

Module 2. Fan memberships – Monetising exclusivity and demand

Unit 4.2

Introduction

In this section of the course, we will discuss the concept of fan memberships. This is another important revenue stream that has developed in the modern era and is now based on the concepts of managing exclusivity and demand of these memberships.

In this module, we will cover fan memberships, what they were, and what they have become. We will also cover how football clubs can go about creating exclusivity and demand before focusing on what happens, when they get it right, and when they get it wrong.

Fan memberships

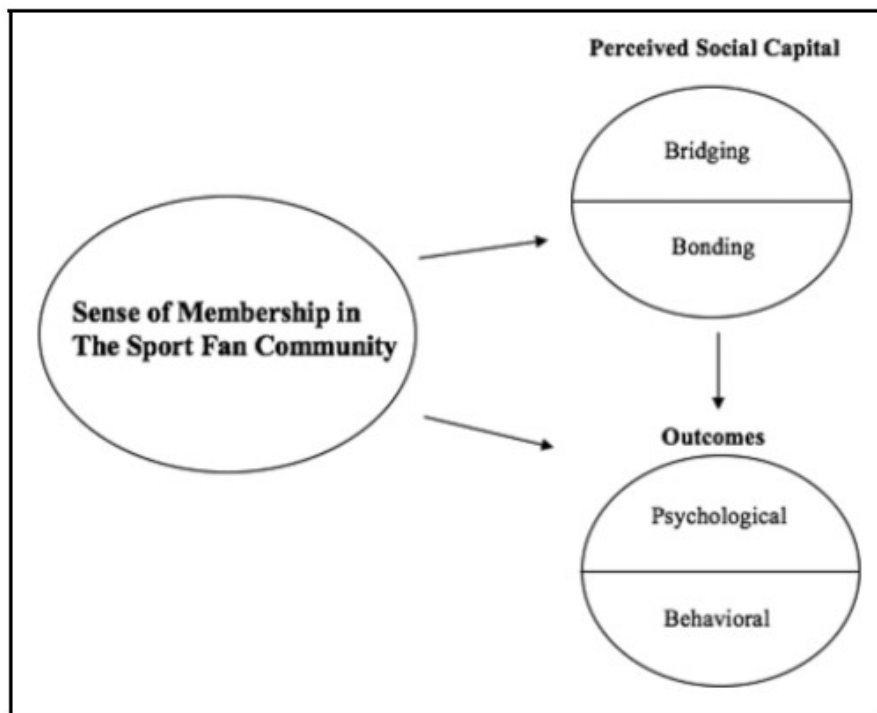
In this first section, we will talk about fan memberships, what they are and how they have developed over time. For the final part of this subsection, we will touch on what form they might take on in the future. But firstly, what are they?

What are they?

Fan memberships have their history in fan clubs. Fan clubs are a collective group of individuals who focus on one individual, band, club or team, and spend considerable amounts of time and other resources including money to follow their chosen area. They are motivated and organised, with a strong connection to the person or group that they follow. Fan clubs in this form have existed for many years, and have been a staple in industries such as music and sport, offering those that are members a sense of community with likeminded individuals who might be much needed (Hume, 2022).

The importance of these communities cannot be understated, and, to further explain this point, work by Mastromartino *et al.* (2020) suggested that an individual's membership of a community, in this case sport fans, could have benefits for the individual above and beyond getting news first. This is detailed in figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Sense of membership in the sport fan community



Source: Mastromartino *et al.*, 2020, p. 4.

By having membership of these groups, the individual can access additional social capital, which could help them both inside and outside of these groups. This is because membership opens up beneficial relationships with other individuals who can assist both individuals in their daily lives away from the fan membership. If an individual is interacting and creating new relationships with others, then they will often also receive further intangible benefits, such as psychological benefits that can make them feel good about themselves.

Focusing back on the business side, some fan clubs and membership schemes have become lucrative businesses for the owners of these spaces, whether they are offline or online—by producing content such as linked products, written content or early bird access to tickets through the fan clubs themselves.

Fan memberships have continued to develop throughout the years, and while the vast majority are run as independent ventures by fans themselves, others have moved or been created. There is now an increasing number of fan club and membership schemes that are run by the management of the club or artist themselves. This move has allowed them to have more control over the content and products shared with their fans and, indeed, over how they do the sharing.

Whereas previously the individuals who ran these membership schemes would have to create products or access that, on occasion, was not authorised by the entity—for example, the club they were following—now, these schemes are able to gain this access.



Fans can now sign up directly with a club and immediately be granted access to, among other things, behind the scenes' footage, early bird ticket releases or limited-edition merchandise.

