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A Study of Digital Fan Engagement Strategies
in Professional Soccer

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COVID-19 and the Bundesliga: A Study of Digital Fan Engagement Strategies in Professional Soccer

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Abstract

This chapter examines how the German Bundesliga clubs have responded to the COVID-19 challenges in terms of engaging fans digitally. Expert interviews were conducted with 13 representatives from three stakeholder groups of the league: club senior managers, consulting managers, and fan representatives. Findings outline six digital engagement principles learned from the clubs' response to the challenges. These include fan centrality at the core, creating a 360-degree view of the fan, turning physical into virtual encounters, the rise and adaptation of social media use, converting tactic into strategic solutions, and the need for flexible and innovative environment. Theoretical and practical implications as well as suggestions for future research are provided.

Keywords: professional soccer, Bundesliga, fan engagement, digitalization, innovation, social media

The world has been in an unprecedented state of global emergency since early 2020, as it has faced COVID-19, the most consequential pandemic in over a century. By January 2022, more than 305 million cases have been confirmed and more than 5.5 million deaths been reported globally (WHO, 2022). Given that the virus is easily transmitted amongst humans who gather in confined spaces, strict contact restrictions - or lockdowns - have been put in place in different countries across the world. The contact restrictions significantly impacted the world economy, and repercussions were felt in every sector, including the sports industry. The Tokyo Olympic Games, for instance, representing the world's premier sporting event, were postponed by a year and staged without spectators in 2021. These measures greatly impacted organizers, athletes, sponsors, and fans. The effect has not been different with national sport governing bodies such as the Bundesliga, the German football top league. There was a complete interruption of matches starting March 13, 2020, and numerous Bundesliga games took place without spectators. One of the key challenges for many clubs was how to keep fans engaged during that time. The chapter thus examines, from the perspective of senior managers, how the clubs have responded to the crisis in terms of engaging fans digitally.

The Impact of COVID-19 on the German Bundesliga

As noted, professional soccer, the most popular mass spectator sport, has not been spared from the profound effects of COVID-19 (Bandyopadhyay, 2021). A number of research works reported on the financial impact of the pandemic on professional soccer. For example, Horky (2021), considering major sources in soccer generated from matchday revenue, sponsorship, and media revenue, contended that fans watching at home (media revenue) generate more direct revenue to the sport than revenue generated on-site (matchday revenue). Manoli 's (2020) study found that the media are not only essential in ensuring financial security of the soccer business,

but, especially during the COVID-19 period, act as a rescuer sustaining the relationship between clubs and fans globally. Although most leagues were allowed to resume matchdays immediately to secure media revenue, the recent *Deloitte Football Money League 2021* report shows an overall significant financial loss in the season 2019/2020 across the ‘big five’ soccer leagues, compared to the previous season 2018/2019 (Deloitte, 2021a). Accordingly, a revenue loss of at least -10 % to -23 % in matchday and media is evident. Yet, commercial revenues increased by up to 3 %, attributed to the established relationships between clubs and their partners.

In Germany, the Bundesliga and the Bundesliga 2 represent the top two German professional soccer divisions for men. In a regular season, 18 clubs play twice to determine an overall winner over 34 match days. In comparison to other European leagues, the Bundesliga is based on the so-called 50+1 rule. This rule ensures that all of the club’s stakeholders, and - by extension - the fans, hold the majority of the voting rights and cannot be dominated by any commercial investor or other powerful external parties. In accordance with *Deloitte’s Annual Review of Football Finance 2021*, the Bundesliga belongs to one of the economically strongest leagues in Europe (Deloitte, 2021b). Moreover, as the report indicated, in the 2018/2019 season more than 40,444 spectators attended games on average, making the Bundesliga the most attended soccer league globally, followed by the English Premier League (39.591) and the Spanish La Liga (28.862). By the same criteria, the Bundesliga 2, the second division, is relatively more successful than most other professional sports.

Despite these encouraging preconditions, the Bundesliga has faced serious challenges throughout the pandemic, similar to other professional soccer divisions worldwide (Drewes et al., 2021). As viral transmissions expanded within Germany, COVID-19 started impacting the second half of the 2019/2020 season, requiring a complete interruption of the matches starting

March 13, 2020 (Deloitte, 2021b). Due to great uncertainties and many fears of going bankrupt, the financially strongest clubs raised funds to support other teams and secure the Bundesliga's competitiveness. Two months later, Bundesliga clubs were allowed to resume games on May 16, 2020 (Horky, 2021), which made the German clubs to be the first within Europe to get official permission to restart their season (Deloitte, 2021b).

