

Module 2. Defining the Fan

Unit 2.1

2.1.1. What is a Fan?

Although we all have fixed ideas of what a fan is, a thorough review of the behavioural, psychological and emotional elements that make up the football supporter will be a good starting point.

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines a fan as “someone who admires and supports a person, sport, sports team, etc.” (Fan, n. d.)

It is clear, however, that the word ‘admires’ somewhat misses the emotional investment all football fans have in their team and the importance of the social identity associated with their support.

Our definition of ‘fan engagement’ stresses this emotional connection:

“Everything a club does to investigate, protect, respect and develop a fan’s emotional investment in” (Bradley;s/n)

Furthermore, research undertaken on behalf of the Fan Experience Company by Colby Cox of Durham Business School, “Fan Focused: Valuable Factors to Create Sustainable Fan Engagement Amongst European Football Clubs and Leagues”, stresses the emotional dynamic of the fan and club relationship. Concepts such as ‘trust’ appear to be important to the fan while concepts such as ‘emotional loyalty’ appear to have currency for clubs.

Based on this and other research sources, our definition of a **football fan** recognises the following factors:

“Someone who has a considerable emotional investment in following a football club, who demonstrates this in transactional ways (e.g., purchasing tickets, replica shirts, etc.) and in emotional ways (e.g. mood affected by team performance to a tattoo of the club on his/her arm, etc.) The reasons for a fan’s attachment to a club may vary: they can be following the family tradition, being close to where they were brought up or the club being successful when they were at an influential age, e.g., 7 years old” (Bradley; s/n).

Much has been written about the psychology of sports fans¹, so it is clear that the concept of 'fandom' extends beyond simply admiring a club, to something more akin to a long-term personal relationship, with all of the attendant 'ups and downs.' For example, if you admire a particular artist, they may release an album you do not like, but this is unlikely to send you into a temporary fit of depression; on the other hand, a team continuously under-performing might just do that.

Friends do not send light-hearted abuse if the new Coldplay album did not meet your expectations, but if your team is doing poorly, then get ready for it!²

Football fans, according to their own country's culture, may also display many self-deprecating attributes, often making light of their club connection, presenting it as a 'prison sentence' or punishment for something they did wrong in a previous life.

Psychologists researching Henru Tajfel and John Turner's social identity theory (1979) also show the lengths to which 'social belonging' matters to football fans (Vinney, 2019). Levine, M., Prosser, A. & Evans, E. (2005) examined this in the context of emergency intervention. They undertook experiments exploring the effects of social belonging on 'real life' helping behaviour. In the first study, intergroup rivalries between soccer fans were used to examine the role of identity in emergency helping. The study showed that an injured stranger wearing an ingroup team shirt is more likely to be helped than when wearing a rival team shirt or an unbranded sports shirt.

Research has also linked social belonging to self-esteem. Nguyen and Griffin (2013) argue that "people tend to categorise themselves into groups in order to gain a greater sense of who they are, with consequences for self-esteem, prejudice and stereotyping" (slide 16).

We see prejudice in football today in the racism of some fans (and some fan groups) and in the anti-social and abusive behaviours many people associate with football fans. We see stereotyping in the easy associations fans of opposing clubs make. An example of this would be the homophobic abuse Brighton & Hove Albion fans sometimes receive, just for coming from a town noted for its inclusive and diverse culture (South, 2013).

¹ See *The Science of Being a Sports Fan. What does it mean to be "addicted" to your favorite team* (Gambino, 2013), available in <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/the-science-of-being-a-sports-fan-9227430/>, and *The Psychology of Sports Fans. Are you a fair weather fan?* (Krauss Whitbourne, 2011), available in <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201112/the-psychology-sports-fans>

² Mark Bradley is a lifelong fan of English 3rd Division team Sunderland whose troubles were featured in two Netflix series entitled *Sunderland til I Die*.



In their report *The Future of the Sports Fan*, two businesses (Performance Communications and Canvas8) consider the intensity of the emotional connection sport is capable of creating:

Few areas of popular culture have the power to affect people as intensely as sport. Over the course of their lives, an estimated 5% of people will switch religions. How many British football fans will switch from one team to another? Closer to 2% (Performance Communications and Canvas8, n. d.)

Previously, we explored the emotional connection fans have with their sport, such as the BIRG and CORF concepts (Taylor, 2000)³. These acronyms help to understand the different emotional relationships fans have with their teams:

BIRG = basking in reflected glory

This self-evidently describes a fan who very visibly manifests his or her support of the club after a victory

CORF = cutting off reflected failure

This, again, self-evidently describes the fan who, when his or her team loses, acts as if there were no emotional connection or investment at all.

These definitions are useful because not only do they acknowledge the emotional investment but also begin to explore associated behaviours. One thing is for certain: the definition of a football fan is not valid unless it recognises the psychological and emotional aspects of the relationship.

Having looked at the general description of the football fan, it is important to recognise that, in recent times, fans may display their support in a variety of ways.

I spoke to a friend whose son is a big follower of our local team. I asked him if all of his son's friends attended games like he did. The answer was surprising: he told me he was the only one! They all self-describe as football fans but consume the game in different ways. One kid manages his team on FIFA 2020; another streams matches instead of attending; another plays Fantasy Football; and another follows his team's performance in the media. He says his emotional investment is the £2 he gambles each week on his team winning! (Bradley, s/n).

³ For reference review, see Cialdini et al (1976), Cialdini and Richardson (1980), Holt (1995).



This shift from attendance to consumption across a variety of channels was noted by Soccerex, the Global Football Business Event company, in an event brochure in 2019⁴:

The Modern Football Fan: The football fan and their needs are central to the activities of all involved in the game but as football has involved with the globalisation of the modern world so too has the modern fan. They have more choices, less time and higher expectations than ever before. They are more diverse and more widespread. Against this backdrop, rights holders, media and sponsors must select the right product, channels and relationships that deliver the experiences and authenticity that fans crave. (Soccerex europe 2019 conference concept, 2019, para. 11)

Therefore, what do these emotional and multi-channel user fan definitions for clubs? Simply that both ends of the 'modern fan' spectrum need equal attention.

We must recognise that fandom does not exclusively belong to one group. If clubs are going to grow sustainably, part of that growth must come from less represented groups, such as families with younger children, women, people of different ethnic origin, etcetera.

Reading suggestion:

- "Market insight: 10 tips to meet the needs of the modern fan" available in <https://www.soccerex.com/insight/articles/2016/10-tips-to-meet-the-needs-of-the-modern-fan>
- "Fan entertainment: attracting and engaging fans" available in <https://www.soccerex.com/insight/articles/2017/fan-entertainment-attracting-and-engaging-fans>

Exercise:

1. **How do you manifest your support of your club?** (Do you attend matches, support from afar or invest your time differently?)
2. **How does your emotional investment manifest itself?** (Can you accept defeat with a smile or is losing hard to take?)

⁴You will find more information about it in <https://www.soccerex.com/>

2.1.2 Fan as a Customer

This unit sets out to explain the circumstances and perspectives which determine why sometimes it is NOT wise to call a fan 'a customer' and when it might be beneficial to do so.

First – and we may say this categorically –, every fan hates the idea that his or her club is referring to them internally as 'customers.' Given the definition we have presented in 2.1.1 and the clear emotional elements involved in football fandom, it is clear that fans differ in nature from someone using a supermarket. It may be their favourite supermarket brand, but, as a former Commercial Manager at Welsh club Cardiff City once said: "No one telephones their local supermarket and asks if they can spread their late grandfather's ashes there"

Therefore, it is unwise for clubs to refer to fans as 'customers' in external communications. When they do (and it has happened), fans point to this as an example of 'modern' football preferring commercial enterprise to strong fan relationships. However, in our view, the term is very important, because –if used correctly (within the business)–, it can help associations, leagues and clubs to learn from other sectors.

Module 1 traced the history and meaning of customer engagement exactly because football can learn a lot from it. Put simply, businesses sell these days by creating long-term emotionally driven relationships with customers. The majority of these businesses are simply selling commodities and using brand and marketing as an artifice to cover the emotional void in their offering. They envy the emotional dimension that football enjoys, and they wish to emulate it. Football, by its nature, creates strong emotional bonds, but (in the majority of cases) IT does not maximise this in the way it deals with fans. This course argues that, if the sport were to adopt some of the practices of the world's most customer-friendly organisations, it would benefit enormously.