Fan memberships in sport

Fan memberships are an integral part of modern-day fan discourse within sport. Teams, clubs and sporting organisations the world over will now offer the opportunity to become a member of the organisation to its fans. This is no different within the sport of football, in which clubs have always been in some form membership organisations. The founding of many of the larger modern-day clubs occurred when members of an existing group decided to form a football team themselves. The membership would then vote on such things as who should lead the team for a certain period, what should be the colours of the club, and where the club should play.

Some clubs continue to practise these original membership ideals to the present day. FC Barcelona is one such membership organisation. FC Barcelona currently has an estimated 146,000 members in its organisation, with membership costing 185 euros *per annum*. The membership of the club entitles the member to discounts on match tickets, access to Barça TV, and an opportunity to vote on club matters and elections.

Even if some clubs continue to practise these membership structures and instead rely on a group or single investor to make the decisions and essentially run the club, they do still practise membership structures. These have more in common with the fan clubs that we mentioned at the start of this module. In many cases, this limits the ability of these fans to make decisions about the club in a meaningful way. Instead, these schemes are designed so that fans can gain priority access to things that matter to them and the clubs can be aware of who might buy existing or new products.

This is not to say these relationships are not useful despite, maybe, the one-sided nature of them. Football clubs are limited in one key factor: the size of their stadium. The stadium they play in might regularly sell out; therefore, it is wise of a fan who wishes to be part of that environment, to make sure they are at the front of the queue.

It is not just the big teams that are offering these memberships; some are weaving it into an integral part of their offering. The previously mentioned Wycombe Wanderers fan membership scheme—which grants ticket access, but acts like a subscription service, and was launched in 2021—has shown that clubs are evolving in the way memberships are handled.

It can even feed into the real fan vs. fake fan debate that we covered in the previous course. To briefly recap Giulianotti (2002), it can be said that some fans are more than happy to interact with their chosen club in this way, feeling that the connection offered by these formal membership schemes allows them to display their fandom to others.



Being part of this membership gives them the psychological benefits that we discussed earlier, and allows them to interact with likeminded individuals.

However, we can also note that, for some fans, even for those who are deeply passionate about the club, these formal membership schemes are not welcomed. They see them as a further 'hypercommodification' of the game of football (Giulianotti, 2002). These fans, although they will purchase season tickets that will grant them access to club fixtures, they wish to protect their traditions; so it will be reluctant to engage with a club led membership scheme, as this was not a make-up of their original fandom practices.

Monetising fan memberships

In the early days of these fan clubs and membership schemes, which were largely focused around music and artists, the aim for those involved was not to make money, but to share an interest. However, this area has developed revenue and latterly profit has become a key part of the overall aims of the individuals or groups involved.

Revenue can be gained in many ways from fan membership schemes. In the first instance, a fee is charged for being a member of the schemes; this can be done either monthly or yearly, as we have seen in the case of FC Barcelona (Hume, 2022). How much any organisation will charge is, of course, up to them; for example, British Cycling charge an annual membership fee of £26 regardless of age (British Cycling, 2022), while Tottenham Hotspur have a range of fees costing from £20 for junior members to £48 for adults (Tottenham Hotspur, 2022). The amount that is charged depends on numerous factors; how popular a team, product or individual is can be one of the main drivers. For example, a team like Tottenham, who compete in the Premier League and various European competitions with world-class players, is more likely to be able to charge much higher figures, and making fans to pay them, than a team in the lower reaches of the football leagues. We will discuss the intricacies of demand in the following demand subsection.

Other organisations chose not to charge for membership of these groups. They allow consumers to sign up for free, usually with just an e-mail address. By signing up to these free memberships, the consumers are still able to access content that is only available to members and not the general public, despite not paying for it. They might even be able to access other benefits, such as early ticket releases or weekly newsletters. This practice is often observed in large-scale organisations with extensive mailing lists, such as national federations or mega events.

The benefit for an organisation of adopting this approach is that they can still have the details of their fans, which can help them tailor their offerings of goods or services to people who are more likely to purchase them. This will give a greater return on the cost of promotion by achieving a higher level of sales. Additionally, the organisation will have a list of potential customers who could, at a later date, be converted into paying customers. On occasion, organisations may even sell these membership lists to other

organisations to gain additional revenue. If this were to occur, this would be covered in an agreement when the consumers sign up to the membership.

We are now seeing many organisations offering a combination of a free and paid membership. They do this for a number of reasons; as we have seen above, they will offer the free membership list to boost their own marketing objectives and having a potential revenue source at their fingertips. With the paid membership, the organisation can access those fans who are able and willing to contribute financially to the organisation. These fans are the ones that a sporting organisation needs as their financial contributions, as they can help the organisation balance the books or even make a profit.

