

Module 4. Financial benefits from fans – How growing fandom grows the business

Unit 4.1

4.1.1 Where does revenue in football come from?

While we have discussed fandom in the context of the national team as well as clubs throughout the course, this final module focusses on football clubs and their fans rather than the fans of national teams. The reason for this is that football clubs operate as businesses on a day-to-day-basis. National teams have a different status as they only play together a few times a year or during major tournaments. Moreover, the success and failure of national teams tends to be much more volatile in nature – after all, Italy, the reigning European champions in men’s football, failed to qualify for the World Cup for the second time in a row. Meanwhile, football clubs can build up both their squad and their fanbase season-by-season.

Before discussing how growing fandom can financially benefit football clubs and grow them as businesses as well, we need to have a clearer understanding of the general distribution of revenue in football. This section discusses the revenue streams of football clubs, whilst also pointing out how fans are connected to these revenues. Of course, actual turnover statistics differ drastically between countries and football leagues. Therefore, the following statistics from the English Premier League should merely be seen as one example to illustrate different revenue streams of football clubs. In this example, we will look at three clubs in the Premier League – the club with the highest turnover (Manchester United), a club that sits in the middle when it comes to turnover (Leicester City) and the club with the overall smallest turnover (West Bromwich Albion, who were actually joint lowest in the league during the season in question, together with Huddersfield Town) and examine where this turnover comes from. We will use the financial figures of the 2017-2018 season. These figures provide a better idea of revenue streams outside the Covid-19 pandemic. While Conn (2019) collated data on the revenues on all clubs of this season, the ways in which clubs publish their financial reports differ, and therefore we do not have the exact same statistics to compare from each club. Nonetheless, the three tables below detail what we know about the club finances from this season and allow us to draw some conclusions regarding the overall revenues of Premier League clubs.



Table 1: 2017-2018 revenues of Manchester United

Club	Manchester United
Overall turnover in 2017-2018	£590m
Gate and match day income	£110m
TV and broadcasting revenues	£204m
Commercial income	£276m

Source: adapted from Conn, 2019

Table 2: 2017-2018 revenues of Leicester City

Club	Leicester City
Overall turnover in 2017-2018	£159m
Gate receipts	£13m
Premier League TV rights	£124m
Commercial and other income	£8m

Source: adapted from Conn, 2019.

Table 3: 2017-2018 revenues of West Bromwich Albion

Club	West Bromwich Albion
Overall turnover in 2017-2018	£125m
Gate receipts	£7m
TV and media	£102m
Commercial income	£13m
Merchandising	£3m

Source: adapted from Conn, 2019.

Although not all clubs label their revenue figures the same way and the three clubs vary drastically in their overall annual turnover, these figures allow for drawing some general conclusions. In all three cases, the revenues received from the media, TV stations and broadcasting rights were the most significant income. The figures also show that the clubs earn a lot less from the actual ticket sales (labelled as gate receipts or gate and match day income) than they do from the broadcasting fees. Of course, it would be far too simple to conclude that the fans at the stadium do not matter, as they are the ones that create the atmosphere that is also heard and seen on television. During the pandemic, public commentary has widely concluded that watching sports on TV without the fans present has felt “weird” (see for example O’Connell, 2020). Watching the atmosphere is certainly something that TV spectators will expect outside a pandemic.

This means that some of these revenues cited above are likely influenced by one another. For example, the good atmosphere in the Premier League makes it more attractive for broadcasters to pay for the rights to show the matches and those fans that attend a game are more likely to visit the fan shop and purchase merchandise. Therefore, the revenue streams cannot be seen as entirely independent of one another. The other noteworthy aspect of the club finances is that despite the high turnover, the running costs of the clubs are also high. During the season that the above data stems from, West Bromwich made a loss of £7 million, Leicester City had a profit of £2 million before tax, and Manchester United made a profit of £26 million before tax (Conn, 2019).

If you are interested in finding out more about the ways in which Premier League clubs generate revenue, the following video also provides interesting further information by explaining how Manchester City became the first team to rival Manchester United for revenues during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Source: Tifo Football. (2022). *Manchester United's Finances: City Have Caught Up* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixlhLyRuGQ>

As mentioned before, the clubs discussed as part of this section are merely one example, and the exact distribution of revenues highly varies depending on the context. The men’s leagues in other countries and women’s leagues, for example, have fewer overall revenues from broadcasting rights to distribute among their member clubs. Moreover, club ownership also has a significant impact on revenues, as the video linked above highlights well. Leagues that have specific rules on club ownership like Germany, where the so-called 50+1 rule determines that football clubs cannot distribute more than 49% of their shares to outside investors, therefore also provide a different context for revenue generation. Nonetheless, it is a very good example to highlight the sheer importance of the revenues that come from the television and media rights.

