

The Impact of Social Media Interactivity on Fan Loyalty: An Empirical Study of Football Clubs in Europe

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital platforms has transformed how football clubs engage their supporters. Social media, in particular, enables clubs to maintain interactive, personalized relationships that foster loyalty and identification.

This study conceptually investigates how perceived interactivity on social media influences fan loyalty among European football fans. Drawing upon engagement theory, relationship marketing, and social identity perspectives, the study develops a conceptual model linking perceived interactivity, authenticity, and responsiveness to emotional and behavioral loyalty.

A quantitative survey-based empirical design is proposed to test these relationships across multiple European contexts. The model contributes to sports management literature by integrating digital engagement constructs with traditional loyalty frameworks, and it provides managerial implications for optimizing digital communication strategies within football organizations.

Keywords: fan engagement, social media interactivity, loyalty, football management, Europe.

JEL classification: I2, M3, Z2.

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1. Introduction

In the digital era, professional sports organizations have increasingly turned to social media platforms as a primary interface for managing relationships with their supporters. These platforms enable clubs to transcend geographic boundaries, communicate instantly, and cultivate ongoing dialogue with fans. For European football clubs—many of which possess global audiences—social media has become not merely a communication tool but a core component of strategic fan relationship management.

Fan loyalty represents one of the most valuable intangible assets for sports organizations, influencing revenue, brand equity, and long-term viability. Loyal fans demonstrate sustained emotional attachment, repeat consumption, and advocacy behaviors that strengthen the club's position within competitive leagues (Bauer,

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Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008). However, traditional drivers of loyalty—such as local identity, on-field success, and heritage—are now complemented by digital engagement dynamics that operate through social media interactivity.

The concept of interactivity encompasses two-way communication, participatory dialogue, and feedback mechanisms that enable fans to co-create meaning with clubs (McMillan & Hwang, 2002). When well managed, interactivity enhances perceptions of authenticity and responsiveness, deepening emotional bonds and strengthening behavioral loyalty. Despite this, the relationship between perceived social media interactivity and fan loyalty remains underexplored within the European football context. Moreover, cross-country cultural differences in digital engagement patterns warrant comparative analysis.

This paper aims to address these gaps by developing and conceptually validating an empirical framework to examine how social media interactivity influences fan loyalty. The focus aligns with the journal's interest in comparative and strategic management perspectives, highlighting digital transformation within a globalized industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fan Engagement in Sports Management

Fan engagement has evolved from a marketing-oriented concept to a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions (Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, & Biscaia, 2014). It refers to the intensity of fan–brand interaction and the quality of experiences derived from that relationship. In the digital age, engagement extends beyond physical attendance or merchandise consumption to include online participation, such as commenting, sharing, and content co-creation (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2017).

Engagement serves as both an antecedent and consequence of loyalty. Loyal fans often engage more deeply, while interactive engagement mechanisms can themselves generate loyalty by reinforcing identification with the club (Funk & James, 2001).

2.2 Social Media Interactivity

Social media interactivity can be conceptualized as the degree to which communication between an organization and its audience is reciprocal, responsive, and participatory (Men & Tsai, 2013). For football clubs, interactivity manifests through timely replies, multimedia storytelling, fan polls, live Q&A sessions, and personalized content.

McMillan and Hwang (2002) categorize interactivity into three dimensions:

- User control – the extent to which users navigate and influence the communication experience;
- Two-way communication – mutual exchange between sender and receiver;

Synchronicity – the speed and immediacy of feedback.

These dimensions collectively determine the perceived relational closeness between the fan and the club's online persona.

Research in corporate communication shows that higher perceived interactivity enhances trust, satisfaction, and relational commitment (Men & Tsai, 2013). However, empirical evidence from sports contexts remains limited, especially regarding cross-cultural variations across European football ecosystems.

2.3 Fan Loyalty

Fan loyalty comprises emotional and behavioral components. Emotional loyalty involves psychological attachment and identification, whereas behavioral loyalty relates to repeat actions such as watching matches, purchasing merchandise, and renewing memberships (Gladden & Funk, 2001).

Bauer et al. (2008) suggest that brand image, satisfaction, and identification are key precursors to loyalty in sports. The digital environment introduces new antecedents—particularly perceived interactivity and authenticity—that may reinforce these relationships.

Authenticity, in this context, refers to the perception that the club's digital communication reflects genuine values and fan-oriented intentions. Research indicates that authentic communication enhances trust and emotional connection (Vale & Fernandes, 2018), which are essential for sustaining loyalty in a competitive digital landscape.

2.4 Theoretical Integration

The conceptual model proposed in this paper integrates three complementary theoretical lenses:

Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011): emphasizing interactive, participatory experiences that create value co-creation between the organization and its audience.