Since the restart, challenging circumstances have brought safety precautions and hygiene regulations to the center of attention, replacing the original focus on team performance and competition. As a result, a new reality emerged, which included stadiums without fans, a counted number of masked staff, social distancing within teams, no collective jubilation, etc. With this new reality, the typical soccer atmosphere, for which the Bundesliga is known, diminished, resulting in 22 men playing in an empty stadium. Nevertheless, the Bundesliga has been one of the few leagues with the privilege to fully complete the season and determine a champion. It has also been the only top league in Europe to complete all matchdays of the season and simultaneously end the season in the original fiscal year 2019/2020 (Deloitte, 2021b).

The restart of the season, in part, has allowed the German league to register an economic loss of only 4 % (Deloitte, 2021b). By comparison, the league that normally generates the highest revenues, the English Premier League, suffered a 12 % drop. All other professional soccer leagues also recorded declines: for example, Spain's La Liga by 8 %, France's Ligue 1 by 16 % to the Italy's Serie A by 18 %. According to the report, the main reason for the decline is the lack of matchday revenue, part of which, in Germany's case, was offset by additional commercial revenues, due to the strong and long-established partnership that the leagues have with several sponsors.

As medical innovations advanced and vaccines started to be approved in early 2021, the Bundesliga started preparations for the new season 2020/2021 and, at the beginning of July 2021, the German professional soccer clubs were allowed to admit a maximum of 25.000 fans to their stadiums. However, the regulation applied in conjunction with strict hygiene restrictions and official figures relating to the COVID-19 situation. Also, it was on the condition that Germany's federal states may mandate more specific and tougher regulations. Some Bundesliga clubs, for instance Bayer 04 Leverkusen and Borussia Dortmund, decided to let only vaccinated or recovered fans into their stadiums.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Fans and Fan Engagement

Fans in professional soccer are considered of paramount importance. Fan engagement has evolved from the concept of customer engagement. This derivation is not surprising, as fans are known to be a particular type of customer operating in the sports world. However, they are not conventional customers; they are special customers who actively contribute to the clubs' business, generate value, and add quality. Yoshida et al. (2014) define fan engagement as "as a sport consumer's extra role behaviors in non-transactional exchanges to benefit his or her favorite sport team, the team's management, and other fans" (p. 403). It is worth noting that the concept of fan engagement differs from traditional customer engagement by incorporating the emotional environment characterizing the relationship between fans and clubs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only interrupted matchday operations, it has also negatively affected fans' everyday lives (Mastromartino et al., 2020). Between March 2020 and July 2021, more than a year passed during which Bundesliga fans did not visit a stadium. These circumstances have made it even more apparent that soccer's center of attention is the stadium. A stadium not only brings together people who share the same passion, it is also the physical place

where the club and team can communicate with their fans, and to which fans can respond directly. However, due to the pandemic, stadiums remained abandoned for a long time and, without fans, have appeared as emotionless venues, lacking their unique atmosphere (Majumdar & Naha 2020). One could argue that, without stadiums, the crucial component of building fan engagement is missing. Therefore, the vital role of fans in creating a unique atmosphere has been appreciated more than before during the pandemic (Drewes et al., 2021).

To date research has only paid scant attention to the impact of the missed matchdays and absence of stadium attendance on fans and their engagement. However, a few studies do provide insights on the subject matter. For example, Parnell et al. (2020) reported that stadium visits present a crucial part of fans' daily lives, connecting them with other people. Hence, the interruption of stadium attendance has caused great social disruption among fans. It abruptly eliminated fans' opportunities to forget about daily stress and devote themselves to their passion, and the overall shared experience of the matchday was missing. As a consequence, fans have lost the established tradition of discussing their team's performance or other game-related topics before and after games in-person.

Sport can be consumed through participation or spectatorship, and the consumption of sport as a spectator can be viewership through the media or attendance at live games. Clearly, COVID-19 had strong implications on the latter. As for media consumption, there are some striking developments in terms of how fans consume sports. Next to an increasing number of fans following matches on TV, the openness to try out new media, based on novel subscription models, has grown intensely. There also seems to be a slide shift in interests, with the growing popularity of esports during the pandemic, for example. In connection with this, some researchers questioned if fans might have become alienated from professional soccer or the clubs

and their athletes to some level due to the long phase of restrictions. This may include fans looking for new interests or hobbies that satisfy their social cohesion needs during the pandemic (Evans et al., 2020). Again, these developments emphasize how important it is for clubs to pursue appropriate strategies to strengthen fan engagement on an on-going basis.

The Need for Digital and Innovative Action

For over two years now, the pandemic has affected the sport industry. Clubs needed to react aptly and sustain fans' interest and attachment to their club. This led to a call for novel approaches to building and maintaining of clubs' relationships with their fans in difficult times (e.g., Mastromartino et al. 2020). According to Bond et al. (2020), creativity and innovation are of foremost importance to address these challenges. Other researchers suggest that the use of digital technologies may ensure continuous exchanges between clubs and fans in the new normality shaped by COVID-19 (Ratten, 2020). For instance, FC Midtjylland, a Danish soccer club, is positioning big monitors in the stadium so that fans can support their team from their cars. At the same time, they are all gathering in the same stadium – sharing the experience without any risk of viral transmission. Furthermore, broadcasters implemented creative ideas to get viewers at home more involved by letting them actively participate while watching their favorite team (Majumdar & Naha 2020). America's major professional leagues have entered into partnerships with digital companies, such as Amazon Web Services or Microsoft, aiming to maintain and intensify fan engagement.