Doing so is not 'selling out' or becoming a faceless entity. Doing so would allow clubs, especially those outside of the elite, to strengthen relationships to the point that their viability relies less on winning.

The accumulation of our experience⁵ underlines this. Here is a quote of a supporter of Newcastle United (a famous club from the North East of England) when he was asked if he would be happy to be referred to as a 'customer':

⁵ Fan Panels, Fan Focus Groups, Fan Surveys and related research (The Fan Experience Company)

‘Of course, we can't because that connection is much more emotional, and many football fans would see it as an insult to be called a customer. They see a customer as someone on the end of a commercial arrangement: you give me this, I pay you that, and that's it. There is nothing else. There is no emotional engagement or anything like that’ (2007)⁶

Now this is a little more complex, because if we are going to take good practice from other industries and apply them to football, why cannot we take the word ‘customer’ and apply it to a football fan?

Certainly, there are other users of a football club that may not share the emotional investment that the fans we have been exploring do. Any club with good stadium facilities will wish to maximise these, particularly on non-match days, to generate additional revenue streams.

These may include match day hospitality, conferences and meetings, parties and celebrations. Of course, clubs will have no difficulty referring to these users as ‘customers’, since they are paying for a ‘product’. One would hope that they would enjoy an experience that reflected the values of the club and its desire to meet and exceed their expectations, but they would not argue were the term ‘customer’ be applied to them.

Let us examine the different types of fans to prepare us for a time when we are contemplating lifting their levels of engagement.

Exercise

Complete the following table with an example of something this particular fan will need, expect or look forward to when attending a game:

Table 1: Match day requirement according to the type of fan

Type of fan	Match day requirement
‘Ultra’ fan: an 18-year-old fanatical follower of the club who has been warned for bringing pyrotechnics into the stadium.	
A 75-year-old season ticket holder with a seat in the main stand.	
A 30-year-old mother, bringing her 7-year-old twins to the game.	
A disabled supporter who uses a wheelchair.	

⁶ Opinion voiced at a Fan Panel at Newcastle United (2007) – The Fan Experience Company. To respect the privacy of the supporter, we are not providing his/her name



We know that these are all fans. However, while each one may have an emotional investment in the club (*the young kids will soon have it), they each have different requirements on a match day.

The 'Ultras' bring life, colour, noise and relentless support, regardless of the team's performance, so long as there is sufficient effort on display. They often present security challenges, with their pyros and other devices, but they can often add to their passion with positive community activities.

In recent times, an FC Köln fan raised money for children's charities (Bundesliga clubs and players get behind fan-fuelled #Saisonspende initiative to raise money for charity, 2017) while in other countries fans exploits do not always border on the mischievous.

It is clear that the motivations of the 'Ultras' are going to be different from those of the elderly fan and the young mother with twin boys. The elderly fan may have mobility issues, and comfort and shelter are likely to be key requirements. Warm attentive treatment from club employees will be welcomed.

For the mother of the young kids, the needs are again different. If they are coming by car, it must be easy to park. There must be plenty for the kids to do to avoid them becoming bored. If possible, there must be a chance to experience some 'magic' (for example, having a picture with the mascot or meeting a player)⁷

When it comes to the disabled supporter, many clubs simply see the needs of the disabled supporter in physical access terms. They think it is needed to modify the entry so people can come into the stadium; perhaps, if they are using a wheelchair such entry will make it easier for them. Having engaged in several studies of the Disabled Fan Experience⁸, it is clear that there is a disconnect between what many clubs believe matters to fans (easy physical access) and what actually does matter to fans (fair treatment, help when needed, simple adjustments to allow them to enjoy the experience like any other supporter.) For example, Derby County (a club from the Midlands of the UK currently in the second tier of English football) converted gold trollies into carts that were capable of driving disabled fans to the main entrances at the stadium without being exposed to bad weather and without having to make their own way across the car park⁹.

⁷ The Fan Experience Company has run (in partnership with the English Football League) the Family Excellence programme since 2007 to improve family experiences at stadiums and to encourage the attendance of younger fans. In the first 10 seasons of the scheme, junior attendance rose 37% (some 6 million more children watching Tier 2, 3 and 4 football.)

⁸ The EFL Disabled Fan Experience programme (2009-12 & 2015-18) examined the disabled fan's perspective of attending a game for the first time. This was a qualitative study aimed at identifying and sharing best practices across the League. The Accessible Supporter Guide was published in 2018 and that was distributed to all clubs to assist with their engagement of disabled fans.

⁹ See the case of Derby County Disabled Supporters Club. <https://www.dcdsc-official.co.uk/fans-page>

In the last few years, the exploits of the Shippey family¹⁰ have led to many clubs adopting the idea of a 'sensory room', where the autistic child is protected from the noise of the game but is still able to enjoy it like any other fan¹¹. It is also common in many stadiums in Europe for disabled supporters to be able to pre-order snacks and drinks and have them brought to their seats.

2.1.3 The Spectrum of Fandom

It is important to recognise the wide spectrum of fandom. The emotional investment is common to all types of fans, but they each consume football differently and each have needs which, if addressed in a positive, engaging way, will lead to increased levels of trust in the club and emotional loyalty too –currencies that are vital for fan engagement.

We have talked about the modern football fan. As mentioned earlier in this module, in the Soccerex conference in Spain (a trade conference for football) the topic of discussion was the 'modern fan' and his or her needs. But we are yet to explore the wider spectrum of fandom and the way clubs should approach the challenge of engaging each segment appropriately.

There are three different dimensions to the spectrum of fandom

1. Consumption

This relates to the way each fan 'consumes' his or her love for her club or national team. It ranges from attending matches to having a more distant relationship with the club, included watching them on TV or looking out for their results. This also embraces those who manifest their support through playing eSports, streaming games, buying the replica shirt or even expressing their attachment by gambling on the team's results.

2. Attendance habits

Attendance habits can vary from not missing a single game, home or away, for several decades to only attending home games; and from attending some home games to picking one or two games a season to watch. Habits can be the result of geographical, economic or emotional factors.

3. Emotional investment

¹⁰ A Sunderland-supporting family with three autistic boys whose campaigning on behalf of the needs of young autistic match attendees has led to the creation of sensory rooms in many stadia.

¹¹ See the article "Couple who campaign for autistic football fans are given MBEs" (2019), by Gillan, T., available in <https://www.sunderlandecho.com/news/people/couple-who-campaign-autistic-football-fans-are-given-mbes-1332627>

As we explored in the first unit of this module, the levels of emotional investment and manifestations of social identity can range from minor to major. It would appear that many of the sport's difficulties with anti-social behaviour and prejudice have their roots in social identity, *but*, at the same time, these same fans are among those on the front line when it comes to supporting their communities during the current pandemic.

It would not be possible to provide an exhaustive list of the different types of fans in the spectrum, but that is not the point. What is important to recognise is that a 'one size fits all' approach to fan engagement is not desirable nor even possible. If clubs wish to begin the process of addressing levels of fan engagement, they must first do the following:

- Identify the key fan segments.
- Identify the individual fans in each segment.
- Understand the characteristics and behaviours of fans in each segment.
- Understand the needs/expectations of fans in each segment.
- Seek to deliver against these needs.
- Have communications, feedback, measurement and improvement processes in place.

One approach is to create a fans' parliament. In the next example, from Wolverhampton Wanderers¹², you can see that it will help the club to understand different views within the fan base. A group of fans comes together regularly to discuss their experiences and to address ongoing issues. Wolves (the club's accepted nickname) also recognise the breadth of the fan spectrum by having a Junior Fans Parliament¹³ which allows younger fans of the club: "To make supporting Wolves even better and welcome the next generation of supporters to the Club" (Junior's Fan Parliament, n. d., para. 1).

Brighton and Hove Albion Football Club launched an initiative that shows that they clearly understand the characteristics of their fans. Several years ago, they contacted each fan at the end of the season and shared with them the exact distances in miles that each had travelled in the previous season following the club. The impact on fans (some of whom we know) was immediate. Some shared their distances on social media and, appealing to fans' natural competitive nature, a 'league table' was created.