Relationship Marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994): focusing on long-term relational exchange, trust, and commitment as drivers of loyalty.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986): explaining how identification with a group or club strengthens emotional attachment.

Together, these frameworks suggest that social media interactivity fosters identification and trust, which in turn enhance loyalty behaviors. This theoretical synthesis provides the foundation for the conceptual model below.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

3.1 Conceptual Model

The proposed model positions Perceived Social Media Interactivity (PSMI) as the central independent variable influencing two dimensions of Fan Loyalty

(FL)—emotional and behavioral. It also introduces Perceived Authenticity (PA) and Responsiveness (R) as mediating mechanisms.

PSMI → (via PA, R) → Emotional Loyalty → Behavioral Loyalty

3.2 Hypotheses

- H1: Perceived social media interactivity has a positive effect on emotional loyalty.
- H2: Perceived social media interactivity has a positive effect on behavioral loyalty.
- H3: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between interactivity and emotional loyalty.
- H4: Responsiveness mediates the relationship between interactivity and behavioral loyalty.
- H5: The strength of these relationships varies across European cultural contexts.

These hypotheses collectively predict that interactivity, by fostering authentic and responsive communication, strengthens both emotional and behavioral components of loyalty.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design intended to empirically test the conceptual model linking perceived social media interactivity to fan loyalty among European football fans. A quantitative approach is justified because it allows the testing of relationships between latent constructs and provides a systematic means of examining the magnitude and direction of hypothesized effects (Creswell, 2014). The design is conceptual–empirical in nature, meaning it proposes a structured empirical framework that can be applied to real data in future research while relying here on simulated methodological rigor.

The research will rely on primary survey data collected through an online questionnaire. This approach aligns with recent sports management studies that leverage online communities as efficient sampling spaces for fans who actively engage in digital environments (Parganas et al., 2017). The use of self-administered online surveys is especially appropriate for examining digital engagement phenomena, as it targets respondents already active in the social media ecosystem.

4.2 Sampling Strategy and Participants

The target population consists of fans of professional football clubs across Europe, specifically from the top-tier leagues of England, Spain, Germany, and Italy. These leagues were selected because of their international prominence, large digital audiences, and well-developed online engagement infrastructures. A non-probability

purposive sampling method is proposed, focusing on individuals who actively follow football clubs on social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook.

Participants will be invited through club-specific online fan forums, Reddit communities, and social media groups. To ensure data reliability and comparability, only respondents aged 18 and above with at least six months of online following activity for a particular club will be included. Based on prior sports management research, a sample size of 400–500 respondents is considered sufficient to detect medium-to-large effect sizes in regression-based analyses (Hair et al., 2019).

To enhance representativeness, responses will be stratified across different countries, ensuring that at least 100 valid responses are collected per national sub-sample. This enables comparative analyses across cultural contexts while maintaining adequate statistical power.

4.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection will be conducted via an online survey instrument distributed through Google Forms or Qualtrics. The survey will be prefaced by an informed consent statement outlining the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and anonymity assurances. No personal identifiers (e.g., names, emails) will be collected.

The survey will be open for approximately four weeks, with periodic reminders posted on relevant fan community pages to maximize participation. To reduce common method bias, items measuring independent and dependent variables will be placed in separate sections, and some question formats will be reversed in polarity. Responses will be automatically coded into numerical data for subsequent statistical analysis.

4.4 Measurement of Constructs

The survey instrument will consist of five main constructs, each operationalized through multiple Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). All scales will be adapted from validated instruments in previous studies, with minor contextual modifications for football fandom.

Construct	Conceptual Definition	Example Measurement Sources	Example Items
Perceived Social Media Interactivity (PSMI)	The degree to which fans perceive the club's social media communication as reciprocal, responsive, and participatory.	Men & Tsai (2013); McMillan & Hwang (2002)	"The club's social media allows me to share my opinions and receive responses."

Construct	Conceptual Definition	Example Measurement Sources	Example Items
Perceived Authenticity (PA)	The extent to which fans perceive the club's online communication as genuine and consistent with its values.	Vale & Fernandes (2018)	"The club's posts seem sincere and aligned with its real identity."
Responsiveness (R)	The perceived timeliness and attentiveness of the club's replies and interactions.	Kent & Taylor (1998)	"The club reacts quickly to fan comments and questions."
Emotional Loyalty (EL)	The emotional bond and identification a fan feels toward the club.	Bauer et al. (2008)	"I feel emotionally connected to my favorite club."
Behavioral Loyalty (BL)	Observable commitment through repeated behaviors such as content consumption or merchandise purchase.	Gladden & Funk (2001)	"I frequently interact with and support my club's digital and physical activities."

A pre-test of the questionnaire with 20–30 respondents will be conducted to ensure clarity, validity, and reliability. Based on feedback, wording adjustments will be made to improve item comprehension.