Based on the above figures, we can conclude that football clubs earn the majority of their revenue from their share of the broadcasting fees. The match day income (tickets and



hospitality) are also a significant income, and so is other commercial income, including sponsorship money. The revenue from merchandise is comparatively small, but even at a small club like West Bromwich Albion still significant enough to amount to several million British Pound.

Exercise

Most professional football clubs will have their annual financial reports easily accessible online. Sometimes the media also report the financial figures. Pick any professional football club and try to find a finance report for a past season. Do their revenues differ from the above examples, or are they similar?

4.1.2 Can fans prevent their clubs from earning revenues?

The different revenue streams outlined in the previous section are, of course, connected to one another – and they are also connected to the fans of the club. Sporting success has some impact on revenue – a higher position in the table will guarantee a bigger share in the distribution of the TV income, and successful clubs also tend to be more widely supported across the world rather than just in their local area. However, we have also learned that success on the pitch has relatively little impact on fan loyalty, which is one of the aspects that sets fans apart from regular consumers.

Looking at the four above revenue streams, there are two which the fans are directly responsible for: the revenues from the gate and hospitality on the match day and the purchase of merchandise. The correlation between these two is quite straightforward to understand; if fandom grows, then the income from match days and merchandise is also bound to grow. However, there are instances in which fans boycott either matches or merchandise. Reasons for such a boycott were discussed in Module 2 of this course. If fans boycott games, it usually happens because they are not happy with a decision made by their football club or with an ongoing situation. Manchester United are a prominent example of the latter that was covered previously on this course. After ongoing protests targeting the perceived poor ownership and leadership of the Glazer family at Manchester United, which according to the fans has seen too little investment in the infrastructure at the club, a group of dissident fans left the club in 2005 to start FC United of Manchester. However, this was not a solution for everyone – many disgruntled fans also stayed behind and continued to support Manchester United. The hashtag #EmptyOldTrafford started trending in August 2022, encouraging fans to boycott a Manchester United home fixture against their rivals from Liverpool (King, 2022). Boycotting games is a phenomenon that Merkel (2012) refers to as fans “voting with their feet” (p. 364). This example shows that when elements that are perceived to be issues by fans are not resolved, they will continue to make use of this strategy. It is up for debate if this is something that can harm Manchester United in the long run as the club has a diverse revenue stream as outlined earlier. However, boycotts can more easily harm smaller clubs – including most women’s



teams – that still relies much more heavily on the income from match days. In some cases, football fans also boycott merchandise such as shirts. For example, at Newcastle United a supporters' group designed and sold an alternative football shirt to give fans an option to purchase a shirt with the club's colours that does not show the logo of the sponsor at the time, Wonga – a moneylender with a questionable reputation (Marsh, 2015).

While fans are much more loyal than regular consumers and are unlikely to switch brands, this highlights that football clubs cannot and should not neglect their fans and strive to build a good relationship with them if they want to maintain and increase the revenue that comes directly from the sale of tickets, match day hospitality, and merchandise, as fans know they can use their purchasing power to negotiate. Especially for those clubs that do not receive as high a pay-out from TV revenues as Manchester United, this can make a significant dent in their revenues. However, even those revenues that are not directly paid by the fans – for example, as money earned from broadcasting companies and sponsors – rely on the fans at least to some extent. The atmosphere created by the spectators is considered an integral part of sports broadcasting. Again, this is something that the fans are aware of and will utilise if necessary. For example, in Germany, fans across the country collaborated on a special kind of protest. When a new security strategy was to be voted on and implemented by the Deutsche Fußball-Liga (DFL)¹ in December 2012, proposing regulations that included several points that would result in an extreme tightening of security checks, it caused an immense uproar throughout German football cultures. Fans of professional football clubs all over the country united in the campaign "12:12" that was initiated by the so-called "Bündnis ProFans", a union made up of groups affiliated with different teams in Germany. In order to protest against the imminent security reforms, the stadia throughout the country remained silent for the first 12 minutes and 12 seconds for almost the entire month of December. This is a remarkable protest considering that it marks a rare occasion of fans from different clubs – including rivalling teams – working together. It also received a considerable amount of media attention. Writing for the news outlet Deutsche Welle, Knight (2012) calls the silence an "eerie new sensation at Bundesliga stadiums across the country" (para. 1). It confirms earlier research by Brick (2000) who explains that football fans have a significant media profile and the potential to pursue an agenda. This protest did not directly hurt the clubs financially – the fans still attended the matches. The only thing they did was to be silent for twelve minutes before resuming business as usual. However, it was supposed to show the football clubs and the league what could be and how the impact of the games is lessened when there is no atmosphere. Overall, this mobilisation was also considered a success from the fans' point of view as after only a few weeks the DFL entered negotiations with the fans and showed willingness to address

