

# Module 3. Offline and Online Communities – Gaining from Fan Loyalty

## Unit 3.1

### Introduction

The development of the online world has changed every single area of life the world over. In sport, it has been just as important. While there have been significant changes in how people interact with their football club, many things have stayed the same.

The challenge for football clubs is how they manage this ever-evolving engagement from both offline and online communities, and continue to gain from fan loyalty in this modern world. In this topic, we will discuss the developments of football fandom, the communities that these fans inhabit and how they have moved to online spaces and if they act the same way as the more traditional offline fans. We will then discuss whether we can, by using fan loyalty, gain from these fans, regardless of location. Firstly, let us explore how we as fans have altered the locations and our interest when interacting with our chosen football entities, and what this could mean for the development of football fandom.

### History of Football Fandom

When football teams first formed out of the factories of industrial England, there had been fans that watched them. Football fandom has been an important factor in the sport since this early formation and its importance in the individuals, often focused on working-class males, who identify as fans, is summed up in the following quote from former Liverpool FC manager Bill Shankly.

“Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that” (Adcroft and Teckman, 2008, 5).

The quote, of course, was tongue in cheek. However, it also grasps the real importance of the pursuit. Traditionally, fans have displayed strong connections to their local area, engaging in behaviours which have at times been violent.

Fans have developed as the game itself has developed. While still a typically male dominated pursuit, the behaviours and connections between the fans have altered.

### Football Fandom Development



The traditional demographics and behaviours that have been a staple of fandom for generations are now changing. There is perhaps not a definitive moment that this change occurred, but instead, more likely, gradually evolved due to other factors. There has been an increasing mixing of the classes within football, no longer is the game the exclusive preserve of the working-class, with all sections of society becoming involved in the game.

A further factor that has changed fandom is that stadiums and match days have become more welcoming for all types of fans. Whereas in the past stadiums were unforgiving places with limited facilities and a decidedly mixed atmosphere, they are now, at the top level of the game at least, extremely welcoming. The facilities have improved for all fans and there are different areas, which come with different prices, to cater for all potential customers.

This change has also attracted a new type of fan, for example, it has become more acceptable for women to go to games where previously this was unusual. Children are also welcome at grounds and clubs, which now have dedicated 'family' sections where groups can sit. And while violence still exists within football, these groups, in most countries, are being marginalised within the stadium on match days.

This change has been driven by the increasing investment in this game. Football, being the pursuit of the working class, was not considered to be worth much as a business entity and instead relied upon those with an existing interest in the game to act in a philanthropic manner. This continued until clubs began to charge fans for entrance, relying extremely heavily on gate receipts for numerous years for all of their external income. However, as its popularity grew so did investment in the game, beginning with sponsorship deals and media rights, that provided welcome income to teams and clubs.

Sponsorship deals began to appear in the latter stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when companies, often related to the owners of the clubs themselves, put their logos on match jerseys of the club. This developed into full-scale sponsorship, as it did the world over in many sports and events, as companies recognised the vast media exposure football in particular was now receiving. Soon this media attention itself was a source of revenue for the clubs, and as competition grew, both domestically and internationally for the best players, they took full advantage. One famous example, that we will use as a form of case study, was the formation of the Premier League in England. The league was formed following a split between the leading clubs at the time, who had become frustrated at the low television rights and prize money that they were receiving, and the governing body, the Football Association.

The influx from large media rights deals and prize money, with government legislation following the 1989 Hillsborough Disaster banning requiring all-seater stadiums in the top division, focused the attention of the clubs on developing their grounds. In these all-seater stadiums, fandom again changed. Before, fans could move around the ground and mingle with whomever they chose and would form groups with like-minded individuals,

