



SCHOOL OF  
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# The Unbreakable Bond

A Qualitative Study on the Relationship between Football Fans and  
Their Clubs

by

Axel Paulsson & Tim Kämpe

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Supervisor: Veronika Tarnovskaya

Examiner: Mats Urde

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# Abstract

**Title:** The Unbreakable Bond: A Qualitative Study on the Relationship between Football Fans and Their Clubs

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**Authors:** Axel Paulsson and Tim Kämpe

**Supervisor:** Veronika Tarnovskaya

**Thesis Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to outline the relationship between football fans and their respective clubs. The seemingly unbreakable consumer loyalty a football team enjoys is arguably unique in the corporate world, and we aim to examine this loyalty and its influence on the brand-consumer relationship.

**Theory:** The theory used in this thesis is centred around brand loyalty and consumer-brand relationships. The seminal work of Fournier (1998) is used as a foundation for studying the relationship between fans and their respective clubs and the aspect of loyalty hones in on identity, community, and brand attributes.

**Methodology:** This study takes a qualitative approach where eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with football fans in order to collect the empirical data.

**Findings:** The conclusions from this thesis is that Fournier's model on consumer-brand relationship is insufficient in describing the connection between a fan and their football club. This is a unique consumer-brand relationship, divergent from existing models, that deserves its own classification. Therefore, this thesis has extended Fournier's (1998) typology to include an additional relationship form called "Fandom", which relates to connections that are intense, enduring, public, asymmetric, personal, both positive and negative, and voluntary at the start but as time passes it grows into an imposed relationship. Finally, another finding is the need for an additional dimension to explain the consumer-brand relationship. To solely view it as a dyadic connection is not justifiable, and instead third parties must be accounted for which means that the relationship can be triadic in nature as well.

**Practical Implications:** The findings showed the importance of a strong brand loyalty in connection to creating a lasting, unbreakable relationship. By developing a clear brand identity that consumers can identify with as well as to provide platforms and contexts where brand communities can develop, managers can create a greater brand loyalty and potentially cultivate a fandom relationship.

**Keywords:** Consumer-brand relationship, Football fans, Brand loyalty, Identity, Community

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Axel Paulsson & Tim Kämpe

Lund, Sweden

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The inaugural FIFA World Cup in 1930, hosted in Uruguay, marked the dawn of what would evolve into a global sporting phenomenon. However, financial constraints limited participation to just 13 national football teams, primarily due to the exorbitant travel costs and the inability of players to take extended leave from their daytime occupations. This trend persisted for decades, with football largely regarded as a pastime rather than a lucrative venture. In 1958, as Sweden prepared to host the World Cup, the Swedish Football Association took a notable stance by formally forbidding the selection of professional, wage-earning players for the national team. Their rationale underscored football as a cultural pursuit accessible to the masses, shielded from commercial agendas.

Fast forward almost a century, and the landscape of sports in general, and football in particular, has undergone a remarkable transformation. Football has transcended its status as a mere sport to become a multi-billion euro industry. The top football clubs now operate on a scale akin to mid-sized multinational enterprises, generating staggering revenues and commanding global audiences. For instance, Deloitte (2024) reports that the top 20 clubs collectively generated over 10 billion euros in revenue, with Real Madrid leading the pack at 831 million euros in 2023. Furthermore, football clubs have evolved into powerful brands in their own right, with values that rival those of established corporations. Manchester City, for instance, boasts a brand value of 1.51 billion euros, closely followed by Real Madrid at 1.46 billion euros (Statista, 2023). In tandem with their growth as corporations and brands, football clubs have diversified their business portfolios, expanding into new realms beyond the football pitch. Today, they are multifaceted entities that engage in various commercial activities, from merchandising to digital ventures. Noteworthy examples among English clubs include West Ham United's investment in eSports, Arsenal's establishment of an innovation lab supporting technology start-ups, and Tottenham's focus on real estate development, as noted by Holzmayer and Schmidt (2020).

Despite the increasing commercialization of sports blurring the lines between football clubs and conventional corporations, studies indicate that supporters resist viewing their teams as

commercial entities (e.g. Chadwick & Beech, 2007; Chadwick & Holt, 2006; Conn, 1998). Underwood et al. (2001) argue that fans' deep emotional connection with their clubs engenders a sense of sacredness, fostering a profound bond and a sensitivity towards over-commercialization. This distinguishes football supporters from the lion share of non-sport brand consumers, and Chadwick and Holt (2006) provide additional findings which further illustrate the differentiation. They argue that consumers, or fans, of sport teams do not act in the same rational, economic manner as customers in sectors like FMCG or retail. The irrationality can be exemplified by the many instances where football clubs have suffered prolonged difficulties, performed much below par, and caused widespread feelings of disappointment within the fan base, yet supporters still return to consume match tickets, merchandise, and broadcasting subscriptions. In 2009, English powerhouse Newcastle United were relegated from the Premier League after having played in it since its conception in 1992. This was a major shock and the whole fan base was deeply disappointed, yet when the new season started the tickets were once again sold out. Similarly, Manchester United made it a habit to win with their 13 league titles between 1992-2013, but they have not been close to achieving the same success during the last 10 years. Still, Manchester United is one of the biggest clubs in the world in terms of fans, recognition, and revenue. These examples are underpinned by the findings of Fisher and Wakefield (1998) who conclude that fan motivation and loyalty is seemingly unrelated to competitive club performance.

## 1.2 Problematization

While brand loyalty is a heavily studied phenomenon in marketing literature, the loyalty exhibited by football supporters represents a unique case as, unlike other consumer behaviours, football supporters exhibit a seemingly unwavering allegiance despite fluctuations in team performance or product quality. Examining non-sport brands, Greyser (2009) does argue that repeated successful brand activities and deliveries on the promised value can create an increased loyalty reserve. This reputational reservoir, as he calls it, can serve as a cushion in times of crisis and retain customers even though satisfaction levels are below par - however this cannot continue in perpetuity. Similarly to Greyser, Fournier (1998) argues that there are forms of connections in which there is a high tolerance for transgressions. In her seminal work on consumer-brand relationships, she calls this type of connection a “dependency” and describes it as an obsessive, highly emotional relationship cemented by a feeling that the other is irreplaceable. Fournier (1998) defines the

consumer-brand relationship as a dyadic connection centred around the interactions consumers have with brands. The specific relationship-type she refers to as a “dependency” is in her work exemplified by how interview subjects found certain products irreplaceable. They could not go a day without certain product attributes like the smell of a detergent, or the moisturising effect of a skin care item. Towing a congruent line with both Greyser and Fournier, Jeon and Baeck (2016) argue that the strength of the customer-brand relationship is a tangible mediating factor in times of crisis, showcasing a certain degree of resistance to negative reputation from loyal customers.

While this shows that strong loyalty and close relationships exists for non-sport corporations as well, we argue that supporters' loyalty to their football clubs is a phenomenon that challenges conventional branding paradigms. Football supporters are argued to act in different, irrational manners compared to other consumers, and this can be illustrated by the lack of continuity in terms of product-related brand attributes within the sport. Akin to previously mentioned items, football clubs also have certain product attributes, and while the brands selling detergent or skin care might exhibit certain qualities like a distinct fragrance or a powerful moisturising effect, Bauer et al. (2008) stipulate that the product-related brand attributes of a football team consists of five elements: (1) success, (2) star players, (3) head coach, (4) team, and (5) team performance. All of these building blocks are highly prone to change, even in short-term cycles. To exemplify, during the 2022/23 season of the Premier League, which consists of 20 clubs, 32 head coach changes were made, with four clubs substituting their manager four times during the year (Transfermarkt, 2024). The elements of success and team performance are also fugacious, exemplified by the historically highly competitive clubs Newcastle United and Manchester United who now perform below par. The building blocks of star players as well as the team itself are also subject to a high degree of change, as players regularly complete club transfers, leaving the team composition and existence of star players looking differently from season to season. According to FIFA (2024) during the year 2023, a total of 74 836 players changed clubs, and this number only accounts for cross-border transfers, illustrating the lack of continuity in terms of team composition.

These volatile product-related attributes illustrate football clubs as something supporters simply cannot depend on, defying one of the core functions a brand has, namely to be a seal of guarantee for customers (Kapferer, 2012). Yet, supporters showcase a seemingly bulletproof loyalty, and clubs enjoy a virtually bottomless reputational reservoir.



Devise that the detergent or the skin care item exhibited a similar amount of volatility in regards to product-related brand attributes. It is inconceivable that customers would make repeat-purchases, develop a loyalty and subsequently a relationship with the brand if the fragrance suddenly changed every other month, or if the moisturising effect varied every week. It would simply not be dependable anymore, and hence not suitable under the relationship headline “dependency” coined by Fournier (1998). While many supporters are arguably emotionally dependent on their teams, the irregularity of football clubs positions them outside of what can be considered a dependency relationship, and neither does any of the other categories in Fournier’s typology seem to fit.

Advocates call for increased academic scrutiny of brand attachment and consumer-brand relationships in novel sectors like sports (Shimul, 2022), and this unparalleled loyalty existing between supporters and their clubs prompts a reevaluation of existing consumer-brand relationship models. The questions raised about the nature of the relationship between football fans and their clubs, which the existing literature fails to adequately capture, unveils untrodden academic ground, ripe for novel research. In this context, we seek to understand and decode the connection between supporters and their clubs, focusing on the role of brand loyalty as a key driver. By delving into this topic we aim to shed light on a relationship that defies conventional brand paradigms and opens new avenues for scholarly inquiry. Through a comprehensive analysis of the relationship from a fan-perspective, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between sport, business, and consumer loyalty.

### 1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to outline the relationship between supporters and their football clubs. Given the hyper-commercialisation of sports in general and football in particular, football clubs can be positioned in the arena of corporate entities and this study will view the connection between fans and their teams from a consumer-brand perspective. The seemingly unbreakable consumer loyalty a football team enjoys is arguably unique in the corporate world, and we aim to examine this loyalty and its influence on the brand-consumer relationship by asking:

*What does the relationship between football supporters and their clubs look like, and how is it shaped by the inherent brand loyalty?*

## 1.4 Delimitations

This study focuses on the relationship between fans located in Sweden and their favourite teams in England. The reasoning behind this is that the Premier League is arguably the biggest football league in the world, with the highest following worldwide. Not only is it the biggest league in football, but it is also the richest, most financially strong tournament, which means that these teams are at the forefront of hyper-commercialisation. As a final note, the decision to study Swedish fans of English football teams is rooted in the widespread phenomenon of Swedes showing strong support for English teams.

## 1.5 Intended Contributions

This study intends to contribute to the existing literature within brand loyalty and consumer-brand relationships. The hyper-commercialisation of football has propelled the sector into the realm of conventional branding and marketing practices, and given this novelty there is a lack of understanding of the consumer-brand relationship between a fan and their club, as well as how the strong associated loyalty fuels it. We intend to contribute to existing theory by mapping out a consumer-brand relationship that is insufficiently explained by current models, and by doing so, we aim to tentatively build out existing theories in order for them to capture seemingly divergent forms of consumer-brand relationships like the connection between a fan and their football team.

## 2. Literature Review

The following section will present the existing academic work relevant to the topic of this research paper. The evolution and the current state of the main literature streams within brand loyalty as well as consumer-brand relationships will be outlined, and each area of branding research will also be supplemented with the current state of academia in relation to the area of football.

### 2.1 Differentiations within the Concept of Brand Loyalty

In the early days of research encompassing the phenomenon of brand loyalty, the initial stance was to view it in relation to switching costs. Klemperer (1995) proposes that brand loyalty occurs when a consumer has a wish for compatibility between current and past investments. These investments are argued to come in four different shapes: (1) physical, (2) informational, (3) artificial, and (4) psychological. The first two shapes can be considered as more geared towards operational needs and focus on the requirement for compatibility with existing equipment, transaction costs related to switching suppliers, the cost of learning to use new brands, as well as the uncertainty attached to utilising previously untested brands. The artificial investments relate to discount coupons or similar loyalty bonus programmes which are created by corporations to create a sense of previous investment among recurring customers. The psychological investment is described by Klemperer (1995) as non-economic brand loyalty. There is no financial gain to stick to a certain brand, but customers change their own preferences in favour of products and brands they have previously tested. The rationale behind this behaviour is that it reduces cognitive dissonance. While the first three types of investments clearly relate more to tangible switching costs, the concept of psychological brand loyalty caught the interest of several scholars, spinning it off to its own distinct research area.

Bloemer and Kasper (1995) focus on the psychological dimension of brand loyalty and stipulate that while recurring purchases is an important part of loyalty, the antecedents to that very behaviour are just as important. They go on to argue that brand loyalty can be divided into two distinct types: (1) true brand loyalty, and (2) spurious brand loyalty. The difference between the two is that spurious loyalty is a function of inertia, while true brand loyalty is argued by the authors to be based on a psychological evaluation process resulting in brand

commitment. To exemplify, Bloemer and Kasper (1995) mean that a true brand loyal customer is attached to the specific brand, and this commitment drives the will to keep consuming that very same brand. In contrast, a consumer with spurious loyalty might buy from the same brand again, but they can also easily switch to another brand. Given the complete lack of attachment a spuriously loyal buyer inhibits, a better deal, a bonus coupon, or an enhanced visibility can swiftly capture their interest and direct it towards another brand. Interestingly enough, Bloemer and Kasper (1995) stipulate that the two types of brand loyalty are end-points in a continuum, meaning that the commitment to a brand can differ substantially.

In the same vein as the differentiation between spurious and true brand loyalty, scholars argue that there are three main streams of research in relation to the concept of loyalty: (1) behavioural loyalty, (2) attitudinal loyalty, and (3) composite loyalty (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). The concept of behavioural loyalty focuses solely on repeat purchases as a measure of loyalty. Tucker (1964) voiced this argument in an early school of thought and stipulated that loyalty can be fully accounted for by examining purchase behaviour. This means that past purchases of a brand signifies brand loyalty. However, similarly to the concept of spurious brand loyalty, the idea to consider loyalty solely as a function of purchasing patterns is deemed to be stochastic (Uncles et al. 2003). In contrast, attitudinal loyalty is defined as the level of the customer's psychological attachment and attitudinal advocacy towards the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

In congruence with Bloemer and Kasper's (1995) idea that brand loyalty cannot sufficiently be explained by past purchase behaviour, but also needs to be complemented with the underlying psychological attachment that drives the behaviour, scholars support the utilisation of a composite measure, encompassing both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty (e.g., Jacoby & Kyner, 1973; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Dick & Basu, 1994). This more holistic view, which the composite loyalty approach offers, is argued to ease the identification of loyal consumers as well as the determination of the degree of loyalty (Knox & Denison, 2000; Pritchard & Howard, 1997). While the terminology differs between the composite loyalty approach and Bloemer and Kasper's (1995) spurious-true loyalty continuum, the core idea is shared; brand loyalty cannot be sufficiently defined by purchase behaviours, attitudinal dimensions need to be accounted for as well.

