Module 3. Fan loyalty – Building vertical relationships

Unit 3.1

3.1.1 What is fan loyalty?

Football fans differ from traditional consumers of other brands due to their high amount of brand loyalty (see Module 1). When it comes to everyday consumer products, most people are willing to change products and brands if the product does not meet expectations or even fails to perform altogether. However, very few people are willing to abandon their football club when the team lose more games than they win. On the contrary, in some cases, the support for the team becomes even stronger during difficult times as fans believe their impact as the so-called "12th (wo)man" can make a difference if they support the players on the pitch.

This module will give you further insight into the vertical relationship between football clubs or football teams, the football players, and the fans within the context of the concept of fan loyalty. Therefore, it is necessary to first conceptualise fan loyalty. In its most basic term, fan loyalty is the regular and consistent display of dedication and support of the team – unrelated to the results on the pitch.

Maderer, Holtbrügge and Woodland (2016) explore the loyalty of sports fans in further depth and find that there are two different types of brand loyalty in sports fandom:

- Behavioural loyalty refers to fans' actions towards the sports club or the team, including the purchase of merchandise and services and following rituals and patterns on match day.

- Attitudinal loyalty refers to the emotional and psychological commitment to a team. This includes the "knowledge about the club, the importance the club has in the life of the fan, and the extent to which the fan personally feels the successes and failures of the team" (Maderer et al., 2016, p. 9).

On this course, we have already come across both types of fan loyalty. Behavioural loyalty is displayed in the ritualistic practices of many football fans – the importance of rituals in football fandom was discussed in Module 1, section 3.2.2. This type of loyalty is often

expressed through the purchase and public display of merchandise and paraphernalia. Attitudinal loyalty is frequently displayed through a fan's knowledge of the football team as well as their expression of emotions within the context of a football match – all of these traits also being associated with what we described as traditional or hot fans earlier on this course (see Module 1, section 3.1.2). Moreover, attitudinal loyalty is typically associated with local pride and nostalgia (Maderer et al., 2016). This means that the importance of local values and local identity as an integral part of the football fan experience is also an expression of attitudinal loyalty (see Module 1, section 3.2.3 and section 3.2.4). The examples of fan mobilisations such as Spirit of Shankly in Liverpool and the movement for Catalan independence in Barcelona (see Module 2) can also be classed as expressions of values associated with the football clubs and can be considered factors contributing to attitudinal loyalty among the fans.

These two types of loyalty do not only coexist, but they also impact on each other and can therefore not be treated as entirely separate phenomena. For example, Maderer et al. (2016) found that strengthening attitudinal loyalty has a positive impact on behavioural loyalty. In practice, this means that if a football club actively try to build a relationship with the fanbase based on attitudinal loyalty, this can also increase behavioural loyalty. For example, they might do this by appealing to fans' identification with local values or feelings of nostalgia. However, this will also impact on fans' behavioural loyalty and result in repeating consumption patterns, including the purchase of match tickets and club merchandise.

The question of how football clubs financially benefit from fans and monetize the loyalty of this unique group of consumers is addressed in Module 4 of this course. This module focuses on the step that precedes monetization: Football teams need to build a relationship with their fanbase, which we refer to as vertical relationships, in contrast with the horizontal relationships among the fans themselves that were explored in the previous module. This relationship is particularly important in football due to the unique nature of fans as consumers and their brand loyalty. In comparison with brands that produce regular consumer goods or household goods, there is relatively little fluctuation in football club's consumer base. As explained in Module 1, the process of becoming a fan is not a straightforward process and traditional methods of marketing and advertising will have limited success. Football fans usually start supporting a team either through the process of socialisation or through a rational, but most of the time unconscious, choice. For many fans, this involves supporting the same team as their friends or family, or a team that represents values that they identify with. There are, of course, new markets for football clubs to explore and expand to, especially as football audiences become increasingly global. At least in men's football, many clubs do so by participating in an international pre-season summer tour. For example, in the summer of 2022, Tottenham Hotspur travelled to South Korea to solidify already existing interest in the team – as both the men's and women's captains for South Korea play for the London team (Wright, 2022).