These fans can be further segmented into what they would be able or willing to pay so that an organisation can interact with them according to the fan's expectations. When an organisation adopts this practice, the options are often displayed as different tiers of membership, for example, bronze, silver and gold. We can see something similar in the figure below, detailing the membership structure of Southern Premier Division side Merthyr Town FC.



Figure 2. Merthyr Town FC membership structure

MERTHYR TOWN FC

MEMBERSHIP PACKAGES
2017/2018

BRONZE MEMBERSHIP £20

- * Ownership and loyalty discount card
- * Become a shareholder of Merthyr Town Football Club

SILVER MEMBERSHIP £50

- * Ownership and loyalty discount card
- * Become a shareholder of Merthyr Town Football Club
- * Personalised brick inside the atrium

GOLD MEMBERSHIP £115

- * Ownership and loyalty discount card
- * Become a shareholder of Merthyr Town Football Club
- * Personalised brick inside the atrium
- * Reserved car park space on match days

CAR PARK SEASON PASS £75

ON SALE NOW!

Source: Merthyr Town FC, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3InzivU>.

Typically, and as expected, those individuals at the lowest paid level will receive fewer benefits than those at the higher levels. As individuals pay more, they are rewarded further, earlier access to tickets, exclusive meet and greets with athletes or other exclusive opportunities. What is interesting about this example is that it comes from a relatively small team who are in the lower levels of English football, highlighting that you do not need to have the biggest budget or be the biggest club to implement some of these ideas.

Regardless of whether a fan membership scheme charges money or not, the expectations of the members need to be constantly considered with unhappy consumers always best avoided. Sporting organisations will constantly have to evaluate whether or not they are providing value in their service. If membership does not yield any special benefits, then, what is the point of being a member? Too few benefits at a high price and people will

become uninterested. Too many benefits can also have this impact, as consumers don't feel value is attached to them.

Success can be measured quite crudely in this regard; if you have a lot of paid members, or the take-up of free membership is positively correlated to increased ticket or merchandise sales when those individuals are targeted with promotion, then the organisation is doing well. Low take up of these initiatives would suggest that, unfortunately, the organisation in question has not yet reached its potential in this regard, and the area should be revisited.

The question now becomes the following: how do we attract consumers to become members of these fan groups and to take out memberships? The following section regarding exclusivity and demand will seek to answer some of these questions.