¹ The DFL is a subsidiary branch of the Deutscher Fußball-Bund (DFB), the German equivalent to the Football Association. The DFL is responsible for the operative business in the first and second division.



some of the aspects of the new security strategy that were considered problematic (Kicker, 2013).

As pointed out earlier, football fans are extremely loyal to their clubs and many of them feel a duty to support their teams. Therefore, mobilisations and protests – fans voting with their feet or perhaps in the latter example with their voices – are usually considered a last resort. However, the examples show that fans are aware of these options, and it is therefore in everyone’s interest to pursue a positive relationship and good communication between the football club and their fanbase.

4.1.3 Revenues in women’s football

At the time of writing, there is a significantly larger amount of money at stake in men’s football, while the women’s game is still playing catch up when it comes to the revenues. Nonetheless, women’s sport in general has grown in significant ways over the past few years and there is a clear desire for watching women’s sport and specifically women’s football. For example, in England, the viewership figures of women’s cricket and women’s football have increased steadily over the last decade, although there is still room for improvement as watching women’s sport has not become a habit for everyone yet, for example, writing in February 2022, the BBC found that only 35% of the audience of the Women’s Super League in England were repeat watchers (BBC Sport, 2022). The table below showcases the annual viewership figures for women’s sport in the United Kingdom.

Table 4: UK viewership of women’s sport

Year	Number of viewers (in millions)
2012	20.1
2013	21.8
2014	28.0
2015	22.6
2016	25.2
2017	25.1
2018	27.3
2019	32.8
2020	26.9



2021	32.9
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Source: BBC Sport, 2022

The table shows a slight spike in viewership in 2019 – there was the World Cup in women’s football that year that is most likely responsible for this, but overall the table shows a slow yet steady increase in viewership of women’s sport.

In 2021, FIFA published their first ever benchmarking report on women’s football called “Setting The Pace” (FIFA, 2021). In this report, the governing body set out to find out what the status quo in women’s football is, and the findings allow us to draw some conclusions on how the increased interest in women’s sports translates into practice, especially when it comes to revenues. For the purpose of this report, the football governing body surveyed 282 women’s football clubs in 30 leagues globally. FIFA (2021) listed ten key conclusions from this report, which can be summarised as follows:

1. Leagues in which at least 80% of the clubs have girls’ youth structure have a national team ranking, while those in countries that do not have this kind of youth infrastructure.
2. Leagues that have a club licensing system and financial controls in place tend to have more clubs that operate at a profit or at least break even.
3. In 65% of the leagues, the teams with the most qualified coaches performed the best.
4. Performance was much better at clubs that have access to a higher number and better quality of facilities.
5. Money from selling broadcasting rights is important and provides a major opportunity for growth, with the income from broadcasting currently accounting for 6% of revenue for women’s clubs and 18% of revenue for leagues that were surveyed.
6. Clubs that offer a season ticket option have higher attendance figures.
7. Clubs with a written out, codified strategy for women’s football usually had a higher revenue and higher attendance figures.
8. Leagues that negotiate broadcast rights exclusively for their women’s league typically generate more with those broadcasts.
9. Just under three quarters of the clubs reported that they negotiate sponsorship contracts exclusively for the women’s team, which tends to result in a higher revenue from sponsorship.
10. The clubs that raised high revenues (more than one million dollars annually) earned more than 50% of that revenue from their sponsorship deals.

The report allows for the conclusion that those football clubs that take women’s football seriously and run their women’s team professionally also generate higher revenues.