However, only the men's team went on the South Korean tour though, as the women's team travelled to the US. Nonetheless, even this example shows how complex and complicated marketing in football is as starting to support Tottenham Hotspur because their favourite player from the national team (in this case, South Korea's captains Heung-min Son or Cho So-Hyun) may be a rational choice for a young South Korean fan, but is preceded by a much more complex process than simply advertising a consumer product to a target group. For that reason, this module discusses how football clubs, their marketing teams, and even their players can use different communication tools to build a solid relationship with existing and new fans, especially considering the uniqueness of the consumer-brand relationship in football fandom.

3.1.2 Stakeholders involved in fan-club relationships

In simple terms, the two main actors in vertical communication and relationship-building seem obvious; we have the fan community on the one side and the football club as an entity on the other side. However, when assuming a more nuanced perspective, it quickly becomes clear that the relationship is a little more complex.

On the fans' side, there are, of course, individual fans. Each fan interacts with the club they support differently and has a unique way of experiencing their fandom and building loyalty to the club. Fans can and regularly do interact with the club as individuals. However, football fans also often engage and organize in groups, which align with their specific fan practices or consumption patterns (e.g., Fillis and Mackay, 2013; Nash, 2001). These are sometimes in organized formal ways, such as officially registered fan clubs or – at least in the United Kingdom – Supporters Trusts, and sometimes in informal ways, such as friendship groups that watch games together. The specific patterns in which fans organize and form groups varies depending on the context they operate in, such as different clubs, leagues, or countries. Moreover, formal organization of fans typically occurs when fans perceive the need for their communication with the club to be strengthened. The Supporters Trusts at football clubs in the UK are an excellent example of this. The first official Trust was founded at Northampton Town FC in 1992 to give the fans a voice and the power to try to save the club from serious financial troubles (see Lomax, 2000). Since then, the main purpose of Supporters Trusts is to give fans a voice through a board that they can elect. Depending on the club and the context, the Trust board can directly speak to representatives of the football club.

On the club's side, there are also different agents that are involved in forming relationships. Football clubs have different representatives that speak on various topics to different audiences. The players and the manager obviously represent the sporting aspects of the football club, but they can – and frequently do – interact with the press and the fans as well, making them an important agent in the horizontal communication. Moreover, there are others that can officially communicate on behalf of the club, such as

members of the board of directors, administrative staff and, of course, fan liaison departments and marketing departments.

All of these different agents can be considered stakeholders of the football club. Those working for the clubs, like players, fan liaison officers, and marketing managers, are internal stakeholders. The fans are an external stakeholder group. There are, of course, many more stakeholder groups involved in football, such as sponsors, governing bodies, policymakers, and more. The following table shows a list of stakeholders that is representative for most European football clubs and their main objectives, as adapted from Senaux (2008).

Table 1: Football club's stakeholders and their objectives

Stakeholder	**Objectives**
Shareholders	Financial, sporting success, ego, political reasons
Players	Sporting success, salary
Leagues and federations	Development of football
Local authorities	Image, political interests
Support associations (or governing bodies)	Governance of the sport, values
Supporters	Sporting success, entertainment, identity
Television	Audience, financial gain, entertainment

Source: adapted from Senaux, 2008.

For the purpose of this module, we are mostly interested in those stakeholders that actively contribute to the fan-club relationship, but it is important to remember that these stakeholders do not exist in a vacuum. All stakeholders in a football club interact with each other, and sometimes their objectives clash. For example, objectives that relate to identity and values may clash with the financial and political objectives pursued by other stakeholders. Fans are not the only stakeholders, and football clubs need to negotiate their objectives against those of the other stakeholders involved. Regardless, the relationship between football fans and the club that they support is a key factor to consider when attempting to understand football fan communities. It was pointed out in Module 1 that football fans cannot be seen as traditional consumers due to their increased brand loyalty. However, this increased loyalty and unique status also comes with a certain

expectation: Football fans want their voice to be heard. Therefore, they organize in Supporters Trusts or supporter mobilisations, like Spirit of Shankly, when they feel this is not the case. This is also the reason football fans sometimes choose to protest (as explained in Module 2). They are an important stakeholder group and Freeman, Wicks and Parmar (2004) argue that decision-makers need to consider the desires and wishes of stakeholders to ensure the ongoing success of an enterprise. If football fans are seen as stakeholders, this implies that the clubs should attempt to meet the needs and expectations of the fans. The examples of fans organizing in supporter groups and mobilisation, however, show that this is not always the case. This module highlights how vertical relationships can be built when the different stakeholders make use of the various communication tools available to them.

