakeholder relationships are developed. Governance structures and management practices influence how these events are designed and implemented, especially when organizations must balance sporting objectives with financial and reputational considerations [3]. This becomes particularly relevant in periods of economic pressure, when sports organizations must adapt their strategies in order to maintain public interest and justify resource allocation [2]. In addition, the complexity of organizing sporting events varies considerably

depending on their scale, ranging from local competitions to international tournaments, each requiring different levels of coordination, resources, and expertise [11].

Another important dimension is the promotional and relational role of special sporting events. Sports organizations increasingly use events to support sponsorship activation, strengthen brand identity, and develop more direct forms of communication with their audiences. In this context, digital technologies and communication platforms extend the impact of an event beyond the physical venue, allowing continuous interaction before, during, and after the event itself [4]-[20]. As a result, the value of a sporting event is no longer limited to the competition itself, but includes its mediated and extended presence in digital environments.

The literature also suggests that the attractiveness of a sporting event is shaped by more than the competitive act itself. Elements such as atmosphere, visual identity, communication strategy, and the overall event setting contribute to the perceived quality of the experience. The design and development of sports venues also play a role here, as they influence how events are structured and experienced by audiences [7]. This is why special events often include complementary activities such as fan zones, community interactions, and branded activations designed to deepen audience involvement. In practice, these elements can transform a simple competition into a memorable experience and can support the long-term positioning of teams, venues, and sports brands [21]-[4].

Seen in this way, special sporting events occupy an increasingly important place in contemporary sport because they combine competitive value with experiential and relational value. They offer organizations a way to attract attention, activate partnerships, and strengthen their public image, while offering fans a more engaging form of participation. This dual role explains why event organization is no longer treated as a purely logistical activity, but as a strategic function within sports management.

2.2 Digitalization and media in sport events

The development of digital technologies and the expansion of media platforms have fundamentally reshaped the way sporting events are produced, distributed, and experienced. The contemporary sport industry operates within a highly mediated environment, where visibility and accessibility depend not only on the event itself, but also on the channels through which it is communicated. The integration of digital media has extended the reach of sporting events far beyond physical venues, transforming them into hybrid experiences that combine live participation with continuous online interaction [24].

Media has long played a central role in shaping the meaning and perception of sport. Traditional broadcasting contributed to the globalization of sporting competitions, while also influencing how audiences interpret and emotionally connect with events [17]. At the same time, the relationship between sport and media has evolved into a mutually reinforcing system, in which sporting events generate content and narratives, while media platforms amplify their visibility and commercial value [8]. This interdependence has intensified with the rise of digital technologies, which have diversified both the forms of content and the ways in which audiences engage with sport.

Recent research highlights that media consumption is closely linked to sports participation and audience development. Increased exposure to sports-related content can stimulate interest and involvement, contributing to the expansion of fan bases and the growth of event attendance [19]. This connection becomes even more relevant in digital environments, where access to content is immediate and continuous, and where fans can interact not only with the event itself, but also with other fans, athletes, and organizations.

Social media platforms have become a central element in this transformation. They enable sports organizations to communicate directly with their audiences, bypassing traditional media filters and creating more personalized forms of interaction. The effectiveness of these platforms is reflected in measurable indicators of engagement, such as likes, shares, comments, and user-generated content, which provide real-time feedback on audience response [18]. In this context, fan engagement is no longer limited to passive consumption, but involves active participation in the creation and dissemination of sport-related content.

Technological innovation further strengthens this dynamic by introducing new tools for communication, analysis, and interaction. Digital platforms, mobile applications, and data-driven systems allow sports organizations to better understand audience behaviour and to tailor their communication strategies accordingly [20]. These developments support a more targeted and efficient approach to audience management, while also raising expectations regarding immediacy, personalization, and accessibility.