In the context of football, behavioural loyalty relates to the repeated purchases of for instance tickets, merchandise, broadcasting subscriptions and other club-created items. A large part of the research on the topic of brand loyalty and football has come within the behavioural loyalty literature stream (e.g. Yoshida et al. 2014; Moital et al. 2019). However, identically to the brand loyalty field as a whole, researchers within football loyalty increasingly agree that the attitudinal component of loyalty cannot be ignored (e.g. Rosenberger et al. 2019; Yoon et al. 2017). In the context of football, the attitudinal loyalty defines the degree of attachment to a team, and Heere and Dickinson (2008) argue that this commitment connects to a resistance to change. Honing in on this reluctance to change, Wang et al. (2011) argue that attitudinal loyalty for football brands encompasses three dimensions: (1) a persistence of a supporter's attitude in the long-term, (2) a resistance to alter or substitute the allegiance to the specific team, and (3) a biased interpretation of team-related information. This illustrates attitudinal loyalty as a product of the interaction between potential negative external changes and the supporter's psychological will to persist in terms of team allegiance. This shows that when a football team performs below par and supporters maintain an unwavering allegiance, the attitudinal loyalty is activated, and if purchasing patterns remain the same during times of crisis, the behavioural loyalty remains high.

There are arguments suggesting that the attitudinal dimension plays a more substantive role in football brand loyalty as a strong team allegiance does not necessarily equate repeated, or frequent, purchases, nor does a high degree of repeat-buying ensure a solid team allegiance. Behavioural loyalty alone is not a sufficient measure. For instance, Merten et al. (2023) found that fans supporting a foreign club tend to show a significantly stronger psychological attachment and identification with the team, compared to supporters who originate or reside in the same region as the club. While the close geographical proximity lowers the threshold for repeat purchases of for instance match tickets or official merchandise, it does evidently not promote a stronger attitudinal loyalty. To further illustrate, Maderer and Holtbrügge (2019) argue that certain internationalisation efforts undertaken by football clubs, such as business activities, can have a negative impact on attitudinal loyalty, while behavioural loyalty remains unaffected in this regard. This shows that within the realm of football, behavioural and attitudinal loyalty are not necessarily linked. To expand on the findings of Maderer and Holtbrügge (2019), the potential tensions in terms of attitudinal loyalty created by international business activities can arguably be linked to supporters' aversion to view their team as a commercial entity. Underwood et al. (2001) argue that fans' deep emotional

connection with their clubs engenders a sense of sacredness, fostering a profound bond and a sensitivity towards over-commercialization, and this stance is shared by a host of additional studies as well (e.g. Chadwick & Beech, 2007; Chadwick & Holt, 2006; Conn, 1998).

While the lion share of football brand loyalty research points to a reluctance from fans to consider their club as a corporation, Abosag et al. (2012) argue that this perception is stale and less relevant today. In today's environment, they argue that supporters have developed a more pragmatic stance towards commercialisation and branding efforts, realising that these are necessary tools to ensure the future success of their clubs. They present findings that show how fans with a strong emotional attachment to their club seemingly have a stronger perception of the club as a brand and support commercial activities to a larger extent. This directly opposes the argument of Underwood et al. (2001) who argue that a strong emotional connection does not warrant a stronger support for brand extensions and business activities, but instead an increased aversion to them. While Abosag et al. (2012) challenge the status quo, they do also emphasise the importance for club managers to exercise business activities with caution. Brand extensions and other ventures must clearly reflect the heritage and tradition of the club in order to obtain fan approval. This shows how Abosag et al. (2012) view supporters as more pragmatic as they accept commercialisation on the terms that it leads to club success further down the line. However, as exemplified through the many instances of sustained poor team performances and enduring club allegiance from fans, performance and success are seemingly not necessary for the cultivation and maintaining of loyalty, an argument mirrored by Fisher and Wakefield (1998). Then, what is it that drives loyalty?

## 2.2 Antecedents to Brand Loyalty

The concept of brand loyalty has received extensive scholarly attention and been a heavily studied subject for almost six decades. This focus has sprouted a wide variety of perceived antecedents to brand loyalty, with Desveaud et al. (2024) reporting that over 200 different concepts have been identified and examined as tentative drivers of brand loyalty.

Conceivably, many of these antecedents are intertwined, which has posed challenges for researchers to effectively synthesise and consolidate these concepts into different overarching categories. Desveaud et al. (2024) argue that drivers of brand loyalty can be split up into four meta-concepts: (1) brand offer, (2) consumer-brand alignment, (3) brand experience, and (4) consumer-brand bonding. Examining these stipulated categories separately, the concept of

brand offer revolves around the consumers' perception of product or service attributes, including both functional and non-functional characteristics. Consumer-brand alignment refers to how brand image and identity is evaluated and matched with the consumers' own idea of themselves, their personality and characteristics. Brand experience focuses on the consumer response which occurs when interacting with the provided product or service, and finally the concept of consumer-brand bonding describes a connection characterised by high degrees of emotion and trust, which the consumers form with a brand. While it is beyond the scope of this study to review and account for all components of each of the four meta-concepts, the following sections will present the most relevant aspects for this study and the football brand loyalty perspective.

### 2.2.1 Brand Offer

Examining the concept of brand offer, Kapferer (2012) stipulates that a brand exhibits a host of key functions utilisable for the customer. He summarises these functions in eight different categories: (1) identification, (2) practicality, (3) guarantee, (4) optimisation, (5) badge, (6) continuity, (7) hedonistic excitement, and (8) ethical. The function of identification refers to the ability to quickly identify sought-after products, and in a similar vein, the practicality function revolves around how brands allow customers to save time by unlocking the concept of identical repurchasing. The functions of guarantee and optimisation pertain to the quality of the product or service. The brand guarantees a certain quality no matter where or how you buy, and the brand can also come with the promise of optimised performance for the particular purpose. The badge-function means that the brand works as a confirmation of one's self-image, or a symbol of the status a customer wishes to showcase to the surrounding environment. On a more intrinsic note, the function of continuity describes how a brand that is consumed on a repeated long-term basis can benefit the consumer by invoking a sense of familiarity and intimacy. Hedonistic excitement refers to how a brand can function as an activator of enchantment for the customer. Certain aspects of the brand can appear as strongly attractive, for instance the logo, design, or mode of communication. Finally, the ethical function describes how a brands' CSR activities and responsible behaviour can create a sense of satisfaction for consumers. Noticeable here is that some functions are the result of certain product-related attributes, while others are more connected to non-product-related dimensions. Honing in on that very subject, Keller (1993) explains that these attributes relate to the specific properties and qualities of a brand that characterises the product or service.

Specifically, product-related attributes relate to the tangible, physical features of a product/service, while non-product-related attributes encompass external components that are not directly tied to the product or service, but still connected to the process of buying and consuming. To exemplify, the fragrance of a detergent is a product-related attribute, while the price, packaging and usage imagery are non-product-related attributes.

From a football perspective, Bauer et al. (2008) argue that product-related attributes are the ones that directly affect sport performance, while non-product-related dimensions do not directly connect to success for the team on the pitch. With this definition in mind, the authors argue that these attributes can be listed and categorised. For product-related brand attributes, Bauer et al. (2008) stipulate that a football club hosts five different concepts: (1) Success, (2) star player, (3) head coach, (4) team, and (5) team performance. As previously explained, these attributes are all prone to a high degree of change, with players and managers frequently changing clubs, and success as well as team performance can vary largely from month to month. There simply is no guaranteed continuity. However, Bauer et al. (2008) also present eight non-product-related brand attributes for football teams, and these concepts are arguably more solid and long-term oriented. These attributes are: (1) management, (2) logo and club colours, (3) stadium, (4) club history and tradition, (5) club culture and values, (6) fans, (7) sponsor/owner, and (8) regional provenance.

Even though these concepts are less volatile than the product-related attributes of a football club, they are not immune to change. Similarly to the board of directors attached to a conventional corporation, the management positions within a football club do change, however rarely as often as for instance the head coach. The logo and club colours can be considered to be the very heart and soul of a football brand, but there are instances where even these items have been altered. Major clubs occasionally modernise their logos to keep up with the times, as an example Manchester City updated their logo in 2015, Juventus revamped theirs in 2017, and Aston Villa unveiled a new shield in 2022. Even club colours can change, even though it is a rare occurrence. Manchester United wore green and gold at the time of their conception, in contrast to their red jersey today, and another extraordinary example is Cardiff City who changed from their original blue colours to red in 2012 when Malaysian businessman Vincent Tan took over the club, believing it would bring good fortune.



Moving on, a change of stadium is a massive undertaking for a football club, yet given the old age of many arenas, clubs increasingly renovate, rebuild, or construct new homes. The concepts of club history, tradition, culture, and values are to a large extent safeguarded by the fans themselves, and Bauer et al. (2008) argue that these very attributes are vital to how the brand is perceived, especially in this context where there is no physical core product. In such a context, De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2001) explain that the perception of a service brand (or non-product brand) is heavily influenced by the organisational culture, the behaviour of the stakeholders, and the permeating values. In terms of the fans as a non-product-related attribute, this is closely related to how the fan base takes part in a brand co-creation by for instance providing a certain atmosphere in and around the stadium during games (Cherubini, 2006). This aspect will be further explored under section 2.2.3.

While the fan base of a major football team is a large, diverse melting pot, certain changes and alterations can be noticed. As a result of soaring ticket prices, especially in the Premier League, many clubs experience a shift in match day attendance from highly engaged, often local, supporters, to experience-seeking tourists and sponsorship representatives. In 2024, Tottenham's supporters trust reacted vigorously to the news that season tickets were to increase in price with 6%, stating that it is unacceptable and cannot be justified (BBC, 2024). The second-to-last non-product-related attribute stipulated by Bauer et al. (2008) is the ownership of the football club, which is a dimension of particular interest in recent times. In 2021, a consortium led by the Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund took over Newcastle United, sparking widespread debate regarding sportswashing and the appropriateness of a cultural British institution now owned and operated by Saudi interests. While this is solely one example, it showcases how football club ownership has become increasingly prone to change with the trend of foreign purse-strung entities showing interest in investing in sport. Lastly, the concept of regional provenance relates to country-of-origin effects on either a local, regional, or national level. Bauer et al. (2008) exemplifies this by pointing to how clubs like Arsenal or Chelsea are heavily influenced by the parts of London in which they are situated. The local provenance is arguably the dimension least prone to change, however it is not unheard of for clubs to relocate. In 2002 Wimbledon FC were moved by its owners from the south of London to Milton Keynes, and in 1913 Arsenal moved up to north London from their original base in the south of the capital. In conclusion, observing the product-related, and non-product-related, attributes of a football club, it is discernible that the product-related

aspects are prone to change to a much higher degree, however it is not unheard of non-product-related dimensions showing signs of volatility as well.

A key takeaway from the field of brand offer in relation to football clubs is the result presented by numerous researchers (eg. Bauer et al. 2005; Bauer et al. 2008) that the effect of non-product-related attributes on attachment, identification, and loyalty is almost three times higher compared to product-related attributes. The rationale behind this is that many fans have a long-standing history of being a supporter and have experienced a multitude of product-related changes, and that the more solid contextual aspects of non-product-related attributes hold a greater relevance. This signals that competitive success is not the central driver of the loyalty and relationship between fans and their club, but instead aspects such as culture, traditions, other fans, and values matter more.

### 2.2.2 Consumer-Brand Alignment

Examining the consumer-brand alignment, the concept of brand identity becomes central. Kapferer (2012) has done extensive work on the subject and defines brand identity as key beliefs, core values, and vision of the brand and it is not uncommon for it to draw upon origin, roots and heritage. Kapferer (2012) further argues that if constructed and maintained carefully, the brand identity can be an important aspect that breeds loyalty. He goes on to argue that the concept of identity has six different facets and can be captured with the following headlines: (1) physique, (2) personality, (3) relationship, (4) culture, (5) reflection, and (6) self-image. The first two facets, physique and personality, relate to how the brand is depicted by the company itself. They revolve around salient physical specifics as well as the certain communication style of the brand. The aspects of relationship and culture depict externalisation as well as internalisation. The relationship facet connects to how the brand interacts and relates with its customers, and the culture dimension is described as the brand's ideology. The last two aspects illustrate the consumers themselves. The reflection describes how a brand can portray a certain image for its users and how customers wish to be perceived in a certain way from consuming a specific brand. Finally, the self-image facet refers to how customers view themselves as a result of consuming a certain brand. All of these aspects are argued to make up the identity of the brand, and especially relevant to the concept of consumer-brand alignment are the reflection and self-image facets. The alignment between consumer and brand is argued to occur when consumers have a sense of shared identity with

the brand (Carlson et al. 2008), which implies a process of self-categorisation for others, similarly to the reflection facet. A comparable concept is self-congruence which is a process of self-definition and relates to the connection between the consumer's real or ideal view of themselves and the brand's identity (Sirgy, 1982), a concept more similar to the facet of self-image.

In the realm of football, teams wield a strong ability to construct a personal connection with fans by stimulating emotional responses (Sutton et al. 1997), and this extends to the point where supporters view their team allegiance as a part of their own identity (Tapp, 2004). This stance is mirrored by a myriad of researchers. For instance, Hogg et al. (1995) argue that a fan's identification with their club can help them define themselves through the process of self-categorisation, and Wann et al. (2000) mean that team allegiance can be a vital part of one's social identity. With this in mind, researchers argue that "a sense of belonging" is an antecedent to supporter-team identification (Wann & Pierce, 2003). Furthermore, Fink et al. (2002) mean that fans have traditionally identified with and supported certain teams instead of singular athletes, however given the rocket-like growth of social media and its importance for sport sponsors (Koronios et al. 2022), star players have been transformed into powerful cultural products in their own right which makes it easier for fans to identify not only with their favourite team, but with certain individual players as well (Summers & Morgan, 2008). Lewis (2018) even means that there is evidence of fans inhibiting such a strong player identification that a club transfer for that particular player triggers a change in team allegiance for the fan, following along with their favourite athlete. While this is arguably an extreme, Hoegle et al. (2014) stipulate that football stars play a large role in determining the degree to which a fan identifies with their team. A rationale behind this is brought by Robinson et al. (2004) who argue that connection is kindled much easier with a single player, than with a more abstract entity such as a football team. However, noteworthy is also that team identification appears to be a significantly more stable concept, surviving periods of underwhelming results and hardships, while Chung et al. (2019) argue that identification to individual players is highly volatile and strongly correlates with the players' performance, signalling a more fragile connection.

Even though players are clearly gaining increased power in terms of fan-identification, Merten et al. (2023) present results showing that football fans overall identify more with their favourite team than their favourite player, by quite a long distance. In the same research, they

also present the interesting findings that identification can seemingly be transferred between clubs and players. Fans showed a weaker connection with their favourite player if (s)he had never represented their favourite team, and the same applies to their team identification. Additionally, Merten et al. (2023) conclude that there is a positive correlation between team identification and loyalty, and this is argued to be true for both attitudinal and behavioural aspects. Fans who feel aligned with their team are more likely to remain a supporter no matter the state of the team performance or success, which is seemingly a red thread throughout this literature body, and a finding mirrored by Fisher and Wakefield (1998).