Exercise

Look at the above list of stakeholders, adapted from Senaux (2008). Which of the stakeholders are internal and which are external?

3.1.3 Unilateral communication between football clubs and fans

The last two sections of this first unit of this module are concerned with two different types of communication between football clubs and fan communities. This section discusses unilateral communication, meaning one-way communication that usually happens from the top down (meaning the club sharing messages with the fans). The following unit discusses bilateral communication, meaning the dialogue between fans and the club.

The increased mediatisation and technological advancement of public life has undoubtedly changed the world of football, as it has opened ways for football clubs to communicate (almost) directly with their fan communities. Giving interviews to the mainstream media is an excellent way for representatives of the club, especially players and managers, to communicate with external stakeholders, including the fans. One example of this was already mentioned in the previous module. We learnt that many fans of the United States Women's National team connect and form relations over their shared experience of an alternative form of patriotism. This movement was, however, fuelled by an interview that USWNT captain Megan Rapinoe gave to Meg Linehan, a journalist with the magazine "The Athletic" (Linehan, 2019). While Rapinoe was reacting to tweets from then US President Donald Trump, the message clearly reached an audience of USWNT fans, who then took the remarks and incorporated them into their own feelings for the team and their personal interpretations of American patriotism.

While interviews with the mainstream media can be a very straightforward and quick way of communication with the fans, there is one major caveat, the exact message as well as the timing and the context of the message are out of the football club's or the

player's hands. Some journalists publicise a word-for-word quote, like Linehan did in the case of her interview with Megan Rapinoe. However, quotes may also be used out of context, or a mainstream media outlet may simply choose to prioritise other stories and a message that may be important to the interviewee may get lost among other news stories that are published front and centre. This means that relying on the mainstream media – an external stakeholder in their own right – to relay messages can be a very effective form of communication with the fans, but it is also unreliable.

Boyle and Haynes (2004) discuss concerns that clubs have over losing control to mainstream media and broadcasters. This is especially relevant in today's context of broadcasting football; while television used to be free-to-air, this service has now been replaced by subscription services for most consumers, who must pay additional money to view sports content. This means football clubs do not only lose control over the messages (as broadcasters decide which interviews to air), but there is also a missed opportunity for monetization (this topic is discussed in further depth in Module 4). This caused football clubs to start investing heavily into managing their own intellectual property, which includes their image rights and alternatives to traditional broadcasting subscriptions (Boyle and Haynes, 2004). Many major football clubs now offer their own online TV subscription service, promising an exclusive glimpse behind the scenes and providing clubs with a more direct form of unilateral communication without using the filter of the mainstream media. The establishment of club-owned TV channels is discussed in further depth in Module 4, which looks at how fan-club relationships can be successfully monetized in a manner that benefits stakeholders. Even if clubs do not have their own web TV programme, all commercial clubs run websites that allow them to share their news directly with all stakeholders, including fans.

To summarise, football clubs have several unilateral communication channels with the fan community. Those associated with the club can offer exclusive interviews to the mainstream media. As mainstream media (both print/online and TV) has a wide reach, this can be a very efficient way to reach many people, but it is a communication method that can be unreliable and difficult to control. In an attempt to protect and monetize their intellectual property, most football teams have created their own communication tools, including websites, web TV channels and in some instances also magazines that are either sold at matches or mailed to members of the football club. All of these communication channels are unilateral, meaning they are one-to-many communication tools (see Module 2 for a classification of different forms of communication). As such, one-sided communication channels are unlikely to fulfil fans' needs. As stakeholders rather than just consumers of a product, many fans want to have a platform to voice their opinions towards the club as well. Unilateral communication works well when it comes to spreading news and important information regarding the football club and upcoming fixtures. It can also aid in the development of attitudinal loyalty among fans, as this type

of loyalty is built through knowledge about the club and is often associated with feelings of nostalgia and identification with the core values represented by the football team.

3.1.4 Bilateral communication between football clubs and fans

This module as well as the two previous modules have already discussed that football fans are more than just consumers. Many fans want to be active participants in their relationship with the football club and expect to have a say in how this relationship is shaped. The final section of this unit discusses ways in which football clubs can foster such a dialogue with fans efficiently.