From a marketing perspective, digitalization has also enhanced the role of sporting events as platforms for sponsorship activation and brand communication. Social media, in particular, allows sponsors to engage audiences through integrated campaigns that combine event visibility with interactive content, thereby strengthening the connection between brands and fans [4]. In this sense, the value of a sporting event is increasingly linked to its digital presence and its capacity to generate engagement across multiple platforms.

The participatory nature of contemporary fandom further amplifies the impact of digital media. Fans are not only consumers of content, but also contributors to the narratives that surround sporting events. Through online communities, discussions, and shared experiences, they play an active role in shaping the visibility and meaning of sport [16]. This shift from passive spectatorship to active participation reinforces the importance of digital environments in the overall structure of sporting events.

For this reason, digital media should no longer be treated as a simple extension of the event. It is already embedded in the way sport is produced, followed, and remembered. A match may still unfold in a stadium, but much of its public life happens elsewhere and continues well after the final moment. What counts now is not just the competition itself, but the wider experience built around it and the ways in which that experience remains active across different platforms.

2.3 Fan experience and fan engagement

In contemporary sport, the relationship between organizations and their audiences is no longer limited to attendance or viewership. What matters increasingly is how sport is experienced. The notion of fan experience captures this shift, referring to the way individuals perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to sporting events across different contexts, from the stadium to digital platforms. In this sense, sport is not only watched, but lived, discussed, and shared.

Recent work places the fan at the centre of this process, emphasizing that the value of sporting events is shaped by the quality of interaction between organizations and their audiences [5]. This interaction is not restricted to the moment of the event itself. It begins before the competition, continues during it, and extends afterwards through communication, memory, and online engagement. The experience is therefore cumulative and relational, built over time rather than consumed instantly.

Fan engagement develops within this broader experiential framework. It reflects the degree to which individuals become involved with a sport, a team, or an event, not only through behaviour, but also through emotional and cognitive attachment. Digital environments have intensified this process. Online platforms allow fans to follow teams continuously, exchange opinions, and participate in discussions that extend the life of sporting events beyond their physical boundaries [23]. As a result, engagement is no longer tied to presence in the stadium, but to a constant flow of interaction.

This transformation has also changed expectations. Fans are more attentive to how they are addressed, how they are included, and how authentic the communication feels. Research shows that perceived authenticity plays an important role in sustaining engagement, especially in environments where commercialization is highly visible [22]. When communication appears distant or purely promotional, engagement tends to weaken. When it reflects shared values and a sense of belonging, it becomes stronger and more stable.

The spread of digital media has altered fan behaviour in fairly visible ways. Supporters no longer rely on one channel, or even on one type of attention. Some watch entire matches live. Others return later for short clips, commentary, reactions, or debates online. Many do both. What follows

from this is a more flexible pattern of consumption, but also a more uneven one, because the experience is no longer concentrated in a single place or moment [24]. For sports organizations, that creates a practical challenge. Communication has to reach audiences that differ not only in preferences, but also in timing, habits, and degree of involvement.

Even so, sport has not lost its collective force. People still gather around it, still react together, still build small rituals around repeated encounters with the same team, competition, or event. That may happen in the stadium, but it now happens just as quickly in digital settings, where responses circulate immediately and shared emotion becomes visible in real time [13]. The communal side of sport has not weakened; it has simply spread into additional spaces.

Seen more broadly, this tells us something about the place of sport in everyday life. Media routines, lifestyle changes, and easier access to information have made fan engagement less fixed than before [15]. Many supporters now move between different forms of participation, combining live attendance with mediated and digital interaction, depending on context and availability. The expansion of digital platforms allows fans to follow events, interact with content, and remain engaged without being physically present [24]-[23]. Interest in sport has not diminished. What has changed is the form in which that interest is expressed.

In this context, cultivating the fan experience becomes a strategic concern. It involves more than organizing events or producing content. It requires attention to interaction, communication, and the overall coherence of the relationship between the organization and its audience. Studies in the field of sport management underline that meaningful engagement emerges when fans feel involved, recognized, and connected to what the organization represents [5]. This connection forms the basis for longer-term relationships, which extend beyond individual events and contribute to the stability of the fan base.