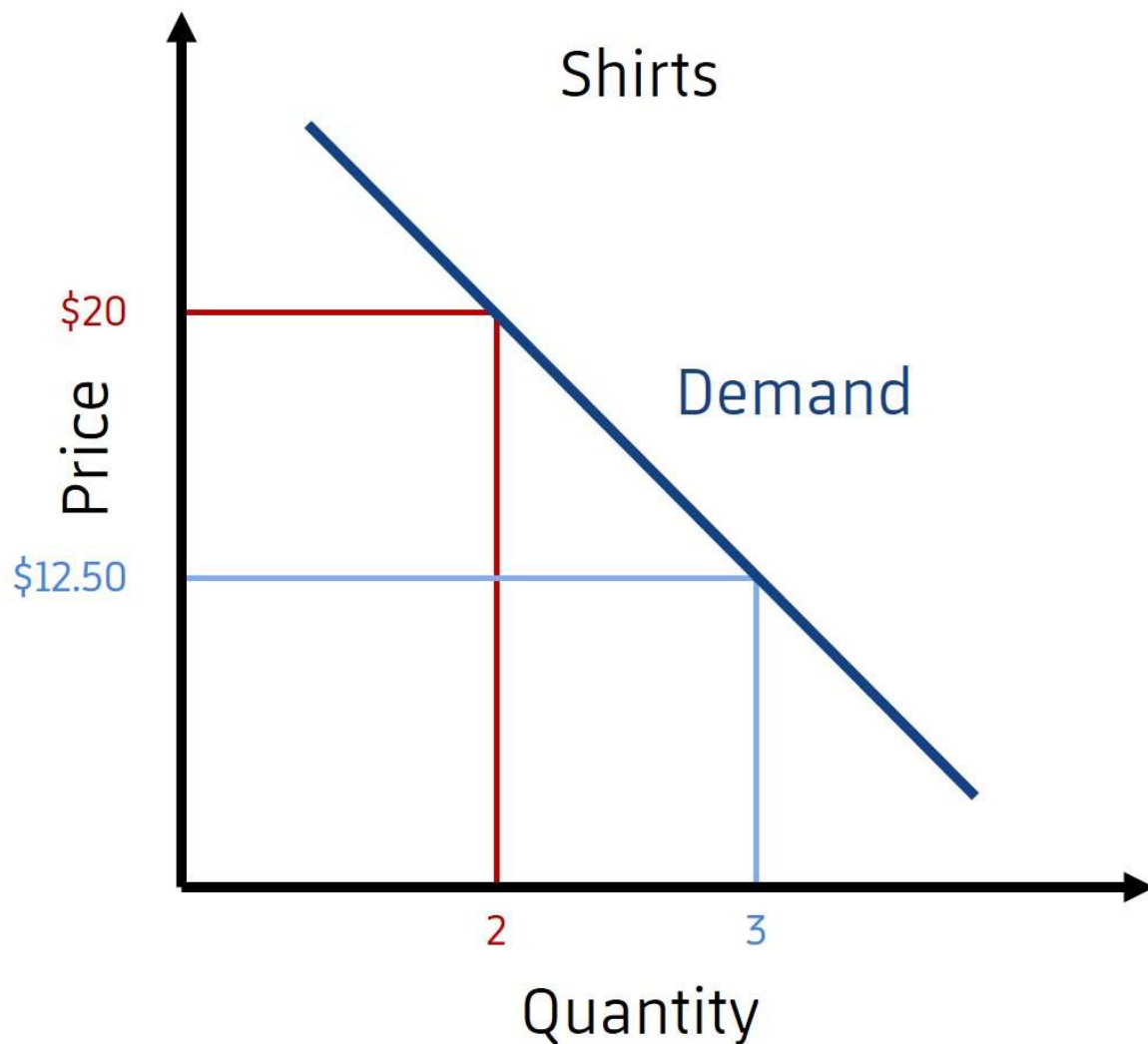
Exclusivity and demand

In this section, we will focus on the concepts of exclusivity and demand. We will discuss the way in which sporting organisations can attempt to create levels of exclusivity around their products. However, firstly, we will recap the elements that make up demand, and how organisations can best harvest its potential.

Demand

Firstly, let us revisit demand in its most basic form. Demand is an area of business that is very important when organisations and businesses are trying to assess the need for a product. The formula for demand is as follows: $P = \text{price}$, $Q = \text{quantity}$, $S = \text{sales}$ and $D = \text{demand}$ (Pettinger, 2016). This formula can be seen in action in the example produced by Carlson (2005).

Figure 3. Demand



Source: Carlson, 2005, <https://bit.ly/3NSXnvG>.

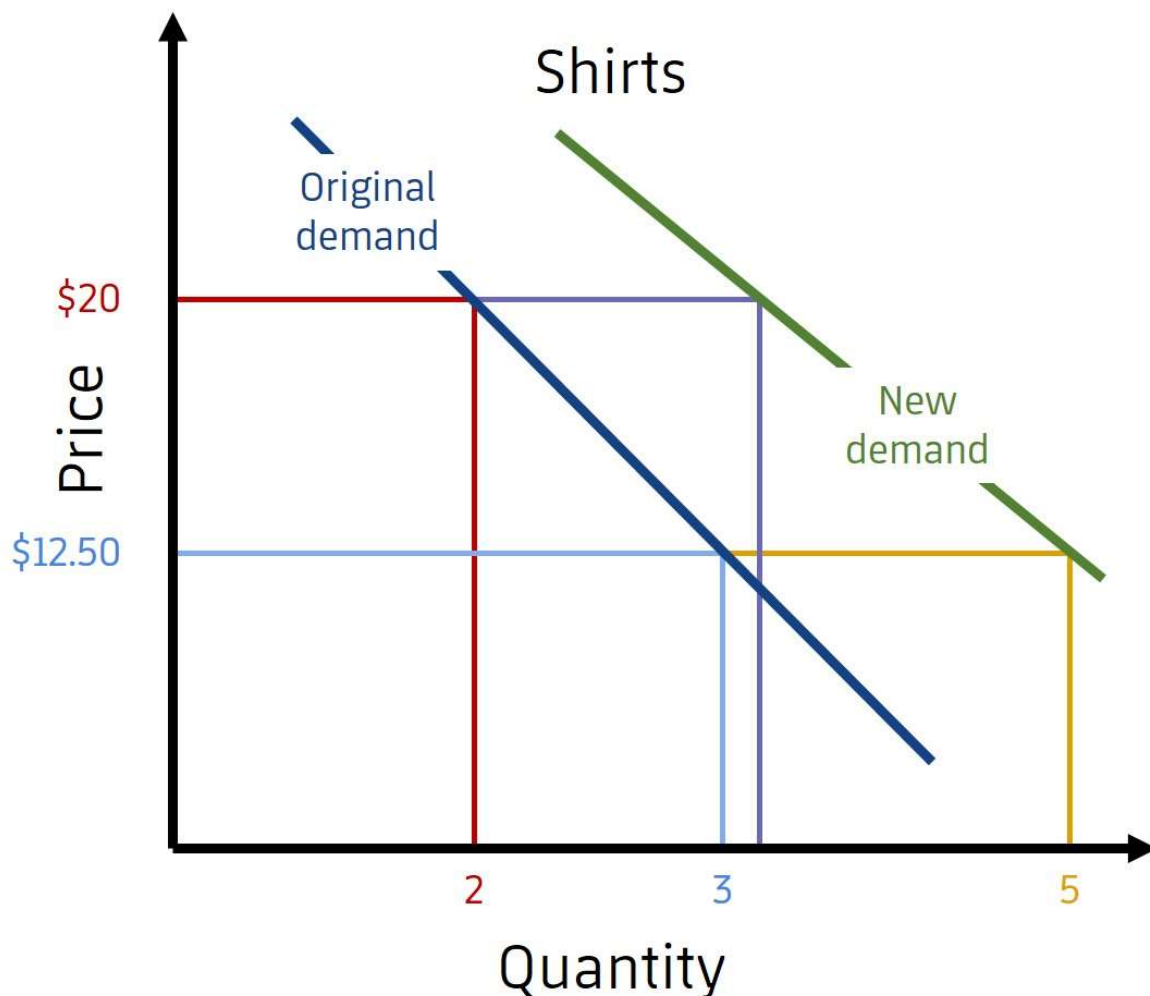
In this figure above, we can see the example chosen is shirt sales, a common method of driving revenue for football clubs. In this example, the shirts priced at \$12.50 sell one more unit than those shirts priced at \$20. Despite selling less units, the shirts priced at \$20 will bring in revenue of \$40, whereas the shirts priced at \$12.50 will only bring in a combined revenue of \$37.50. Therefore, while demand is lower, the price should be kept at the higher level as revenue is greater.