The advent of social media and with it the establishment of many-to-many communication tools are therefore beneficial for both football clubs and fans as they allow for a dialogue and hence bilateral communication. Many professional football clubs make use of social media nowadays. In his 2018 study of social media use among football clubs, Aichner (2018) found that, at the time of writing, all 78 football clubs from the four biggest football leagues in Europe (the Spanish Primera División, the German 1 Bundesliga, the English Premier League, and the Italian Serie A) had accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. On top of that, 75 of the 78 clubs already had their own YouTube channels in 2018 as well. Moreover, Aichner's (2018) study found that fans engage with the social media content posted by the club regardless of the topic. Nonetheless, when looking at social media advertising in particular, he found that posts with emotional appeal significantly outperformed those with fact-based appeal – this confirms that emotional content may have a positive impact on engagement. That means that social media posts that appeal to fans' attitudinal loyalty have the potential to be more popular or become "viral" posts that are widely shared.

There are some downsides to using many-to-many communication tools in the online sphere. In their study of English football clubs' social media marketing McCarthy, Rowley and Keegan (2022) found that the passion exhibited by football fans can drive engagement, but it can also turn into a problem, especially within the context of rivalries that exist in football:

> Combined with the passion of fans, emotive and tribal nature of football, insatiable appetite for information, this can have real impact on the wellbeing of the very people responsible for posting on behalf of football clubs. (McCarthy et al., 2022, p. 519)

It is not only team rivalries and tribalism that negatively impact on social media usage, but sometimes there is also outright hate speech, including racism, with posters often hiding behind the anonymity of the internet. For this reason, several organizations in English football – namely the FA, Premier League, EFL, FA Women's Super League, FA

Women's Championship, PFA, LMA, PGMOL, Kick It Out, Women in Football and the FSA – engaged in a social media boycott between 30th of April and 3rd of May 2021 (Ornstein, 2021). A few weeks prior to this boycott, the former Arsenal and France player Thierry Henry had already quit social media, citing racism and the lack of policing problematic comments on platforms as the main reasons (Christenson, 2021).

Clearly, social media provides a fantastic opportunity for football clubs and players to engage with their fans and strengthen those vertical relationships. However, as many-to-many communication platforms that often make it easy for users to hide behind nicknames, social media offers a different challenge when it comes to control; while the internal stakeholders can now control their messages, they cannot control the messages they receive, some of which can be harmful or abusive. Module 4 of this course further explores the benefits of social media marketing and the question of how social media can be used specifically as a marketing tool to foster loyalty, build a mutual, but also economically beneficial relationship with fans.

Social media can provide football clubs with an excellent tool to build a relationship with the fan community through bilateral communication, but due to the disadvantages that come with using these platforms, not all such dialogue can or should take place in an online environment. Football clubs are advised to employ specific personnel for this purpose. With the introduction of the new Financial Fair Play regulations in 2012, the European football federation UEFA made it compulsory for all clubs playing in their competitions to employ a support liaison officer (SLO). The roots of this role, however, date further back. The first European club to appoint someone in this capacity was the German team Borussia Mönchengladbach in 1989. These SLOs act as a mediator and communicator between the fan community and the football club as an entity. The following video summarises the role of the SLO, while highlight some variations that occur in different contexts:

Source: SD Europe. (2018, May 4). *What is the function of a supporter liaison officer (SLO)? | SD Europe* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX9st091TBQ

In an interview with the newspaper "The Guardian", Arsenal London's SLO Mark Brindle explains: "I act as the bridge between the club and the supporters and, significantly, I am now recognised by most fans as well as those within the club" (Foster, 2019). SLOs organize the officially registered supporter groups and fan clubs, and they also work closely with other stakeholders such as local authorities, stewards, the police, and the SLOs of other football clubs to ensure that matchdays run smoothly. While some football clubs prioritise the work of their SLOs – in Germany, for example, every Bundesliga team employs at least three full-time staff members as part of their SLO team – in some places SLOs must divide their time between their work with the fans and other duties. Stuart Dykes, the CEO of Supporters Direct Europe, an international organization representing the interest of European football fans, comments:

> Many English clubs view the role as an extension of customer service, which is fine as there is an element of that involved, but they are already very good at customer service, and it isn't helpful to confuse the two roles. There is a misconception that in continental Europe the role is solely linked to that of the safety officer, but there is a much broader remit in building reciprocal relationships between supporters and the clubs by encouraging an open and continuous dialogue. (Foster, 2019)

To encourage football clubs to strengthen the position of their SLOs and therefore improve the dialogue and relationship with the fanbase, UEFA published a comprehensive guide for SLOs including many tips and case studies that highlight best practice examples.