4.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data will be analyzed using SPSS and AMOS (or SmartPLS) to evaluate reliability, validity, and causal relationships. The following analytical steps are proposed:

1. Preliminary Screening: Removal of incomplete responses and outliers; assessment of missing data and normality.
2. Reliability Testing: Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70 will indicate acceptable internal consistency.
3. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): To identify underlying factor structures and ensure items load correctly onto their respective constructs.
4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA): To verify the measurement model's goodness-of-fit indices (CFI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08).
5. Hypothesis Testing: Multiple regression or structural equation modeling (SEM) will test the direct and mediating effects among constructs (H1–H5).
6. Comparative Analysis: One-way ANOVA or multi-group SEM will explore cross-country differences in the proposed relationships.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The study will adhere to standard ethical guidelines for social science research. Participation will be voluntary and anonymous, with respondents free to withdraw at any time. No personally identifiable data will be stored. Ethical approval will be sought from the author's institutional review board prior to data collection. All procedures will comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) relevant to participants based in the European Union.

4.7 Limitations of Methodological Approach

Although the design ensures robust measurement and cross-cultural insight, it remains cross-sectional, limiting causal inference. Additionally, reliance on self-reported measures may introduce social desirability bias. Future studies could complement survey data with behavioral analytics or longitudinal tracking to strengthen validity.

5. Discussion

The findings of this conceptual–empirical framework suggest that social media interactivity plays a pivotal role in shaping both emotional and behavioral fan loyalty among European football supporters. The proposed model emphasizes that when fans perceive digital interactions with a football club as authentic, responsive, and participatory, they develop a stronger psychological bond with the organization and are more likely to demonstrate loyal behaviors such as repeat engagement, content sharing, and brand advocacy.

From a theoretical standpoint, the model reinforces and extends several key streams of research within sports management and relationship marketing. First, it expands fan engagement theory (Yoshida et al., 2014) by situating interactivity as a *precursor* rather than merely a correlate of engagement. This distinction is significant because it positions interactivity as a controllable managerial variable that can be deliberately shaped by clubs to influence fan outcomes. Second, by integrating relationship marketing theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the model highlights how digital interactions translate into psychological identification and commitment. In this sense, interactivity functions as a relational mechanism that fosters trust and belonging — essential precursors of loyalty in both consumer and fan contexts. These findings support the argument that loyalty in sports is not purely affective or behavioral but also relational and participatory. Third, the proposed mediating roles of authenticity and responsiveness contribute to the growing literature on digital authenticity in sports branding (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Authenticity, in particular, has emerged as a differentiating factor in how fans evaluate communication credibility. The perception that a club's digital voice aligns with its heritage, values, and community identity enhances fans' sense of psychological ownership and belonging. This

authenticity-driven connection deepens emotional loyalty, which in turn strengthens behavioral loyalty.

Because the study is grounded in a European comparative context, cultural variation is central to its interpretation. Europe's football landscape is characterized by heterogeneous fan cultures, varying degrees of commercialization, and distinct communication traditions. For instance, English Premier League clubs often emphasize global branding and high-volume digital content, whereas German Bundesliga clubs highlight community engagement and member-driven governance. These institutional differences likely shape how fans interpret and respond to interactivity cues.

Drawing from cross-cultural communication and comparative management theory, it is reasonable to expect that fans in more collectivist cultures (e.g., Southern Europe) may value communal interaction and inclusivity, while those in individualist cultures (e.g., Northern Europe) might respond more favorably to personalized responsiveness. Future empirical studies could operationalize cultural dimensions (such as Hofstede's cultural indices) to test these moderating effects formally.

Such comparative insights are vital for international sports management, where clubs operate across markets with distinct expectations of authenticity, humor, and transparency in digital communication. Understanding these nuances allows organizations to localize engagement strategies without compromising global brand coherence.

6. Managerial Insights and Digital Strategy

From a managerial perspective, the conceptual results underscore that interactivity should be treated as a strategic asset rather than a technical feature of social media operations. The quality of online interaction — including how clubs respond to fans, acknowledge user-generated content, and sustain dialogue — directly influences loyalty outcomes. This calls for a rethinking of digital engagement strategies across football organizations.

First, authentic storytelling must become a guiding principle of online communication. Fans increasingly expect transparency, cultural sensitivity, and emotional resonance from clubs' digital voices. Generic or excessively commercial content tends to erode trust, whereas authentic narratives — such as behind-the-scenes moments, community initiatives, or heritage-focused campaigns — foster genuine emotional connection. Second, responsiveness should be embedded in communication management. Research in public relations (Kent & Taylor, 1998) shows that dialogic responsiveness signals respect and acknowledgment, key ingredients in building relational capital. Clubs that consistently reply to fan messages, highlight fan contributions, and resolve concerns promptly can transform social media into a space of shared ownership rather than one-way broadcasting. Third, the comparative perspective highlights that one-size-fits-all strategies are ineffective. Managers should develop localized engagement frameworks, adjusting

tone, humor, and responsiveness based on cultural expectations. For example, playful banter that works on English club accounts may not resonate with German or Italian audiences, where authenticity and respect carry higher value.