These perspectives suggest that fan experience and fan engagement are closely intertwined. Experience provides the context in which engagement develops, while engagement gives depth and continuity to that experience. Understanding this relationship is essential for explaining how sporting events move beyond isolated moments and become part of a broader process of interaction between sport organizations and their audiences.

2.4 From fan experience to loyalty

The discussion around fan experience becomes relevant only when it is linked to longer-term outcomes. Among these, loyalty remains one of the most important, both from a managerial and a theoretical perspective. In sport, loyalty is not simply a matter of repeated consumption, such as attending matches or buying merchandise. It reflects a deeper attachment, often built through repeated experiences that reinforce identification, emotion, and trust.

One of the mechanisms through which this connection develops is the presence of rituals. Game-day routines, symbolic behaviours, and shared practices create continuity in the relationship between fans and sport. These rituals are not incidental. They structure the experience and give it meaning over time, making participation feel familiar and emotionally significant [12]. Through repetition, they contribute to the formation of stable patterns of behaviour, which are commonly associated with loyalty.

Emotion plays a central role in this process. Sporting events generate intense affective responses, and these responses influence how fans remember and relate to the experience. Emotional reactions do not remain isolated at the level of the event itself. They extend into the way fans interpret future interactions, shaping expectations and preferences [9]. When experiences are perceived as meaningful or authentic, they tend to strengthen attachment. If fans feel that everything is reduced to promotion or surface-level messaging, the reaction tends to be quite different. Instead of getting closer, they step back.

For this reason, engagement does not automatically turn into loyalty. Being present, active, or visible around a team or an event is one thing; developing a lasting connection is another. What seems to matter more is not how often fans interact, but how they experience those interactions. When communication feels genuine and consistent with what the organization stands for, people are

more inclined to stay connected over time [22]. In this sense, loyalty is built less through repeated exposure and more through trust and credibility.

The way sport is presented also plays a role here. Teams and events are not just competitive entities; they are perceived as brands, with their own identity and image. The way this identity is constructed, through communication, partnerships, and visual elements, influences how fans relate to it. These aspects are not just decorative. They shape how sport is understood and felt, and they can either strengthen or weaken the bond with the audience [6]. When everything aligns with what fans expect or value, the connection becomes stronger. When it feels forced or out of place, the reaction can easily turn into distance or even rejection.

Sponsorship adds another layer to this relationship. It brings the commercial side of sport closer to the fan experience, sometimes in a very visible way. When done carefully, it can blend naturally into the event and even enhance the overall experience. In such cases, fans may start to associate not only with the team, but also with the brands involved [4]. This kind of connection is more subtle and depends a lot on how naturally it is built. If it feels integrated, it can extend loyalty beyond sport itself. If not, it risks being ignored or resisted.

At the same time, the identity of teams and the way they are positioned in the market influence the stability of fan relationships. Branding strategies, including the development of visual identity, narratives, and communication style, contribute to the creation of recognizable and coherent images [21]. These images serve as reference points for fans, helping them to maintain their attachment even in periods of poor performance or organizational change.

Taken together, these elements show that loyalty is not the result of a single factor, but of a combination of experiences, interactions, and meanings. Fan experience provides the context in which emotional responses and engagement emerge, while engagement creates the conditions for more stable forms of attachment. Loyalty appears when these processes are consistent over time and when fans perceive that their relationship with the organization is meaningful.

In this sense, the transition from experience to loyalty can be understood as a gradual process rather than a direct effect. It involves repetition, recognition, and the accumulation of positive interactions. For sports organizations, this means that loyalty cannot be imposed or assumed. It must be built through coherent strategies that connect experience, communication, and identity in a way that resonates with the expectations of fans.

3. Research methodology

The empirical part of this study is based on a questionnaire survey conducted between June 15 and August 5, 2025. Data were collected using an online form distributed via Google Forms, targeting individuals with an interest in sport. The choice of an online survey allowed for easier access to respondents and facilitated the collection of data within a relatively short time frame.