If you are interested in finding out more about the role of SLOs, you can view the full guide here:

Source: UEFA. (2021). UEFA Practical Guide to Supporter Liasion. https://editorial.uefa.com/resources/026f-13cca3e5461b-a462a58818bb-1000/uefa_practical_guide_to_supporter_liaison.pdf

While SLOs may occasionally also use social media to communicate with fans, they are much more than social media managers. They are personal reference points that fans can contact when they have issues, concerns, or questions, and they are also responsible for communicating the fans' wishes, ideas or problems to other internal stakeholders within the football club.

As this unit highlights, there are several ways in which football clubs can and should engage with their fans. All of them have advantages and disadvantages. Giving interviews in the mainstream media is an established method of spreading information to as many people as possible. However, messages spread via the media get filtered by another external stakeholder (the press or TV companies) and is therefore difficult to control or time. For that reason, many football clubs rely on their own media, such as their website, their match day magazine or even their own (online) TV channel to spread messages. These unilateral communication tools are excellently suited to spread information or even build attitudinal loyalty. However, fans see themselves not as customers or consumers of their football club, but as stakeholders and therefore expect a bilateral dialogue. Although not without flaws, social media has become an important tool, with almost all professional football clubs having more than one active social media platform. Online communication, however, does not replace the work of an SLO to act as a mediator and facilitator between football clubs and fan communities.

Exercise

The SLO and their team are a critical mediator between European football teams and their

fans. Access the document above and read at least two of the case studies. Take note of the ways in which the SLOs communicate with the fans.

Unit 3.2

3.2.1 Fan expectations – What do football fans want out of the relationship with their football club?

As stakeholders in their football club, fans have certain expectations and demands, just as other stakeholder groups do. In this unit, we will discuss what exactly it is that fans want and in the subsequent section we will address if some of these expectations are currently more likely to be met in the women's game than in the men's game.

Football clubs meeting their fans' expectations is important. Henry and Ping (2004) argue that sports enterprises should show accountability to all stakeholders, even when "investment is largely emotional rather than material" (p. 31). This, of course, means the fans.

As mentioned before, football fans tend to organize and unite in fan groups when they feel their needs and expectations are not met properly by the football club or – in some cases – by the governing body. At the time of writing, fan communities in men's football tend to be larger and more widely organized than in women's football, and research has mostly focused on the expectations of fans of all genders supporting men's football. The table below highlights three important research studies on football fan expectations and highlights the relevant key findings from the studies.

Table 2: Research studies on football fan expectations

Authorship	Football club	Key findings concerning fan expectations
Brown (2007)	Manchester United FC (Men's team)	● The strong opposition to the US-based Glazer family becoming majority shareholders of the club in 2005 is deeply rooted in the idea that the Americans do not understand local, Mancunian culture. ● The takeover was seen as representative for corporate destruction of fan communities. ● Deep frustration with the absence of regulation of ownership in English football. ● Fan opposition and public protests were unsuccessful. ● A dissident group of fans founded a new amateur club called FC United of Manchester as a more authentic community experience.

Millward (2012)	Liverpool FC (Men's team)	• Football fans at many clubs (including Liverpool) protest against commercialisation processes. • The commercialisation of sport is perceived to drive a wedge between the football club and its local community. • Fan mobilisations may sometimes gain traction and popularity, but the major decision-making power in football is of financial nature.
Cleland and Dixon (2015)	Newcastle United FC (Men's team)	• After popular manager Kevin Keegan resigned in September 2008, fans initiated supporter-led meetings to communicate their disappointment with the club's management structure and ownership. • The meetings led to the formation of a formal Supporters Trusts. • The social and cultural meaning of the club was a central point of discussion at the meetings. • Despite fans organizing, they remain relatively powerless – their best chance would be to organize boycotts and, thus, harm the club financially. • Boycotts are difficult to organize because many less actively engaged fans will still attend matches or purchase merchandise.

Source: adapted from Brown, 2007; Millward, 2012 and Cleland and Dixon, 2015.