¹² Official page: <https://www.wolves.co.uk/fans/fans-parliament/>

¹³ Official page: <https://www.wolves.co.uk/fans/fans-parliament/junior-fans-parliament/>



This is also reflected on the content that fans want to see on social media, and clubs have learned that this is another way in which the characteristics of different fans can be reflected, celebrated or embraced. For example, the Admin team at AS Roma have developed a reputation for uniquely human content, included a most recent campaign where, each time they signed a player, they would show videos of missing children (anywhere in the world).

As a direct result of this remarkable campaign, six children have been reunited with their families. The success of this initiative has led to more than 50 European clubs use their social media to help to find missing people¹⁴. The project will begin on 25 May: the International Missing Children's Day.

Fan behaviours are often impacted by the performance of the team. The biggest indicator of this is in changing levels of attendance.

Take the Sunderland Club. Established in 1879, it has won six first division titles (the last one in 1936) and two FA Cups (the second, famously, in 1973, when the club was in the second division and defeated the 1972 English First Division runners-up Leeds United 1-0 at Wembley.) The club's stadium (Stadium of Light) has a capacity for 49,000 fans. However, in light of recent performances, when the club dropped in consecutive seasons from the Premier League to League One (2 tiers lower), attendances fell.

In the 2016/17 season, the last played in the Premier League, the club's average attendance was 41,791 while, two seasons later, in the third tier, the average had dropped to 32,157¹⁵. While no research appears to indicate the specific reasons why fans stopped attending, it is likely that poor on-field performance was one of them.

Drop two divisions and you may lose 23% of your ticket revenue. Few fans will have suffered as much as Sunderland fans have in recent years, but the point is made. However strong the emotional connection of the match attending fan, the quality of the team and its success on the pitch are important factors in their attendance habits.

M2 - U1 (P) - Video p/lectura 2 - spectrum of fandom 1

M2 - U1 (P) - Video p/lectura 2 - spectrum of fandom 2

In terms of this study, **what is the learning for clubs?**

¹⁴ 'Football Cares' initiative (European Clubs Association) <https://www.ecaeurope.com/news/what-is-the-football-cares-initiative/>

¹⁵ For more information, you can visit Football Web Pages (<https://www.footballwebpages.co.uk/sunderland/attendances>)

It is simply that both ends of the modern fan spectrum need equal attention. But the central message is the same: club stories, its history, its heritage, its values, stories of its former legends and local beliefs must be expressed in ways that reach *all* fan types.

Later in this course we will explore how to engage and retain different fan segments, but for now, please attempt the following.

Exercise

Suggest ways in which clubs can engage and appeal to the following fan segments:

Table 2: Ways in which clubs can engage and appeal to different types of fans

Type of fan	How to engage
Overseas fan (non-match attending)	
Local fan (non-match attending/eSports fan)	
Parents of attending fans (locally based)	
Match-attending fans who are studying and living away from the area where their team plays	

2.1.4 Can Fans Be Treated as Customers?

In unit 2.1.2 the sensitivities involved in calling fans ‘customers’ was explored. We explained that, for the traditional fan, this word has associations with ‘commercial operations’ where the fan is simply someone who can be exploited by the club. However, for some groups, such as those using the club’s conference and banqueting facilities, the need to be treated as a customer is important.

This unit will explore the importance of using customer engagement techniques to improve match day experiences and, therefore, levels of fan engagement.

Customer journey mapping, as explained by Marquez, Clement and Downey (2015), can be used to help employees to better understand and optimise the user experience. A customer journey map is a picture of the customer’s experience expressed from their perspective and by using a map. The map illustrates the customer’s experience through a series of touch points (individual parts of the ‘journey’ that are important to the customer and, by definition, different types of customers.) Taking ‘a walk in the customer’s shoes’ is an effective way of understanding where the experience can be altered, modified or improved.

Many organisations use this approach to improve current customer process, and football is no different. The Fan Experience Company has developed a Fan

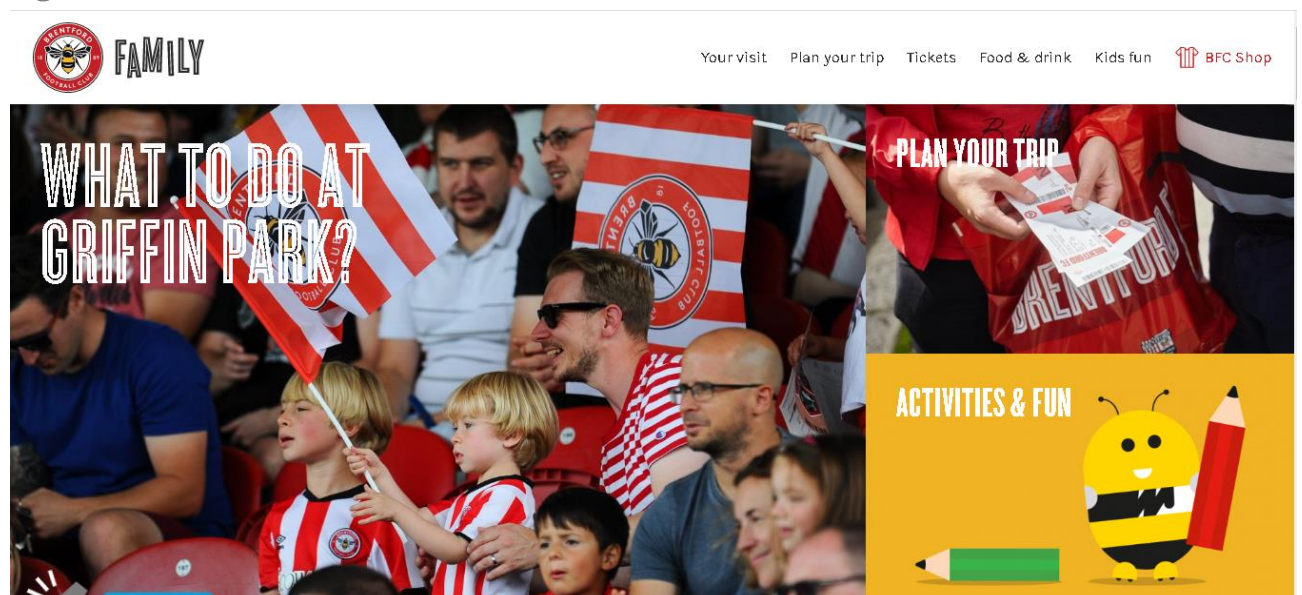
Experience Assessment¹⁶ model over several years. This is based on the concept of the 'customer journey map.' It includes all of the 'touch points' experienced by fans on a match day. Applied effectively, it can help clubs to find ways of improving the experience for certain fan audiences.

Let us examine this by looking at a club's website and the needs of fans attending their first game. The importance of recruiting, engaging and retaining new fans cannot be emphasised enough, for if clubs wish to sustainably grow attendances, they must recognise that part of this growth must come from new fans, but that is where the problem starts.

Let us take the example of a mother of football-supporting children—a new fan with the potential to increase attendances by 3— who wants to surprise her kids with tickets for a game at the local club. Like the majority of users these days, she will visit the club's website, but will she find the information she needs or will she find that the website solely concerns itself with the needs of existing fans? (e.g. stories and stats, leaving new fans to guess when to arrive, where to sit, what is going on for kids and what to do if the kids get cold or bored.)

However, if the mum happens to have Brentford FC as her local club, she will find that her needs will be met. This club is the first (as far as this research shows) to have created a dedicated club website for families and other new fans.

Figure 1: Brantford Football Club official website



Source: Brantford Football Club official website [Fans supporting the Brantford Football Club] (n. d.) Retrieved June 2020 from https://family.brentfordfc.com/?_ga=2.145083895.27445222.1588936827-1178451753.1588936827. Screenshot by author.

¹⁶ For further information, go to www.fanexperienceco.com

Of course, this means that Brentford (and other clubs like them, including Middlesbrough¹⁷ and Belgium's OH Leuven¹⁸) is not only providing for an under-supported fan segment (the new one and the family), but it is also demonstrating that thinking of fans as progressive businesses think of customers will deliver sustainable growth.