Moreover, improving opportunities for the fans, for example, by offering season tickets, is also clearly beneficial. Despite the positive trends in women's football and increased public interest, the "Setting The Pace" report also found that 70% of the clubs surveyed operate at a loss. Moreover, only 13% of the clubs had an annual turnover that exceeded one million US dollar. Overall, women's football clubs still earn significantly less. The same is also the case for international tournaments. Despite Euro 2022 shattering records not only in women's football, but football as a whole – the final broke the European Championship spectatorship record – UEFA estimated that they are operating at a loss of over 60 million Euros. The one exception to the rule is the United States, where women's football now generates higher revenues than men's football (Johnson Hess, 2019). Despite this being the case since 2016, it took until 2022 for the women's national team to finally strike a deal with their governing body that guarantees them equal pay to the men's team (Hernandez, 2022).

4.1.4 Creating a diverse leadership to grow both fandom and the business

A report published by Fair Game, a collective of football clubs that identify as "value-driven clubs", in collaboration with researchers from the University of Portsmouth makes a bold claim: The core reason for financial failures in football – especially so in men's football – is gender inequality (Fair Game, 2022). For example, it has been proven that gender diversity in company boardrooms improves the financial performance, not only in sports, but across other industries as well. However, depending on the league – the report looks at the top division clubs in England and Wales – only up to 11.3% of the board members are women. In some leagues, the number is as low as 4.3% women on the club boards on average. These figures are especially low when compared to other industries, with 39.1% of the board members being female across FTSE 100 companies.

The report then further argues that not only is it necessary to hire more women in leadership roles, but those women also need to be more visible. The authors explain:

While clubs cannot directly influence broadcasting, it is important to consider the impact of visibility on fan engagement and attendance, as these both affect club revenues. Visibility of women in roles within clubs – leadership, coaching, and other – is important to encourage other women to engage with the clubs, as fans, commercial partners, or potential staff. For example, research from the Women's Sport Trust showed that exposure was a key reason for watching women's sport for more than 80% of fans. So seeing or listening to women encourages more women to engage with football clubs, increasing both fan base and the potential employee pool. (Fair Game, 2022, p. 14)

This report argues that growing female participation in football, for example through growing women's football and hence both the visibility and the expertise of women in football in general, football clubs will automatically be run by a more diverse group of leaders. This has proven to be beneficial for business growth.

Source: Fair Game. (2022). The Gender Divide That Fails Football's Bottom Line: The Commercial Case for Gender Equality. *Fair Game – the wider interests of football*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6047aabc7130e94a70ed3515/t/6225fcd351786a64ba4421b0/1646656733257/The+Gender+Divide+That+Fails+Football%27s+Bottom+Line+-+Fair+Game+Report+March+2022.pdf>

The report concludes that the growing interest in women's football, which is also well documented in the growing viewership figures cited in the previous section, is the sign of a new age of women's football. This provides football leagues and clubs with an excellent opportunity to capitalise on this still untapped potential of women's football and diversify their revenue streams by attracting money from broadcasting and sponsorship opportunities in the women's game. The next and final unit of this course looks at this in more detail and will answer the question of how clubs can grow both their fan engagement and their business.



Unit 4.2

4.2.1 Marketing to fans with exclusive content

The two reports discussed in the previous unit give lots of insight into making women's football more successful. Although the reports make several suggestions on how football in general and especially women's football can be made more profitable, growing strong relationships with the fanbase is absolutely crucial for clubs that wish to grow their revenues. Football fans are an important stakeholder group because a good atmosphere at the stadium, a vibrant fanbase and growing viewership figures on television are likely to also attract bigger sponsorship deals and give the football leagues the power to negotiate better deals with the broadcasters. Football clubs that create higher revenues can, in turn, also afford better professional infrastructure.

The key is to not only attract occasional viewers, but to turn these viewers into loyal fans. Moreover, football clubs need to provide a level of service that appeals to fans and builds both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty. Additionally, clubs should establish a good level of communication with this fanbase – many of the critical elements of which were already discussed in Module 3. This section discusses two examples in which clubs can use their established communication with the fanbase and implement marketing efforts while considering the particularities that come with marketing to an existing fanbase: The implementation of a club TV channel that offers exclusive insights and the use of social media marketing.