While this is not an exhaustive list of studies done on football fan expectations and the fans' opinion on their relationship with their football clubs, these examples allow for some conclusions to be drawn. In all three case studies, one of the main concerns of the fans is that those with power in their football clubs do not understand the social and cultural role that the club plays in the local community. All three cases involve club owners coming in as outside forces and being perceived as a threat. In all three cases, fans organized in protest, but found that they were relatively powerless, especially within the ownership structures in place in English football. The fate of each club varies slightly – Liverpool was soon sold, although Millward (2012) doubts that the fan protests were the driving force behind it, and it was an economic decision. Newcastle United fans had to endure their

nemesis Mike Ashley for another thirteen years until he decided to sell. Manchester United, of course, remains one of the most popular football clubs in the world and owned by the Glazer family, while a dedicated group of fans enjoys following FC United of Manchester in the amateur divisions. Nonetheless, despite the relationship between these big football clubs and their fans soured, little has changed. Nevertheless, Cleland and Dixon (2015) stress that football clubs – especially medium-sized and smaller ones – should not completely ignore their fans. They cite Portsmouth FC and Coventry City as famous examples of clubs that went into administration after their fans chose to stop attending.

There is something valuable to be learnt from these three case studies in English men's football; there is a common denominator when it comes to fan expectations. In all three cases, fans were aware that they lacked economic power in relation to the majority shareholders in their club. What they demanded was clear communication and representation in front of the club; they wanted their voice to be heard. In all three cases, they saw the loss of local identity and their values threatened. These attributes are core elements of attitudinal loyalty, the kind of loyalty that evokes emotional and psychological attachment to the club. Based on the above examples, it becomes clear that to maintain a successful relationship with their fanbase, these elements need to be considered by a football club.

3.2.2 Women's football – A unique relationship or history repeating itself?

As mentioned before, most research done on fan expectations and the ways in which fans react when these needs are not met focus on men's football. This is unsurprising, given that at the time of writing, the fan communities in women's football are still much smaller than in men's football. Women's football is still at the earlier stages of professionalisation and, as a result, it does not have the same reach yet and the fan experiences feel different.

Yet, at the same time, the women's game is often defined and evaluated in comparison and contrast with the men's game. The below video featuring interviews with England fans after the side's 2022 European Championship win highlights this phenomenon well, as many of the fans compare women's football to men's football in their remarks:

Source: JOE.co.uk (2022, August 2). *What men's football can learn from the women's Euros* [Video]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/www.JOE.co.uk/videos/419901313504633/

It is important to note that the video does not feature the interviewer's question, so the comparisons that the fans make between women's and men's football may be shaped by the set of questions they were asked. Nonetheless, this highlights the typical media framing of narratives on women's football. There is an emphasis on questioning how and why women's football is different or, in this case, even perceived to be the better

experience for fans. It is important to remember that feelings and experiences are highly subjective, though. For example, the fans in the linked video suggest that both the fans and players in women's football are less violent. One fan claims that even the play styles are different, with female players committing fewer fouls and diving less. A quick fact check actually proves this assumption to be wrong. There were a total of 42 fouls committed in the Euro 2022 women's final between England and Germany[1]. The Euro 2020 men's final between England and Italy only saw 34 fouls[2]. This highlights an important aspect. Although men's and women's football are sometimes actually quite similar in the way that the matches play out, the fans' perception is that the two games are inherently different. That means that the experiences as well as subjective impressions and feelings shared by fans of women's football feel different from fans of men's football.

This warrants the question of why this is the case. Spencer (2022) writes about his own experiences with women's football and argues that there is a special and unique relationship between the fans. He recounts his experience of a Manchester United women's game:

> Manchester United manager Marc Skinner stayed behind for nearly an hour after his side's final WSL home game of the season on Sunday to speak with fans, take pictures and sign autographs. Most of the United players were still out on the pitch doing similar for at least half an hour, before going on to meet and spend time with more of the supporters outside the stadium afterwards. [...] [T]hat close connection between managers and players and the loyal fans who support them is a familiar sight throughout the WSL, whether Arsenal, Chelsea or wherever. (para. 1-4)

Just like other fans, he also immediately draws a comparison to men's football:

> It doesn't happen like that in the men's game, and it is that which makes women's football special, compared to the Premier League where it can so often feel like an "us and them" disconnect between those on the pitch and those in the stands (Spencer, 2022, para. 5).