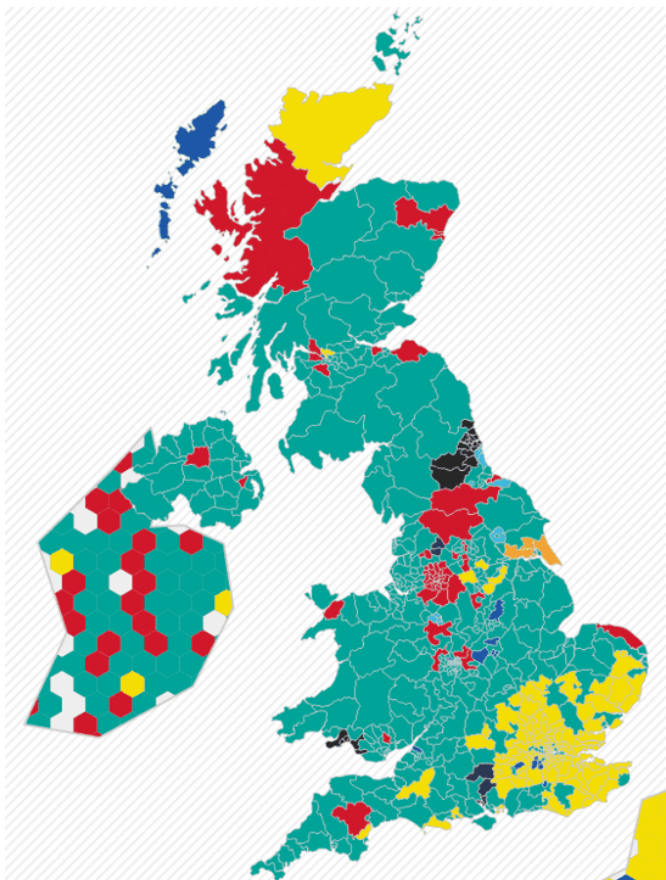


but with set seating, this practice was limited. Although in the long-term, existing communities were hampered by this move, there were some positives. With fans being forced to sit, policing and stewarding also got better and combined with laws implementing football banning orders, troublemakers were weeded out.

Another development of modern fandom is the concept of local identity. As we have already mentioned, strong local identity was central to early fan support, but not now. As the reach and exposure of football leagues grows around the globe, this local identity has been under threat. Previously, fans would have come from the local area and supported their local team, regardless of level. Though, through the advent of better media services, those living far away could see the best teams in their country or globally on a more regular occurrence. It did not become uncommon to see shirts from the most successful teams in different cities and even in different countries.

This can be detailed in the figure below, which is based on Twitter searches for clubs from different UK and Ireland locations. Whereas there are pockets of local support, see the black area in the north-east of the country which is Newcastle, the map is dominated by the following teams: Liverpool in green, Manchester United in red and Arsenal in yellow.

**Figure 1: UK and Ireland Twitter Search by Club**



Source: Guardian Sport, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3RBN3eQ>

The above figure of fans taking an interest in teams away from their local areas may not have been caused exclusively by the move to online fandom, even though it is through this method that they are interacting. The increase in media, such as television, has led to generations of fans following and supporting clubs that are not local to them.

Some of the more traditional fans have worried about this trend for some time and even formed protests against it. Manchester United fans were ultimately unsuccessful in stopping the takeover by the American-based Glazer family in 2007, with some even forming a breakaway football club in protest at what they saw as the further erosion of their local identity and connection to the club (Brown, 2007).

These communities that have existed for an extremely long time, although continuing to develop, are now increasingly being found online.

### **Online Fandom**

Even in the initial stages following the birth of the internet, fans were communicating online. As the online space has developed, so have the fan's actions, with a far greater range of potential platforms and activities that can be entered into. In this section, we will discuss some of those actions and how perhaps fans acting exclusively in those online spaces can be considered to have the same standing as those fans in more traditional offline spaces. Although, firstly, we should discuss the online world and the prevalence of the internet globally.

### **The Online World**

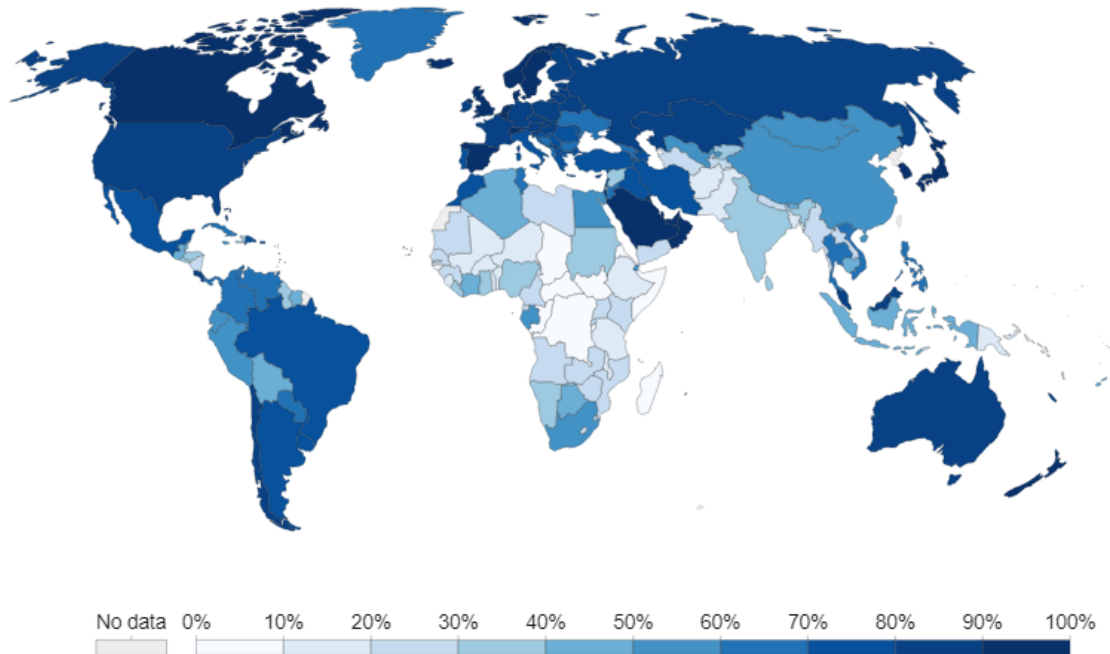
Given the almost constant stream of technology innovation, it is easy to think that everyone in the world has internet access as it is so prevalent in most developed countries; however, this is not the case, and it would be unwise to think so. We can begin to understand this by looking at the chart below detailing internet usage globally.



