FAN ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN FOOTBALL: THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE INTERACTION PROCESS BETWEEN FOOTBALL CLUBS AND THEIR FANS

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Cite this article as:
Atanasova, N., Ivanov, S. (2025). Fan engagement and social media in football: the digital transformation of the interaction process between football clubs and their fans. *Proceeding book of the 4th International Scientific Congress "Applied Sports Sciences", 2025, Sofia.* pp. 593 - 599. https://doi.org/10.37393/ICASS2025/91

ABSTACT
Football is not only a sport but a global phenomenon that unites cultures, nations, and communities. Several clubs worldwide have developed special policies to encourage optimal involvement and engagement from their fans in the processes and events surrounding their favorite club. With the introduction of extensive digital development, a significant portion of supporters' engagement activities are now conducted through social media. Football is a dominant theme in platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter, where a new type of engagement is developing.
The object of the research is people supporting different football clubs. The purpose is to investigate the impact of social media on the connection between football clubs and their fans.
The research tasks are reduced to exploring the engagement instruments used through social media and establishing fans' preferences and habits when interacting with the clubs online. During the research process, an online survey was conducted to gather general information about fan affiliation and brand engagement. The data obtained show the most often used social media platforms, the type of information they recommend, as well as the frequency of interaction with them.
Some reserves in football clubs' policies are being uncovered, particularly regarding the organization of online initiatives for interaction with supporters.

***Keywords**: marketing, communications, social media, football*

INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution, characterized by the widespread adoption and integration of digital technologies into all aspects of life, has had a significant impact on how clubs in the sports industry operate and implement innovations (Fitzgerald et al., 2014; Hanelt et al., 2021).

The dynamic processes and continuous changes in the environment present new realities and challenges for brands in shaping their marketing communications. The application of modern communication tools and their strategic combination requires the adoption of new and digitized approaches.

New technologies empower sports organizations with innovative approaches to communication, helping them achieve their goals. The specifics of digital media have a significant influence on society and the processes that occur within it. Interaction among users, partners, and brand communities now occurs through entirely new communication channels (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Abeza, Finch, et al., 2019).

Among social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have emerged as primary channels through which football leagues have promoted fan engagement over the past two decades (Machado et al., 2020; Maderer et al., 2018).

Over the last decade, digital engagement platforms have become an integral part of the structure of the most successful football brands, facilitating greater fan participation and enabling the co-creation of value (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016).

In the context of social media, Customer Brand Engagement (CBE) contrasts with traditional marketing. In digital interactions, customers assume control over marketing decisions (Solem & Pedersen, 2016) and actively participate in branding activities.

The interaction process is multifaceted, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Bilro & Loureiro, 2020; Cheung et al., 2020; Hollebeek, 2011). CBE encompasses the depth of the consumer-brand relationship (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019) and supports organizations in building a loyal customer base with an emotional

attachment to the brand.
Hollebeek et al. (2014) divide consumer engagement into three dimensions of brand interaction. First, cognitive processing, defined as "the level of a consumer's thought activity related to the brand" (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Second – affection. Affection can be described as the degree of positive feelings a consumer experiences toward a brand under specific interaction conditions. Therefore, the second dimension of CB is the emotional one. The third dimension is behavioral engagement. This type of affection (addiction) is described as "the level of energy, effort, and time a consumer devotes to brand-related activities" (Hollebeek et al., 2014).
Brand engagement in sports demonstrates that the more actively a fan follows and interacts with their favorite club, the more loyal they become and will express this loyalty through repeated support (Barreda et al., 2016).

Aim and Objectives
The aim of this research was to analyze the process of digital interaction between fans and football clubs through social media platforms.
The research tasks to fulfill the aim are:

1. Research and analysis of specialized resources related to marketing forms of communication and their complex implementation in the football industry.
2. Research on establishing fans' preferences and habits in their online interaction with football clubs.
3. Research and analysis of football clubs' policy in applying marketing on social media.