This example highlights why the fan experience in women's football feels so different to many fans. They feel appreciated by the football club and there is a direct line of communication between the fanbase and the club (in this case, the players, and the

[1] You can view the official statistics released by UEFA here: https://www.uefa.com/newsfiles/weuro/2021/2032236_fr.pdf

[2] You can view the official statistics released by UEFA here: https://www.uefa.com/newsfiles/euro/2020/2024491_ts.pdf

manager). This communication happens organically, without need for the fans to organize, let alone form Supporters Trusts, the way fans in men's football do. Manchester United manager Marc Skinner has an explanation for this: "Women's football has always been a little more unique, where you feel like you can touch it more. Men's football has obviously been built for so long that it's hard to touch it" (Spencer, 2022, para. 12). In other words, with women's football being newer and the fan communities being smaller, there is a closer connection between the clubs and those representing the club and the local communities. This is exactly what the fan groups in the case studies examined as part of the previous section were so worried about. Through the ongoing commercialisation of men's football and the involvement of investors that do not understand the local values and the local community, this experience is lost.

3.2.3 When the Queen became a Lion: Changing branding at OL Reign

Women's football has increased in popularity over the last decade, resulting in increased spectatorship figures (see Module 1). Naturally, this means that women's football has also become an interesting site for investors (the opportunity for monetization in football is discussed in further detail in Module 4). However, there are some instances where investors make decisions to change the branding of the product or company that they invest in because they hope that a rebranding will increase appeal in a different market. This also happens in football, most infamously at Cardiff City in Wales. After purchasing the football club, the Malaysian owner Vincent Tan made the decision to change the club's colours from blue to red and replace the traditional crest featuring a bluebird with a dragon. Marketing experts agreed this could be a good decision to appeal to the Asian market. The colour red is perceived to be lucky in China and elsewhere – including Tran's home country of Malaysia (WalesOnline, 2012). The local fans, however, felt like they had been robbed of their identity. After several years of vehement fan opposition, Tran finally agreed on a compromise. The Cardiff City strip is now once again blue, but the red colour is still used in an alternative kit for away fixtures. The crest now features both colour, with a bluebird being shown prominently and a dragon being pictured smaller below the bird (Thomas, 2015).

A foreign investor coming in and changing a club's branding, which for many fans is anonymous with the club's (and therefore also their own) identity, very clearly clashes with all the expectations and needs established in section 3.6.1. Yet, the phenomenon is not exclusive to men's football, as something similar happened to Seattle-based OL Reign in 2020. In fact, this women's club had already been through a number of changes. Founded as Seattle Reign in 2012, the club moved from its previous home base to Tacoma in 2019 and were subsequently renamed Reign FC. In 2020, Reign FC was purchased by the French OL Group, who own Olympique Lyonnais men's and women's teams. The club therefore officially became a charter club for the French owners. The previous club crest featuring a queen and the old colours of black and blue were ditched in favour of a lion

and the colour blue, red and gold (Evans, 2020). The video below was posted as part of the announcement and visualises the changes made to the crest:

Source: OL Reign. (2020, March 6). *We Are OL Reign* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4S6UUMR8KE

While the new colours and crest bear meaning for the French city of Lyon, there is no connection to the Seattle area or the former Reign FC, meaning that the sole purpose for the rebranding was to bring the new club in line with the Lyonnais brand.

Comments on the YouTube video were deactivated, perhaps with foresight. However, the official announcement on the OL Reign website allowed for comments from fans (OL Reign, 2020) and many of them are not favourable. One user writes:

> Really? Really? Are you kidding me? We had not only the best logo in the league, but one of the most original logos of ALL sports teams. And you make it a MALE lion?! What were you thinking? You weren't thinking. You were trying to make us fit with your French history. What about the history of Washington state's spirts [sic] teams. Were you not informed, or did you just ignore, the fact that ALL of our states professional sports teams use the colors navy blue, white and lime green. Distinctive colors, a unique group of colors not used by any other sports teams (the new red, white and blue-so cliche). [...] I will not buy ANY new merchandise. I will proudly wear my apparel with the original Queen logo not only to every game, but every chance I get. (OL Reign, 2020, https://bit.ly/3SjQIgH)