**Figure 2: Share of the Population Using the Internet**

## Share of the population using the internet, 2019

All individuals who have used the Internet in the last 3 months are counted as Internet users. The Internet can be used via a computer, mobile phone, personal digital assistant, gaming device, digital TV etc.



Source: International Telecommunication Union (via World Bank)

OurWorldInData.org/technology-adoption/ • CC BY

Source: Our World in Data, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3AT3JZq>

What needs to be noted from these charts is that internet usage is not as widespread as, perhaps, we think. Therefore, we must be mindful that both offline and online communities remain important factors in terms of sport and interaction with a particular club. We cannot simply abandon every offline community to throw all of our budgets at those online.

We can, of course, predict with some degree of certainty that access to internet-based services will continue to improve as technology and the methods used to receive it also improve. However, what we cannot accurately predict is when this might occur, and it might be some time yet.

Even as we have started to speak about the shift into online fandom, and in the sections to come, we must be mindful that it is likely to be our more traditional fans that remain offline. This is likely to be the case even in high internet usage areas and countries, as the older generation of fans may not have the skills or means to access or take part in online fandom practices.

### Development of Online Fandom



As we have noted, there has always been an online component to fan support; however, online fandom has grown rapidly due to the advances in technology that have occurred from the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has brought into focus new ways of communicating between the club and fan. Previously, this would have been a one-way communication strategy, the club, would have communicated with the fan, telling them news or informing them of offers, there would be very little in the way of return from the fan themselves. However, now with the advent of various social media platforms, this channel of communication has opened up. Fans can communicate directly with the club, its sponsors and employees, including players, on a range of topics. Of course, there are benefits and drawbacks of such communications for both sides, this unfettered, constant access to either party may be welcome at some times and unwelcome at others.

This online space now plays a central role in the discourse around the football fan experience, and those fans online continue to display their habits formed within their fandom communities.

### **Online Fan Habits and Communities**

Early discussion between fans on the internet would take place in dedicated online football fan forums. The forums would often be set up by fans themselves as a way of bringing like-minded individuals together who may be unable to discuss football or share news at a match. This disconnect may be due to different locations within the stadium (all-seater) or, as we have seen, a different geographical location. Clubs themselves even set these places up so that fans could interact, but also the clubs would have overall control of content discussed and an understanding of who was participating in them.

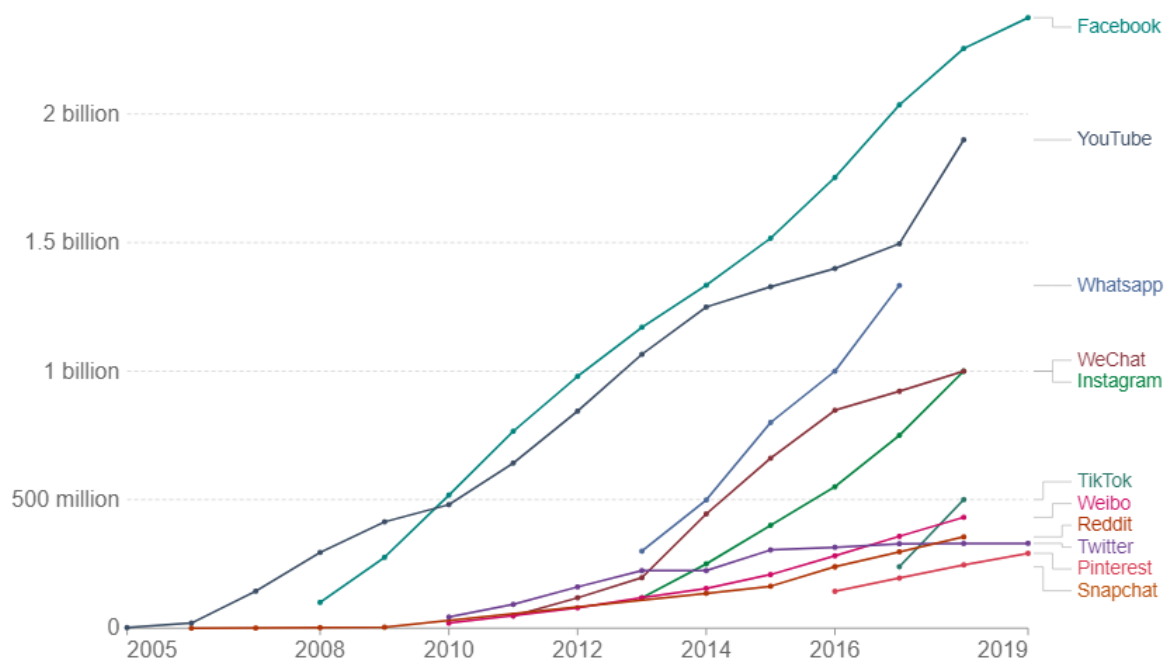
Fan forums remain an important part of the online fan experience, though the spaces in which fans have begun to interact have also developed. From the figure below, we can see that there has been a rapid acceleration in the usage of all forms of social media since Facebook first broke ground in 2005.