The subject of research is the various strategies, instruments, and forms of improving football clubs' social media policies.
The research was conducted among 217 football fans of Bulgarian and foreign football clubs.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct the overall research, a methodological toolkit was employed, comprising the following scientific research methods:
1. *Content Analysis* – examination and theoretical analysis of specialized literature sources, including:

- Scientific literature related to digital transformation and new communication models in the football industry.
- Scientific literature on consumer brand engagement with a focus on sports brands.

2. *Marketing-oriented survey methods – the questionnaire method.*
To achieve the research objective, an adapted online questionnaire based on Hollebeek et al. (2014) was used, containing indicators for measuring brand engagement. A five-point Likert scale was applied (1 – strongly disagree; 5 – strongly agree) to collect responses. In addition, questions were included regarding fans' preferences and habits in their online interactions with clubs. The results were processed according to established procedures for identifying and measuring brand engagement, including univariate frequency distribution and variation analysis. All participants examined are over 18 years of age and participated in the research voluntarily. While completing the online form, they had the opportunity to withdraw at any time without any consequences. All these clarifications have been included in the content of the questionnaire. The main channels through which the participants were engaged in the survey were specialized groups created on social media, as well as the support of several football clubs that agreed to publish the information on their official websites. A purposive sampling method of respondents was used. The questionnaire was distributed online from February to April 2025.
3. *Mathematical-Statistical Methods of Analysis.*
The data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Methods were used to provide a quantitative assessment of the research data – variation and frequency analysis:

– relative percentage distribution of the obtained responses;
– indicators of central tendency and dispersion – mode, median, arithmetic mean, range, standard deviation, and coefficient of variation.

RESULTS

We analyzed the opinions of 217 individuals who supported different football clubs. Defining the respondents' profile is crucial for outlining strategic guidelines in online interactions with football clubs. The data are presented in Table 1. The men prevail over the women. The share of people who have been supporting a football club for more than 10 years and who are part of the fan club is the largest.

Table 1. *Profile of the respondents*

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	**175**	**80,6%**
Female	40	18.4%
How long have you been supporting your favorite team?		
For less than a year	2	0.9%
For 2-5 years	7	3.2%
For more than 5 years	19	8.8%
For more than 10 years	**189**	**87.1%**
Relation to football		
Administrator	7	3,2%
No relation to football	44	20,3%
Competitor (amateur league)	57	26,3%
Competitor (professional league)	22	10,1%
Coach	27	12,4%
Member of a team's fan club	**60**	**27,6%**

The univariate frequency distribution showed that the share of people supporting the Bulgarian teams PFK "Levski" Sofia and SFK "Etar" Veliko Tarnovo was the biggest (14.1% each). Regarding foreign clubs, Barcelona was the most supported (10.1%). An important part of the overall research was to establish the social media used by fans to follow their favorite club.

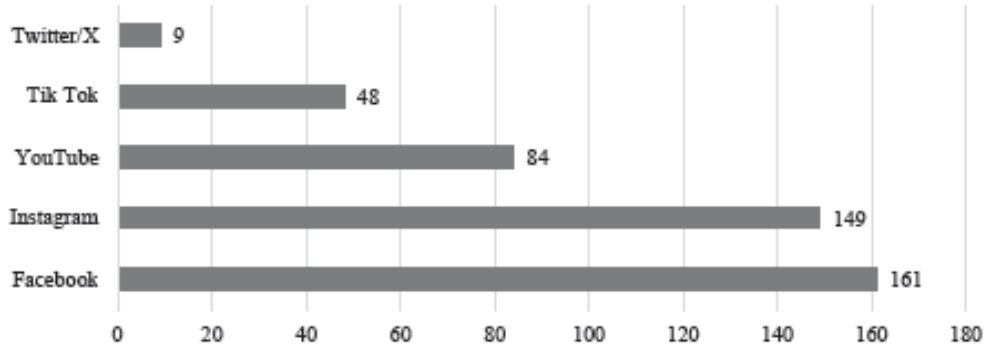

Figure 1. *Which social media do you use most often to follow your favorite team? (number of responses)*

The graph clearly shows that Facebook is the leading platform in engaging fans (161 responses, 74.2%), followed by Instagram and YouTube.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of responses regarding the frequency of interaction with information.