### 2.2.3 Brand Experience

As an overview of the field, research has shown that brand experience happens for customers during three different stages: (1) while searching, (2) while shopping and receiving service, and (3) while consuming (Holbrook, 2000; Brakus et al. 2008; Arnould & Price, 1993). Observing the first stage, the brand experience occurs when consumers search and evaluate products or services. This experience can be either direct, if the interaction involves physical contact with the product, or indirect if the experience comes from advertisements or other visual aids (Hoch & Ha, 1986; Kempf & Smith, 1998). The brand experience related to shopping and service focuses on atmospheric variables and the mannerism of the deployed salespeople (Ofir & Simonson, 2007). A prime example from the retail sector is Abercrombie and Fitch who provide their customers with a complete, stimulating experience in-store, with elements like shaded lightning, loud music, and engaging visuals. Brakus et al. (2009) describe the example of Abercrombie as being part of an exclusive country-club community while shopping. Finally, brand experience also occurs during the actual consumption of the specific product. These experiences are multifaceted and often revolve around hedonic feelings, fantasies, and fun (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The composite of these aspects makes up the entirety of the brand experience, and Brakus et al. (2009) argue that it has a clear impact on consumer satisfaction as well as brand loyalty.

From a football perspective, the brand experience stages are intertwined and it is arguably more difficult to divide the concept into outright individual stages or sections. However, similarly to more conventional products or services, the environment and atmosphere on-site is a major contributor to the brand experience. For football teams, this revolves heavily around the ambience, mood, and feeling in and around the stadium during games.

Interestingly enough, this atmosphere is largely resulting from the fans themselves, engaging in chants and similar signs of allegiance. Cherubini (2006) means that supporters frequently turn from consumers into prosumers and are themselves involved in creating the brand experience. While the fans themselves play a key role in the brand experience for football teams, Shuv-Ami (2016) argues that the clubs themselves can do more from a marketing perspective in order to enhance the experience. The author means that an approach similar to large-scale “American” event production can be adopted, with actions such as national anthem performances, giving away specially branded merchandise, facilitating artistic shows during the half-time break, and decorating the stadium in distinct ways. Shuv-Ami (2016) argues that this can be important from a managerial perspective as an enhanced and satisfactory fan experience cultivates engagement and loyalty, irregardless of whether the team is performing or under-performing on the pitch.

Another dimension which is imperative for the brand experience in relation to football teams is the fan community. Underwood et al. (2001) argue that sports create a rare sense of belonging and community with common symbols, a shared collective identity, and motives for solidarity. This is underscored by Heere and James (2007) who state that sport teams, and football in general, are among the strongest communities around. Several studies have shown that a strong brand community results in a positive impact on attendance, purchase intentions, word-of-mouth, and overall participation (e.g. Woolf et al. 2013; Hedlund, 2014; Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Given the rise of the internet and social media, these communities are not limited by geographical constraints, with globalisation enabling fans all over the world to connect with each other as well as the club (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010). For instance, Manchester United currently have 291 officially recognised supporter clubs spread out in 97 different countries. It is in the interest of football clubs to provide contexts for these communities to grow, as McAlexander et al. (2002) argue that community-integrated customers are less prone to react negatively to product failure, or poor performance in the case of football, and they also serve as brand missionaries by being emotionally invested in the welfare of the club. This emphasis on community shows that the relationship between a fan and a football brand might not be dyadic in nature, but instead the connection needs to be supplemented with additional actors, such as fellow supporters, to be sufficiently illustrated.

#### 2.2.4 Consumer-Brand Bonding

The last meta-concept in relation to brand loyalty antecedents is the consumer-brand bonding. This phenomenon mainly revolves around the concepts of trust and attachment. The concept of trust is described by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) as the consumers' perception of the brand as a reliable and honest entity. Trust also encompasses the consumers' will to rely on the brand in the future, and to what degree the consumer is confident of doing so. Brand attachment in turn revolves around the affection, passion and emotional bond which can occur between a consumer and a brand (Tsai, 2011). Both attachment and trust are concepts that are linked to attitudinal loyalty, according to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). Honing in on the trust dimension, researchers mean that this concept is only relevant in situations where uncertainty exists, which then the brand trust can help mediate (Doney & Cannon, 1997). This could for instance be in a situation where consumers feel vulnerable or when there are fewer differences between considered brands. Doney and Cannon (1997) go on to explain that brand trust builds on the consumers' belief that the company will act in the best interests of the consumers.

Moving on to brand attachment, Park et al. (2010) describes the concept as two-dimensional: (1) it relates to the link between the consumers' self-concept and the brand, and (2) it takes into account the frequency and strength of brand-related thoughts and feelings. The first dimension describes how consumers cultivate a sense of "being one" with the brand (Thomson et al. 2005), while the second dimension directly relates to how often the consumer experiences feelings, thoughts, or memories of the brand. Scholars have found a stream of different positive outcomes stemming from brand attachment. Consumers with a strong attachment also exhibit high degrees of commitment and engagement (Dennis et al. 2016), they demonstrate brand loyalty (Diallo et al. 2021), trust brand-related information (Zhang & Patrick, 2021), forgive transgressions (Fedorikhin et al. 2008), and participate in the brand community (Takamatsu, 2021). In addition, consumers with a strong brand attachment also show positive perceptions of logo changes and brand extensions (Walsh et al. 2019; Chang et al. 2020).

From a football perspective, the consumer-brand bonding between a supporter and their team is evident. Underwood et al. (2001) argue that fans' deep emotional connection with their clubs engenders almost a sense of sacredness and invokes a high degree of passion. This

passion in turn often results in consumer-brand engagement, or in this case, fan engagement. Dessart (2017) describes this concept as the positive attitudes to partake in the community through different manifestations that go beyond purchasing and consuming. For football fans this could mean actively following and engaging with their club on social media, voicing ideas or concerns to club agents, and creating the stadium atmosphere which has been previously discussed. Parganas et al. (2017) mean that fans enjoy engaging with the community to share their own experiences and thoughts about their club. Not only does this tie into the dimension of frequent brand-related thoughts presented by Park et al. (2010), but it also shows a sense of being one with the brand as this fan engagement results in a co-creation of the football product. This creates a fascinating dynamic and relationship between fans and their clubs, and researchers argue that this passion and engagement stem from the strength of the consumer-brand relationship (Leckie et al. 2016; Brodie et al. 2011). This propels this literature review into its next section. While there are many complex and intrinsic dimensions and antecedents of a fan's loyalty towards their club, the connection goes beyond simply being loyal in the behavioural or attitudinal sense. A result of this loyalty is the conception of a relationship between the supporter and the football club. The next section will hone in on that very subject and examine the concept of consumer-brand relationships, and while this is a popular topic among branding scholars, it is virtually untrodden ground from a football perspective.

## 2.3 Consumer-Brand Relationship

From the perspective of brand relationship theory, consumers view their interactions with a brand similarly to a human relationship in which mutual satisfaction and interdependence are key concepts to defining the relationship strength and quality (Dick & Basu, 1994; Fournier, 1998). Tsiotsou et al. (2014) add that satisfaction, trust, and commitment are vital to keep the relationship sustainable, and Belaid and Behi (2011) argue that if consumers find their connection to a brand satisfactory in these regards, they will be inclined to prolong and solidify their relationship, resulting in an avoidance to switch to another brand.

Fournier (1998), who has done seminal work on the topic of consumer-brand relationships, notes that it is widely acknowledged that consumer behaviour affects the dynamics between consumer and brand, but it is equally important to consider the brand as an active and contributing member of the relationship dyad. This dyadic two-way relationship connects

well to the inclination of many consumers to humanise their brands, and assign personality traits to them (Fournier, 1998). Moreover, Fournier (1998) discusses how relationships can be determined by the different types of bonds that make parties join together. The different types of bonds can be either substantively grounded as in more functional or materialistic, or emotionally based. The emotionally based bonds can be quite diversified in terms of the intensity ranging from simple liking to friendly affection, passionate love or even an addictive obsession. Furthermore, she argues that there are three important factors, sociocultural, relational, and psychological, all of which give a context that shapes the significance and determines the meaning of the relationship. The different factors are influential since the relationship is both affected by and affect the context in which they are established within. Examining the process closer, Fournier (1998) stipulates that the brand relationship quality is created by the interplay between brand behaviours and consumer behaviours. This relationship quality is in turn argued to be six-faceted and comprise the following dimensions: (1) love/passion, (2) self-connection, (3) commitment, (4) interdependence, (5) intimacy, and (6) brand partner quality. The quality of the relationship subsequently results in relationship behaviour such as accommodation, tolerance or forgiveness, biased perceptions, devaluation of alternatives, and attribution bias - which all together determine the relationship stability and durability.

Moreover, Fournier (1998) explains how brand relationship quality develops and strengthens through meaningful consumer and brand actions similar to what a strong relationship between two persons is based on. However, whereas meaningful actions can strengthen the quality of the relationship, meaningless or lack of meaningful interactions can dilute or weaken the relationship quality. Hence, the relationship quality dimensions can influence the stability and durability of the consumer-brand relationship and the brand-relationship quality construct creates a holistic perspective which can be used to better understand the relationships that form between consumers and brands.

With this in mind, it is conceivable that brand loyalty and consumer-brand relationships are related concepts that intertwine and overlap, however Fournier (1998) argues that consumer-brand relationships is a much more all-encompassing, holistic way of looking at consumers connection to certain brands, while loyalty solely provides one dimension. Similarly to a relationship between two individuals, the connection cannot be sufficiently explained by measuring or stating the existing loyalty towards one another. While loyalty



arguably is a strong force and affects many other areas of the relationship, it offers conceptual richness to widen the scope and examine the entirety of the relationship. For football fans, a vital part in their support for their respective teams is the inherent loyalty, which in turn has a wide variety of antecedents explored in earlier chapters, however that very loyalty drives supporters to form unique relationships with their team, and it is this multidimensional connection this study seeks to understand.

In her own attempt to understand a multitude of different consumer-brand relationships from a wide array of contexts and domains, Fournier (1998) identified seven salient dimensions to help categorise consumer-brand relationships: (1) voluntary vs imposed, (2) positive vs negative, (3) intense vs casual, (4) enduring vs short-term, (5) public vs private, (6) task-related vs personal, and (7) symmetric vs asymmetric. Based on these dimensions, Fournier (1998) presents a typology with 15 different forms of consumer-brand relationships. These forms are outlined in Table 1 below.

<b>Relationship form</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
Arranged marriages	Nonvoluntary relation driven by third-party preferences. Long-term, exclusive, but low-level attachment.	The use of a certain motor oil as per manufacturer recommendation.
Casual friends	Sporadic engagement low in affect and intimacy.	A consumer and their household cleaning brands.
Marriages of convenience	Long-term, committed, but driven by environmental influence rather than deliberate choice.	The switch to a new local dairy brand following a consumers' move to a new region.
Committed partnerships	Long-term, voluntarily, loving, trusting, intimate and a commitment to adhere despite potential hardships. Exclusivity rules apply.	A food-interested consumer and their cooking appliance brands.
Best friendships	Voluntary, driven by reciprocity and positive rewards. High emphasis on true self, honesty, intimacy and identity.	A runner and their running shoe brand.
Compartmentalised	Specialised and situationally	A consumer and their stable

friendships	driven. Lower intimacy than other friendships but higher emotional reward. Easy exit and entry.	of perfumes, with one utilised day-to-day and others during nights out or special occasions.
Kinships	Nonvoluntary union based on lineage ties.	A consumer's preference for a certain coffee brand due to an inheritance from a parent.
Rebounds	A union based on a will to move away from a past partner, rather than attraction per se.	A consumer and their use of low-fat products provided by diet brands.
Childhood friendships	Infrequent, reminiscent connection that serves as a reminder of past self.	A consumer's occasional use of a specific cereal brand they had as a child.
Courtships	Interim state in the process of developing a committed partnership.	A consumer and a brand they have been given a free trial of.
Dependencies	Obsessive, highly emotional, selfish. The other is perceived to be irreplaceable and separation yields anxiety. High tolerance of transgressions and disappointment.	A consumer and a specific type of skin care brand with a perceived vital moisturising effect.
Flings	Short-term, high emotional reward but no commitment or reciprocity.	A consumer and trial-sized toothpaste.
Enmities	Intense connections with a negative effect. Strong desire to avoid or inflict pain on the other.	A consumer and their ex-partners favourite brands, serving as painful reminders.
Secret affairs	Emotional, private, risky if exposed.	A consumer with a high-status job and their favourite afternoon snack brand being associated with childhood, e.g. Twinkies.
Enslavements	Nonvoluntary, everything on the other party's terms. Involves negative feelings but there is no other choice.	A consumer and their use of the local, pricey grocery store, simply because there is no other alternative in the area.

Table 1: Fournier's (1998) typology over relationship forms

Noteworthy is that different relationship types can have a more positive tone such as “best friendships” or “committed partnerships” but also more negative connotations such as “enslavements” or “arranged marriages”. Nonetheless, all different relationship forms are meaningful and beneficial for the consumers in some way regardless of how they are portrayed (Fournier, 1998). However, it is mentioned that these relationships can deteriorate if they are not maintained or if the consumer is affected by environmental, partner-oriented, or dyadic/relational stresses. These stress factors can be if a promise is broken by the brand, the consumer’s needs have changed or if the consumer moves to a new location, away from the brand. Consequently, the relationship can be influenced by different factors and the development of the relationship between the consumer and the brand is not linear but rather dynamic.

## 2.4 Key Theories

Considering the hyper-commercialisation of football, the sector deserves spotlight from the mainstream marketing and branding literature as well. Precisely as consumers form relationships with certain brands within for instance fashion, food, or automobiles, fans form relationships with their football brand, the club they support. The uniqueness of the consumer-brand relationship between supporters and their clubs is seemingly not captured by Fournier’s (1998) typology, but nevertheless there are certain relationship forms that appear more relevant than others: (1) kinships, (2) committed partnerships, (3) dependencies, (4) best friendships, and (5) enslavements. These are summarised in Table 2.

<b>Relationship form</b>	<b>Description</b>
Kinships	Nonvoluntary union based on lineage ties.
Committed partnerships	Long-term, voluntarily, loving, trusting, intimate and a commitment to adhere despite potential hardships. Exclusivity rules apply.
Dependencies	Obsessive, highly emotional, selfish. The other is perceived to be irreplaceable and separation yields anxiety. High tolerance of transgressions and disappointment.
Best friendships	Voluntary, driven by reciprocity and positive

	rewards. High emphasis on true self, honesty, intimacy and identity.
Enslavements	Nonvoluntary, everything on the other party's terms. Involves negative feelings but there is no other choice.