More specifically, this particular fan segment (the new family) has needs unlike those of the traditional fan. The latter can be easily (and somewhat unfairly) characterised as someone who stays in the local bar finishing a beer until 5 minutes before kickoff time whereas the former will not be sure when to arrive. So, here is a list of recent developments aimed at ensuring the new fan buys the ticket, enjoys the experience and returns:

- A match day schedule, explaining everything that happens before kickoff. Where can kids meet the mascot? How can they get an autograph and a selfie with a player? Where are there things for them to do? Where can they kick a ball?
- An opportunity to register your child as a 'first time' attendee. At clubs like Luton Town¹⁹ and Swindon Town²⁰, it is possible to do this and then, on the day, receive free VIP treatment, including a chance to sit in the dugout with your family before the game starts and enjoy a unique view of the players' warm up.
- An opportunity to order kids' snack boxes to be brought to your seat by the club's furry mascot shortly before kickoff, such as that offered by Doncaster Rovers²¹.

Figure 2: Luton Town Football Club official website



Source: Luton Town Football Club official website [A young fan supporting the Luton Town Football Club]. (n. d.) Retrieved June 2020 from <https://www.lutontown.co.uk/supporters/families/first-time-fans/>. Screenshot by author.

¹⁷ The Middlesbrough official website is <https://www.mfc.co.uk/grfz> (Here new families receive the surprise of a pre-match tour of the Generation Red Family Zone facilities which sometimes includes meeting one of the first team squad)

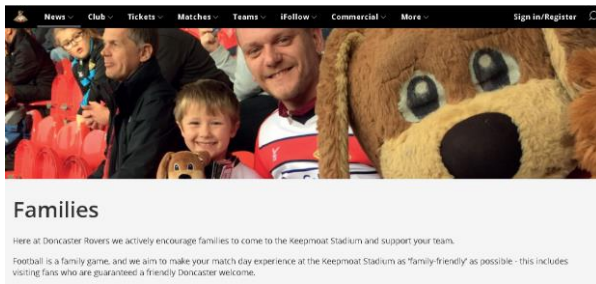
¹⁸ The Belgium's OH Leuven official website is www.ohleuven.com (Here a new family stand was created for the 2019/20 season)

¹⁹ See "First time visitors to kenilworth road" on <https://www.lutontown.co.uk/supporters/families/first-time-fans/>

²⁰ See "My First Game" on <https://www.swindontownfc.co.uk/news/2019/january/my-first-game/>

²¹ The Doncaster Rovers official website is <https://www.doncasterroversfc.co.uk/fans/families/>

Figure 3: Doncaster Rovers official website



Source: Doncaster Rovers Football Club official website [Fans supporting the Doncaster Rovers Football Club] (n. d.) Retrieved June 2020 from <https://www.swindontownfc.co.uk/news/2019/january/my-first-game/> Screenshot by author.

Figure 4: Swindon Town Football Club official website



Source: Swindon Town Football Club official website [Father and son fans supporting the Swindon Football Club]. (n. d.) Retrieved June 2020 from <https://www.doncasterroversfc.co.uk/fans/families/> Screenshot by author.

What is important about the above initiatives is that there is a strong business sense behind them. They, like many of the activities undertaken by progressive customer-facing businesses, are aimed at creating value, which in turn leads to emotional engagement and future loyalty. It is good business sense to look after new fans and their families.

All of the clubs described operate in tiers 2 and 3 of English football too. They clearly cannot create a sustainable increase in attendance by winning alone. They must seek a more reliable way and, as we will come to learn in this course, have found that adopting the fan engagement approach has borne fruit for them.

The opportunity is clear. If we develop services and experiences that will create value for fans, we are simply following good business practice. This is particularly the case when it comes to attracting new fans. They will be used to high levels of service in other parts of their lives, so why should not they expect it in football.

So, it is OK to use the word 'customer' –but with one caveat. Anyone with an emotional connection to a club needs to be very careful, because they risk making it



look like the club is only interested in exploiting fans, without recognising their emotional investment.

Exercise:

Examine your club's website and identify the ways in which they are using it to appeal to different fan groups with different needs.



Unit 2.2

2.2.1 The Match-Attending Fan

In this unit we are going to explore the match attending fan: his or her behaviours, expectations and hopes. While it is clear that every club would benefit from the atmosphere a full stadium brings, it is also true that for clubs outside of the elite, this also means they are maximising their biggest revenue opportunity: ticket sales.

To begin with, we need to apply the thinking from the unit on the spectrum of fandom and declare that it would be unwise to assume all match-attending fans are alike. Just like in the wider spectrum of fans, attending and non-attending, there are different segments based on gender type and age, but there are also segments based on consumption, habits and emotional investment.

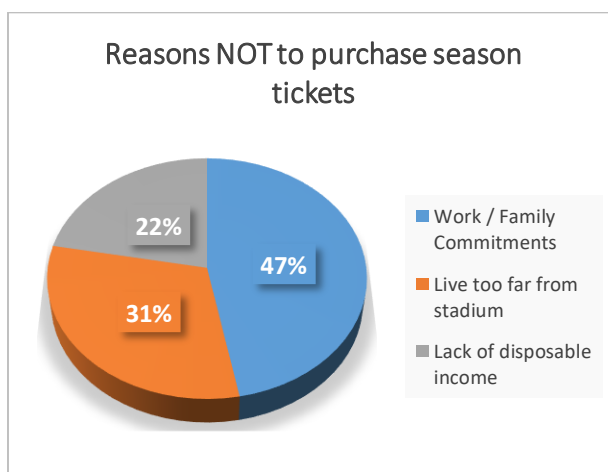
What do we know about the characteristics and the expectations of the match-attending sports fan?

Firstly, it is self-evident that, while having a wide choice of match consumption before them, they prefer the 'live' experience, so what do we know about their preferences, expectations and hopes?

In 2019, the EFL (English Football League, 2019) undertook a comprehensive survey of supporters of all 72 clubs.

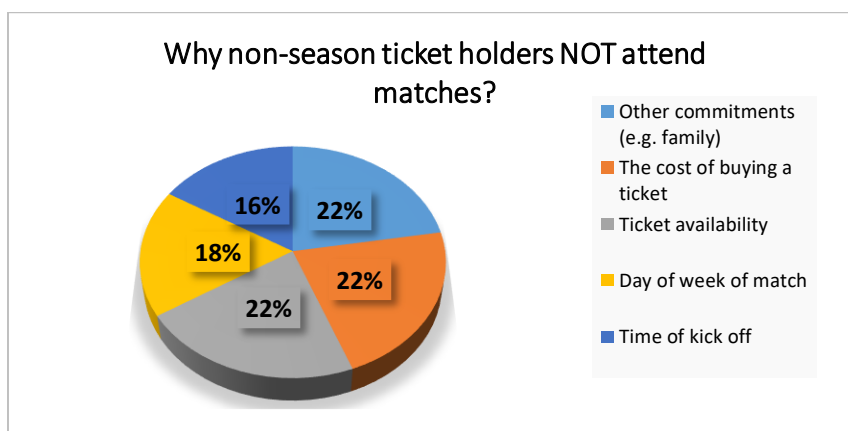
The Match Day Attendance part of the survey produced the results shown in the chart below.

Figure 5: Graph with the biggest reasons (in order) causing fans NOT to purchase season tickets



Source: Adapted from *Match Attendance. Supporters survey 2019* (pp.36-37), by English Football League, 2019, EFL. Copyright by English Football League. Adapted with permission.

Figure 6: The biggest factors (in order) causing non-season ticket holders *not* attend matches



Source: Adapted from *Match Attendance. Supporters survey 2019* (PP. 35-35) by English Football League, 2019, EFL. Copyright by English Football League. Adapted with permission.

It is also important to note that the various programmes and interventions delivered to the clubs by the EFL to help them with things like family engagement, away fan engagement and disabled fan engagement, means that the 2018/19 season saw the highest attendances across the EFL for 60 years. The survey responses reflect this high level of commitment, with 95% of supporters having attended at least one home game during the season and three quarters also stating they attend away games.