The implementation of a club-owned subscription TV service was briefly mentioned in Module 3 of this course as a way for football clubs to establish a unilateral communication channel that provides more control than mainstream media does. Boyle and Haynes (2004) attribute the rise of club-owned TV stations to a growing concern about the ways in which football clubs' intellectual property was used. The first club to establish their own TV station to broadcast daily was Manchester United as early as 1998. While other major clubs in the UK Celtic and Rangers in Glasgow initially felt that this was too expensive and not cost-efficient (Boyle and Haynes, 2004), large clubs running their own club TV channels has now become a staple. Naturally, both the costs of producing videos for web view and the cost of hosting and streaming have decreased significantly since the early days of Manchester United TV, making it a viable service for football clubs on a small budget as well. Most clubs charge their fans a comparatively small monthly fee for the service, for example FC Barcelona's Barça TV+ costs just under €40 for an annual subscription at the time of writing. In return, subscribers can access live streams of matches, match reviews or highlights, and original documentaries.

While football clubs can, of course, monetize the content by charging their subscribers a small monthly fee, creating a subscription platform with exclusive content comes with further benefits. As mentioned before, clubs can manage the content without the limitations and restrictions they face with the mainstream media and broadcasters. Moreover, the exclusive content can help strengthen the relationship with the fanbase, as this type of content is excellently suited for building attitudinal loyalty. To recap, in Module 3, we already learnt that attitudinal loyalty refers to the emotional and psychological commitment to the football club, including the fan's knowledge of the club and the impact it has on the fan's everyday life. Moreover, attitudinal loyalty in football is often closely linked to feelings of nostalgia and the values fans associate with their club. Research further links attitudinal loyalty to an increase in behavioural loyalty. In football, the latter is often tied to spending behaviour as well, including the purchase of match day tickets and club merchandise. By providing a service that includes exclusive content, football clubs can offer their fans an experience that builds and strengthens attitudinal loyalty and goes beyond just the match day experience.

Many women's football clubs are integrated clubs, meaning they are attached to an existing men's team. If this is the case, then it is also likely that the men's team already have an existing subscription platform and the infrastructure to produce regular video content. Including the women's team in the process is a straightforward decision to make. Manchester City, for example, produces content on their women's team for their TV platform. However, the club has also decided to make the content about the women's team part of their free-to-view content at the time of writing. The free tier of their TV channel also includes content on the men's team such as interviews with the players, while the subscription tier includes the full match replays of the men's team and some exclusive documentaries. This is an excellent opportunity for the club to draw attention to the women's team among those fans that already follow the club's TV platform for exclusive content on the men's team.

Of course, establishing a television channel or platform for a subscription service is a much more feasible endeavour for bigger football clubs. Integrated women's clubs further benefit from the existing infrastructure as these platforms were originally built for the men's club drawing larger crowds already. However, smaller clubs that do not have this kind of infrastructure can use social media platforms to create a similar loyalty-building effect. McCarthy, Pioch, Rowley and Ashworth (2011) explain that users of social media move through six phases in their usage of these networking sites, in which they use them as follows:

1. As a text-based sharing medium;
2. As an audiovisual medium;
3. As a tool for democratised influence – facilitating of peer influence among consumers;

4. Being motivated through shared interest(s) – thereby engaging in different social media platforms;
5. To fulfil desire for brand interaction.

The last three are especially interesting and important in the context of football fandom. McCarthy et al. (2011) further draw attention to the benefits of relationship marketing, which is a specific form of marketing that focuses specifically on retaining customers for a long time and prioritising customer satisfaction. As such, this kind of marketing focuses on existing customers rather than acquiring new customers. To implement this strategy, brands need to establish modes of long-term engagement with their customer base. Considering what you have already learned about football fans and the differences between fans and other consumers over the duration of this course, it becomes clear how this type of marketing is essential to football clubs. Football provides nearly ideal conditions for a successful relationship marketing because fans already exhibit a high amount of brand loyalty. If a club focuses its marketing efforts on the relationship with their fanbase (as also outlined in Module 3 of this course) this can strengthen both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty.

You can find out more about relationship marketing in Mark Morin's Tedx Talk linked below.