**Figure 3: Most Popular Social Networks**

### Number of people using social media platforms, 2005 to 2019

Estimates correspond to monthly active users (MAUs). Facebook, for example, measures MAUs as users that have logged in during the past 30 days. See source for more details.



Source: Statista and TNW (2019)

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Source: Our World in Data, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3INVYpC>

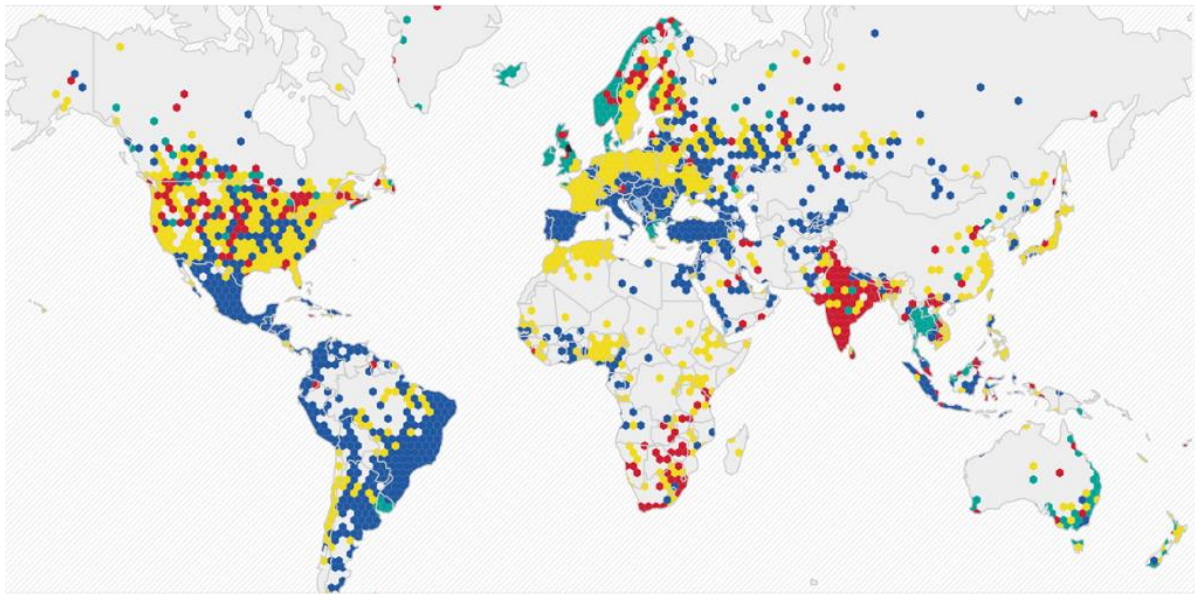
Football fans, like members of the general population, now inhabit all of these social media areas. Discussion groups are held on every available platform, and some fans can even make livings out of content production on sites such as YouTube. ArsenalFanTV was one of the first and largest fan-based channels on the site, combining interviews directly from fans and hosting 'watch alongs' during fixtures (MacInnes, 2017).

As the fans have moved location, so have the clubs, to make sure that they are interacting with all of their fanbase. Clubs now have dedicated social media managers to cultivate content and to measure its response when posted online. It is an important metric to get right, a club's online output is now a central component of its business and marketing strategy. Never has this been more important due to the continued spread of fans all over the globe.

These online communities have brought people together from further afield as the internet and access to it has developed. This can be noted in the figure below, published by newspaper, The Guardian. Each dot was plotted following analysis of the engagement of fans towards a particular club through social media platform, Twitter. As you can see below and in the previous UK and Ireland version in the previous section, the geographical spread of fans interested in clubs has expanded.



**Figure 4: Global Twitter Search by Club**



Source: Guardian Sport, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3RBN3eQ>

The expansion of a club's reach provides the club with opportunities, but also with some issues to contend with. By having more fans, a club is more than likely able to increase its revenue sources through various products. However, this will need some planning, for example, in terms of logistics and marketing, the appropriate merchandise in the correct areas. This is further complicated by the fact that online and offline fans may have different needs. So, do the fans online or offline act the same way or require the same things?