Table 2: Relevant relationship forms for this thesis from Fournier's (1998) typology

The rationale behind this selection is that all of these five forms show high degrees of strength, power, and commitment in terms of the connection between the two parties. Kinships are arguably a powerful relation as it is governed by lineage ties, while a committed partnership and best friendships are serious, deep relationships. Dependencies and enslavements also wield a high degree of power in the connection as there is an existing perception that there are no alternatives, the relationship is irreplaceable. Furthermore, the relationship form categorised as a kinship holds relevance for the football context as it focuses on lineage ties and heritage - aspects that this literature review has unearthed to be potentially important for the loyalty of a football supporter. For instance, Conn (1998) describes how the close bond between a supporter and their club can be heavily influenced by family history. Dependencies are of particular interest as they are described as obsessive, highly emotional, with a high tolerance of transgressions, and enslavement is relevant because of its inherent sense of having no other choice. These two relationship forms arguably connect to the persisting team allegiance in times of prolonged underperformance and disappointment. The relationship forms coined committed partnerships and best friendships are of relevance for the football perspective due to their emphasis on voluntary commitment, long-term orientation, trust, and congruence in terms of identity and values. However, while these five selected relationship forms create a starting point for a categorisation of the consumer-brand relationship between a fan and their football club, the connection will be thoroughly mapped out with the same dimensions Fournier (1998) used to create her typology. These dimensions are outlined in Table 3.

<b>Dimensions that form the consumer-brand relationship</b>
Voluntary vs imposed
Positive vs negative
Intense vs casual
Enduring vs short-term

Public vs private
Symmetric vs asymmetric
Task-related vs personal

Table 3: Fournier's (1998) underlying relationship dimensions

As outlined by the different relationship forms, the concepts of trust and dependability become important. Fournier (1998) explains how the consumer-brand relationship can deteriorate as a result of certain stress points such as the breaking of promises, changed needs, or lack of continuity. With this in mind, the product-related and non-product-related brand attributes of a football team (Bauer et al. 2008) becomes an additional key theory for this study. The categorisation developed by Bauer et al. (2008) is outlined in Table 4. As the literature has shown, both sets of attributes are prone to change, but the product-related attributes are volatile to a much larger degree given the unstable nature of team composition, head coach appointment, team success, and star player presence. This volatility can seemingly be seen to interfere with the emphasis on kept promises and continuity in relationships.

<b>Product-related brand attributes</b>	<b>Non-product-related brand attributes</b>
Success	Management
Star Players	Logo and club colours
Head Coach	Stadium
Team	Club history and traditions
Team Performance	Club culture and values
	Fans
	Sponsor or owner
	Regional provenance

Table 4: Brand attributes for a football club according to Bauer et al. (2008)

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Philosophy

Before it is possible to discuss and decide on methodological choices, it is necessary to consider the underlying philosophical assumptions that will be held by the researchers throughout the research process (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). The philosophical assumptions regard the views about the nature of reality as well as what knowledge actually is and how it can be acquired. Ontology is the philosophical term which refers to the researchers' views of reality and if reality is regarded as a single truth or if there exists multiple truths (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). This study takes an ontological position of relativism, meaning that an assumption is made that multiple truths about the reality coexist. The truth is created by people who are embedded in a context and is dependent on the viewpoint of the individual, thus making reality to be in the eye of the beholder (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Furthermore, Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) mention how different factors such as the cultural context influences how people experience a situation which further shows how realities can be viewed differently depending on the individual's experiences. In the context of fans' relationships with a football club, the fans' perceptions of the club are regarded as true to the individual as their perceptions are unique since they will have different experiences of their club. Consequently, the truth is dependent on the fan's viewpoint within the context of their personal experiences of the club.

The second aspect of the philosophical assumptions is epistemology and it relates to the researchers' stance on what knowledge is and how knowledge can be acquired (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Aligned with the ontological position of relativism, this study is situated in the social constructionism view within the realm of epistemology. This means that reality is viewed as a social construction and that it is determined by people and their interactions rather than external factors (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Therefore, it is essential to understand the different experiences people have regarding a situation or phenomena to be able to properly explain their behaviour (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). As the purpose of this study is to outline the relationship between supporters and their football clubs, it is necessary to understand the different experiences that football fans' have of the club and how they make sense of it, rather than to search for external causes to try and explain their behaviour.

Following this, it is beneficial to collect in-depth data to incorporate different perceptions and experiences to gain a nuanced understanding of the meanings that fans' place on their relationship with the club.

## 3.2 Research Approach

### 3.2.1 Qualitative Research

In line with a relativism and social constructionism research philosophy, this study takes a qualitative approach with focus on primary data collection. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), qualitative data is information gathered in a non-numeric design. Furthermore, they emphasise that it is created by an interactive and interpretative process. Similarly, Bryman and Bell (2015) states that instead of quantifying numerical data, a qualitative approach emphasises the understanding and analysing of words or behaviour. This was deemed suitable for the study as its purpose is to outline the relationship between fans and the football club. In order to examine and characterise this relationship, it is essential to gain an understanding of fan's perceptions and experiences with the club. A qualitative research approach enables the researchers to gain rich insights to the relationship between the fan and the club since fans can freely explain and elaborate on their subjective perceptions and experiences (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

### 3.2.2 Abductive Approach

This study takes an abductive approach, incorporating and combining characteristics from both a deductive and inductive approach. Similar to the deductive approach, an abductive approach utilises previous literature to create a theoretical framework that is taken into consideration from the beginning (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, it also goes beyond the existing theories to find explanations of a research phenomena that cannot be explained by current theories meaning it contributes to the development of an existing theory much like the inductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Thus, there exists a constant dynamic interplay between theory and the empirical data throughout the research process.

In the context of this study, the abductive approach was deemed most suitable because of the nature of the relationship that exists between a fan and the football club. Although both consumer-brand relationship and brand loyalty are well researched phenomena, the

connection to sports and within the context of football fans and clubs lack theoretical underpinning. Moreover, Gabbay and Woods (2005) states that an abductive approach is especially applicable when the phenomena has not been thoroughly researched before as it allows the researchers to relate the findings to the theoretical framework and contribute to new theory. Hence, it is relevant to use previous literature on consumer-brand relationship when examining the relationship between football fans and their club where the findings might lead to a development of existing theory. In accordance with this reasoning, the interview questions were made with the theoretical framework in mind to examine the specific context but also to allow for new insights that can be of relevance for the development of theory (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

### 3.3 Data Collection

#### 3.3.1 Interviews

As the purpose of this study is to outline the relationship between fans and the football club, it is necessary to gain insights to perceptions and experiences of this relationship. From the clubs perspective, the relationship with the fans is more about how they work with strategies to capture and maintain the interest of the fans which makes it more suitable to take the fans' perspective for this study. Therefore, this study examines the relationship from the fans' perspective since they will have more rich insights from individual fans' experiences and perceptions of the club in order to explore and characterise the relationship. Furthermore, it is important to get an understanding of fans' view of the club and their reasons why they have this view. From this, it would be possible to gain deeper insight into the characteristics of the relationship through the fans' underlying rationales, experiences, and perspectives.

Following the reasoning above, a data collection method that emphasised fans' experiences and perspectives was needed to acquire insights into the relationship between the football fan and the club. Furthermore, it is essential to understand the fans' constructs of reasoning and their logic behind their behaviour and actions to fully grasp the relationship between the fan and the club. Deriving from this, qualitative interviews is an appropriate method of data collection when the aim is to develop an understanding of the respondent's world which can be gathered from the respondents' experiences and perspectives (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Moreover, they mention that interviews are favourable in situations where it is desirable to



gain insights to the individual respondent's experiences as potential external influence from other participants is removed. Thus, interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate data collection method.

In order to collect the data, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted to outline the relationship between football fans and their club. Since the interviews are semi-structured, the researchers can take advantage of having predestined themes and questions that guide the interview while simultaneously maintaining a flexible approach to uncover new insights (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). In accordance with Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), a topic guide with predestined themes was created to guide the interviews. The themes were developed with the previous literature in mind to cover relevant topics that relate to the dynamics of the relationship between the fans and the club (see Appendix 1). Furthermore, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews generates a strength as it allows for follow-up questions which can provide a greater richness to the data (Adams, 2015). Moreover, it enables the researchers to utilise the technique of laddering up and down which further can generate deeper insights to the topic (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Adams (2015) mentions how this is especially suitable when examining a topic that is not well researched before as potential leads can be spotted and pursued.

As mentioned, in total eight interviews were conducted for this study. All of the interviews were conducted online through the digital platform Zoom and the duration of the interviews varied between 45 minutes and 60 minutes. The choice to conduct the interviews digitally was made mainly due to the convenience and availability of the respondents. The respondents were geographically spread out across Sweden, making it difficult to conduct the interviews physically in person. With a limited time frame and scarce resources, conducting the interviews digitally enabled more respondents to be included in the study. Furthermore, in order to still be able to capture body language and other non-verbal communication that are prominent in face-to-face interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015), the interviews were conducted as a video call.

Before the interview began, a brief explanation of the study and its purpose was presented to the respondents. Furthermore, the researchers asked for permission to record the interview which all the interviewees consented to. The interviewees were also informed that they could at any time, both during and after the interview, withdraw a statement if they felt that they

said something they did not want to stand by. This to ensure that the respondents felt comfortable in expressing their opinions and experiences of the club, especially in regards to questions of potential sensitive topics such as their thoughts about scandals the club had been involved in. Moreover, since both the authors and the respondents were native Swedish speakers, the interviews were all conducted in Swedish. This enabled the respondents to freely express themselves without being limited or restricted by a potential language barrier. During the interviews, the respondents' answers were less standardised due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews which facilitated a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between the fan and their club. Consequently, the sequence of questions that were asked differed between the interviews, however, they still followed the same underlying structure of the topic guide which is in line with the semi-structured approach (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Depending on how the interview unfolded, the arranging of the questions were adjusted to facilitate a good flow in the interview which enabled the respondents to freely talk about their experiences.

After all the interviews had been conducted, they were transcribed in order to provide an overview of the empirical data. It is necessary that the interviews are transcribed in order for the authors to be able to analyse the data without being dependent on their own memories. Furthermore, it creates the possibility for the researchers to revisit the empirical data which further strengthens the analysis of the respondents' answers (Bryman & Bell, 2015). For the transcription, the researchers utilised Microsoft Word's transcription function as an aid. However, the interviews were also manually compared to the recording to ensure that there were no errors in the transcription. As the interviews were conducted in Swedish, excerpts that are presented in the analysis were translated to English in order to match the language of the paper. There is a risk that the translation of the quotes affects the meaning and interpretation of it, nonetheless, the advantages of conducting the interviews in Swedish outweighed the potential risks. Moreover, quotes and the authors' interpretation of them were sent to the respondents which they could confirm or correct in order to reduce the risk of any misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the empirical data.

### 3.3.2 Sampling

This study utilises purposive sampling as for its sampling strategy. Purposive sampling is defined by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) as when potential respondents are screened and

selected from a predefined set of criteria for being included in the study. For this study, the predefined criteria were that: (1) the respondents were football fans, and (2) the respondents supported a team in the English Premier League. The first criteria is quite self explanatory, since the purpose of this study is to outline the relationship between fans and football clubs it is necessary that the respondents are indeed football fans. The reasoning for the second criteria is twofold. One reason is the fact that the English Premier League is the biggest and most watched football league in the world with the largest following of fans in the world. This makes it relevant to focus on fans from the English Premier League as they are prominent within the football world. Another reason is to avoid fans that support a club solely because of the geographical aspect that they support the local club from where they live. Although this can be an aspect of the relationship as seen in Fournier's (1998) characterisation of "enslavement", it is more desirable to have respondents that have a stronger connection with their club since they can give greater explanations to their experiences and perception of the club which is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship. In regards to demographics, no criteria was included in the sampling strategy as it is of no relevance to the aim of the study. The aim of this study is neither to identify differences between certain groups nor to be truly representative in terms of the demographics within the football world, but rather to gain a holistic view of the relationship between fans and the football clubs. However, aligned with social constructionism and the need for multiple perspectives, an effort was made to include respondents of different age groups, gender, occupation, and supporters of different football clubs.

In order to connect with people who were relevant for this study and met the predefined criteria, the researchers published a post in different football fan groups on Facebook. In the post, some background along with the purpose of the study was mentioned before asking the potential respondents to reply to the post if they would be interested in participating in the study. The post was sent out in football fan groups on Facebook such as Manchester United Sverige, Tottenham Hotspur Sweden, Liverpool Swedish Hardcore Fans, and Arsenal Sweden. The reason for publishing the post in these groups is that people that have joined these groups are self proclaimed fans of different English Premier League clubs, meaning that they meet the predefined criteria and can be included in the study. Once people replied to the post, indicating their interest in participating in the study, the researchers wrote to them on Messenger to schedule an interview. The potential respondents that were contacted were asked to give suggestions for a time and date for the interview as the researchers were

flexible and wanted to ensure their availability. The different respondents that participated in this study and their respective details are summarised in Table 5 (see subheading 3.3.3 Table of Respondents).

### 3.3.3 Table of Respondents

Table 5 contains an overview of the respondents' name, gender, age, occupation, which football club they support, and the length of the interview.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Club</b>	<b>Length of Interview</b>
Arez	Male	32	Employment services	Manchester United	54 min
Mathias	Male	52	Editor-in-Chief	Tottenham	53 min
Tomas	Male	42	Salesman	Manchester United	55 min
Andreas	Male	38	HR	Arsenal	47 min
Robin	Male	36	Journalist	Liverpool FC	55 min
Jenny	Female	43	Section manager	Tottenham	45 min
Lina	Female	42	Marketer	Manchester United	60 min
Philip	Male	25	PR manager	Manchester United	52 min

Table 5: Overview of the respondents

## 3.4 Data Analysis

After the empirical data has been collected, an analysis of the material is conducted. In order to thoroughly and correctly analyse the data, the analysing process has followed the recommendations made by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). They state that to truly understand and make sense of the empirical data, it is essential for the researcher to go back and forth and familiarise themselves with the material before it is possible to establish appropriate themes from the data. For the analysing process, Rennstam and Wästerfors

(2018) mention three important steps which are sorting, reducing, and arguing, all of which have been taken into consideration when analysing the data in this study.

The first step is sorting the data which entails structuring and categorising the data in order to familiarise with the material and identify potential themes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Initially, they emphasise the importance of spending time with the empirical data to find recurring patterns that potentially can be considered as relevant themes for the study. To process the data, the material was read multiple times where recurring topics were noted and sorted into different themes. As the study takes an abductive approach, the analysis of the data was considered from the previous literature as well as new perspectives to identify relevant themes that go beyond the initial theories. In this study, Fournier's (1998) seven dimensions was used when analysing the data and sorting it into themes to be able to later characterise the relationship between football fans and their clubs. However, the authors also identified other themes and a new dimension that was of relevance emerged, going beyond the initial theory. These themes and the coding process for this study can be seen in Appendix 2. Furthermore, the sorting considered both the "whats" and the "hows" from the interviews. The "whats" refers to the content and what is said in the interviews where recurring elements can form relevant themes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The "hows" concerns how the respondents communicate and present their experiences regarding the choice of words, the tone of voice, gestures, and other behaviour. As suggested by Gubrium and Holstein (1997), analytical bracketing will be used to maintain a duality between the two aspects.

The next step is reducing which requires the researchers to reduce the data and remove excessive information (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This can be achieved through either categorical reduction or illustrative reduction. Categorical reduction is when the data has been sorted into different categories and, thereafter, the categories are reduced to a selected few that are of most value for the study with the most insightful data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Here, the categories were evaluated both within different themes but also among different themes and either deemed useful or not sufficient for the study in order to select the most relevant data for the study. Certain categories were coupled into a new more comprehensive theme and reduced in that way (see Appendix 2) whereas other categories were removed all together. The relevant and useful data that remains is the foundation for the analysis presented in the final work.