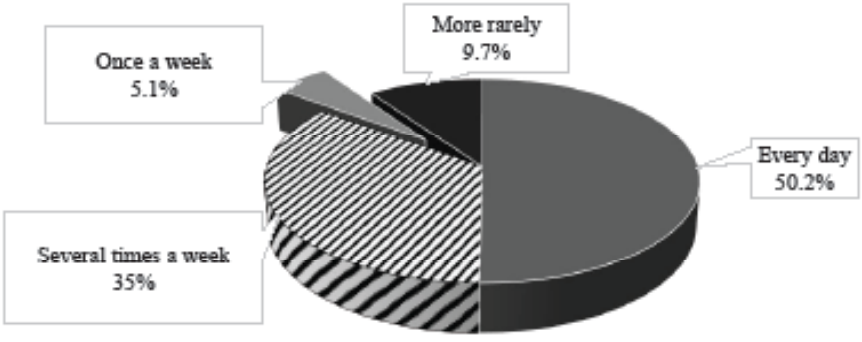

Figure 2. *Frequency of interaction with the information shared on social media*

Figure 3 presents the preferences of football fans for various content related to their club on social media.

The most popular content, according to fans, is *news, club events, and highlights from previous matches.* This emphasizes the fans' interest in the actual state and activities of their favorite club.

The average interest is shown toward advertising videos containing promotions of different items – 99 responses (45.6%), sketches, interviews, and funny videos – 89 responses (41%), retro footage revealing the history – 86 responses (39.6%), and so on. These are additional engaging formats which broaden the emotional relationship and the possibilities for interaction, but are not a priority for the researched subjects.

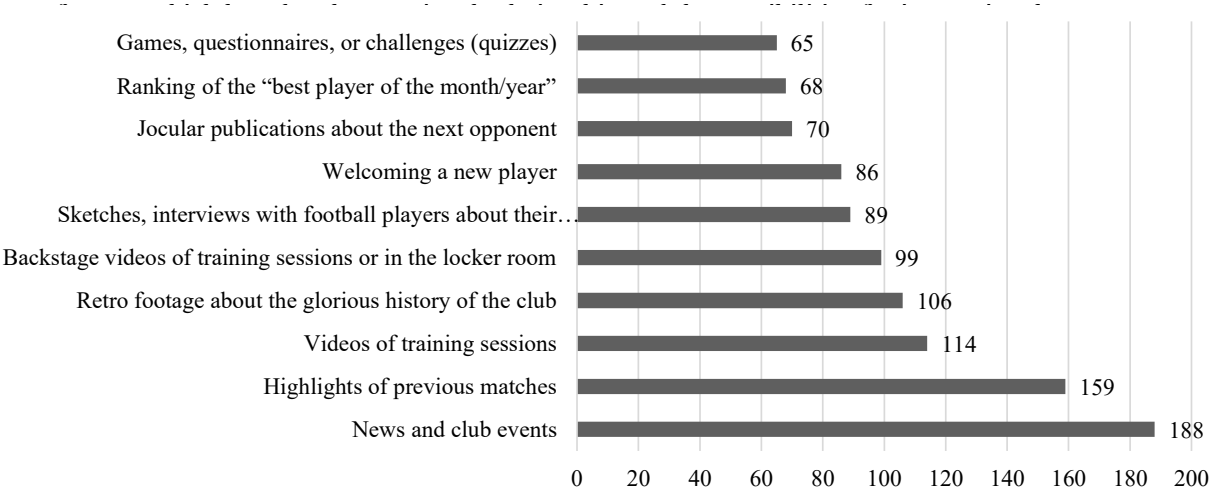

Figure 3. *What content of the club's social media do you prefer? (number of responses)*

The analysis of the results includes a review of different factors that directly impact fans' brand engagement.