### **Are Offline and Online Fans the Same?**

An interesting topic which has been subject to much debate, both on the terraces and in academic journals, is whether the views of offline and online fans should be treated the same. Previously, fans who primarily acted within online spaces were often considered to be less authentic than those fans who cheered their team on every week on the terraces. In virtually all the fan typologies, they would sit near the more casual fan due to their lack of match attendance and other associated actions that more local, traditional fans would partake in.

However, there are now increasing calls for fans from both offline and online spaces to be treated equally (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010). Gibbons and Dixon (2010) noted that this distinction between online and offline correspondence was not applied in other settings, and to do so purely in football was wide of the mark. The recognition that fans can interact online and still be considered to be highly involved and genuine supporters is becoming increasingly noted in research. The Fillis and Mackay (2014) supporter matrix, is made up of four sections; Social Devotee, Casual Follower, Fan and Committed Supporter, all of whom refer to the fans using social media to interact and keep up to date with club

matters (Fillis and Mackay, 2014). Furthermore, in sport settings, it was found that those who participated more in online discussion about their sport or club, were also the most likely to engage in offline discussion with individuals about the same subjects (Palmer and Thompson, 2007).

Fans themselves are also softening in their views towards the online fan, becoming more understanding of the intricacies of modern life. In much the same way as academia has noted it, fans are now judged as being authentic regardless of from where they interact with the club and other fans. For example, issues that have been outside the control of an individual that perhaps has forced that person to move away from their hometown for work or better prospects, in effect forcing them to be fans from afar, is no longer seen as such a terrible thing.

For many emigrants, supporting a football club is a way of reaffirming the connection of an individual to the place where either they are in or where their parents grew up. While they perhaps cannot attend every fixture that the team plays, alongside online action through various social channels and even making a pilgrimage to a select few games will mark them out as a true fan according to others.

Further closeness between the online and offline worlds can also be seen in numerous articles referencing online relationships that have been fostered between individuals before resulting in offline assistance (Palmer and Thompson, 2007).

This section of the module has argued that fans, regardless of where they are positioned and chose to interact with their fellow fan or the club, should be treated as if they are the same. Of course, the channels of distribution, how they engage for example, will be different, but the way they are viewed when considering their fandom and loyalty to a club should be the same. It is this concept of fan loyalty that we now move on to.

## **Fan Loyalty**

In this section, we begin to understand the concept of fan loyalty, the role that it plays in contemporary sport and how we, as clubs and sporting organizations, can get the best results out of it. As we seek, in this module, to gain from fan loyalty, we should first clarify what we mean exactly by gains within this context.

In this topic area, this, of course, could be financial, and in one sense, at least, it always comes down to this. Loyalty drives revenue, the more loyal a fanbase, of whatever product, the more money an organization is likely to see. This is because it is much easier to sell to an existing customer than a new one, where success rates are much lower.

So, perhaps by developing and increasing loyalty towards our club we could, for example, increase the financial gains from our existing fanbase by keeping them loyal to our organization. Or we could encourage new members to increase financial outlay and in fact switch their loyalty over to us.



We might also consider loyalty within another form that is not focused solely on financial outlay. The loyalty of members who might wish to engage with volunteering at their chosen club as part of the fandom. By nurturing the loyalty, but also the desire for the individual to help out, a club can create a volunteer workforce which can further assist in club business, for example, match day operations. A club that gets this right can benefit from highly loyal, knowledgeable, and motivated volunteers who can have a further positive impact by improving the experience of other fans during a match day. Although this is only part of the story.

We must remember that, of course, fans are not normal business customers and their relationships with their clubs are not normal either. It is an incredibly competitive marketplace with many clubs, sports, organizations, and events vying for the attention of the fan. This is compounded by the fact that the events are live, it is a perishable good, and while it can be watched again on repeat, the live moment has gone.

Eyal mentions the concept of hope, which keeps the fans of particular teams coming back (Eyal, 2021). It might be the year that the team wins the title or finally beats their rivals, and fans want to be there to see it. This highlights the differences of fandoms when considering it next to a normal business. You would not under any circumstance keep going back to a restaurant if they kept messing up your order or providing you with second-rate food, hoping that the next time they will get it right.

We keep going back as fans because that is what we do, we remain loyal to our club, it is entwined with memories and feelings that keep us going in the hard times and make sure that we are there in the good. However, we would be naïve to think that this is the same for everybody and that it will stay the same forever.

Throughout this module, we have been able to discuss the different levels of fandom. Those that are highly involved, committed fans, whether online or offline, will be with the club through thick and thin. Despite multiple losses or poor performances, they will continue to be fans of the club. Others do not share this level of commitment instead interacting with the club when it suits them to do so, this highlights the importance of loyalty.