Finally, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) presents arguing as the final step of the data analysis process. This study utilises the excerpt-commentary units model introduced by Emerson et al. (1995) and its logic in how to present and argue for the analytical point. The argument starts with an analytical point which indicates the direction of the point. Following this is an orientation where the empirical excerpt is introduced and presented, which afterwards leads to an analytical comment where the empirical excerpt is used to further develop the analytical point (Emerson et al. 1995). Throughout the analysing process, the researchers are aware that there exists a risk of potential biases and assumptions which can interfere and influence the analysis. While it is near impossible to fully avoid these risks, a reflexive approach has been adopted by the researchers to mitigate these potential flaws.

### 3.5 Quality Criteria

It is important that the quality of the study is taken into consideration at every step when conducting qualitative research. However, it is argued amongst scholars regarding which criteria to use when evaluating the quality of qualitative research. Central in the discussion of how to evaluate a study are the concepts of validity and reliability. These criteria originate from quantitative research which is why Bryman and Bell (2015) argue that an adaptation of these criteria is necessary when evaluating qualitative research. They suggest four sub-criteria that can be used to evaluate qualitative studies which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

#### 3.5.1 Credibility

The criterion of credibility is related to internal validity and refers to whether the study actually researched what it intended to research. Within qualitative research, a part of credibility is about the appropriateness of the chosen method and if different perspectives have been included in the study. This study takes a social constructionism view and hence, there has been a focus to incorporate a great variety of perspectives of football fans' experiences and perceptions of their clubs. In order to gain a holistic view of the relationship between fans and the football clubs, participants from different demographics were included in the study since it incorporates a greater variety of perspectives.

Furthermore, respondent validation can be used to ensure credibility (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Respondent validation is when the participants of the study respond to confirm that the data

has been correctly interpreted by the researchers. This has been utilised in this study where quotes and the authors' interpretation of them were sent to the respondents in order to get confirmation or clarification of the quotes. The risk of any misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the empirical data is reduced through respondent validation which strengthens the credibility of the study.

### 3.5.2 Transferability

When it comes to qualitative research, the aim is not to generate statistical generalizability but rather transferability. Although a study is bound to the context of what is being studied, it is possible that the insights can be relevant in other settings beyond the particular context meaning there can be an element of transferability within qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This study is contextually bound within football and more specifically fans that support clubs from the English Premier League. In order to increase the transferability of this study, a purposeful sampling strategy was utilised and an attempt was made to incorporate multiple different perspectives of the relationship between football fans and their clubs. Subsequently, a greater richness and depth of fans' perspectives and experiences could be obtained which enables better insights to the relationship. The rich insights allows a deeper understanding of the phenomenon which improves the transferability of theory where findings can be relevant beyond the particular context.

### 3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability can be compared to reliability which in quantitative research relates to the ability to replicate a study and achieve similar findings. However, this is neither especially desirable nor plausible within qualitative research since a study and its insights is bound to the context and the strive for replicability can hinder in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Nonetheless, it is important to be aware of potential biases and to strive for unbiased insights. Therefore, it is suggested that the researchers are transparent with their procedures throughout the research process to ensure that the study and its findings is not dependent on the researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Hence, there has been a high level of transparency throughout this study regarding methodological choices. The reasoning behind and the implementation of data collection method, sampling, and data analysis has consistently and thoroughly been discussed in this

study. Thus, the research procedure has been transparently disclosed regarding how the data was collected and analysed to ensure dependability.

### 3.5.4 Confirmability

The criterion of confirmability refers to the bias of the researchers and if it has been taken into account throughout the study. While it might be near impossible to fully avoid bias, the researchers should strive to avert it as much as possible (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Since this study takes an abductive approach, the empirical data is both collected and analysed with previous theories in mind. However, to limit the theoretical bias, a conscious consideration of alternative explanations and themes is made that goes beyond existing theories. Furthermore, the potential theoretical bias that stems from the social constructionism view of the study and the assumptions associated with it is taken into consideration when conducting this study. Alvesson (2003) discusses reflexivity as an important part of qualitative research and how it is necessary to consider potential bias by evaluating methodological choices made throughout the study. Furthermore, he mentions the importance of actively considering alternative explanations to the research phenomenon. Therefore, a reflexive approach has been adopted by the researchers throughout the study to mitigate potential biases.



## 4. Empirical Data and Analysis

This chapter is divided into three sub-parts. The first section revolves around the strong loyalty a fan shows towards their club and which aspects this phenomenon is influenced by. A thematic analysis found identity, detachment, and community to be of particular interest in this regard. These aspects will be examined through the aid of empirical evidence. The second part revolves around the consumer-brand relationship between fans and their clubs. This second section is closely connected to the first part as the strong loyalty and its related concepts heavily influence the nature of the relationship, and this effect will also be discussed and analysed in the second part of this chapter. The third and final part of this chapter revolves around the examination of the consumer-brand relationship as a triadic connection, instead of the dyadic nature established by Fournier (1998).

### 4.1 Underlying Factors Influencing Loyalty

#### 4.1.1 Identity

In the beginning of this study it was argued that football fans are immensely loyal towards their clubs. It does not matter how the club performs or which players they have, the fans stay true to their clubs and remain loyal. From the interviews, this extreme loyalty was indisputable as the respondents mentioned how there was nothing in the world that could make them support another team. It was even argued that they would rather not be supporting any team than supporting a different team. One respondent highlighted his loyalty by quoting the famous footballer Eric Cantona.

*“I mean, it's like Cantona said. “You can change your wife, your politics, your religion, but never, never can you change your favourite football team.” The football team has to stay the same and that is probably how most fans feel.” - Tomas*

Thus, the strong loyalty that fans have towards their clubs was prominent among the respondents. One aspect that seemed to be an underlying factor to this loyalty was that the fans could identify with the club that they supported. Several themes could be established regarding how the clubs' identity was of importance to the supporters. One theme that was identified was how the respondents recognized themselves with the club and the club's

values. Several respondents emphasised how important it was for them that the club they supported stood for the same values as themselves.

*“Yes I believe a lot in this, what the club stands for. I think it's that kind of identity, that we often have broken new ground as a team which we can be proud of [...] Today, I would probably say that I am proud that the club is a football club that is inclusive, that drives women's football, youth football, that cares a lot about the local surroundings.” - Mathias*

In this scenario Mathias can identify with the club and their values of being an inclusive club where the club supports everyone no matter the gender or age of the players. This makes him feel proud to be a part of the club and is a crucial part of why he supports and stays loyal to this club. It can be seen as when the fan's values align with the club's values, they feel that they recognize and identify themselves with the club. Furthermore, it becomes important for the fans that these values are aligned since football and the club is such a big part of their life. Another aspect regarding the identity of the clubs was that the club's identity influenced and became a part of the fan's personal identity. One respondent discusses how he felt as one with the club and that the club was a part of his identity.

*“Well of course I identify with the club. I believe that when you have been a supporter of one club for a while then it is almost like your DNA becomes the same as the club. I mean the club becomes a part of your DNA and that is something that never will change or be lost.” - Arez*

This mindset of merging and becoming one with the club further strengthens the fan's recognition with the club as they can see themselves as a part of the club. Arez mentions how he not only identifies with the club but that the club actually is a fundamental component of his identity. Moreover, this amplifies the fan's loyalty towards the club as the fan views the club as a part of themselves.

Related to identifying with the club and the club becoming a part of the fan's own identity, a strong reactance to actions and behaviours that went against the respondents values was eminent among many of the respondents. When asked if they would feel less attached to the club if the club carried out actions that did not align with their values, the response was quite

the opposite - that they would be even more engaged with the club to try and change the decision that from the supporter's perspective was wrong.

*"I mean that's just the thing, it's like you become even more engaged with the club in a situation where they have done something wrong. I discuss and voice my opinions about the club and their actions even more those weeks. It's important that we supporters rally and voice our concern if we think that they have made a bad decision. I will still watch every game but they need to know that they did wrong and hopefully correct their mistake."* - Robin

The importance of the club's identity is very evident when actions are carried out that go directly against the values that fans attribute to the club. Robin explains how he becomes even more attached to the club as he tries to make the club realise that they have made the wrong decision by voicing his disapproval. While it might be logical to believe that the outcome would be the opposite, that a fan would feel more detached if the club made a decision that went against their values, the fans' reactance and engagement connects back to the club being a part of their identity. As the club is seen as a part of themselves, they want to correct what is wrong and not simply give up by switching allegiance to another club. This further illustrates the relevance of identity as an underlying factor to the high level of loyalty among football fans.

#### 4.1.2 Detachment

While there exists a very strong loyalty amongst football fans, they can still feel negative emotions towards the club or the decisions made by the club. When faced with negative emotions, the respondents responded in different ways. Some reacted and voiced their dissatisfaction as mentioned before, others learnt to cope with it individually over time. However, in addition to reacting to the negative feelings that came from the club making decisions that goes against their own and their fans' values, the fans reasoned and rationalised their continued support for their club. A common rationalisation was to separate the club from the people that made the decisions.

*"There are some things that I don't stand for, for example how they have treated some of our players very badly you don't do that. But then you don't think that it is the club who does this,*

*it is the owners or the coaches. I simply separate the club and what the club stands for from the people that are connected to the club.” - Arez*

Arez describes how he does not agree with certain actions taken from the club but also how he differentiates between the club and the people that are associated with the club. He argues that it is not the club that has done something negatively but rather the people at the club. Through this rationalisation, it is possible to continue to support a club although they carry out actions that go against your values since it is not perceived as the club's doing. Philip showcases a similar reasoning of how the club is bigger than the people associated with it.

*“No, I wouldn't feel less attached. I don't view the owners, the players, the coaches, or those who are CEO, sporting director and those guys as the club, the club is so much bigger than that. The owners think that it is their club because some papers say it but it's not their club. So I separate the club and the people which is a nice way to think about it when you see all the weird decisions that have been made.” - Philip*

It is explained how there is a detachment between the club and the people that work within the club. Philip even mentions how the owners of the club are not the real owners of the club since the club entails so much more than the legal ownership of it. Furthermore, the detachment between the club and the people at the club is described as a coping mechanism where he can maintain a positive attitude towards the club even when poor decisions are made. Nevertheless, Philip mentioned how he would buy less merchandise from the club following the decisions that contradicted his values as he did not want to support the owners of the club.

*“If the club did something outrageous that I could not support, then I wouldn't buy any tickets to their games. I wouldn't buy any merchandise either or in any way help them financially since I don't want the owners to benefit from this. But I would still watch the games and support the club, just not financially.” - Philip*

On one hand, the detachment facilitates a continuance in the emotional support and the attitudinal loyalty towards the brand. On the other hand, it can create a spiteful attitude towards the owners which leads to a change in the consumption behaviour and in turn the

behavioural loyalty. Philip's reasoning is that he wants to punish the owners for their poor decisions but in the end, the club as such will suffer financial losses as well as a consequence.

Another aspect of how the fans detached the club from the individuals working at the club was to view players and coaches as interchangeable. Similar to how fans cope with negative emotions that originated from decisions that did not align with their values, separating the players from the club aids the fans in coping with poor performances and results.

*“When you have players that perform badly or even worse, don't fight and give their all for the badge, then it is easy to just separate them from the club. I mean, of course they are a part of the team and the club but maybe they shouldn't be here in the first place. They are not true Arsenal players and hopefully they will leave as quickly as they came here.” - Andreas*

This empirical excerpt shows how Andreas separates players that do not perform well from the club, stating that they are not truly a player of the club. It becomes easier to accept the poor results or performances when attributing them a status of not being a player of the club. In this sense, it is not the club who performs poorly but rather players that are not representative for the club. Similar to when the fans handle negative feelings derived from decisions that contradicted their values, it aids their support for the club as the emotional connection remains intact since it is not necessarily the club but rather individual players that happen to be at the club that are underperforming.

#### 4.1.3 Community

Besides that the fans could identify with the club they supported, it became evident that the social interaction with other fans played an integral part to fan's loyalty towards a club. Similar to what Heere and James (2007) mention, many of the respondents stated that they had a strong sense of community and explained how integrated their football community was in their everyday lives. When asked if they watched the games alone or with others, the common answer was that they usually watched the games alone at home but that they occasionally watched the games with friends from the community. However, although the respondents mainly watched the games alone, they also mentioned that they engaged in conversations and had discussions with other fans on a daily basis.

*“Well I think about the club multiple times a day and I pretty much talk about the club or football in general at least once per day, often more. I have a lot of friends that are football fans whom I talk to and you talk to your colleagues at work so it is just easy to begin a conversation about it. So yeah, definitely every day.” - Philip*

*“There isn't a day when I am not talking about Liverpool. We discuss it at home within the family or if I meet people in the streets it doesn't matter or if you go to the football practice or whatever...there is always someone that wants to discuss the latest news about the club or why we lost that last game. And then you have social media where I go on Twitter and it is all about football and different fan pages that I follow where I read and comment about different things about the club.” - Robin*

This showcases the very high engagement that fans have with their communities. It has become an important part of their lives where they have surrounded themselves with other fans with whom they can talk about their club and also football in general. Philip mentions how it is a conversation starter and how integral it is in his social interactions on a daily basis. Similarly, Robin also points out how football and the team he supports, Liverpool, is a constant talking point in his life. Furthermore, he also mentions social media as a platform for the community to engage with each other. Robin expanded on this and described the importance of social media for the community.

*“The world has become a lot smaller in the last 10 years. Different social media and platforms make it possible to have the social interaction. So although I see fewer games at the arena, the club is just as present in my life as it is for someone supporting a Swedish club. This makes it easier to love and follow and engage with the club.” - Robin*

Social media is seen as an important platform that enables the community to engage with each other beyond geographical limitations. In this sense, it does not matter that a person does not support the local club as it is still possible to have the same presens of the club in one's life and a community through social media. This also shows how a strong community fosters loyalty among football fans. The community makes the fans more engaged with their club and follow them more closely. Another respondent discussed how a potential lack of community would negatively influence their following of the club.

*“If I couldn’t talk about the games or if I couldn’t express my opinions online or whatever, then I wouldn’t feel as engaged with the club. I would probably not watch as many games and I mean I most likely wouldn’t feel a need to buy merchandise from the club if I can’t talk to or meet other fans.” - Lina*

This displays how a lack of community can negatively influence the loyalty towards the club. It can be seen as that a lack of community would lead to a decrease in the fan’s attitudinal and behavioural loyalty. Lina mentions how her consumption behaviour would change as a consequence of not having a community regarding the football club which relates to the aspect of behavioural loyalty. Similarly, the attitudinal loyalty would also decrease as she feels less engaged with the club and would not follow it as closely as if there exists a strong community. Thus, this indicates the importance of the community among football fans and its connection to fans’ loyalty towards their respective clubs.

## 4.2 The Consumer-Brand Relationship

This section will examine the collected empirical evidence of the consumer-brand relationship between football supporters and their clubs from the standpoint of Fournier’s (1998) stipulated relational dimensions: (1) voluntary vs imposed, (2) positive vs negative (3) intense vs casual, (4) enduring vs short-term, (5) public vs private, (6) task-related vs personal, and (7) symmetric vs asymmetric.