So how do experts see their needs changing in the near future? The *Future of the Sports Fan* (2015) indicates that 66% of respondents to the prompt 'Being a fan means ...' said 'match attendance'.

It also identifies eight future trends. Four of them are relevant to match attending fans:

1. Fanbases will become more diverse and inclusive.
2. Fans will become more active and influential.
3. Fans will demand unique venue experiences.
4. Being a fan will become a luxury.

Let us look at each of those in detail.

Fanbases will become more diverse and inclusive

Women currently make up 50% of the world's population but are outnumbered significantly by male fans across the globe. Of course, in some leagues, there is less of an imbalance, but the recent growth of the women's game, girls' interest in watching and playing football and a more general change to a more inclusive society, has led to more and more women attending football matches.

In 2015 the EFL²² undertook a survey to identify what mattered to female fans attending men's professional football. The following were the two key findings:

- 1) Merchandise –particularly offering a wider range of women's fit clothing, both replica kit and leisure wear. It is vital to note here that “women's fit” does not mean a shirt with a slashed V-neckline, as per the recent controversy about the Nike international kits; it simply means something slightly more tailored. Offering this kind of range would allow female fans to demonstrate their allegiances more and has the added bonus of generating income for the club.
- 2) Visibility of women at the club. This could be in terms of club executives, speakers at events, stadium announcers on matchdays, or the mere raffle drawing; but all the groups commented on the lack of women in official and visible club roles. Additionally, these women need to be treated with respect rather than objectified or used for cheap ‘double entendre’²³; the Oxford fans and Huddersfield fans both gave very strong examples of where women working for the club had been subjected to this.

One key learning from the project was that different fan segments have different match day needs. So how can we support this in the stadium? For example, how do we identify, develop and deliver the needs of parents (including mothers) who are bringing children to their first match?

Research undertaken by the Fan Experience Company (based on over 1800 individual ‘family experience’ detail match day assessments) identified comprehensive requirements/recommendations for clubs to follow to meet and exceed the needs of families and, therefore, to encourage their attendance.

In other units we will explore this in more detail, but here are several key requirements of clubs wishing to attract and retain new families:

²² The English Football League (tiers 2, 3 and 4 of English football) www.efl.com

²³ A joke displaying prejudice against women and/or misogyny

- Ensure websites contain information for families (especially, on key elements such as entertainment for kids, opportunities for ‘magic moments’, time and place when and where to meet the furry mascot, kids’ refreshments, toilets, etc.)
- Provide dedicated areas within the stadium where families can gather (to ensure a ‘family-friendly’ atmosphere.)
- Offer refreshments suitable to modern families (healthy snacks in addition to sausage and beer.)
- Ensure social media messages are inclusive (for example, by creating a ‘virtual’ furry mascot to communicate family-related messages.)

Fans will become more active and influential

It is much easier for fans to organise themselves these days. Whereas, in past times, there might have been a printed fanzine to convey the ‘independent fan voice’, these days fans are hosting podcasts.

When new owners took the helm at Sunderland, one of the first things they did was to engage with fans both through official club channels and independent outlets, such as the Roker Report podcast²⁴. This led to, among other things, the discovery that, while continuous defeats were the biggest issue, fans recognised that it was difficult to change this and that it would make sense to focus on things that would have a positive impact on fans attending the stadium. This resulted in the project to renew all of the seats in the Stadium of Light (with players and fans involved together over the summer of 2018) (The Newsroom, 2018).

Fans of MLS club Seattle Sounders work with the club through the medium of the Alliance Council, where fans get to meet the club’s owners on a regular basis to discuss matters of importance to them (Darwen and Mothershaw, 2016-present time)²⁵.

What is clear (and this will be covered in other units of this course) is that fans will become more active and influential, and clubs (and leagues, associations) need to be prepared for this and need to have processes in place to facilitate this.

Fans will demand unique venue experiences

As consumption choices increase, there is a risk that fans will choose a remote consumption channel to watch the game, so it is important that clubs (especially

²⁴ The Roker Report official website is <https://rokerreport.sbnation.com/>

²⁵ More information in <https://www.soundersfc.com/supporters-and-alliance/alliance>

those relying upon ticket revenue as their primary source of revenue) ensure that the actual live experience trumps every other option. As *The Future of the Sports Fan* report confirms, a televised rugby match broadcast led directly to a 25% fall in attendance at the game.

Naturally, fan consultation needs to be in place to support this, but it is likely that, over time, we are likely to see more opportunities to socialise and to engage in pre- and post-match entertainment, especially as *The Future of the Sports Fan* says that 54% of event-attending fans do so for social reasons and 46% for pre- and post-match entertainment.

Brøndby IF, the much-loved Copenhagen club has recently invested a six-figure sum in creating a stand-alone external covered and heated fan zone. This allows direct access to the stadium, but features live music, live interviews with current and past club 'legends', activities and entertainment, refreshments and dining.

Brøndby IF has also created, in our view, Europe's best family lounge. This is a part of the stadium, accessible from outside and with direct access to the stadium concourse, that contains everything kids will want to do before watching their heroes do battle. It has mini-football, arts and craft (for kids of different ages), eSports, indoor sports, music, competitions and more.

Add Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0dtek9MJTI> A short video taken from the experience in Brøndby's fan zone (July 2019 v Silkeborg IF)

Being a fan will become a luxury

The United Nations (2020) confirmed recently that, after Covid19, more than 1.5 billion people globally will lose their livelihood. This will impact on all leisure activities, with a big impact on football.

The Future of the Sports Fan report confirms that 3 out of 4 fans say they are being held back from watching live sports because of ticket prices, while 76% of those interviewed said they would attend more games if tickets were more affordable and 79% believe tickets for live sports are overpriced.

It is, of course, paramount that clubs which rely on ticket revenue for the vast majority of their income must continue to remain sustainable. However, they need to do this in ways that do not compromise their existing supporter base and that encourage re-attendance from lapsed fans and new attendance from new fans.

This can be done in different ways, including the following:

- Give fans easier-to-pay options; for example, instead of paying the season ticket in full, the fan is offered an interest-free option of splitting the payments over 12 months or the length of the season.
- Give the fans 'magic moments' and other rewards, by offering loyalty points based on attendance and other habits; for example, attending B team games, attending in bad weather, etc. This is best illustrated by MLS club Philadelphia Union which, among other fantastic rewards, offer player-worn jerseys²⁶.

Exercise:

Based on your experiences²⁷ as a match-attending fan, answer the following questions:

1. What do you like most about your match day experience?
2. What do you enjoy least about your match day experience?
3. Which part of the match day experience, if not addressed/improved, might lead you to no longer attend?

2.2.2 The Non-Match Attending Fan

In this unit we explore the characteristics of non-match attending fans:

1. Those who could attend if they wanted to (geographically close)
2. Those who cannot attend (e.g. those living in a different country to the one in which his or her team plays)

Given our focus on using fan engagement to help non-elite clubs to grow sustainably (i.e., to attract, engage and retain fans without relying on winning or high-quality football), we are focusing on two things here:

1. How can we engage geographically close fans to attend matches and/or contribute monetarily to the club?
2. How can we engage those living in a different country so that they undertake positive non-match attending behaviours, such as joining membership schemes or subscribing to official club streaming services, and advocate following the club to their friends and family?

Our experience is that there is one common factor to both scenarios that can help to strengthen each relationship and that is the club's approach to fan engagement:

²⁶ For further information, see <https://www.philadelphiaunion.com/tickets/stm-rewards>

²⁷ The whole experience from info, ticket booking, cost, travel and everything that happens inside and outside of the main arena

everything done to understand, protect, respect and develop the emotional investment the fan has in the club.

So, in a time when many have chosen to follow their clubs *virtually*, what does this mean for clubs (especially those outside of the elite) for whom the fan relationship is vital to financial viability? Who truly owns the fan? Is it the club they devote their hearts to or is it one of the many other rights holders, media and sponsor organisations?

You could even ask what we mean by 'the club'. There is a clear distinction between the club as a physical manifestation and the club as an abstract entity that connects with fans on several levels. For example, let us take a Malaysian student who has successfully managed English 6th Tier club Bradford Park Avenue to the extent that they have qualified for the second qualifying round of the Europa League (where they will meet Estonia's FC Kuressaare, managed by a Zimbabwean barista.) And just when BPA are about to invite him over to a pre-season game, his best player signs for Progrès Niederkorn of Luxembourg, so off he pops to manage them for the next few seasons.