A total of 112 valid responses were obtained and included in the analysis. The questionnaire consisted of 24 items designed to capture different aspects related to fan behaviour, participation in sporting events, and perceptions of fan experience. The structure of the instrument followed a logical sequence, starting with general demographic questions and continuing with items directly linked to the research objectives.

The data were processed using descriptive and inferential approaches. The analysis included univariate and bivariate examinations, as well as basic multivariate interpretations, in order to identify patterns and relationships between variables. The processing of data was carried out using spreadsheet-based tools, which allowed for the organization, filtering, and visualization of results.

From a demographic perspective, the sample included both male and female respondents, with a distribution of 38% female participants and 62% male participants. The age structure of the sample was relatively diverse. Approximately 5% of respondents were under 18 years old, 32% were between 18 and 25 years old, 28% were between 26 and 35 years old, 15% were between 36 and 50 years old, and 20% were over 50 years old. This distribution offers a broad perspective on different categories of sport consumers, allowing for the observation of variations in behaviour and perception across age groups.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the results should be interpreted with caution. The sample size and the method of data collection do not allow for broad generalizations, but they provide relevant insights into current patterns of fan engagement and the perceived role of special sporting events in shaping the fan experience.

4. Findings and Discussions

The first issue explored in the survey was the extent to which respondents take part in sporting events. As shown in Figure 1, most participants indicated that they attend such events quite often, accounting for 68% of the sample. This result suggests that live sport continues to hold strong appeal, especially because the atmosphere and emotional intensity of being physically present cannot be fully reproduced through television or digital viewing.

Another 18% reported that they attend sporting events only occasionally, most often because of time constraints rather than a lack of interest. A smaller group stated that they rarely or never attend in person, preferring instead to follow events from home on television or other devices. This points to the coexistence of two forms of consumption: direct participation and mediated participation, both of which remain relevant in contemporary sport.

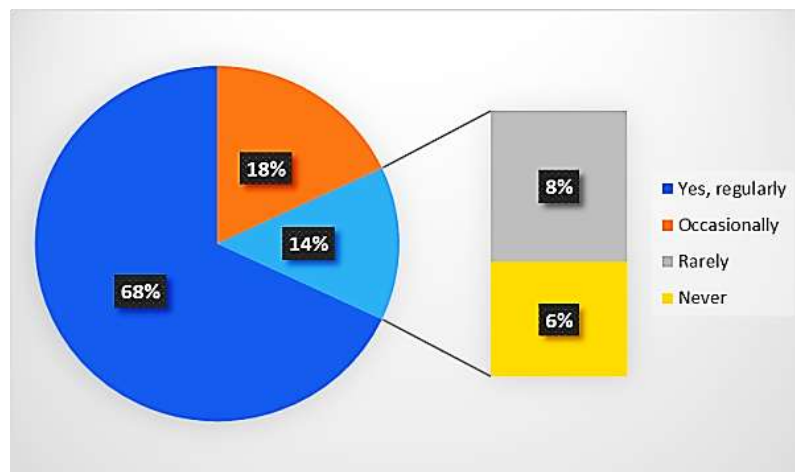


Figure 1. Distribution according to the degree of participation in sporting events.

The next question focused on the role of fans in sporting events. Responses were distributed across the available options, yet the dominant view was clear: fans are perceived as an important, and in many cases essential, part of the sporting event itself (Figure 2). Respondents associated the presence of fans with atmosphere, energy, and support for athletes, suggesting that spectators are not viewed as passive observers, but as active contributors to the event experience.

This perception is consistent with the wider understanding of sport as a social phenomenon in which the audience helps shape the meaning of the competition. The absence of fans during the pandemic made this particularly visible, showing how strongly the live sporting environment depends on crowd presence and participation [11].