The conducted variation analysis (Table 2) indicates that communication policy can serve as an effective tool for increasing brand engagement and fan trust. The obtained data allows for the identification of factors and phenomena that significantly influence the formation and enhancement of brand engagement. The results reveal that most of the examined factors fall within the positive range of the scale. The mean values range from 2.55 to 3.85, indicating that certain conditions are perceived more favorably by fans and have a more substantial impact on the brand's communication with its community. The most significant limitations are observed in the behavioral engagement dimension, particularly in terms of commenting on club posts on social media and participating in online discussions and forums.

Table 2. *Results from the variation analysis*

Factor	*n*	Xmin	Xmax	R	*Mean*	*SD*	V	As	Ex
Cognitive engagement									
I often think about the club/team I support	217	1	4	3	3.73	0.589	15.79%	-2.457	6.430
I discuss the club/team with other people	217	1	4	3	3.82	0.553	14.47%	-3.546	13.066
I follow the news related to the club/team	217	1	4	3	3.85	0.487	12.64%	-3.984	17.482
I know the list of players and the statistics well	217	1	4	3	3.70	0.673	18.18%	-2.488	6.037
I read analyses and comments about the team's performance	217	1	4	3	3.58	0.656	18.32%	-1.695	3.114
Emotional engagement									
I feel a strong emotional bond with the club	217	1	4	3	3.65	0.692	18.95%	-2.202	4.688
The team's results affect my mood strongly	217	1	4	3	3.22	0.946	29.37%	-1.019	0.011
I feel proud to be a fan of the club	217	1	4	3	3.75	0.574	15.30%	-2.760	8.733
I share my emotions on social media after the team's matches	217	1	4	3	2.91	1.023	35.15%	-0.546	-0.844
The negative results directly affect my activity on social media (passivity)	217	1	4	3	2.57	1.044	40.62%	-0.266	-1.118
I feel a strong disappointment after the team's losses	217	1	4	3	3.27	0.919	28.10%	-1.170	0.496
Behavioral engagement									
I comment on the club's publications on social media	217	1	4	3	2.59	1.103	42.58%	-0.187	-1.287
I follow the official profiles of the club on social media	217	1	4	3	3.74	0.665	17.78%	-2.800	7.391
I share the publications of the club on social media	217	1	4	3	2.97	1.040	35.02%	-0.666	-0.755
I participate in online discussions and forums related to the club/team	217	1	4	3	2.55	1.058	41.49%	-0.199	-1.180
I create and share content (pictures, videos, memes) about the team on social media	217	1	4	3	2.65	1.088	41.06%	-0.302	-1.193
Interaction with various short video clips featuring famous athletes who promote the brand	217	1	4	3	2.80	1.002	35.78%	-0.474	-0.812

The values of the coefficient of variation (V) for the different factors of the three types of brand engagement (Figure 4) allow us to make some general conclusions about the researched subjects.