The digital game has fans who see the clubs they follow as *exchangeable images*²⁸, so how do we stop this from happening? **How do we project the club's identity strongly enough to secure their support for life?**

If by this exchangeability we see the 'modern fan' as operating in a global free market economy, then 'telling the story', revealing the stories that built the club and continue to grow it, communicating the values it stands for and making decisions that reflect these principles will surely strengthen both the physical and the virtual fan relationship.

It also helps make the club less ephemeral, more tangible and unique and more able to connect with aspects of the fan's own image of his or herself. It becomes less of a commodity and more of a belief system.

What, therefore, is the learning for clubs? Simply, that both ends of the 'modern fan' spectrum need equal attention, but the message is the same. Clubs' stories (i.e., history, heritage, values, former legends and local beliefs) must be better told, both locally and globally. Projecting what makes the club distinct must become a strategic imperative. Creating enduring memories and magical moments must be at the top of everyone's job description.

²⁸ There is no strong emotional connection and, therefore, nothing stopping the fan from switching allegiance.

Rewarding and championing supporter behaviours, such as attending lower category games, turning up in terrible weather, supporting the youth team, being positively vocal on social media and not missing away games, should be a top priority for match attending fans.

Attracting geographically close fans who do not attend may open up big possibilities for the club. When data and fan engagement expert Bas Schnater worked at AZ Alkmaar²⁹, he identified that up to 75% of fans on the club's database had never attended a game (Schnater ; 2018). That clearly offered opportunities for the club to take actions to 1) find out why and 2) find ways to encourage attendance.

AZ Alkmaar is already known for its pro-active approach to match-attending fans. After every home game, it emails a fan experience survey to anyone buying a ticket for the game two hours after the match ends³⁰.

Estonia's Premium Liiga³¹, with whom we have worked for the past 18 months³², has recently experienced a 47% overall attendance increase in only 6 months. This was achieved through a committed programme of promoting what makes each club different: engaging with local communities, transforming the fan experience and making sure no one leaves without a positive memory 'beyond' the 90 minutes.

Community engagement can involve connecting with groups whose perceptions of football may not reflect the reality of the experience. The English FA addressed this with their Increasing Asian Representation in Grassroots Football initiative (Football Association, 2019)³³ while other clubs establish community focus groups: identifying, engaging and consulting with representatives of different members of the community.

1. What do they think about football?
2. What do they think about the local football club?
3. What is stopping people from attending?
4. How can we help change perceptions?
5. How can we sustain dialogue so that we can measure the impact of any related work?

²⁹ The AZ Alkmaar official website is <https://www.az.nl/en>

³⁰ You will find the survey in the next link: https://r1.surveysandforms.com/m/8e4i9o12-703t3h42-331RFDIPB9?utm_campaign=925784_23-04-19%20Postmatch%20AZ%20-%20Heracles&utm_medium=Dotmailer&utm_source=AZ%20Alkmaar%20mailings&dm_t=0,0,0

³¹ The Estonia Premium Liga official website is <http://www.jalgpall.ee/voistlused/52/premium-liiga>

³² Mark Bradley and his team.

³³ Football Association (2019) Media Release, Increasing asian participation in grassroots football

One way in which the English encouraged increased attendance by geographically close fans of the women's game was to introduce their Sister Club programme³⁴. Launched in 2016, the Sister Club Programme was set out to help girls' clubs around the country to become affiliated with their local FA WSL club. As part of the programme, Sister Clubs would gain access to hundreds of match tickets, player appearances, coaching sessions, camps and mascot places as long as they agreed to attend matches.

Two levels of affiliation were established –gold and silver– to meet the different needs and circumstances of the groups being engaged. The FA also invested in creating a programme officer at each participating club to set up and run their programme.

Key to all of these programmes are the four Fan Engagement Pillars³⁵ created by the Fan Experience Company:

- Identity and meaning
- Engagement and dialogue
- Fan experience
- People (volunteer/club employee) engagement

These pillars will be referenced at different stages of the course. They help to create strategic focus on growth by creating and sustaining a culture of customer/fan engagement, as we described in the opening module of this course.

If a local attendance growth programme does not meet these four criteria, then it is unlikely to succeed.

Consider the following examples:

- Has the club conveyed its 'story' effectively: what it stands for, what its values are, why it exists?
- Has the club engaged the local community to identify any barriers to attendance and addressed them?
- Will the experience offer more than 90 minutes of football so that not only does the attendance grow but also the fanbase becomes more diverse (families, different ethnic groups, women, etc.)?

³⁴ For more information, see the following article (2016) on <http://www.thefa.com/news/2016/Mar/08/fa-launches-sister-club-programme>

³⁵ The link of the official website of The Fan Experience Company is www.fanexperienceco.com

- Is everyone at the club focused on well representing its values and creating engagement at every possible opportunity?

So, let us turn our attention to fans in different countries, where the chances of attending are remote or, if it did happen, it would be a once-in-a-lifetime event. If it were the latter and the game were to be postponed, would the club know about it and would they be able to swiftly rescue the situation?

Everton Football Club achieved this in 2014 when Ric Mee made the 7,000-mile journey from Kuala Lumpur to a game against Crystal Palace that was postponed shortly before kick off due to strong winds (“Everton give Malaysian fan VIP treatment”, 2014). Because Ric had tweeted his disappointment at the time, the club was able to pick up on this and give him an experience he would not forget: meeting Roberto Martinez, the club’s manager, and getting a tour of the famous Goodison Park stadium.

The Guardian newspaper takes up the story:

Much to his bemusement, Lee then woke up on Thursday to find out he had become a media star. Invited back for a tour of the ground with the former centre-forward Graeme Sharp, he was greeted with a barrage of flashes from photographers and, somewhat inevitably, a Sky interviewer. (Everton give Malaysian fan VIP treatment after match postponed, 2014, para. 3)

This, of course, is ‘one-in-a-million’ example of how a club can engage a fan from another country, and, of course, in this case, he had actually travelled to Liverpool to see the game. But what about all of the other Everton fans in Malaysia? What about those new Sunderland fans who saw the club’s adventures and disappointments of the Netflix series ‘Sunderland ‘til I Die’ and want to display or feel otherwise their ‘black cat’ connection? Sunderland, of course, is no longer among the elite. It is in the 3rd tier of English football. It may have set the UK 3rd tier attendance record with 46,039 fans attending their 2018 Boxing Day (26 December) game with Bradford City, but it has far fewer resources than Premier League clubs like Everton.

Whoever the non-attending fan –whether they live locally or live in another part of the world–, the fact is that they do consider themselves to be fans. Their weekends are ruined if the team loses, and they find themselves with an extra leap in each step if they have won. They may have to wake up at 03:00 to watch their club’s big game or take time off from work. They clearly display all of the emotional and psychological characteristics of the fan (as described in Module 1.)

If you can get them to attend locally, then we have set out how to achieve that, but if this is not possible, you must aim to strengthen the relationship so that even if they do not attend matches, they feel much more connected with the club; and this is where the club's identity and how it is conveyed virtually comes into play.

It is about getting them to connect to something more than just the football. It is about getting them to see that you are different. We have shown the example of AS Roma and their Twitter campaign where, when they sign a player, they also show a video of a missing child (6 of whom have now been reunited with their families.) They also choose a club of any size, anywhere in the world, and focus them on their globally reaching Twitter account, most recently Curzon Ashton, of the 6th tier of English football.

Put Twitter Account: <https://twitter.com/asromaen/status/1258137918465617922>

Clubs with extra-strong identities, like Germany's FC St Pauli, a club with an anarchist tradition who reject racism, homophobia and all prejudice, and work with local community groups, are in prime position to engage 'distant' fans, because they stand for something.

Other clubs use their strength of identity to open up new fan bases. Borussia Dortmund have activated several virtual and physical approaches (Borussia Dortmund virtual party attracts millions of viewers in China, 2020) to engage new fans in China, for example.