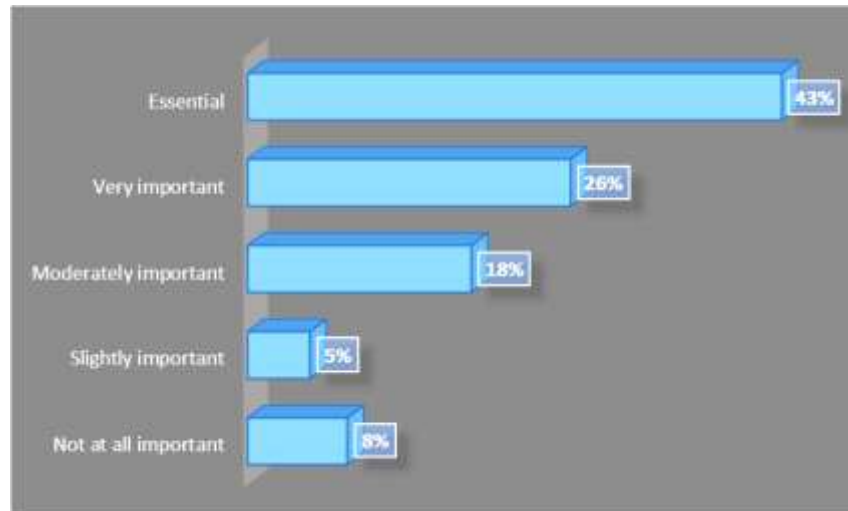


Figure 2. Distribution according to the role of fans at sporting events.

Respondents were also asked to assess the extent to which fans influence athletes during competitions. Here again, opinions were not entirely uniform (Figure 3). A share of 18% considered that fans have no real impact, especially in sports centered on individual performance, while 5% chose the option “I don’t know.”

Even so, the prevailing view was that fan presence has a positive influence on athletes. Support, encouragement, and emotional energy from the stands were seen as factors that can enhance both performance and the overall atmosphere of the event. At the same time, 33% of respondents pointed to the possibility of a negative influence, particularly when fan behaviour becomes aggressive or hostile. This result is important because it shows that the influence of fans is not perceived in exclusively positive terms, but as a force that can shape competition in different ways depending on how it is expressed.

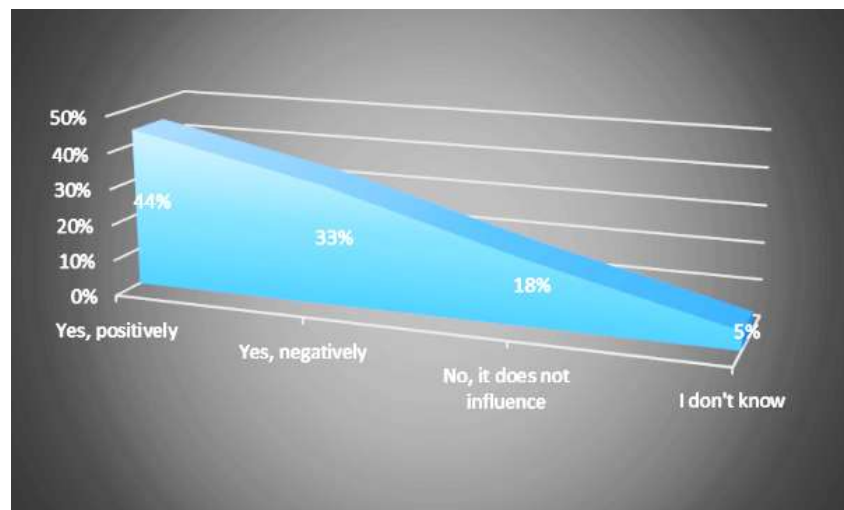


Figure 3. Distribution according to the degree of influence of fans.

Another item addressed the issue of fan absence from sporting events, an issue strongly associated with the pandemic period. The responses presented in Figure 4 reflect a broad recognition that the absence of spectators had significant consequences for sport. Matches played without crowds were widely perceived as lacking atmosphere, while the financial impact was also considerable, given the loss of ticket revenue and the reduced commercial value of events.