There are many ways in which we can increase demand for a product or service we produce. If a team is successful, the demand for its products will often increase in line with that success. More people will want to be associated with the club, as it is winning and, therefore, it is not unusual to see an increase in demand over this period. A particularly interesting kit, or perhaps collaboration, with another well-known brand can also increase demand, as individuals, even some who may not even be fans of the club,

race to purchase the shirt. As we have also previously discussed in these courses, signing a high-profile player can lead to an increase in demand for a product—for example, shirts—and, therefore, an increase in sales.

What happens to our demand when one of these factors comes into play can be found in the figure below, again from Carlson (2005). Make sure you are considering the extended pink and purple lines with the new green demand line.

Figure 4. Changes in demand



Source: Carlson, 2005, <https://bit.ly/3NSXnvG>.

The original demands, based off price, are still evident; however, the new demand line has come into focus. The new demand has increased shirt sales at both \$12.50 and \$20 per shirt. If we look closely, we can see that the \$12.50 shirts have increased significantly and are now selling 5 units, which brings in total revenue of \$62.50, much more than the revenue of shirts at \$20.

The increase in demand at certain price points can be down to one of the factors we have mentioned previously, such as winning, signings or a must-have design. However, we

can also create increases in demand by adopting a method of generating exclusivity surrounding a service or product. It is this that we focus on next.

Exclusivity

There are a few ways of making a product or service feel exclusive to its potential customers. Exclusivity could be formed due to the nature of a product, which attracts the consumer by fulfilling a desire in the mind of that consumer (Wölk, 2015). As Heine (2010) suggests, luxury and, therefore, exclusive brands formulate “images in the minds of consumers that comprise of associations with a high price, quality, aesthetic, rarity and specialty” (Heine, 2010, p. 156).

Although Heine (2010) is coming at this problem from a fashion perspective, the general idea is the same when applied to the sporting field. Even if there are many versions of the product or service, if it satisfies those luxury criteria, it can be considered to be exclusive as not everyone would be able to afford them. But this is not the only possible way to think about exclusivity; we can also drive a feeling of exclusivity by provoking scarcity.

The rule of scarcity is that the more rare or unreachable something is, the more valuable this can make that entity (Sukharj, 2022). Limiting the availability of an item, whatever that may be—for example, clothing, games consoles or tickets—will invariably drive up interest, due to the feeling among potential consumers that they are missing out on something.