Finally, the integration of interactivity into a club's broader brand management strategy requires coordination across departments — marketing, communications, fan relations, and operations. Metrics such as interaction ratios, response times, and content engagement levels should be included in performance dashboards, linking fan interactivity with measurable loyalty indicators such as merchandise sales or membership renewals.

While this paper conceptualizes a comprehensive model, several directions remain open for empirical exploration. Longitudinal studies could investigate how changes in social media interactivity over time influence fan loyalty, especially during periods of poor on-field performance or organizational change. Experimental designs could test causal effects by manipulating interactivity levels in simulated digital environments. Moreover, mixed-method approaches combining surveys with social media analytics (e.g., engagement metrics, sentiment analysis) could yield richer insights into fan–club interactions.

Researchers may also extend the model to other sports or emerging digital platforms such as TikTok or fan token ecosystems, which introduce new forms of interactivity and participation. Finally, comparative studies beyond Europe — particularly involving Asian or Latin American markets — would deepen understanding of global fan cultures and their digital behaviors.

To summarize, the integration of interactivity, authenticity, and responsiveness into fan relationship management transforms digital communication from a promotional tool into a strategic mechanism for sustaining long-term commitment. For both scholars and practitioners, the findings emphasize the need to view fan engagement as a dynamic, co-created process grounded in dialogue, authenticity, and shared identity.

7. Managerial Implications

For practitioners, the findings highlight that fan loyalty is not merely a function of team success, but also of digital relationship quality.

Clubs should:

- Invest in interactive social media management, ensuring two-way dialogue rather than one-way broadcasting.
- Promote authentic storytelling—content that aligns with the club's heritage, community, and values.
- Monitor response time and tone to maintain credibility and emotional resonance.
- Segment content strategies based on regional fan cultures and language preferences.

Such strategies strengthen the emotional and behavioral ties that sustain fan loyalty and brand equity over time.

8. Conclusions

This study set out to conceptually examine how social media interactivity shapes fan loyalty within European professional football. Drawing upon engagement theory, relationship marketing, and social identity frameworks, it proposed an integrative model linking perceived interactivity, authenticity, and responsiveness to emotional and behavioral loyalty. The study argues that in an era where digital communication dominates fan–club interaction, the quality of interactive online experiences has become a decisive factor in maintaining and strengthening fan relationships.

The conceptual findings emphasize that interactivity is not merely a technical function of social media but a relational mechanism that fosters emotional closeness and long-term behavioral commitment. When fans perceive that clubs communicate with sincerity, respond promptly, and allow space for participation, they internalize a stronger sense of belonging and identification. This aligns with the broader shift from transactional marketing toward co-creative, dialogue-based relationship building in sports management.

From a comparative management perspective, the framework underscores that fan engagement practices are culturally embedded. European football, with its diversity of traditions, fan cultures, and communication styles, provides an ideal setting to explore how national context moderates the digital relationship between clubs and supporters. Differences in communication norms, collectivism, and emotional expression likely shape how fans interpret interactivity and authenticity online. Consequently, future empirical work should investigate these contextual variations to better understand the **cross**-cultural transferability of digital engagement strategies.

Beyond its theoretical implications, the study offers strategic guidance for football clubs and sports organizations. Effective fan engagement requires moving beyond content broadcasting to cultivating two-way dialogue. Managers should invest in responsive community management, authenticity-driven storytelling, and real-time fan interaction, ensuring that digital communication mirrors the emotional values that underpin fandom. By doing so, clubs can transform social media from a marketing platform into a relational ecosystem that sustains loyalty and advocacy.

Finally, while this research contributes a novel conceptual model, it also highlights avenues for future inquiry. Empirical testing through large-scale, cross-national surveys or digital analytics would validate the proposed relationships and assess the strength of mediating effects. Longitudinal designs could further reveal how fan loyalty evolves over time as clubs adapt their digital engagement strategies. As the sports industry continues to digitalize, understanding how interactive technologies shape emotional and behavioral loyalty will remain central to effective sports management and global brand development.

In sum, the study advances the discussion of fan engagement by positioning social media interactivity as a strategic, relational, and culturally contingent driver of fan loyalty. It bridges theoretical and managerial perspectives, offering both a conceptual foundation and practical roadmap for clubs seeking to strengthen their fan communities in an increasingly connected sporting world.

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