In practical terms, respondents associated the lack of fans with a diminished sporting experience, both for teams and for audiences. This reinforces the idea that spectators are not external to the event, but part of its functioning and value.

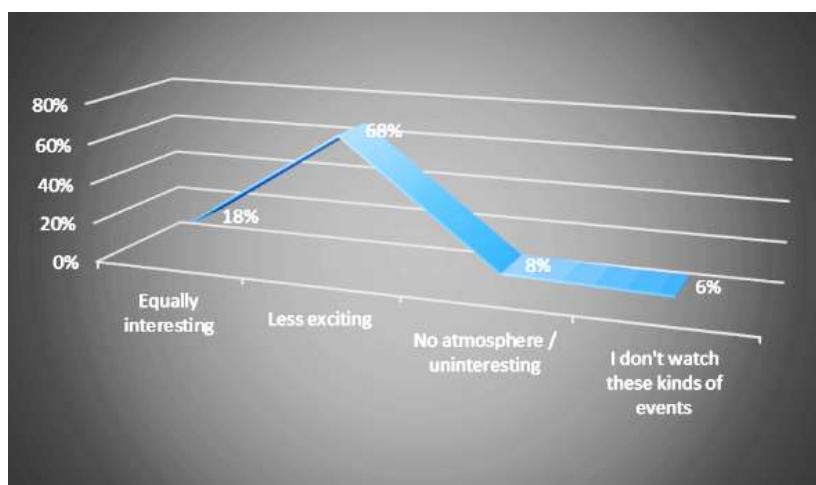


Figure 4. Distribution based on fan attendance at sporting events

The survey also explored whether fans would be willing to pay more for tickets if part of that money were clearly directed toward improving the fan experience. The responses shown in Figure 5 indicate a generally favourable attitude toward such an option. Most participants expressed openness to paying more, provided that the additional cost would translate into visible improvements in stadium conditions, facilities, comfort, or entertainment options.

This result suggests that respondents do not evaluate ticket prices only in financial terms. They also connect price with perceived value. When the event promises a better overall experience, higher costs may be considered justified.

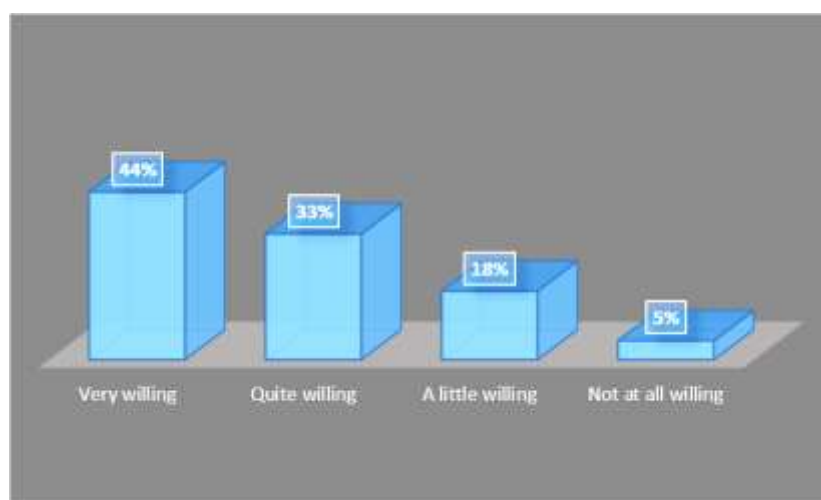


Figure 5. Distribution based on improving the fan experience

The next question referred to the average frequency with which respondents attend sporting events. As shown in Figure 6, 34% stated that they participate weekly, while 23% do so monthly. The remaining respondents were distributed across less frequent categories, including rare participation or non-participation.

This distribution confirms that, for a substantial part of the sample, sporting events occupy a regular place in everyday life. Such frequency is relevant because it points not only to interest, but also to habit and continuity, both of which are important for understanding fan behaviour and loyalty.