The emotions that are most at play here according to Sukharj (2022) are curiosity and urgency. It is this curiosity about a particular product that can really assist marketers when attempting to successfully sell a product. If the product is new or a rare variation of an existing product, then curiosity is likely to be high. Organisations can cultivate the curiosity around a product by drip-feeding information about the product, perhaps through ‘teaser trailers’ (Schwartz, 2021). These trailers could also only be released before for those who have signed up for membership of the organisation, further enhancing the benefits of membership and, if it is a paid membership, the revenue streams of the organisation.

A feeling of urgency can also prove more than useful. If, rightly or wrongly, a consumer believes that they will miss out on a product that they wish to have, then they will feel a sense of time pressure to buy this before they believe it will be sold out. When an organisation creates this pressure, and it is done successfully, then often an upturn in sales will be noted due to the rush to buy what is perceived to be a limited product. For some products, this sense of urgency is created because the product in question is needed in daily life and is of significant importance for the consumer, practically. However, this motivation can also be more psychological than any actual benefits that a product purchase would bring.



If a consumer fears as above, that by not being at the front of the queue to purchase a product will result in some form of personal loss, then they will be at the front of that queue, whether physically or online.

Now that we have discussed in depth about exclusivity and demand, it now becomes a requirement to understand how we can best go about creating these concepts.

Creating exclusivity and demand in sport

There is no better place to begin with creating exclusivity and demand than, once again, with ticketing. We have already discussed the issues surrounding ticket pricing and how clubs are in a constant battle trying to generate as much revenue as they can. Even think about the seats that you sit on in the stadium: some are plastic, in some cases, there are no seats at all, while others are padded and comfortable to sit on with larger leg space. Clubs can create a level of demand by altering the price of an individual seat.

Those seats that are not soft or have good leg or a good view of the pitch are likely to cost less, although demand may still be high, depending on factors such as the wealth of the fans or the type of match. Demand could be increased by altering the price, either up or down, and a price rise could also create some form of exclusivity. Different seating areas, and attached services, are offered in almost every football club. The prices of the tickets are often extremely high, creating that sense of exclusivity for the purchaser, giving the benefits, both intangible and tangible, that are required.

Even though some fans might not be able to afford these particular seats, all is not lost for them or the club. Fans holding memberships might also be able to enter prize draws exclusively for them, to win better tickets or a match day experience, once again, driving revenue for the club, but also more membership benefits for the consumers.

As we analyse this area further, we adopt the following method by Sukharj (2022), who sets out four areas in which organisations can create exclusivity with their products.

- Waiting lists
- Set deadlines
- Limit quantities
- Have qualifications

'Waiting lists' can be set up ahead of the launch of a product or service, to build anticipation amongst potential customers. Customers are encouraged to sign up and, therefore, create a buzz amongst themselves and others who might have previously been reluctant to act. This strategy might be useful when launching a new product, such as a kit, with a clear release date. Fans of a club could sign up using the club's own website to be offered a chance to purchase the kit upon its release.

This approach could be used in tandem with the 'set deadlines' tactic; by having a clear deadline, it puts time pressure upon the action and again encourages individuals to act



sooner rather than later. If we extend the example of releasing a new kit, the deadline is put in place to mirror the kit announcement. When football kits are first announced, a rush of traffic will be diverted to the club's website and other social media platforms, as fans rush to purchase the new item. The deadline can even act as a way of measuring expected demand, and allows the sporting organisation the insight into how they should manage launch day so that enough kits are available for everyone who wants one.

By taking a different approach, but still creating exclusivity and demand, an organisation could 'limit quantities' of the new kit that are initially released. This, once again, forces customers to act quickly to be one of the people able to purchase the kit. Of course, more kits will be released, but some fans will be motivated by being the first person to own one of the new kits for a number of weeks or months. We can also see this method regularly adopted in the world of sports ticketing. With stadiums having a finite number of seats, there is always a risk that they will run out. Some sporting organisations have got very good at letting fans and other potential customers believe that seats are running out and that they could miss out on the game altogether if they do not act now. There is a risk to this method, by not allowing people to purchase a product by the time they are given the option, since they might have already moved on and be no longer motivated to purchase.

A final method, and arguably the most commonly observed in sport, is the 'have qualifications' method. This can often be seen once again in sports ticketing, no more so than in football. The qualifications that we are talking about here are usually based on attendance at other fixtures. For example, those individuals who have season tickets, are members of a supporter's club, have club membership or can evidence a regular pattern of fixture attending, are prioritised for new ticketing purchases. This becomes especially useful for these individuals at high-profile fixtures where the tickets are going to sell out quickly.

Practices of monetising exclusivity and demand

Once we have created a sense of exclusivity around our product or service, it is likely that the demand will follow. Now that we have both of these forces acting in our favour, we need to capitalise on it, making sure that we can now monetise this area.