There seems to be a lot of concern with using a lion at as part of the club's crest. Another commenter agrees with the previous commenter and asks: "Could you have at least considered a Lioness? Nothing like a male lion to represent a female soccer club in Washington" (OL Reign, 2020, https://bit.ly/3SjQIgH). Other commenters bemoan that the club "sold out" and accus the French owners of "taking advantage of a league desperate for investment by stripping their culture and inserting [their] own" (OL Reign, 2020, https://bit.ly/3SjQIgH). The fan community at this club is smaller than that of Cardiff City. Nonetheless, it is clear that many dedicated fans are not happy and feel that their culture, values, and identity are being disrespected. However, at the time of writing, OL Reign have relocated back to Seattle, the attendance figures at matches remain stable and there has been no significant fan resistance to the new club identity, unlike it has been the case at European football clubs. No research has been done yet to find out why this is the case, but it is obvious that the smaller fanbase in women's football provides fans that want to protest with less strength in numbers. The boycott of merchandise (as announced by one

of the above-cites commentators) is, therefore, also bound to leave a relatively small economic impact on the football club.

It is noteworthy that the case of OL Reign is not entirely unique in women's football. Something similar happened to the German women-only club FFC Frankfurt, which became an integrated team of Eintracht Frankfurt in 2020, citing financial reason (Sturm, 2019). It seems that from an economic perspective these decisions are necessary, especially as the women's game becomes increasingly more commercialised and some clubs struggle to keep up with the increased costs that come with this process. However, there is no doubt that such a drastic change of club identity has a significant impact on the relationship between the club and the fanbase.

3.2.4 The future of fan-club relations in women's football

It is undoubtedly a time of change for women's football as the sport increases in popularity. This has an impact on all stakeholders involved. In their study of the narratives dominating Dutch women's football after the team won the European Championship in 2017, Peeters, Elling and Van Stekenburg (2019) found that the increase in popularity of women's football in the Netherlands significantly changed public narratives on women's football. The study found that the rise in popularity and media coverage could "go hand in hand with a hegemonic gender discourse that constructs men's football as normative" (Peeters et al, 2019, p. 1104). This is also something that can be observed from the examples in this module – even the fans themselves often describe their personal, subjective experiences of women's football in relation to or comparison with men's football.

Looking at examples like the former Seattle Reign in the US and FFC Frankfurt in Germany, they indicate the direction in which women's football is headed. With the increasing popularity of the game, it also becomes more commercialised. On the one hand, this provides the clubs with opportunities for monetization (these are discussed in detail as part of Module 4), but on the other hand, it also means that operation costs are bound to increase as competitions become more competitive and there is a race to sign the best players. This puts some of the older stand-alone clubs in a position to compete with the integrated women's teams of Barcelona, Wolfsburg, or Manchester United. These integrated clubs have the financial backing of the associated men's teams and are therefore under less pressure to be economically successful in the emerging market of women's football. Such decisions are essential for the economic survival of the clubs at a time when the fan communities are not large enough and sponsorship deals are still financially less lucrative than those offered to men's teams. However, at the same time, rebranding the football club by changing the kit colours or the club crest is perceived to be a core change in the club's identity. As we have already learned in Module 1 of this course, fans feel a strong sense of identification with their football club and associate

certain values with this identity. This sense of identification is not only crucial for the development of attitudinal loyalty, but also behavioural loyalty (as outlined in section 3.5.1). Behavioural loyalty translates into fans' actions towards the club, such as purchases of tickets and merchandise, and is therefore a core element of the vertical relationship between football clubs and their fanbase.

Women's football is still an emerging market and fan communities in women's football are still evolving. The last decade has seen a significant number of changes in the sport and its popularity, that so far peaked in women's football being able to sell out Camp Nou twice and breaking an attendance record for any European Championship final (men's or women's). However, looking at examples like the former Seattle Reign also shows clearly that the internal stakeholders at women's football clubs find themselves with difficult decisions to make. The close relationship between the clubs and the fan communities is what makes women's football such a unique and extraordinary experience for many fans and internal stakeholders like the aforementioned Manchester United manager Marc Skinner. However, this relationship is made possible by the obvious differences between the men's and the women's game, including the until recently relatively amateur status of women's football. While fans want to see women's football develop and demand that female players are paid equally (see Module 2), it is the very same development that potentially threatens the uniqueness of the vertical relationship between women's football teams and their fan communities. The next module picks up on this and explores ways in which women's football teams can grow their revenues and their fanbases, while addressing the risk of jeopardising the very dynamics that make women's football such an attractive choice for its current fans.

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