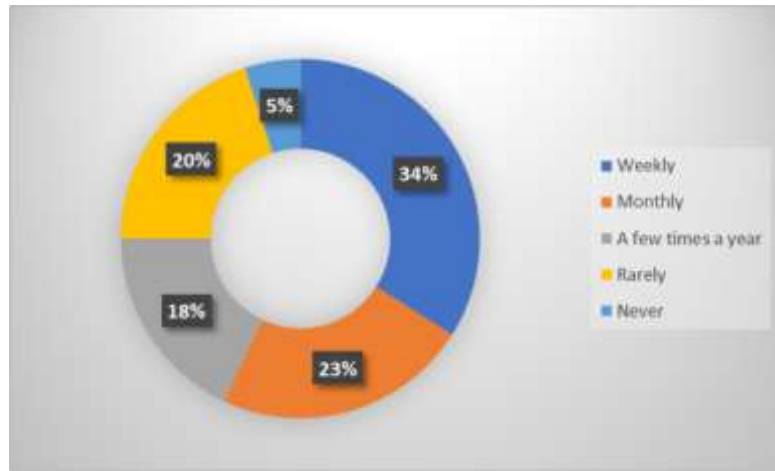


Figure 6. Distribution according to average participation in sporting events.

Respondents were then asked to evaluate the importance of several elements that contribute to the attractiveness of a special sporting event. These included the atmosphere created by fans, the quality of the competition, the presence of star athletes, entertainment elements such as music and lights, and the stadium or venue itself (Figure 7).

The responses show that all these dimensions are considered important. This finding supports the idea that fans do not evaluate sporting events through a single lens. The experience is built through a combination of sporting, emotional, and environmental factors. The quality of the competition matters, but it is only one part of a broader experience that also includes atmosphere, spectacle, and setting.

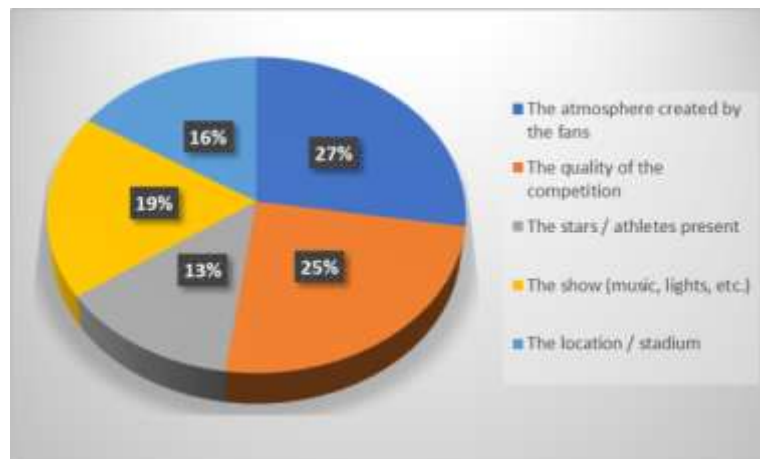


Figure 7. Distribution according to the importance of aspects from a special sporting event.

Finally, respondents were asked whether fans should be consulted in the organization of special sporting events. The results presented in Figure 8 show that 48% believe that fan input can be valuable, especially because these events are designed for and experienced by them. By contrast, 18% felt that such decisions should remain mainly in the hands of professionals, while 10% preferred not to express an opinion.

This distribution is significant because it points to an emerging expectation of participation. Fans are not seen only as recipients of the event experience, but also as potential contributors to its design. For sports organizations, this may represent an opportunity to strengthen identification and involvement by treating fans as stakeholders whose opinions matter.