While this might seem cynical to monetise engagement in this fashion, clubs, many of whom now operate as genuine businesses in their own right, cannot afford to let these opportunities pass by. For clubs that operate at the highest level of competition, the need to make sure revenues cover outgoings has never been more important, not only to stay in business, but to also comply with competition regulations.

Examples in sport

Sport is littered with examples with these type of strategies at all levels of performance, from the bottom leagues and cup competitions to the very top. The first example that we will speak about is the of German Bundesliga club, Borussia Dortmund. In 2019, to



celebrate the 110-year anniversary of the club's formation, released a new home kit, with an entirely black signature replacing the normal yellow signature. The club marketed the kit as the 'Blackout Kit', and it was worn on only one occasion in the league. The club created demand by limiting the number of shirts that they would produce and subsequently sell. The club fostered a sense of exclusivity by making sure that there was limited run on the shirts, but by also granting priority access to purchase the kit. Access was given to fans who had fan membership of the club, rewarding fans for their commitment and membership of the club. It also led to additional supporters signing up so that they would not miss out on promotions like this in the future, bringing further benefit to the club.

In regard to fan memberships specifically leveraging exclusivity and demand for the benefit of the club, we have to look again at football, while highlighting the ticketing market. We have already spoken about the ticketing benefits that members can benefit from; first, access to important match tickets is one of the main reasons sports fans will invest in memberships. The exclusivity of being able to demand fixtures first, when other fans can't, is motivating to particular fans, hence, their subscription to the membership. Even so, this does not make these tickets cheap; to get the maximum revenue from the sales as possible, clubs will continue to charge the highest possible amount until demand has waned. By keeping the demand high, if managed right, the exclusivity of having the tickets also remains high. Some of the better examples of how clubs and teams have managed this will be discussed in the following subsection.

All of these methods can be achieved by creating exclusivity and demand around the products or services that sporting organisations offer. Together with the concept of fan memberships, organisations can tap into a particularly lucrative business, if organisations get it right.

Getting it right

Borussia Dortmund and the 'Blackout Kit' are a fantastic example of how clubs can use fan memberships to link products they wish to sell and create exclusivity and demand while doing so. Not only was the shirt popular with fans and sold out after only three hours, but it also received international attention, which Dortmund could further leverage by selling additional products to members and non-members.

Across the top football leagues in Europe, it is clear to see the impact memberships have had on creating value for both the club and the fan. As the world comes out of Covid, and the football returns to normal with spectators in the stand, there is a lasting legacy of engagement that will stand the better performing clubs in good stead. When football closed down, a lot of fans, especially those from lower league clubs, did not ask for their money back from the season ticket sales. When football did return, and fans were allowed back, clubs rewarded those fans by offering them free items on their return as a way of saying 'thank you'.



It does not always have to be about an immediate return on money. An example of this comes from AFC Bournemouth, who used their membership database in a way that would, undoubtedly, have a last positive impact on the fans that were contacted.

With Premier League football suspended until April 30, the club's ticketing team will proactively call fans on its database who fall into the Government's 'at risk' category.

Staff will engage with those supporters about a range of topics, including their love of the club and favourite Cherries memories, while they will also complete a weekly AFC Bournemouth quiz. (AFC Bournemouth, 2020, para. 1-2).

Fans who have been members of official or unofficial fan groups have mentioned the shared camaraderie that has kept them going during the period where they were unable to watch their team. Through engagement with fans during hard times, such as the pandemic, clubs have found that they can continue to rely on the fan's financial support as the bond is strengthened between the two.

Despite this, it must not be forgotten that, for some organisations, attempting to create an increased level of demand through exclusivity cannot go as planned.

Getting it wrong

Sukhraj (2022) lists the following reasons why music streaming service, Tidal, was ultimately unsuccessful in its attempts at creating a sense of exclusivity and, as such, suffered low demand. Firstly, Tidal did not differentiate itself from other more successful and used streaming platforms. If you are going to create a feel of exclusivity, this is a key element to get right. Furthermore, as Sukhraj (2022) also points out, Tidal was attempting to charge users a fee to gain access to the music on the site, something others were giving away for free, such as Spotify.

The selling points that Tidal trumpeted, such as superior listening experiences and exclusive content, were also unable to be accessed without purchasing the service. It is hard to create this sense of exclusivity and, therefore, high demand, if consumers are unsure what it is that they are getting.