Around 2.9million football fans in China tuned into an impromptu virtual party following the postponement of Borussia Dortmund's Bundesliga clash with rivals Schalke.

Dortmund originally planned to stage an online viewing party for Saturday afternoon's Revier Derby at Signal Iduna Park, before the game was called off on Friday due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

An improvised two-hour event, streamed live in the country where the coronavirus outbreak originated, included fan stories, behind-the-scenes footage, and messages from the club (Borussia Dortmund virtual party attracts millions of viewers in China, para. 1-3)

It is clear that this is part of a bigger strategy too.



Exercise:

Identify the global fan engagement strategy of your club.

2.2.3 The Club/Fan Relationship

While the challenges and opportunities of the club/fan relations have been referred to in several parts of this course, this unit sets out to describe it and to explore its complex characteristics.

Of course, the first thing we should agree is that the 'default position' is to regard it as difficult. That will always be the case if the relationship is purely based on how well the team plays and how many trophies they win. But what about those clubs who have never won a trophy? Does that mean that their fans are always unhappy? Perhaps they are. As Nick Hornby, author of *Fever Pitch* claimed: 'The natural state of the football fan is bitter disappointment, no matter what the score' (Hornby, 1992).

Fan Experience Company colleague Darren Young writes a blog for www.D3D4Football.com, in which he shares his diary of being a fan of a lower league football team. In the first episode he forensically extends this notion of 'disappointment':

I have this friend who supports Liverpool. In almost every other way, we are similar. We're roughly the same age, our views on life aren't a million miles apart nor are those lives themselves. We have shared football experiences and especially pain; following England together to a European Championship and World Cup.

But the similarities end there. You see, I am the supporter of a lower-league team and when our fans sing '*the best team in the land*', there is a certain wit attached because we are often not even the best team in a five-mile radius of our stadium. It's a song that is entirely formed of love and from the heart because our heads know only too well that, in pure ability terms and league placings, we will never be the best team in *the land*, unless we relocate – as if that would ever happen.

My friend's team are, quite literally, the best team in the world. They are currently a zillion points clear at the top of the Premier League, with only two dropped so far. They have an embarrassment of riches in their squad. When they had too many fast, exciting forward players to fit into their XI, they flogged one and brought a goalkeeper for nearly £70m and a centre-back for

£75M. When my team didn't have any fast, exciting forward players we got a full-back in on season-long-loan from Bristol City (Young, 2020. Para. 1-4)

For the most devoted of fans, who attend every match, attendance comes above everything else. It has the potential to make relationships difficult. As Nick Hornby continues to explain:

As I get older, the tyranny that football exerts over my life, and therefore over the lives of people around me, is less reasonable and less attractive. Family and friends know, after long years of wearying experience, that the fixture list always has the last word in any arrangement; they understand, or at least accept, that christenings or weddings or any gatherings, which in other families would take unquestioned precedence, can only be plotted after consultation. So, football is regarded as a given disability that has to be worked around. If I were wheelchair-bound, nobody close to me would organise anything in a top-floor flat, so why would they plan anything for a winter Saturday afternoon? (Hornby; 1992)

Maybe all football fans are at different stages of this state of disappointment: the elite club's fans, angry that they have not qualified for the UEFA Champions League quarter finals, and the devoted follower of the small club, bitter at their loss to a non-league club in the early qualifying round of the FA Cup.

So, if we are to accept that the club/fan relationship cannot be defined as a series of ecstatic joyous experiences (unless you are an FC Barcelona fan in Pep Guardiola's golden years), then how do clubs approach these relationships? I believe the answer lies in taking special care. As George Harrison once sang³⁶:

'Been beat up and battered around,
Been sent up and I've been shot down,
You're the best thing that I ever found,
Handle me with care.' (Handle with care lyrics, para. 1)

Perhaps the song was not aimed at the life of a football fan, but the sentiment is surely recognisable to anyone following a club with the typical 'ups and downs' one experiences.

So, how do we 'handle with care'?

³⁶ *Handle with Care* (The Travelling Wilburys), 1988.



Many fans will identify with the following: that football is the one thing they love, their club is the one thing they love, but they do not feel connected to it³⁷. Ironically, they may get better service from their local coffee shop than they do from their football club. Why is this and what can we do to change that? What role does fan engagement have in bringing the relationship between clubs and fans together?

Part of the problem is the fact that clubs are often accused by fans of keeping them at an arm's length. There appears to be a long-standing mistrust of football fans, which manifests itself in many ways, such as a failure to consult before making decisions that affect them (something which is very evident in the discussions about re-commencing football after the COVID-19 pandemic. There is not evidence of any League that has yet consulted fans.)

There are many explanations for this, ranging from being a legacy of times when football fans were associated with violence (in the 1980s in the United Kingdom, for example, when the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had even tried to enforce ID cards on fans) to a theory that the mistrust of fans had its roots in the U.K. government's deep mistrust for large gatherings of working class men immediately after WW2 (World War 2) as part of their fear of the advance of Communism.

In the light of the evidence of a 'cover up' after the Hillsborough³⁸ disaster, when, in the immediate aftermath, there was a concerted campaign to blame fans for the tragic deaths of 96 Liverpool fans, although the truth was that it was a result of other factors and that—as was proven in court many years later—they were 'unlawfully killed', Mark Jensen, editor of the Newcastle United fanzine, *The Mag*³⁹ commented the following:

The 1980s might be a generation ago but as a Newcastle fan it feels like a completely different world. In the aftermath of the Hillsborough revelations, the memories came flooding back.

Back in the day you were in no doubt that you became a second class citizen as soon as you walked into a football ground; open-air toilets, fences and police officers who knew they had free rein to treat you like the scum they obviously thought you were.

³⁷ This theme occurs in many of the focus groups and surveys we have undertaken over the years: the fact that fans follow and love the club, but the club does not reciprocate.

³⁸ For further information, including what the jury concluded, see "How the Hillsborough disaster unfolded", BBC (2016), available in <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19545126>

³⁹ *The Mag* official website is <https://www.themag.co.uk/>

Newcastle's away support had their own close shaves at Hillsborough in the years before that fateful day, but you just thought it was part of the "fun" at the time.

Maybe the most frightening experience was a pay-on-the-door trip to Spurs for a fifth round FA Cup match in 1987. Reports suggested 10,000 away fans in our end - as a regular traveller you knew it was more like 13,000 or 14,000.

That Spurs crush was only relieved when empty sections next to the heaving Newcastle end were opened up, though this only after a couple of dozen United fans scaled the fences to escape the situation and were promptly arrested. (Jensen, 2012, para. 1-5)

Such was the negative attitude towards football fans in the 80s Britain, that many people simply assumed that fans must be to blame for any incident. These embedded attitudes take decades to shift (as was the case with the Hillsborough tragedy, which has not been entirely resolved three decades later.) At a macro-level, the football industry has to acknowledge, criticise and renew attitudes to fans: engage them, involve them in consultation, listen to their concerns and act upon them.

One example of this is a change in policing of fans. In the United Kingdom, the Engage U.K. project⁴⁰ (characterised by special units at football matches) takes a much more engaging approach. Gone are the batons and horses, to be replaced by a softer, more personal approach, reflecting the fact that the days of violence came to an end. The most recent research highlights the benefits of a communication and engagement-based approach.

Why should the police treat every fan as if they were a criminal when criminality is no more or less evident in football than in any other part of society?

At a micro-level, there are other factors that we must explore. For example (and as we have explored in other parts of this course), there is the belief that fans are only interested in winning. As that is an unrealistic expectation, then there is little that can be done to build positive relationships.

There is some evidence of this in some of the smaller European Leagues top tiers where, for example, there may be a small European league where 40 percent of the clubs in the top division may qualify for European competition (Champions League and Europa League.) There is a focus purely on the sport to the detriment of the fan

⁴⁰ See "Police 'engage' with football fans to lower matchday arrests", BBC (2012) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-19673998/police-engage-with-football-fans-to-lower-matchday-arrests>

experience and levels of attendance, and, as we have illustrated elsewhere in this course, the aggression associated with on-pitch success will seep into fan facing parts of the club and make engagement very difficult.