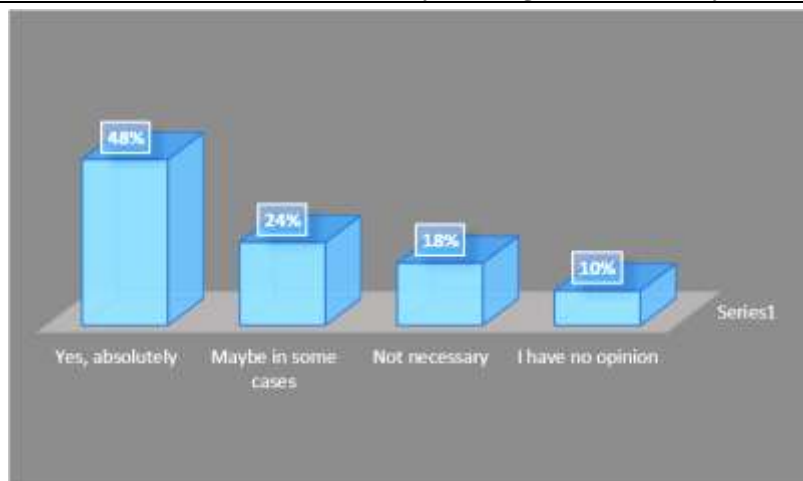


Figure 8. Distribution according to the degree of consultation of fans in the organization of special events.

5. Conclusions

This study set out to understand how special sporting events contribute to shaping the relationship between fans and sports organizations, with a particular focus on experience, engagement, and loyalty.

What emerges quite clearly is that fans are not just present at events; they are part of what makes those events meaningful. Their presence changes the tone of the competition. It adds pressure, emotion, unpredictability. Without them, something essential is missing. This became very visible in the period when access to stadiums was restricted, but it remains true even outside that context. Live sport carries a type of intensity that cannot be reproduced through screens alone.

At the same time, special events seem to matter because they go beyond the match itself. They create a setting in which fans can connect more deeply with teams, athletes, and with each other. The data suggest that people value not only what happens on the field, but also how they feel during the event and how involved they are in it. That involvement does not start at kick-off and does not end at the final whistle. It stretches before and after, across different forms of interaction.

Another point worth noting is the willingness of fans to invest more when they see clear improvements in return. Better facilities, more comfortable venues, additional entertainment or services — these are not seen as extras. They are part of the experience. When they are present and visible, they seem to justify higher costs. When they are missing, the opposite reaction appears. This indicates that loyalty is tied not only to emotion, but also to how seriously fans feel they are treated.

The role of digital media cannot be ignored either. The event no longer exists only in the stadium. It continues online, sometimes even more intensely than during the live moment. Fans follow, comment, react, and share. In doing so, they extend the life of the event and, in a way, reshape it. This creates a hybrid form of participation, where physical presence and digital interaction overlap.

An interesting result is related to the idea of involving fans more directly in the organization of events. A significant part of respondents see value in being consulted. Not necessarily in a formal or technical sense, but as a way of being acknowledged. This suggests that the relationship between organizations and fans is slowly shifting. Fans are not only consumers anymore. They expect, at least to some extent, to be heard.

Taken together, these findings point to a broader idea. Special sporting events are not just competitive moments. They function as spaces where relationships are built and maintained. Experience, engagement, and loyalty are not separate processes. They grow out of the same interactions, repeated over time.

For sports organizations, this has practical implications. It is no longer enough to focus only on the quality of the competition. Attention has to be given to the entire environment surrounding the event: the atmosphere, the communication, the facilities, the opportunities for interaction. Small details matter more than they might seem at first.

There are, of course, limits to what can be concluded. The sample is relatively small and based on voluntary participation, which means the results should be read as indicative rather than definitive. Still, they offer a useful picture of how fans currently relate to sporting events and what they expect from them.

Further research could look more closely at differences between types of sports, levels of competition, or categories of fans. It would also be interesting to explore in more detail how digital engagement translates into long-term loyalty, especially in contexts where physical attendance is less frequent.

What remains clear is that the future of sporting events depends less on isolated moments of success and more on the ability to build consistent, meaningful experiences. And in that process, fans are not on the outside. They are right at the centre.

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