New and often younger fans are becoming less loyal to one club and instead often split their allegiances across two or even more clubs. It is therefore safe to assume that should one team not be giving their desired social outcomes, then they might suffer from a decline in engagement from these fans. The decline in engagement, means a decline in loyalty and as a result, a decline in financial gains.

A further factor that must now be considered is that even if a team is performing well, there are many distractions that can grab the attention. Going back through history, we can see that the attendances for some football matches were astronomical, regularly over 50,000 people with some more important games attracting an excess of 100,000. At a time when nearly all the attendees were men and boys, how did this happen? It is down



to one such thing, choice. In the days before media, the internet and perhaps even TV, there were few distractions from the life of work. It is therefore no wonder that so many people chose to attend a football match, often on Saturdays, when they were not at work.

Now, the choices that are open to individuals of what to do in the leisure time are vast. When we focused on the Premier League attracting fans from all over the world, we did not focus on the same thing happening, but in reverse. For example, other major leagues such as La Liga, Serie A or even leagues in other sports, the NFL, NBA, etc. can provide entertainment. As much as individuals from all over the world can be attracted by the content of the Premier League, English fans will be pulled towards the bright lights of other competitions.

Figuring that loyalty is critical for any sports club, the following subsections will consider how clubs can gain from all forms of loyalty, whether it is offline or online. Before we move onto gaining from loyalty, how do we go about creating and developing loyalty to begin with?

### **Creating and Developing Loyalty**

Loyalty is defined as the giving or showing firm and constant support or allegiance to a person or institution. It is not created just by one thing, but is instead a formulation of multiple aspects that make up this feeling. Some examples could be, a good product or service, after sales service or competitive pricing over several years.

Previously, companies would go out to customers, in this single channel of communication, and build loyalty that way. Following development of online methods, the customer expectation has shifted and to create brand loyalty is now much more of a two-way relationship (Lakshmi and Rau, 2011). For example, customers might occasionally complain, if the organization that they have been with for an extended period of time can solve this problem and even offer them some form of compensation then the link will be strengthened between the two.

This could be done through a process of 'Relationship Marketing', this method is not focused on sales, but on the retention of customers and their satisfaction. This could be through keeping customers up to date with discounts that only they can access, or even something as small as wishing them a happy birthday. When you do this within a football club, an area that already has strong loyalties in place due to being a fan, the result can be even better.

Within sport, we can create loyalty through fan engagement.

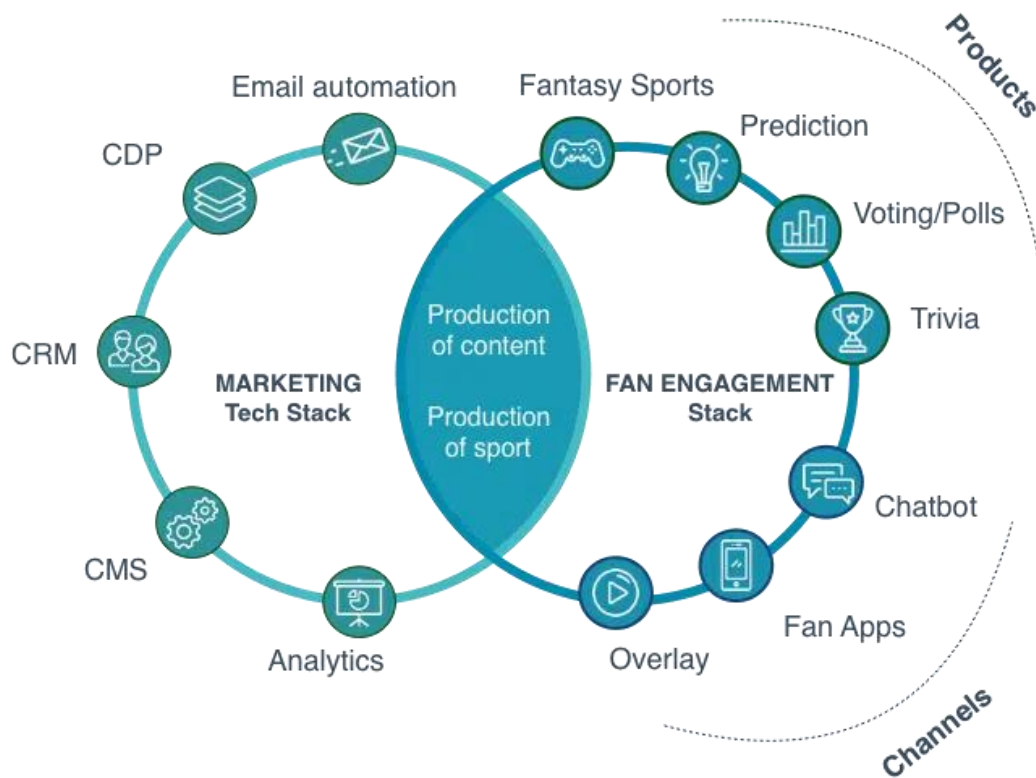
### **Fan Engagement**

Fan engagement is concerned with getting fans to participate in actions with the club at all times. This could be some trivial activities or could be votes on how the club operates. By having strong fan engagement strategies, we can make sure that the club maintains



the interest of the fans and their loyalty. Some of the things that a football club could do to encourage fan engagement are shown in the following figure.