### 4.2.1 Voluntary vs Imposed

This dimension examines whether the relationship is voluntary or not. For instance, relationship types like kinships, arranged marriages, or enslavements have characteristics of being imposed, while committed partnerships or best friendships are voluntary. Considering the relationship between fans and their club, it becomes discernible that the dimension of voluntary vs imposed is not decisively black or white, but rather a grey scale. At the early stages of connecting with and finding a club to support, prospective fans display signs of entering a voluntary relationship.

*“I didn’t have anyone in the family who supported Tottenham. I just remember starting to like them because they were an exciting team to follow. They played the most attacking football, scored the most goals, and had the most technical players in their team.” - Mathias*

This passage shows how Mathias chose his own team to support based on aspects, or brand attributes, he found attractive, signalling a high degree of voluntarism. This freedom of choice is mirrored by other interviewees as well.

*“My dad likes football too, but he supports Liverpool. But I don’t know, I’ve always gone my own way. I never liked Liverpool. It was Eric Cantona, who played for Manchester United, that first caught my attention. His style, his way of playing. It sparked my interest in football and I started following United after that.” - Tomas*

This outtake strengthens the case for a voluntary relationship. Even though Tomas had a strong supporter in the family, he chose a different team because it felt better and was more interesting due to a certain player who played in a special way. Not only does this illustrate a voluntary choice, but it also describes how certain product-related brand attributes can be captivating from a football perspective. Based on Bauer et al. (2008) typology, in these cases the initial fascination is sparked by the product-related brand attributes of star players and team performance.

However, while the initial stage of the relationship appears to be characterised by voluntary choice, when the support becomes solidified with time the relationship becomes seemingly imposed with features of fans describing the feeling of having more or less no choice in whether to support the team or not.

*“You wish sometimes that you could switch teams and stuff, but no, I have still been attached.” - Jenny*

*“When Tottenham hired Mourinho I was close to cancelling my membership, and on the same day I became a member of Union Berlin fan club. It is a club that stands much more for the things I really like. But it was impossible to cut the band with Tottenham. It’s not possible. Following another team becomes some kind of intellectual construct, no strong emotions in it.” - Mathias*

Both Jenny and Mathias describe how they have fantasised about, or even tried, supporting other teams but it simply has not worked. Mathias' explanation of how the emotional aspect



of the support cannot be replicated with another club shows the involuntary nature of the relationship through the absence of alternatives. However, apart from finding substitutes, it also seems like it is impossible to scale back or end the relationship altogether, solidifying the connection as involuntary. Robin's words describe this situation.

*"I never went into a store and purchased my support for Liverpool, it is not an active choice, it just turned out like that. This means that I cannot actively choose not to follow Liverpool, it is a part of me. Of course, there are days when I have been thinking why can't I just don't care today? This game should not bother me, I should just go to that birthday party of my wife's sister and have a good time, but still I find myself on the phone looking for the score and the match news. Yeah, It would never work to stop."* - Robin

Not only does Robin's description show how the relationship between a fan and their club is not an active choice, but it also illustrates how even if the fan would want to scale back their commitment, maybe go to the wife's sister's birthday party instead, it simply seems impossible. This clearly depicts the consumer-brand relationship between football fans and their clubs as imposed.

Examining involuntary consumer-brand relationships, for instance kinships, arranged marriages, or enslavements, the examples from the non-sport domain look like, for instance, the consumer's use of a local grocery store solely because it being the only alternative in the area. While these examples and relationship forms share the incapability to stop or change with the relationship between fans and their teams, the latter is arguably more driven by personal affect and emotion. With this said, the analysis shows that football supporters voluntarily choose their team allegiance in the initial phase. Contrary to previous research, the family supporter history does seemingly not force or constrict club choice to a large extent. Instead, the product-related attributes like star players or team performance are alluring. However, this freedom of choice appears to disappear with the solidification of the fan's support. This can be explained by how the fan begins to identify with the club, creating an unyielding loyalty. The team allegiance becomes a part of who they are and even though they might wish to change, the new version of themselves would not be their true self, but solely an intellectual construct. This outlines how the strong loyalty between a fan and their club drives the consumer-brand relationship towards being involuntary.

#### 4.2.2 Positive vs Negative

Fournier (1998) means that the consumer-brand relationship can invoke both positive and negative feelings for the consumer. The positive feelings are easily imaginable and can for instance take the form of a love for a certain cooking appliance brand from a food-interested consumer. Fournier (1998) exemplifies negatively charged relationships with the connection between a consumer and their ex-partners favourite brands, serving as painful reminders. In the case of football teams, it is evident that the strong loyalty and allegiance shown by fans is largely fuelled by a multitude of positive emotions.

*“I really like the club’s heritage and all that it stands for. Everything from how they picked themselves up from tragedies in the past to how they work with the youth system and upcoming talents. I can feel proud over my club for that I would say.” - Philip*

*“I really like that Manchester United feels like a genuine club. I like the storytelling around giving local talents a chance and there is a pride around that.” - Lina*

Lina and Philip describe aspects about their respective clubs that they really like, and they both mention a sense of pride, which underscores the positive feelings between a fan and their football team. This empirical outtake revolves around operational aspects such as promoting local talent and leveraging a rich heritage, but fans also embrace and speak highly of the values held by their clubs.

*“Today, I would probably say that I am proud that the club is a football club that is inclusive, drives women's football, youth football, that cares a lot about the local surroundings and we give a lot of people work in the area, which is one of the poorest in London. So there is a social engagement going on with the club, despite it being one of the 9 most valued football clubs in the world. So I think that's important. Maybe more important than the fact that you can play well sportingly and win titles.” - Mathias*

Mathias highlights how his team works extensively with providing equal opportunities and helping the local community grow. For him, these values are more important than winning titles and performing well on the pitch. This strongly displays a positive connection to the club as there is a sense of pride for all of what the club stands for and works towards. All of

these examples show how fans view their team as a protagonist who does a lot of good. Furthermore, Mathias also describes how his connection with the club has positively affected other areas of his life as well. This feeling is mirrored by a host of other interviewees as well.

*“Today I have many of my best friends, I have met via Tottenham, and we travel together and do other things outside of football too.” - Mathias*

*“It is a nice experience, watching games with other people. You find a new friend group almost.” - Andreas*

All in all, fans show a multitude of different positive emotions in relation to their club. They feel a sense of pride from how their club portrays itself and cares for its history, they appreciate and identify with the club’s values, and these positive emotions spill over onto other areas of their lives as well. However, while the consumer-brand relationship between a fan and their football team is infused by strong positive emotions, the sun does not always seem to shine. As outlined by the previous subsection, fans describe a seemingly involuntary connection which is impossible to move away from. But, why would you want to move away from the relationship? This signals that there are negative emotions involved as well.

*“It has been many times where I have come into work in a depressed state after a game. However, after as many years of pure garbage as we have had, you learn to cope.” - Arez*

Arez strongly describes how his allegiance to his club has caused prolonged emotional distress to the point where he has become accustomed to it. Not only does this underscore the existence of negative emotions, but it also strengthens the imposed nature of the relationship. There is no point cutting the ties, you simply have to learn how to deal with the negatives. Jenny and Robin showcase similar disappointment and emotional turmoil following a bad game.

*“After the game the other weekend, I had a colleague who supported the other team and I could barely speak to him. I found it so annoying, That’s how it is, you get really affected by how it goes.” - Jenny*

*“No, I am terrible after a bad game. Horrific. Ask my wife. The horrible thing is that I don’t get anything positive out of it at all. When Liverpool win every game it is just status quo for my emotions: I expect them to win so there is no overwhelming joy when they do, but when they don’t I get so upset and angry.” - Robin*

The empirical excerpt from Robin is particularly interesting as it shows how there is no counteracting strong positive emotion to his strong disappointment. It is simply a baseline level of joy, or a deep negative emotion. However, while fans showcase negative emotions as a result of disappointing performances, there is also a common theme of disappointments and upheaval stemming from overarching club decisions and operations.

*“So much disappointment...If we start with the biggest scandal. I still don't understand today how anyone can approve of such a financial model of takeover of the club as the Glazers have done. It's like if I were to go and buy a mega-company on credit and loans where I immediately mortgage the company. There's not a bank in the world that would give me the finances for that. But somehow they've managed it, and I think it's completely wrong. It has massively ruined the club to have them as owners.” - Tomas*

Tomas explains how the ownership of his club has ruined a lot of what he values and appreciates and how it has caused him continuous disappointment. In a similar vein, Mathias strongly condemns a certain club action that caused him to be hugely upset.

*“I am so disappointed that the club has decided to raise ticket prices for all retirees. They have had discounted prices all their lives almost and they have gone to every single game and now the prices will almost double. It is completely unnecessary as the club has so much money either way. That makes me disappointed.” - Mathias*

These excerpts show that being a fan is not solely lined with positive emotions and happiness. The interviewees provide numerous examples of when they have been substantially negatively affected by their club in their day-to-day life, with many displaying prolonged emotional distress. This complicates the classification of the consumer-brand relationship as either positive or negative. Instead, it becomes a volatile, cyclical connection where emotions can swiftly change - almost similar to a toxic, unhealthy romantic relationship. However, this emotional rollercoaster is arguably rooted in the unyielding loyalty and attachment which

exists between a fan and their club. The identification with their team and the strong loyalty means a high emotional investment, which subsequently means a larger disappointment if things go wrong. Interestingly enough, the persistence and enduring wish to remain in the relationship can be explained by how fans detach poor performance and disappointing actions from the club itself, and instead project their negative emotions onto players, managers, employees, or owners.

#### 4.2.3 Intense vs Casual

Fournier (1998) also argues that a relationship between a consumer and a brand can be of a varying degree of intensity. As opposed to the previous two categories, this dimension emerges as straight-forward from a football perspective, and the connection between a fan and their team can categorically be described as intense.

*“I think about my club every day, every day” - Lina*

*“I think it is six or seven years since I last missed a game. I plan my life around it. It is an important part of my calendar.” - Philip*

Both Lina and Philip explain how their day-to-day life revolve around their connection to their respective clubs. This signals a high level of intensity and in Philip’s case it reaches the point where his club dictates his schedule. While these excerpts show an intensity in terms of behavioural aspects, interviewees showcase an attitudinal, emotional, intensity as well.

*“As a supporter I would say that if it is going badly in sports performance, you get so disappointed. But then, once it goes well, all is forgotten and you are happy.” - Mathias*

This description from Mathias shows how supporters are thrown between a wide range of emotions in their relation to their club. This, in combination with the high degree of both positive and negative emotions outlined in the previous section, illustrates an attitudinal intensity as well.

Predictably, the consumer-brand relationship between a fan and their team is intense in nature. Not only is it characterised by strong emotions but it also shows aspects of dictating

the lives of fans on a daily basis. The reason behind this intensity can arguably be linked back to the high degree of loyalty and the inherent self-identification. For fans, their team allegiance is not just a way of practising a hobby, it is an integral part of who they are and how they live their life. There is nothing casual about this relationship and as explained by previous sections, any attempt to scale back to commitment and lower the intensity is deemed by interviewees to be virtually impossible.

#### 4.2.4 Enduring vs Short-Term

Fournier (1998) exemplifies this dimension by describing short-term commitments as for instance free-trials or pocket-sized packaging, while enduring relationships are maintained over time. Similar to the previous section, this classification emerges as non-divisive from a football perspective. The relationship between a fan and their team is clearly enduring.

*“It's like Cantona said. You can change your wife, your politics, your religion, but never, never can you change your favourite football team.” - Tomas*

This quote from Tomas exemplifies how team allegiance ascends into an ever-enduring state and becomes virtually untouchable. You can even change foundational aspects of your life as your partner or your political beliefs, but never the club you support. This signals a highly enduring relationship. Interestingly enough, it signals an even higher degree of durability compared to the relationship types of best friendships or committed partnerships, as Tomas deems these relations to be changeable. Andreas shares the essence in how Tomas describes the relation to the club as unchangeable.

*“I have never even considered it. Even if everything would feel completely useless, I just can't change club.” - Andreas*

These excerpts show how the consumer-brand relationship between a fan and their club is enduring. It simply is constant and this is tenably linked to the high degree of loyalty and identification involved. Since the support becomes a vital part of a fan's identity and life, it is not something that simply fades away or changes in the short-term.

#### 4.2.5 Public vs Private

This dimension revolves around the degree to which the consumer allows their relationship with a brand to be known by others. Fournier (1998) describes how consumers might feel a sense of privacy or even shame around certain brand relationships. This can for instance be a guilty pleasure that contradicts the personality which the consumer wishes to portray. For instance, this can be the relationship between a white collar worker and a snack brand deemed to be childish by their coworkers. For football supporters, the relationships with their respective clubs are overwhelmingly public.

*“I’m known as Tottenham-Jenny in many contexts. One of them being my workplace where I always walk around with my Tottenham coffee cup.” - Jenny*

*“I produce a few podcasts about Premier League in general and Liverpool in particular.” - Robin*

The words of both Jenny and Robin show how fans are very open about their team allegiance, whether it comes in the form of going under a nickname or creating fan content. There is no attempt at all to hide the relationship, on the contrary there is a sense of pride attached to the relationship. This pride is also exemplified by how fans consume merchandise from their favourite club.

*“I have bought the team shirt, several times. I have a quite a few from different seasons. All in all I guess it is around 40 different shirts.” - Philip*

*“I have a few shirts. I had a favourite player and when he played for the team I bought the jersey with his name on it every year. Just last year I bought the away jersey.” - Arez*

The two above excerpts show how fans wish to broadcast their team allegiance by purchasing clothes and other merchandise which are clearly labelled by the club. Taken together, these two themes illustrate a clearly public consumer-brand relationship, infused with a sense of pride and a wish for others to know which team one supports. Once again, this arguably stems from the high degree of loyalty and identification involved.

#### 4.2.6 Task-Related vs Personal

Fournier (1998) argues that a consumer-brand relationship can be fuelled by personal feelings and needs, or revolve more around accomplishing certain tasks. An example of a task-related relationship could be between a consumer and a certain cleaning supply brand. In this instance, there is clearly no real emotional attachment involved but the relationship exists to serve a purpose. The previous sections have clearly outlined the consumer-brand relationship between a fan and their football team as highly personal with high degrees of emotions involved. However, the relationship seemingly also serves a more tangible purpose. This can be illustrated by how interviewees described what their life would look like without their club.

*“It would feel like a really strange empty room in my life” - Jenny*

*“Without Tottenham my life would be much poorer emotionally and dramatically in many ways. I think I would have to do something to fill that void in that case.” - Mathias*

Jenny and Mathias describe how there would be an odd empty space in their life if they did not have their favourite football teams. This shows that the connection does accomplish and fulfil a certain task and this could arguably be the need to be engaged and captivated by something, the need to have a consuming interest. However, compared to the example of a consumer and their cleaning supply brands, the consumer-brand relationship between a fan and their team is still highly personal in nature and the task it performs is arguably an emotional one.