However, through consultation and dialogue, clubs can understand what can be done to 'control the controllables' (that is, to improve things over which the club and its fans have control or significant influence.) Again, we see a contrast between the rest of the industry, where an emotionally positive relationship is the end goal, and football, where it is seen as a problem.

Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa and Biscaia, (2014), in their research on fan engagement, talk about non-transactional behaviours as well as transactional and relationship-related behaviours, highlighting the importance of creating that strong emotional connection that precedes purchases. In understanding and addressing the characteristics of the club/fan relationship, there is much to be done.

Exercise:

Answer the following questions:

How would you describe your personal relationship with the team that you follow?

How could your club better understand the nature of the fan/club relationship?

2.2.4 Other Key Stakeholders

In this unit we are going to identify and explore the value of focusing on other key stakeholders: groups not covered by our definition of the fan. Who are they? Why are they important and what can football do to engage them more effectively?

If we refer back to the previous unit (2.2.3), we recognise that external perceptions of football may range from neutral to negative. Let me illustrate this with an example.

"I spoke to a volunteer at a local club (tier 5 in English football). His club participated in a civic survey where residents of the town were asked for their perceptions of key civic entities (such as the theatre, gardens, etc.). The town has a reputation for being 'posh'; where English customs like 'taking tea' are kept up in nationally known cafes and gin is distilled and sold. The fact that the club was felt not to fit in to this ideal was no better illustrated by the negative associations people made when asked to comment on the local football club.

This led the club to make changes to bring it closer to the identity of the town. Of course, this represented a balancing act between ensuring existing fans were catered for but also trying to influence external perceptions by

introducing pre-match activities, such as how to make gin cocktails and providing ‘street food’ outlets in the small space they have”⁴¹ (Bradley, s/n)

External perceptions are vital to the reputation and sustainability of a club, so the concept of “fan engagement” should stretch beyond fans to encompass other key stakeholders, both local and national.

Here is an (‘incomplete’) list of potential stakeholders whose perceptions of football, your club and your fans may be material to your club’s reputation and, ultimately, viability.

Table 3: Local and national stakeholders’ perceptions

Local stakeholders	National stakeholders
Town/City Hall	Government
Schools & colleges	National sport bodies
Security forces (included police)	National security organisations
Business community	Health & safety legislators
Hospitals & clinics	National media
Ethnic groups	Fans of other clubs
Politicians	National fan organisations
Local media	General public
Local residents	Major brands

Why are these groups important?

There are two reasons why we need to recognise the importance of different stakeholders, both local and national:

1. Their perceptions of your club (and more generally, football) may influence policy decisions locally and nationally.
2. Partnerships between your club and a particular local or national stakeholder may bring benefits to both parties and to the local community (included fans of the local football team.)

The pandemic has generated many examples of clubs thanking health and care services for their service and courage during this difficult time. For example, English Premier League club Sheffield United have found several different ways to show their support:

Include the article <https://www.sufc.co.uk/news/2020/april/thank-you-nhs/>

⁴¹ A 5th Tier English club in the North of England.



Of course, this is a once-in-a-century pandemic, so the context is different. United is not doing this to find favour with the health authorities, but outside of the pandemic, there are still things that clubs could do for front-line key workers.

Stakeholder engagement, whether local or national, is absolutely vital to football, because existing perceptions usually range from neutral to negative. There are many reasons for this, including the salaries earned by football players when many live in poverty, the questionable financial affairs of some clubs and, as we have discussed in the previous unit, the long-standing negative perception of football supporters by the authorities.

It is, therefore, of paramount importance to recognise that in engaging with stakeholders, the first thing we are doing (regardless of the individual initiative) is addressing those negative external perceptions: perceptions that endure today, with national security forces coming out against some leagues resuming their postponed fixtures (due to COVID-19) 'behind closed doors' because they believe fans will gather.

As journalist Melissa Reddy confirms in her article entitled 'Fans have been leading lights in their communities, not louts waiting to disrupt football's return' (2020), fan motivations have been misrepresented by the media, government and other influential agencies.

Last Friday, the Fans Supporting Foodbanks network began their objective of delivering 5000 Personal Protective Equipment [PPE] visors to key workers in London, Manchester, Newcastle and Yorkshire.

Volunteers that pledge their allegiance to clubs in these areas sacrificed their Bank Holiday weekend to ensure that every bit of equipment reached those that desperately need it on the frontline.

While this vital contribution was being made, the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner suggested that the safety of his force during Covid-19 could be placed at risk by supporters gathering at stadiums if football returned (Reddy, 2020, para. 1-3)

There is a long-standing prejudice against fans and their sport that must be combated by ensuring all relevant stakeholders are consulted, engaged and honoured.

However, football's culture of keeping fans at an arm's length does not help the situation, and it also means the individual people, who are not fans of football, are

less inclined to attend, take their kids or recommend the match day experience to friends.

This 'arm's length attitude' can be best illustrated by sharing some of the experiences we have had undertaking our detailed Fan Experience assessments. I had a conversation with a fan who, after seeing his club make several £1m+ signings, found that basic stadium services, like refreshments and washrooms, were poor—in fact, appalling—.

This is football's blind spot. It believes we are only interested in our teams winning. If that were the case, then only the elite would have fans. It is much more than winning that drives supporters (see other units), so it can only damage fan and external perceptions for situations like the following—shared by a fan we spoke to on one of our detailed Fan Experience assessments—to be continually arising:

“I go to the place I love. It's my favourite thing to do. I take my son and it's our special time of the week where we talk about everything: his studies and interests and mine.

So why is it that in this happy place we get the worst service imaginable? Why does the club feel that it should reciprocate our love with indifference? It obviously thinks we don't care”⁴²

It has become so common to get such poor service, that it has become an expectation. The fan we interviewed also claimed the following:

“When did I get a feedback survey? Never. When did I get a thank you from the club? Never. When did my kid get an autograph? Never. Now football wants to grow, wants people to come. Forget it”

We are not naming individual clubs for poor service. We all know examples: clubs which charge exorbitant sums for an experience that is akin to spending a short time in a prison. While other parts of this course will show how football can embrace fan engagement and address them, we are specifically looking at football's immediate opportunities with stakeholders here.

⁴²Opinion voiced - The Fan Experience Company. To respect the privacy of the supporter, we are not providing his/her name. You can read more of our work at www.fanexperienceco.com



Ashton United⁴³, a club at the 7th level of English football, has shown what is possible, with a stakeholder-focused approach. Their chairman Steve Hobson explained⁴⁴ how they use their presence to address social issues in the local area:

We accessed funding to be able to run a survey to find out which members of our local community lacked support. We engaged student volunteers to design the survey and when the results highlighted that there were many elderly residents in the area who were afraid to leave their homes for fear of crime, we know we could help.

We were able to use this data to access further funding to provide a service to these local residents: a meeting place for elderly residents at our club on the mornings before matches. They come in, have a cup of tea and biscuits. They meet new people and they start to feel part of our community. We then invite them to stay on and watch the match. (Hobson, s/n)

In essence, stakeholder engagement is about 'giving back,' and football has a tremendous record of positive community intervention: campaigns to educate people, to grow their self-esteem, to protect them (drugs, knife crime, playing on railways lines, etc.), to engage their imagination and creativity and to help keep them fit abound in our sport.

Aston Villa handed over rooms within their stadium several seasons ago to help young people with their start-up businesses, thereby removing some of the material costs of trying to commercialise an idea.

There is a small community club in Peterborough, Nene Valley⁴⁵, which has also identified innovative ways to support the community. They only use their changing rooms on weekend afternoons and evenings (and even then, infrequently), so, during weekdays, they are able to temporarily convert these spaces into meeting rooms, capable of being hired by practitioners such as masseurs, therapists, yoga teachers, etcetera. In fact, the biggest customer is the U.K. National Health Service, who use the rooms for physiotherapy, health screening and other one-on-one services.

To summarise: there are plentiful examples of football 'giving back', but there needs to be much more emphasis on addressing the roots of society's indifference and dislike of football and its supporters.

⁴³ The Ashton United official website is <https://ashtonunited.co.uk/>

⁴⁴ Mark Bradley experience.

⁴⁵ The Nene Valley official website is <https://nenevalleycc.org/>

Exercise:

List three ways in which your club supports the local community
How else could your club support the local community?



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