**Figure 5: Encouraging fan engagement**



Source: Susnea, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3z96S67>

As we said previously, some of these are trivial, but they create a connection in the fan's mind and perhaps make them feel closer to their club, if even for a brief moment. Now that we have created the loyalty, what can we do to make sure that we maintain it?

### Maintaining Loyalty

Once we have made loyal customers we need to keep them, this unfortunately means more work for the organization as we cannot simply leave them to continue to buy our products, even in the world of football, where loyalty is strong, we should not be so careless. There are multiple ways in which we can go about maintaining these connections with the fans. One of the most common is adopting a loyalty program. This works by rewarding the customer with points for every transaction that is made, this often includes a purchase. Once the customer has got enough points they can be redeemed, perhaps through a gift or access to exclusive event. If you remember the last module, this idea can also help with memberships with many of these schemes running in football clubs around the world.

It is not merely enough in the modern business world, of which football clubs are members, to have these loyalty plans without constantly evaluating their success. A



successful loyalty plan can help a club drive revenue streams by maximising the financial gains from loyal customers. More concerning, a loyalty program that does not agree with its consumers can have the opposite effect, eventually driving those individuals away. Diwan (2020) suggests that we can measure loyalty in three separate ways:

- Participation rate
- Redemption rate
- Engagement rate

Through these three steps we can understand, on a basic level, whether our existing customers are participating within our loyalty schemes, whether they are redeeming any points they have accumulated. Finally, if they are engaging with the program at all and if so, when that is. This can give us insights into how the program is performing, if engagement is low at particular times this might suggest to us that it would be wise to focus on the rewards on offer at that time. If redemption is low, then we might have a more serious problem on our hands and need to assess what rewards we are giving out and whether they are what is wanted by our customers.

This does not have to be done exclusively from an online perspective, although it is more than likely in this modern era that we will use some form of online methods.

### **Fan Loyalty: Offline Gains Example**

When we consider offline gains, we can again look at the story of Dutch top division side, AZ Alkmaar. Having struggled with a declining membership base, the club knew that they needed to do something to readdress the balance. They began with providing a survey to all of their fan members to ask what they thought of the club, match day experience, and value. From this survey and the results of their own internal audit of fans, they were able to tailor responses to meet the needs of the fanbase, as explained below.

AZ used its insights to activate non-renewed members offline. By working together with their supporter groups, AZ distributed 'hand-written' flyers by the most popular player at that time (again, based on survey-insights) and planted these flyers only on the seats that hadn't been renewed yet. In the note, the player thanked the fans for a great season and asked for their support the next one. (Schanter, 2018, para. 7)

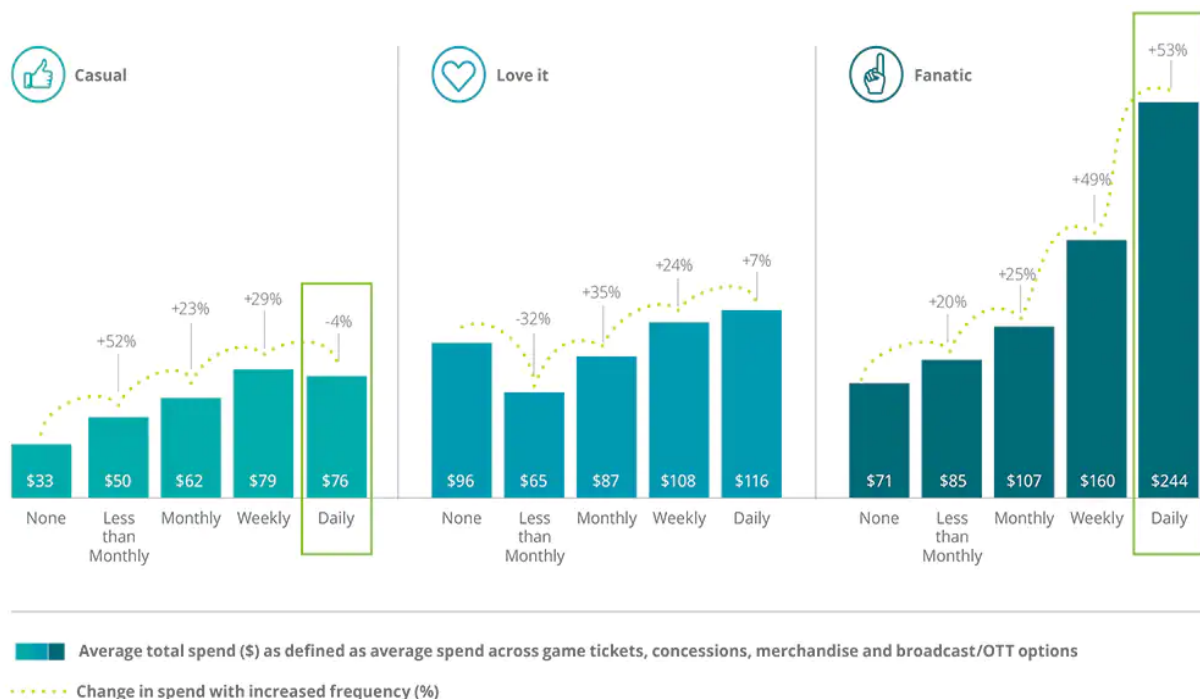
These methods used show the strength of the offline community, as all of the fan groups of AZ got involved in this approach, for example, placing flyers, to encourage those who had not yet renewed to make sure that they did. The method employed increased the retention rate by 15% in just one season, not only this, but they also attracted new fans who further bolstered their membership ranks.