#### 4.2.7 Symmetric vs Asymmetric

Finally, Fournier (1998) outlines that consumer-brand relationships can have varying degrees of reciprocity. It can be argued that all relationships between a consumer and a brand are asymmetrical in nature as the brand never solely serves the one, but instead needs to meet the needs of a larger group of people. Still, some connections are more symmetrical than others. For instance, the relationship form enslavement, exemplified with a consumer's local pricey grocery store, is highly asymmetrical as the consumer does not derive much value or joy from the relationship, while forms such as best friendships are more symmetrical as those brands add a sparkle to the consumers' lives.



For football fans, the concept of reciprocity from their favourite team is intricate. Previous sections have outlined how fans derive much joy from the relationship and how it becomes an integral part of their lives. This signals that the relationship to some extent is a two-way-street. However, the effort put into the relationship by fans is arguably unmatched. On a similar note as Cherubini (2006) discusses, interviewees describe how the fan-created atmosphere at games is completely essential for the clubs.

*“The emotional experience is so heavily connected to what happens inside the stadium. You should sit close to the pitch and not have a big empty space between the bleachers. The atmosphere is so important and a large part of why I actually travel to see Tottenham several times a year.”* - Mathias

Mathias underscores the importance of fans as pro-sumers, aiding in the creation of the football product, and he describes how that very concept entices him to travel to see his team several times each year. This means that fans not only provide an unyielding loyalty to the consumer-brand relationship, but they also actively improve the attractiveness of the brand itself. However, in turn, fans experience a lack of reciprocity from their team.

*“I think it is very hard to get your voice heard as a supporter of Tottenham. You do not get heard in that way.”* - Jenny

*“I have learnt that I am extremely loyal towards a club who has no idea whatsoever who I am.”* - Arez

While Arez describes an anonymity present in most consumer-brand relationships, his words encapsulate the feeling of not being seen or heard, similarly to Jenny’s explicit comment about not being listened to by the club. This illustrates an asymmetrical relationship, especially since the fans provide so much in return to the club. Taken altogether, the consumer-brand relationship between a fan and their club is not a one-way-street as for instance the connection between a consumer and their local grocery store might be. The fans still derive a lot of meaning and value from the relationship. However, the relationship still becomes asymmetrical as the fans provide an unyielding loyalty, play a vital role in the match day atmosphere, and make the brand as a whole more attractive - all while experiencing that

their club does not really listen to them. This signals a consumer-brand relationship that does not lack reciprocity per se, but is still asymmetrical in character.

### 4.3 A Triadic Relationship

Fournier (1998) argues that the consumer-brand relationship is dyadic in nature where two parties are active members of a relationship dyad. Furthermore, she mentions how it is a dyadic two-way relationship which connects to how consumers tend to humanise brands. While there definitely is a dyadic element in the relationship between the fan and their club, there is also a triadic element where the community around the club have a huge role in fans' experiences with the club as displayed earlier in the analysis. The community was mainly analysed from how it fosters a strong loyalty among fans towards their club. However, by being such a big part of the fans' everyday lives it influences the relationship dynamic and becomes a part of the relationship between fans and their clubs.

*“My view is that it’s us, the fans, who follow the club who is this club. I would probably be even more disappointed if I had woken up and seen that the club had made the decision to join the super league project and every other supporter agrees with the decision. Then I would feel like this is not my club, like what happened here?” - Robin*

It becomes very clear how prominent the other fans are in Robin's relationship with the club. Robin mentions how he would feel more betrayed by other supporters than the club itself if they supported a decision that he strongly disagrees with. It shows how he can dislike a decision made by the club and continue to support them whereas if the community also supports the same, in his view, terrible decision then he would feel distant from the club stating that he no longer can recognise himself with the club. This strongly demonstrates the influence other fans have on the relation between a fan and their club, indicating a triadic element of the relationship. Moreover, the constant interaction with the community shows its integral part in a fan's experience of the club.

*“I’m a part of different messenger groups where we write to each other every day. We also meet up every now and then where we discuss the team and so on. So yeah, that’s very important for me that I can call a friend and rant about how bad the team is after we lost and so... I need to get my feelings out to someone else.” - Andreas*

Here the community has the purpose similar to that of a comforting friend. It becomes important for Andreas that he can share his emotions with other fans that can understand him and share the experience of the club. It is essential for the fan to incorporate the community into his relationship with the club where there is a constant interaction with other fans and a place to share their feelings and experiences.

Contrary to this, there also exists a dyadic element of the relationship. Multiple of the respondents mentioned how they usually watched the games alone meaning that the fans typically consumed football and in extension their club similar to Fournier's (1998) description of a dyadic two-way relationship.

*"I often see the game on my own. It's kinda like my alone time which I like. I have previously watched some games with others in the pub but then I can't really concentrate on the game which I don't like."* - Philip

*"I watch football for the sake of football so it's not for this group thing. I don't need anyone by my side to do that. What I find so nice about football is that you don't really need anyone with you or by your side to watch it. You can just watch and enjoy it for the sake of the game."* - Tomas

Both Philip and Tomas mention how they prefer to watch the games alone rather than with others. The community is seen as a distraction which makes it less enjoyable to watch the games which is the core consumption in relation to a football club. Tomas expands on this by arguing that football itself is the main thing and that he can enjoy the game as it is when he is alone. Hence, there exists a dyadic element of the relationship as well, especially in terms of the consumption of the club through watching their games. Consequently, there seems to be elements of both a dyadic and a triadic relationship between football fan's and their clubs. While the dyadic aspect of the relationship is prevalent during the consumption of the club, the triadic aspect appears to be strongly influential in situations outside of the time of consumption which makes it highly significant in the relationship between fans and their clubs.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 The Connection between Loyalty and the Relationship

In order to examine the connection between fans' loyalty and the relationship, underlying factors of the extreme loyalty that fans have towards their clubs were identified and outlined in the first part of the analysis. Identity, detachment, and community were identified as three underlying factors related to football fans' loyalty towards their clubs. Similar to what previous literature has shown (Tapp, 2004; Merten et al. 2023; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998), the findings of this study support the claim that fans view their team allegiance as a part of their own identity and that there is a positive connection between a fans ability to identify with a team and their loyalty towards that team. Furthermore, the community of the club had a positive influence on football fans' loyalty. Aligned with Heere and James' (2007) findings, the fans perceived the club's community to be very strong. This study also implies that the fans engage with the club through the community and that a lack of community negatively impacts their loyalty towards the club. Lastly, detachment was found to be an important coping mechanism for fans in relation to their loyalty. Detachment can be described as fans' rationalisation of why they could stay loyal to their clubs which they do through separating the club from the people owning or working with the club. The respondents mention how they separate the club which they love from the owners or other decision makers within the club when a decision is made that the fan cannot stand behind. Instead of switching team allegiance, the fan copes with the decision by believing that it was the owners, not the club, who made the decision.

The underlying factors influencing the strong loyalty that football fans have can be connected to Bauer et al.'s (2008) distinction between product-related attributes and non-product-related attributes in relation to football clubs. Our findings strongly indicate that non-product-related attributes are the most important ones and that they can be connected to loyalty among football fans. Attributes such as "club history and traditions" and "club culture and values" can be linked to identity and how fans identify with the culture, history, and values of the club which strengthens the loyalty that a fan has towards a club. Furthermore, the community that has been argued to have a positive influence on loyalty is clearly related to the attribute of "fans". As for the product-related attributes, they can be a deciding factor in regards to

when a fan first chooses which team to support. The attributes “star players” and “team performance” were found to be relevant when the respondents first became a supporter of a particular club. However, they were not relevant for the continuance of loyalty towards the same club. This is in line with Bauer et al. (2008) findings that non-product-related attributes are much more influential on a fan’s loyalty than product-related attributes. This relates back to the volatile nature of football, especially regarding the product-related attributes.

With having discussed the strong loyalty that football fans have and underlying factors that influence it, a connection can be drawn to the relationship and how it is shaped by this loyalty. By utilising Fournier’s (1998) dimensions and categorisation of consumer-brand relationships, it becomes evident how this particular relationship is shaped by fans' loyalty. The empirical findings suggest that fans' identification with the club is an important factor in relation to how the relationship can be characterised. As the club becomes a part of the fan’s own identity, an extremely strong loyalty is created which makes it impossible for the fans to break away from the relationship since the fan has become one with the club. Furthermore, fans' self-identification with the club makes them highly emotionally invested in the club. The club is an important part of their lives and who they are which generates strong emotions and a high intensity in the relationship. Besides identification, this study shows how detachment was used to cope with negative feelings towards the club. Fans' disappointment of the club could be projected to the people related to the club as a way to cope with the negative feeling associated with the disappointment which makes the relationship very enduring. Lastly, the community also shapes this relationship as it has become an integral part of the fans' everyday life. However, this will be thoroughly discussed later in the discussion, as well as a more comprehensive characterisation of this particular relationship between football fans and their clubs.

## 5.2 The Fandom Relationship

Having honed in on the consumer-brand relationship between football fans and their teams with the use of Fournier’s (1998) seven dimensions, it becomes clear that the connection is unique and divergent from the relationship type categorisation constructed by Fournier (1998). The collected empirical evidence shows that the relationship between fans and their respective clubs is categorically intense, enduring, public, and personal. In addition, the consumer-brand relationship often commences as voluntary, but as the connection strengthens

the relationship starts showing clear signs of being imposed and something that fans simply cannot move away from. Furthermore, there is an ambiguity in terms of the prevailing emotion derived from the relationship as fans display both a positive disposition and a deep negative emotional impact from the connection to their team. This dimension is clearly complex to the extent where it is pointless to exhaustively label it as either positive or negative, and this complexity and ambiguity propels this consumer-brand relationship into a unique form, as the different relationship types formulated by Fournier (1998) are more straightforward in nature, and clearly defined as either positive or negative. Interestingly enough, while there is a multitude of positive emotions involved in the relationship between a fan and their club, it does appear that the emotional troughs are substantially deeper than the peaks are high. The negative emotions fans experience are simply more intense than the positive counterparts. Lastly, the final dimension revolving around the symmetry of the relationship is also of particular interest. Even though the fans' respective clubs clearly become an integral part of their day-to-day life which results in enjoyment and attachment, the fans still feel that the clubs simply do not care for their wishes, opinions, or needs. In addition, the fans provide hugely to the performance of the brand itself. This shows that the relationship has reciprocal elements, but there is still a substantial asymmetry present as the fans provide so much more than they conceive they receive in return. This categorisation based on Fournier's (1998) dimensions is summarised below in Table 6.

<b>Fournier's (1998) dimensions that form the relationship</b>	<b>The relationship between a fan and their club</b>
Voluntary vs imposed	Voluntary at start → growing into imposed
Positive vs negative	Involves high degrees of both
Intense vs casual	Intense
Task-related vs personal	Personal
Private vs public	Public
Enduring vs short-term	Enduring
Symmetrical vs asymmetrical	Asymmetrical

Table 6: The categorisation of the relationship between a fan and their club, based on Fournier's (1998) dimensions

Examining the existing relationship types in Fournier's (1998) typology, this thesis previously presented five forms that were of particular interest for the study: (1) kinships, (2) committed partnerships, (3) dependencies, (4) best friendships, and (5) enslavements. Departing from the constructed definition of the consumer-brand relationship between fans and their clubs, it becomes evident that it does not fit under any of these headlines.

Firstly, while kinships share the non-voluntary nature, it is not intense to the same extent as the fan-club relationship. Furthermore, kinships circle around a constantly imposed relationship, while the fans voluntarily find a favourite club at the start of the relationship. Secondly, committed partnerships share the long-term nature as well as the will to adhere despite adverse circumstances with the fan-club relationship, however a committed partnership is built on love, trust and voluntarism - aspects that are far more ambiguous for fans in regards to their club. Thirdly, the relationship form called dependency is arguably the best fit. Similarly to the fan-club relationship, dependencies are described as obsessive, highly emotional connections with a substantial tolerance for transgressions and disappointment. However, the obsessive and emotional characteristics of a dependency relationship are fuelled solely by positive emotions. It can for example revolve around a consumer and a particular skin care item which the consumer believes they simply cannot go without due to its appreciated effect. For the consumer-brand relationship between fans and their clubs, it looks different. As previously explained, the high intensity involved is not solely based on positive emotions, but negative feelings play a key role as well, with many fans showcasing enduring emotional distress as a direct result of their team allegiance. Furthermore, as argued in the first chapter of this thesis, the product-related attributes of a football team are highly volatile and prone to change over short periods of time, which shows a lack of dependability, in comparison to for instance the before-mentioned skin care brand. Fourthly, best friendships share the emphasis on identity and the intensity with the fan-club connection. However, a best friendship is built on symmetry, voluntarism and continuous positive rewards, which are aspects not present in the relationship between fans and their favourite teams. Fans are clearly not best friends with the clubs they are committed to. Fifthly and finally, enslavements share a lot of similarities. It is involuntary as well as asymmetrical in nature, involves negative feelings and there is an inherent feeling of having no other choice, which is arguably similar to how a fan perceives their relationship with their club. However, while enslavements share the negatively loaded aspects with the fan-club connection, the latter evidently includes a host of positive aspects and emotions as well,

which the former lacks. Team allegiance becomes a part of a fan's identity, and there is a tangible pride attached to being a supporter - aspects that are not present in an enslavement relationship.

This subsequently means that the consumer-brand relationship between a fan and their club cannot be sufficiently categorised into any of the types stipulated by Fournier (1998). So, what is this relationship? We have decided to title this additional relationship type as a "fandom". A fandom is a relationship which is asymmetrical, intense, personal, public, and enduring. In addition, a fandom contains obsessive emotions to the extent where it becomes perceivably involuntary and impossible for the fan to cut ties with the brand. Finally, while the word fandom has strong positive connotations, we argue that such a relationship can invoke negative emotions as well, with feelings of being disappointed, angry, or sad due to the high expectations one might have. This fandom relationship is arguably distinguishable across all sports, but it also connects to the entirety of the entertainment industry. One can be a fan of actors, artists, bands, tv-shows and their respective brands. In these regards we believe that the consumer-brand relationship coined "fandom" will sufficiently describe the relationship between the entities. In the wider context, it is of course possible for brands of all kinds to cultivate this type of relationship with their consumers, however we are hesitant to whether the relationship between a consumer and for instance a breakfast cereal brand can reach the same levels of obsession, identification, and loyalty as the one between a fan and their football team, or a fan and their favourite artist.

### 5.3 The Dyadic vs Triadic Dimension

As previously discussed, the relationship between football fans and their clubs is very complex. The empirical findings presented in the analysis indicate that this particular relationship exceeds the seven dimensions Fournier (1998) mentions from which her categorisation of different relationship types stem. A new dimension, that in this study has been labelled the triadic dimension, was found to be prevalent in the relationship between football fans and their clubs which further highlights the complexity of this relationship. This new dimension relates to how the relationship is not only dyadic which Fournier (1998) argues but rather triadic where other fans have a significant role in a fan's relationship with their club.