Source: Tedx Talks (2018). *Building sustainable relationships that bring brands and people closer* / Mark Morin / TEDxLaval [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp0Q8Z5Isz4>

In their study, McCarthy et al. (2011) conclude that the football clubs they surveyed did not have relationship marketing strategies and were also not capitalising on the potential of social networking sites as part of such a strategy. However, at the time of writing, this study is more than a decade old and more recent research by Aichner (2019) highlights a shift in the way football clubs approach social media, with most clubs now having a presence on one or more social networking sites (see also in Module 3, discussing bilateral communication between fans and the football club). In their analysis of fan engagement with football clubs on social media, Vale and Fernandes (2018) find that there are three core needs that fans fulfil through different activities on social media:

1. The need for information drives the consumption of social media content.
2. The need for empowerment drives the contribution to existing social media content (this may include commenting or sharing).
3. The desire to express brand love drives fans towards the creation of their own, original content.

These findings have important implications for sports marketers. Football club's resources are limited, which is especially relevant for women's football clubs that are still operating



in an emerging market. Therefore, it is even more critical for social media managers and marketers in these contexts to understand what drives fan engagement and how they should plan and structure their social media content. While the first element – information – is relatively easy to implement and usually already part of football club’s social media strategies. However, the focus should be on exclusive content – similar to the club’s own TV channels – that cannot be found in the mainstream media. The second point – empowerment – is equally important. The club’s social media channels should foster and encourage engagement between fans. A good way of doing this is to encourage comments or include polls. Finally, brand love and creation can be encouraged by asking fans to share and produce content showcasing their love for the football club.

Some football clubs have also thought of special ways to foster such engagement, for example, in 2022, Borussia Dortmund launched a competition for fans to design the home kit for the 2023/2024 season (Pollmann, 2022). This kind of event fosters engagement both on the contribution and the creation level, encouraging fans to create their designs and discuss them with others.

These examples of marketing to fans with exclusive content are excellent tools for implementing a successful relationship marketing strategy. The unique aspect is that fans value and remember the experience they get from this sort of content. However, using these tools may be even more essential for women’s football. A report published by UEFA (2022) finds that fans of women’s football are, in fact, more likely to rely on digital and social media content because mainstream media reporting on women’s football is still rare – this is especially the case in countries where women’s football does not have a high commercial value yet. As a result, using a good relationship marketing strategy and providing exclusive content via stream or social media platforms is even more crucial to fan engagement and growing the fanbase in women’s football than it is the case in the men’s game.

4.2.2 Sponsors follow the viewership numbers

There is a clear correlation between growing viewership figures and especially the number of returning and loyal viewers – meaning fans – and the ability for football clubs and national teams to assume a more powerful role when negotiating with sponsors. However, it can be difficult to find out the exact value of sponsorship in women’s football at the time of writing because not all teams and sponsors make the figures publicly available. Hancock and Hellier (2022) report that after Euro 2022 most sponsors did not want to reveal how much they invested in the tournament and the UEFA also declined to comment, but the authors speculate that sponsorship of the women’s tournament is “a fraction” of what sponsoring the men’s tournament costs. They further conclude:

It's still common for sponsorship deals to cover both men's and women's teams. Within England's Women's Super League, deodorant brand Rexona began sponsoring Manchester City FC three years after sponsoring the men's. But the support for Euro 2022 may help turn the tide.

"Many WSL teams currently share a number of sponsors with their male counterparts," said Conrad Wiacek, head of sport analysis at Global Data. "Brands will now want to associate themselves with women's sport, given the current excitement and potential audience that could now be watching the WSL, which may mean a windfall of anywhere between \$5 million to \$10 million per club". (Hancock and Hellier, 2022)

The "Setting The Pace" report by FIFA contradicts this claim to some extent as it found that, at the time of writing, around 75% of the women's club are now negotiating their own sponsorship deals. However, this also means that roughly a quarter of the clubs do not do this yet. Especially in places where women's teams are set up as an integrated team, it may seem convenient to include the women's team in a sponsorship deal that covers the men's and women's team. However, the FIFA report found that this tends to be less lucrative. In return, this means that more women's teams beginning to negotiate exclusive sponsorship deals will certainly increase sponsorship revenues.