### **Fan Loyalty: Online Gains Example**



It is not just offline where gains can be seen. There has been some fantastic and accessible research conducted by Deloitte showing the financial interaction of different fan groups following different levels of engagement during the off-season. The research was not focused on one particular team, but on a selection of fans who followed sporting organizations in at least one of the following leagues: esports, Major League Soccer (MLS), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), and Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). For this research, Deloitte had focused on three categories of fan, the casual, the love it and the fanatic.

**Figure 6: Tracking Fan Engagement**



Source: Deloitte, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3aK20zN>

As the research states, it is perhaps not surprising to see that those who engage more during the off-season will spend more. This is true for all types of fans, the casual, the love it and the fanatic. It is therefore recommended that a club or team should engage fans with content either directly or as part of a community regularly to increase their net spend throughout the season.

The figure below shows in more detail what sort of content creates the highest spend regardless of fan group. The interesting thing here is the highest level of spend is when the organization creates a connection to community involvement, highlighting the need for this type of action to be at the front and centre of the sports organization's thinking. Remember, this community could be offline or online, and clubs did spend a great deal of time creating online community-based content in the fallout from COVID-19.



**Figure 7: Pertinent Information for Tracking Fan Engagement**



Source: Deloitte, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3aK2OzN>

Finally, it is important to choose the correct distribution channel for the communication you wish to send to fans to be the most effective. The study by Deloitte suggests that currently only 40% of engagements are hitting their mark with fans, leaving a giant 60% of communications unacted upon.

### The Future of the Field

The future of the field will be fascinating as the development of football and the ways in which we can interact with it continue to develop themselves. We are likely to see an increasing level of content, interactions, and transactions moved online as this space continues to develop.

Although it is true to say that some clubs do not rely on fans as heavily as they once did, reports showed that 11 out of 20 Premier League football teams would not have needed fans in the stadium for them to have made a profit (Aloia, 2018), they remain an important aspect of the game of football. Clubs will try their best to take everyone with them, but there will undoubtedly be some who are left by the wayside as the game commercialises far from what they once knew and loved.

While this might not seem like a problem for the clubs as they can always find new fans, those new fans might not have the same level of loyalty to the club as the old ones. Therefore, it might end up developing into a constant battle for the club to replace the fans that they lose.

### Fan Tokens



There is a new type of fan engagement tool that can realise further gains from fans for clubs, fan tokens. We will not spend too much time on this, as we will also be discussing fan tokens in the next module and how they can provide further gains from fans.

But briefly, there has been a rapid increase with cryptocurrency and the impact of NFTs on football, with many players and clubs beginning to get involved in the area. At the beginning of April, Crawley Town FC, a club based in the south of London, became the first club to be outrightly owned through the work of cryptocurrency. The new owners, Wagmi United, promising a selection of NFTs so that fans of the club could have access to the club decision-making (MacInnes, 2022). These investments provide another avenue that clubs could investigate in an effort to monetise interactions within the online communities that they have created.

## Summary

In this module, we began by covering football fandom, the history, and development of fandom as we moved further into the digital age. We then focused on the development of online fandom, specifically on whether fans, regardless of if they were in the stadium or in front of a computer, should be treated the same.

We then moved on to fan loyalty, how we could create it, maintain it, and what we could do with it for of sporting organizations. Finally, we concluded with a look at the future of the field and what perhaps lays in store for clubs and their fans.

It is important for clubs to create loyalty and also to nurture it, in this modern day of sport where content is available all the time, failure to do so will not give the financial returns that these organizations seek.

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