Similar to what Underwood et al. (2001) argued, this study shows that football fans have an extremely strong sense of a community where individual fans share experiences and become a collective with a strong solidarity amongst fans. Furthermore, whereas previous studies have shown that a strong community can have a positive impact on purchase intentions, participation, and brand attitudes (Woolf et al. 2013; Hedlund, 2014), this study highlights the importance of the community in regards to the consumer-brand relationship. The respondents described how the community not only influences the relationship but actually becomes a part of the relationship between the fan and their club. Through sharing thoughts and experiences with the other fans and interacting with the community on a daily basis, the community became essential for the fans in their connection with and consumption of the club. It became evident that this connection to other fans influenced the relationship as it was important for the interviewees to have a daily interaction discussing different aspects and news of the clubs. Moreover, the community was even found to be synonymous with the club where the respondents in essence believed that the fans were the core of the club. Thus, these findings suggest that the relationship between football fans and their clubs can be categorised as triadic which challenge Fournier's (1998) notion of a solely dyadic consumer-brand relationship.

An important factor that enables communities to form around the world is the digitalisation of the world and the rise of social media. As discussed by Gibbons and Dixon (2010), social media enables fans to connect with other fans all over the world, creating communities without any geographical limitations. This was an important notion in this study as the respondents explained how online communities on social media were an integral part of their everyday life. This study confirms what Gibbons and Dixon (2010) discussed regarding how social media enables fans to connect with each other beyond geographical constraints. Furthermore, the findings suggest that it has a significant role in creating a strong community which fuels the triadic aspect of this relationship.

However, a dyadic element of the relationship between football fans and their clubs was also found in this study. Although the triadic element of the relationship was very eminent, a dyadic element was also present which is more in line with Fournier's (1998) idea of a dyadic two-way relationship. The majority of the interviewees mentioned how they watched most games alone, meaning that they consumed the core product of the club, the football games, individually indicating a dyadic nature between the fans and the club in the moment of

consumption. It was even mentioned how the community could be seen as a distraction from the club regarding the consumption of the games. This insight implies that there exists a dyadic element with the relationship between football fans and their clubs.

Nonetheless, it can be seen that the dyadic aspect of the consumption of watching football games is amplified by the triadic element of the relationship. Even if the fans mostly watch the games alone, the community was still an influential factor as to why the fans watched the games altogether. Some of the respondents argued that they probably would watch less games if they did not have a community where they could discuss the team either in person or online. Others mentioned that it would not have an affect on their watching habits, however, the interviewees did reveal that they thought they would feel less attached to the club if there was a lack of community around the club. Hence, the community influences the watching habits which shows that the triadic aspect impacts the fans' consumption of the club, which in itself is dyadic. Therefore, it can be argued that the triadic element of the relationship is boosting the dyadic aspect and has a significant role in the relationship between football fans and their clubs.

To summarise, this study indicates that there exists both a dyadic and triadic element in the relationship between football fans and their clubs. However, the triadic element is more prominent in the relationship as the community of the club has a significant influence on the individual fan's experiences with the club. Moreover, it influences the consumption behaviour, which is connected with the dyadic aspect of the relationship, suggesting that the triadic aspect is more significant for the fans in their relationship with the club. This makes the relationship even more complex as a third part is seen to be involved in the relationship.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Research Findings

Circling back to the outlined research question of this thesis, it is discernible that the subsequent empirical evidence and analysis have yielded interesting results. We asked: *What does the relationship between football supporters and their clubs look like, and how is it shaped by the inherent brand loyalty?*

Firstly, we found that the relationship between football supporters and their clubs are shaped by three key aspects of brand loyalty: (1) the identity, (2) the detachment of the club, and (3) the community. As time passes, the fan starts to identify with their club and their support and allegiance becomes an integral part of who they are. This is a key aspect in why the loyalty is seemingly unbreakable. If one were to change clubs or cease supporting their team, it would in extension mean an overhaul of who they are as an individual as well. Interestingly enough, this means that negative emotions and feelings are detached from the concept of the club itself, and are instead directed towards players, managers, owners, individual decisions, or other aspects that the club soars above like an untouchable cloud. Another interesting finding is the importance of the community, and how the connection with other fans solidifies and strengthens the loyalty.

These three aspects substantially influence the consumer brand-relationship between a fan and their favourite football team. The strong loyalty invokes intense and enduring feelings, as well as a pride which means that the relationship is open for the public eye to see.

Furthermore, it also results in an extremely high tolerance for transgressions, signalling that the relationship is asymmetrical in nature. The intense feelings involved also include negative emotions such as disappointment, anger, and sadness, but the relationship is maintained by the strong identification from the supporter, as well as the detachment of negative outcomes from the club itself. Lastly, the loyalty is strong to the extent where the relationship becomes impossible for supporters to move away from. Their team allegiance is an ever-present part of themselves and this signals an involuntary relationship with their favourite teams.

We found that the consumer-brand relationship between a football supporter and their club is not sufficiently explained by Fournier's (1998) typology. As a result of this, we created an additional relationship formed titled "fandom" which outlines the connection between a fan and their club. A fandom relationship is intense, enduring, personal, public, and asymmetric. In addition to the positive feelings involved, there also exists deep negative emotions as a result of the present high intensity. Furthermore, the obsessive nature of the relationship propels it into the classification of involuntary. Finally, given the clear importance of community which this thesis has unearthed, an additional eighth dimension was added to Fournier's (1998) seven relationship dimensions: dyadic vs triadic. This revolves around how third parties shape the relationship as well, and in the case of the fandom relationship, it is clear that this is a triadic connection as the interaction with other fans is a key aspect.

## 6.2 Implications

### 6.2.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings presented in this thesis have two main theoretical contributions. Firstly, we add an additional dimension to Fournier's (1998) existing seven categories which in turn describe the relationship form. Our addition is an eighth dimension called dyadic vs triadic. This aspect revolves around whether the consumer-brand relationship is heavily influenced by a third party or not. Not only does this correlate with the findings of this thesis but it also connects well with the many online brand communities that have sprouted since Fournier's seminal work. It is arguably becoming increasingly popular to share the brand experience with other people, and this additional dimension captures that very trend. The addition of the dyadic vs triadic dimension opens up for a more precise categorisation of consumer-brand relationships and it furthermore invites a reevaluation of relationships that are classified under the previous seven-dimension typology. This theoretical contribution also leads to the formation of new potential consumer-brand relationship types. For instance, a committed partnership with the additional aspect of being triadic might instead be a new relationship form called polyamorous partnership. Our contribution provides a sound theoretical foundation for the development of additional relationship forms.

On this note, our second theoretical contribution is the definition and construction of a new consumer-brand relationship type: The fandom relationship. This creates an inclusivity in

terms of theory in the way that sport brands, and arguably entertainment or celebrity brands, can be accurately labelled. This is a necessity given the recent hyper-commercialisation of sports, catapulting the sector into the more conventional corporate domain. It is now necessary to view sport teams through corporate lenses as well, and reevaluate existing theories and models to accommodate the inclusion of this new, growing financial sector. Our thesis is one step on this journey and provides an updated view on consumer-brand relationships, as well as a better understanding of the underlying forces of loyalty that drive and forge the close bond between a supporter and their club.

### 6.2.2 Managerial Implications

Although the study has taken the fans' perspective, the findings have generated relevant managerial implications besides the theoretical contribution. While brand loyalty is a well established research topic, this study has provided an increased understanding of relationships where there exists a very high brand loyalty. In the context of football fans, the relationship is very intense with a mixture of positive and negative emotions, yet still it has become an involuntary involvement that the fans cannot escape. From a managerial perspective, this further highlights the importance of cultivating a strong brand loyalty. Although this extreme loyalty that football fans possess is arguably unique to the sporting world, the insights are still useful for more conventional brands. By creating and fostering a strong brand loyalty, managers can tap into the seemingly unlimited reserves that football clubs have where the consumers continue to consume the products regardless of negative backlash or perceived negative emotions. It is especially relevant for managers within sectors that are highly emotional since this study shows how the emotional involvement of fans is a contributing factor to the relationship dynamics between fans and their clubs.

Furthermore, the research ascertained that the relationship between football supporters and their clubs are shaped by three aspects of brand loyalty which are identity, detachment, and community. The aspect of detachment can be difficult to attain from a managerial standpoint, however, both identity and community is influenceable by management. Developing a clear brand identity that consumers can identify with strengthens the relationship as identity was found to be a very important aspect in fostering a strong loyalty. This study indicates that a strong brand identity not only makes consumers identify with the brand but can potentially

integrate the brand as a part of their own identity, making it difficult to switch brand allegiance since it would mean that the consumer would go against themselves.

Lastly, the emergence of a triadic dimension of the relationship signals the importance of having a strong community when fostering a strong relationship. With the rise of online communities, it is relevant for managers to provide platforms and contexts where the communities can develop and strengthen as well as integrating more consumers to be a part of the community. This is an implication that goes well beyond the context of football as brand communities are established in many other sectors and due to the triadic dimension of relationships it becomes very important for managers to manage the communities as a whole.

### 6.3 Limitations

A limitation with this study is the focus on football fans and in particular those that support clubs that play within the English Premier League. It is important to acknowledge that football is viewed differently around the world and that the study is limited to the cultural context of football played in England. Similarly, all the respondents were Swedish which limits the study to the context of Swedish fans that supports English teams. The relationship between football fans and their clubs is shaped by the social and cultural factors that exist in different countries. The view on football and a fan's relationship with a club in South America will not be exactly the same as in Europe due to the cultural differences that exist. Nonetheless, we argue that the findings are still relevant for other settings where there exists a very strong brand loyalty such as other sports and potentially even brands such as celebrity brands.

Furthermore, another limitation is that this study takes the consumer perspective in regards to the relationship between football fans and their clubs. As Fournier (1998) mentions, the relationship goes two ways where both parties are an active member of the relationship. Consequently, the relationship has only been studied from one perspective which limits the study in regards to gaining a complete understanding of the relationship in its entirety. While football clubs cannot tend to each individual fan but rather the fan base as a collective, their perspective of the relationship regarding how they work with and are influenced by this relationship would generate further insights to the relationship dynamics.

## 6.4 Further Research

While this study has generated insights into the relationship between football fans and their clubs and contributed to the consumer-brand relationship literature, new areas for further research have emerged. Firstly, it would be interesting to further look into other contexts where there seemingly exists a strong brand loyalty similar to that of football clubs such as other sports or the entertainment industry. Through this, it would be possible to compare similarities and differences of the relationship characteristics between different contexts where a high brand loyalty exists. This would indicate if the relationship between football fans and their clubs is a unique isolated phenomenon or if it shares characteristics with consumer-brand relationships in other settings.

Secondly, as previously mentioned, this study takes the fans perspective which is why it would be relevant to further look into the relationship from the clubs perspective. Exploring how the clubs work to foster and maintain the relationship would generate additional managerial implication with strategies to create this fandom relationship. Through a case study on one of the biggest football clubs, it would be possible to gain insights to how football clubs operate to nurture this relationship with the triadic nature of the relationship in mind. These strategies would be relevant for brands beyond the football industry as it relates to creating and fostering brand loyalty as well which is relevant for practically all brands.

Thirdly, the addition of a new dimension to Fournier's (1998) theory that incorporates the triadic nature of consumer-brand relationships open up exciting opportunities for further research. Further research could examine and potentially reevaluate previous consumer-brand relationships within sectors that are outside of the sporting world. The rise of social media and the constant digitalisation of the world has given rise to online brand communities and communities have never been more present than today. Therefore, it would be beneficial to look into how the community influences the relationship which can give a more accurate characterisation of the relationship, especially regarding brands that are more hedonic in nature with existing brand communities. This would enable researchers to gain an even deeper understanding of consumer-brand relationships in sectors outside of the sporting realm.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Interview Guide

### **Control question and demographics**

- Which football team do you support?
- How old are you?
- What is your occupation?

### **Supporters background**

- Why do you support this particular team?
- How did it start?
- Why not another team?
- How long have you supported this team?

### **Emotional connection**

- What do you like about your club?
- Are you ever disappointed, angry, sad etc as a result of your club?
- Have you been disappointed in your team for something they did (scandal)? If so, how did it affect you? Did it change your perspective on the club?
- Would you feel less attached to your club if they carried out actions that do not align with your values? What type of actions would that be?
- How does your attachment to the club you support affect your everyday mood?
- Can you think of something that would make you support another club? Or at least not support the current club? Why, why not?
- What would your life feel like without your club?

### **Self-identification**

- Do you identify with your club? How?
- What does it mean to be a (teams name) fan to you?
- How would you describe your team? Their values/personality? Can you relate to that?

### **Consumption habits**

- Have you bought a ticket to a home game? How often?
- Have you bought shirts, kits, or other things related to the club? How often?
- Would anything make you more or less inclined to purchase tickets or merchandise?
- How often do you think or talk about this club? See their games? With who and in what context?
- How do you watch the games?
- How do you engage and follow your club, besides watching games?

### **Community and engagement**

- Have you ever tried to influence others to become a fan of the club you support, if so, how?
- If you did not have anyone to talk to about the team or the games, how would that affect you? Would you still watch as many games? Or be as involved with the club?
- Are you an active or passive member of the community? (ex social media) Explain.

### **Non-product related questions**

- What would be your reaction if your club decided to change the logo? Or even more drastically, change the colours? Would you still be emotionally invested? Would you change to another team?
- What would be your reaction to a change of stadium?
- How would you react if your club was bought by the state of Saudi Arabia, or similar? Do you think their involvement in football is positive or negative, why?
- How important are club traditions to you? Do you have anything specific in mind? How would you feel if the club did not respect these or tried to change them?
- How important is the fan base to you? Is that a reason for staying attached to the club? Do you feel less attached if the fan base were to change? For instance if local supporters stopped coming to the stadium and were instead replaced by tourists or sponsor seats?
- How would you feel if the club lost or changed its local roots? If they moved to another part of the country, or if they took on a more international role, similar to NFL teams who now play matches all over the world and not just on their home turf.

**Product-related questions**

- Who is your favourite player? Why? Has it changed over the years?
- Any player that is or has been a part of your club that you have disliked? Why?
- How would/did you feel if/when these players left the club?
- How would you feel if the club had a head coach you did not like? What would you do? Would you change teams? Did you feel less attached/emotionally invested to the club?
- How would you feel if the club underperformed?
- How would you feel if the team's playing style was not attractive to you?

## Appendix 2 - Thematic Coding of the Empirical Data

Code	Sub-theme	Theme
Recognition with the club and their values	Identity	Underlying factors influencing loyalty
The fan becomes one with the club		
Separating the club from the people	Detachment	
Rationalisation/Coping mechanism		
Friends and family	Community	
Social media		
Interactions every day		
Initial stage of the relationship	Voluntary vs Imposed	The consumer-brand relationship
Impossible to switch team allegiance		
Love for the club	Positive vs Negative	
Proud of the club		
Low lows		
Emotionally intense	Intense vs Casual	
Constantly thinking about the club		
Impossible to switch team allegiance	Enduring vs Short-Term	
Showcasing of their supportership	Public vs Private	
Merchandise from the club		
Emptiness without the club	Task-related vs Personal	
Emotional need		
Co-creation	Symmetric vs Asymmetric	

Little to no response from the club		
The community	Dyadic vs Triadic	A triadic relationship
Constant interaction with other fans		
Consumes football alone		