As recent as 2018, a study found that, at the time, women's sport attracted just a meagre 1% of the sponsorship market. This extended to the media coverage, with only 3% of print coverage and 4% of online coverage being dedicated to women's sport and less than 20% of all TV sport features women's sport or mixed sport (Foley, 2018). It seems like those times are changing, though. Just as Wiacek (as cited in Hancock and Hellier, 2022) suggests, sponsorship deals tend to follow increased audiences and media attention. After England's European Championship success, Mohdin (2022) reports that PR experts predict the Lionesses' sponsorship value to increase tenfold after their final against Germany broke viewer records. Moreover, a few record-breaking sponsorship deals were already negotiated prior to Euro 2022. In late 2021, FA negotiated a three-year-deal with Barclay's to sponsor the Women's Super League, setting a record for sponsorship in women's sport in the UK (Wrack, 2021). In January 2022, the news broke that VISA made a sponsorship deal with FIFA for the 2023 Women's World Cup and is worth 17.5 million Euros (Glendinning, 2022).

At the same time, Mohdin (2022) also issues a reminder that there were calls

to ensure that the inevitable spike in interest, and funding, also cascades down to grassroots level, including making sure that women's teams don't continue to be



lumped with unsociable pitch hours or remote places with poor access to public transport. (Mohdin, 2022, para. 2)

In this she echoes those involved in women's football like Sophia Axelsson, AFC Wimbledon Women's general manager, who stresses that "[t]o be able to grow women's football in England, that money can't stay in the top. There will be a continued lack of diversity and inclusion if the money just stays with those top teams" (Mohdin, 2022, para. 16). This means growing women's football as a whole, meaning attracting both a larger fanbase and players at the grassroots level, happens through investment at the grassroots level and improving infrastructure to encourage young girls to get involved in football. By increasing opportunities at this level, women's football will become more competitive, and that will increase the commercial value and public interest at the same time.

4.2.3 Building a new club and fanbase from scratch: The unique case of Angel City FC

There has been a trend for women's football clubs to associate themselves with men's clubs in one way or another for financial reasons. In Germany, FFC Frankfurt became the Eintracht Frankfurt ladies' team. In the US, Seattle Reign was purchased by Olympique Lyonnais and became OL Reign. The implications, including the loss of identity perceived by the fans, were previously discussed on this course and there is no doubt that such decisions are usually made from a financial standpoint, but are not beneficial when it comes to relationship-building with the fanbase. This is why a women's football club being built from the ground up in less than three years and playing their inaugural home match in front of a crowd of 21,000 people is an extraordinary story. However, this is exactly what happened to Los Angeles-based Angel City FC in 2022.

In 2020, a group of celebrity backers, led by actress Natalie Portman and entrepreneur Julia Uhrman announced they were establishing a new women's football club in Los Angeles. The list of celebrity investors into this club is long and includes the backing of several former USWNT players that contribute not only money, but also their expertise. You can watch the story of how Angel City FC came to be in the following video as well.

Source: FTBL. (2022). The Story Of Angel City FC's Unprecedented Rise [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbvgqLCrJsA>

Abushahla (2021) explains that the unique aspect to Angel City FC is that it is not only built like a business with a vision that goes beyond just the sport of football, but it also began to build a community and a fan culture before the football team even existed. Los Angeles proved to provide the ideal context for this, as there was already an existing campaign asking for a NWSL team in the city. In a move to reach out to this existing movement,



Uhrman scheduled a call with two of the leaders of this movement, asking them to turn the NWSL to LA movement into an official Angel City FC fan club. Uhrman did so by convincing the fans that she shares the same vision:

Even more promising for Rojas was that Uhrman was hitting all the right points when discussing her vision of the club. Sure, the movement called for an NWSL franchise in Los Angeles, but it wasn't going to settle for just any club. At the top of its want list was a sustainable team that fought for its players to get the facilities, treatment, and pay they deserved, and Uhrman was right on the same page. (Abushahla, 2021, para. 36)

This is, of course, a unique level of community outreach, but, in this case, it proved to be extremely effective. Angel City FC sold nearly 16,000 season tickets before ever playing a single match (Elder, 2022).

There is no doubt that Angel City FC is a product of ideal circumstances: There was already a desire for a women's football team in Los Angeles and the project quickly found a diverse group of backers that could not only contribute financial means, but also knowledge of the sport and business acumen. However, this mixture led to something else. It seems that the people behind Angel City FC listened to players and fans and tried to understand what it is that they want or need from a football club. In a personal account of her experience of the inaugural home game of the club, Moskovitz (2022) concludes that "the most revolutionary thing about Angel City FC is it's fun" (para. 1). She compares her experience to that of watching previous league games, which made her uncomfortable, especially knowing that female players were not paid a living-wage at the time and that women's football was plagued by several abuse scandals at the time. And although Moskovitz (2022) remains critical of some of the club's commercial activities, especially those involving NFTs, and does not "care for the volume of girl-power branding" (para. 17), to her, it was a positive and inherently fun experience to watch a women's game where she knows players are respected, and the infrastructure is set up professionally.