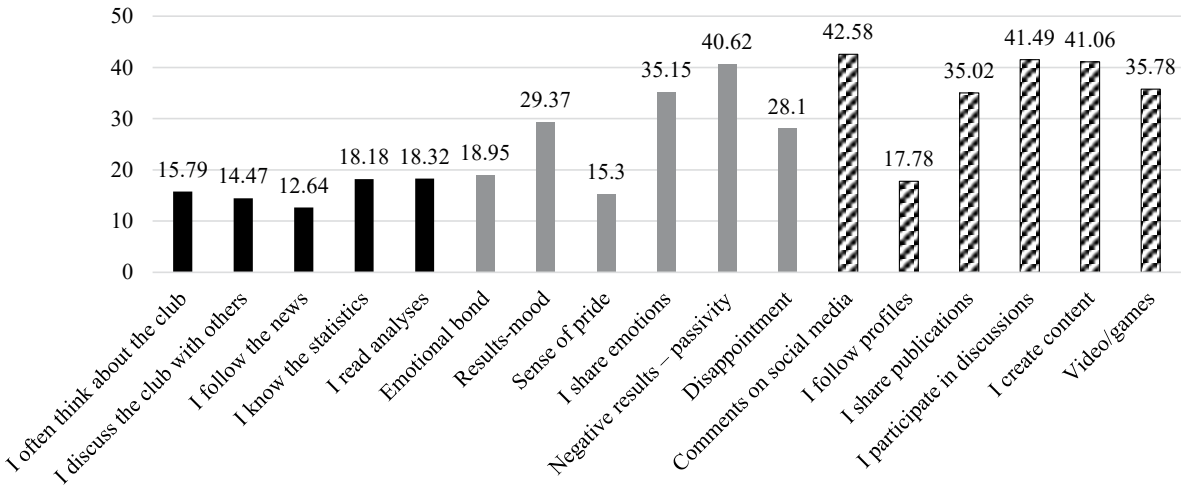

Figure 4. *Values of the coefficient of variation for the different dimensions of brand engagement*

DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal several areas for discussion that could help football clubs analyze the effectiveness of their strategies for engaging with fans through social media.

A key starting point in social media marketing is selecting the platforms to include in a football club's digital strategy. The research data confirm findings from other similar studies: Facebook remains one of the most important social media platforms. Instagram and Twitter are part of a larger group of user-generated content platforms (Kapoor et al., 2018) that play an essential role in the daily lives of consumers worldwide (Voorveld, 2019).

In a study by Tasevski et al. (2019), the authors determined the number of Facebook followers of the top 5 English Premier League clubs. They found that it vastly exceeded that of other platforms. This may be due to Facebook's broader user base, its features that enable the creation of communities and groups, and its variety of content formats (text, images, videos, events).

The second most preferred platform, according to participants, is Instagram. The platform's visual nature—photos and short videos—clearly appeals to the football audience. YouTube ranks third in popularity, indicating that video content related to the club (e.g., match highlights, interviews, training footage, analyses) is of great interest to fans. So et al. (2014) conducted a study on the influence of social media in the tourism industry, where YouTube was found to primarily facilitate content consumption rather than engagement. In contrast to the other leading platforms, Twitter/X has a significantly lower engagement rate. Nevertheless, it can still serve a purpose for quick news updates, live commentary during matches, and direct communication with fans.

Regarding the types of content fans prefer, we can conclude that informational engagement (news, scores, training videos) is most valued. The second most preferred type is emotionally engaging content (highlights, retro footage, interviews). Behavioral stimuli, such as games and questionnaires, remain in the background. They are less prioritized by the fans.

The analysis of motivational categories for interacting with content on social media reveals that informational stimuli lead the way, with 193 responses (88.9%). Fans primarily interact with content due to their need for up-to-date, accurate, and reliable information (e.g., news, events, transfers, results). This confirms the dominant role of cognitive engagement—fans act as "informed consumers."

Social motivation ranks second. A sense of belonging to the fan community (122 responses / 56.2%) is a component of emotional engagement that underscores the importance of identity and loyalty.

The multidimensional nature of brand engagement necessitates a skillful analysis of social media followers and the development of tailored strategies that align with their expectations. The results indicate that cognitive engagement is characterized by consistency—fans exhibit very similar behaviors. Emotional engagement is high but more subjective, showing varied levels of identification and response. An interesting point of analysis is the item: *"Negative results directly affect my activity on social media (passivity)"*. The average score (M = 2.57) suggests a relatively low level of agreement—most fans do not strongly agree that they become passive on social media after defeats. However, the high standard deviation (SD = 1.044) and variation ratio (R = 40.62%) indicate that opinions are widely dispersed—some fans completely withdraw online after losses. In contrast, others remain active or even become more engaged.

These results highlight that social media passivity following a defeat is a highly individual reaction. This should be taken into account when developing digital strategies—not all fans respond the same way during difficult periods, and it is essential to offer ways to keep them engaged even in challenging times.

Behavioral engagement among fans appears to be the most diverse. The data reveal substantial differences in online activity and participation among respondents.

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Design: Slavka Asenova, Svetla Kostova
Publisher: Scientific Publishing House NSA Press
ISBN (Online): 978-954-718-803-7