In the field of sport, there have been equally disastrous attempts. English newspaper, *The Telegraph*, opted to buy the rights to show the Ukraine vs. England football World Cup Qualifier in 2009 (Gibson and Sweeney, 2009). The live match content would be available, specifically online with only a highlights package available for those with only a TV



connection. The sign-up was limited to 1 million people to guard against any potential crashes of the streaming service.

This attempt was ultimately considered to be a failure for multiple reasons. Firstly, fans were disgruntled that they had been side-lined in these plans and weren't informed of them until after they had been completed. Additionally, the sign-up charges of £4.99 and latterly £11.99 did little to render the service to potential customers who were used to seeing a fixture involving the England national team for free, as had been the case for over 20 years. A further issue was that the game was essentially meaningless. England had already qualified for the World Cup and Ukraine were already in second position; so, the game, apart from national pride, had very little riding on it.

While these were all issues before the game kicked off, things did not get better once the match had started. A large number of those individuals who had signed up for the service were dismayed to find that they could not log in to the match; the picture quality was poor and game action was disrupted by regular buffering, as the service did indeed struggle under the demand from consumers.

Whether organisations are getting this right or wrong, are we perhaps reaching a peak? And what does this mean for the industry?

Reaching the peak

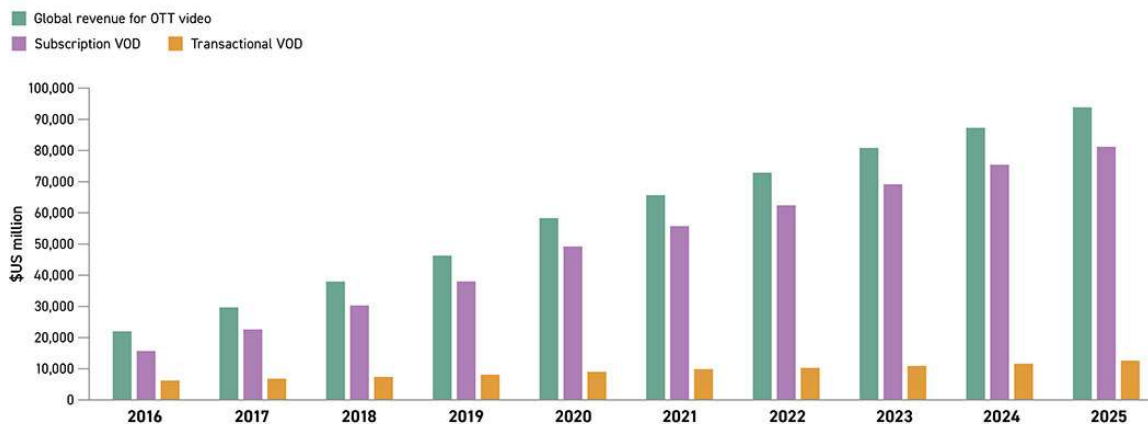
There is some concern that football fans are reaching a limit as to what they can and will pay. Even those that would class themselves in the lowest fan categories are not immune to this and could be finding the current levels of finance required to continue engaging in the sport tough. Dutch football team AZ Alkmaar were one of many clubs to recognise this trend, putting the decline in memberships down to societal changes and how free time has continued to evolve (Schnater, 2018). While AZ were able to turn this decline around and even increase fan membership numbers, it is something that clubs have to continuously monitor, as even a fractional change in membership numbers could have big implications.

While there are, perhaps, some areas in which we might be reaching the tipping point regarding memberships, others are continuing to explode; take, for example, streaming. The increase in streaming can be shown in the figure below, which was produced from the statistics of PwC, and put together by Pennington (2022).

Figure 4. Streaming over time

The streaming boom

OTT video-on-demand is on a historic growth trajectory, but competition is making content valuation more important than ever.



Note: 2020 is the latest available data. 2021–2025 are forecasts.
Source: PwC, *Global Entertainment & Media Outlook 2021–2025*; Omdia; Bundesverband Audiovisuelle Medien; ANCOM

Source: Pennington, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Iqeaov>.

This chart shows that there is an increasing appetite for streaming that shows no real signs of slowing down. This is an area that clubs have regularly tapped into in recent times. By offering those who take out membership access to, perhaps, exclusive streamed content, football clubs can harness the explosion in this form of media and use it to further drive engagement with their fans. Football clubs would do well to continue to invest in streaming and the platforms that it can be placed on, as it will, at its current rates of growth, be a significant avenue of revenue for a long period.

Summary

In this module, we have covered fan memberships, their role and place within sport, and why they are important for clubs from a financial perspective. We have also discussed how we can create demand and nurture exclusivity, in the hope of increasing sales. We have outlined examples of both good and bad practice in these efforts, and, possibly, how clubs could approach this in the future.

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