Not every new football club can expect to have a start as successful as Angel City FC that grew out of an almost perfect context, where the project was backed by people that either brought in money and the power of stardom or that were knowledgeable. Moreover, the club found a way to occupy a niche that was already in demand, as there was already a movement calling for the establishment of a women's football team in Los Angeles. Nonetheless, there are a few lessons that existing football clubs can also learn from the ambitious Angel City FC project, as there are two key aspects to their success:



1. The club leadership reached out to the local community and listened to their desires, needs, and wishes for a women's football team. These were respected in the creation of Angel City FC.
2. The football club benefits from a highly professionalised infrastructure and context. The financial investment was made upfront to ensure that the players had access to first-class facilities and paid according to their status as professional football players. This setup, in turn, also attracts fans that wanted to see better conditions in women's football.

4.2.4 What does the future hold for women's football?

In August 2022, the UEFA published a report titled "The Business Case for Women's Football", proclaiming that the sport "is advancing in every area" (p. 5) with the number of professional women's teams increasing as well as spectator numbers. At the time of writing, the prospects of women's football indeed look exciting. So far, 2022 has been a big year for the sport, seeing record-shattering attendances at Barcelona's Camp Nou and for the Euro 2022 final at Wembley. UEFA (2022) reported that in Europe alone women's football currently has 144 million fans, a number that is estimated to increase to 328 million people by 2033. What is interesting about these numbers is that not all those attracted to women's football are existing fans – one third of the fans in women's football are new to the game as a whole. The report draws these numbers from the responses from integrated clubs specifically as 46% of the integrated clubs that participated in the study reported that establishing a women's team has drawn new fans towards their club. This is especially important in a context like football. As we learned in Module 1, football fans are quite unusual consumers, as they are extremely loyal. It is unlikely that a football fan can attract new fans from a rival team. Aside from young children being socialised into fandom by their families, the only way to grow a fanbase is to stir interest among people that were previously not interested in football. Women's football has a tremendous potential to do so, as it is associated with a different set of values than men's football. The public associate the women's game with inspiration, empowerment, and a family-friendly environment. Moreover, the fanbase tends to be diverse, young, and politically progressive (UEFA, 2022). It can be assumed that these findings are not exclusively relevant to Europe, although this is where the study was conducted. That the fanbase of women's football is younger, more diverse, and politically progressive is, of course, also well reflected in a case study that we explored in Module 2 of this course, which discussed how the fanbase of the US Women's National Team connects over a shared desire for an alternative form of American patriotism that is positioned in opposition to the nationalism that is prevalent in large parts of traditional mainstream American sports.

Despite the growing interest in women's football the positive reaction from the public, including the new football fans, the report also finds that the revenue from matches in the

domestic leagues is still low and inconsistent, making this an area where there is still a lot of potential for growth. The key issue for clubs is to convert initial interest and what Giulianotti (2022) would class as “cool” fandom into consistent, regular match day attendance and “hot” fandom. The examples and case studies discussed as part of this course highlight that there is no one correct way for a women’s team to achieve, as contexts vary heavily between national teams and local football clubs, or between integrated clubs and newly established teams. However, understanding the unique desires and demands of football fans and entering a dialogue with the fans are key steps towards growing a loyal fanbase for women’s football. We covered instances of fan protests and boycotts that happen when the needs and wishes of fans are not addressed. All the examples that this course used for this kind of mobilisation were from men’s football. This is, of course, not a coincidence. This level of mass scale antagonism of the fans towards the club that they support and dedicated so many of their financial and temporal resources to simply does not exist in women’s football at the time of writing. This does not mean that fans of women’s football are always happy with what is happening in the game – the personal account of Moskovitz’ (2022) first visit to Angel City FC is an excellent example of this. However, it seems that for the time being, the fans of women’s football are – on average – more content. This is what translates into what UEFA (2022) identify as inspiration, empowerment, and family-friendliness. These aspects make women’s football unique and can attract people to the game that were not interested in football previously. This is achieved through the establishment of bilateral communication with the fanbase and the local community, and is something that decision-makers in women’s football should bear in mind when implementing strategies for fostering and maintaining fan engagement.

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