While “the most innovative responses [to the pandemic] by sport organizations were born from necessity” (Skinner & Smith 2021, p. 325), several researchers contend that COVID-19 should be seen as an opportunity to take an innovative look at and possibly improve on processes that have remained unchanged for years (Majumdar & Naha, 2020). Against this background, it

is valuable to examine how clubs in the Bundesliga have responded to the crisis in terms of engaging fans digitally.

Digital Fan Engagement at the German Bundesliga: Study Methods

This chapter aims to shed light on the German Bundesliga's actions to counteract the pandemic challenges regarding fan engagement. In particular, it focuses on how the clubs have responded to the crisis in terms of engaging fans digitally.

Given the exploratory nature of the research objective, the study adopted a qualitative research strategy, employing a semi-structured interview method. Interviews were conducted with club managers, consulting managers, and fan representatives. Prior to the interviews, the authors constructed an interview guide consisting of 13 questions, divided into five topic areas. Different versions of the interview guide were drafted in English and German, covering the three different stakeholder groups (i.e., club managers, consulting managers, and fan representatives). A pilot interview was conducted to test the guide. Minor amendments to the guide were made after the pilot.

Because the interviewees are the main instrument of the expert interview, great attention was paid to the selection of appropriate participants and specific selection criteria were established. Accordingly, all the experts were expected to be personnel responsible for the management of fan engagement and work in or with Bundesliga clubs. Moreover, different criteria within the three perspectives were defined, ensuring an overall homogeneity of the interviewees. In light of this, club managers should work in the field of digitalization and represent senior managers. The consultative managers should operate in relevant agencies that provide strategic advice to the clubs or represent leading social media platforms. Lastly, the fan representatives should be able to reflect on the fans' needs and opinions.

The interviews were conducted over the period of one month from end of September 2021 to end of October 2021. The average duration was 33 minutes. The conversations - which were conducted via digital video conference, telephone call, and face-to-face – were digitally recorded and transcribed afterwards. In total, five club managers with the position of Head of Digitalization, Managing Director, and Chief Executive Officer have participated. Similarly, five consultative managers all with a position of Senior Manager have sat for the interview, and three Fan Representatives from Bundesliga 1 clubs have participated.

In analyzing the interview data, the work has followed the procedure proposed by Mayring (2015). A code book has been developed that helped categorize the content and identify inter-relationships. Given this content analysis method, the authors chose to categorize by selecting a combination of deductive and inductive coding. In the first phase, codes were formed deductively, derived from the sub-questions and interview guide questions. Subsequently, and more specifically, multiple sub-codes based on the interview contents were inductively built, helping to find a structure and analyze similarities and differences better. The extraction of the information was done with help of MAXQDA 2020.

Digital Fan Engagement at the German Bundesliga: Findings

This study examined how the German Bundesliga's clubs have responded to the crisis in terms of engaging fans digitally from the perspective of three stakeholders: club managers, consulting managers, and fan representatives.

Digital Engagement Principles

The study identified six core themes, which we refer to as digital engagement principles. These include: fan centricity at the core, creating a 360-degree view of the fan, turning physical into virtual encounters, the rise and adaptation of social media use, converting tactic into

strategic solutions, and need for flexible and innovative environment. Each of these themes is discussed below.

Fan Centricity at the Core

First, the findings reveal the important role of fans, confirming that fans are the center of every club's action for many reasons. This is mainly reflected by the fact that the Bundesliga has been designed accordingly: The league prescribes permanent employees taking care of the fans' needs, so-called fan representatives, who maintain and grow the relationship between clubs and fans. In addition to hiring employees who care about the fans' well-being, other provisions, such as the 50+1 rule, ensure that at least half of the club be co-determined by the members, again emphasizing the importance of fans. The findings show that most Bundesliga clubs see themselves as clubs that focus on fans when compared to other international soccer leagues, which are more determined by investors. Therefore, the respondents consensually point out the significance of fans by highlighting that they are the core of every thought and action.

Interviewee 9, a consulting manager, stated: "Everything is about the fan. Everything we do is very fan-centric and so is everything our partners do". Interviewee 10 added: "The more fans, the more reach, the more marketing opportunities. That is why fans are essential for every club and should be the center of attention". Most club managers state to have learned from the pandemic that fans cannot be taken for granted. Quite to the contrary, "each fan should be viewed as a gift" (Interviewee 1).

Creating a 360-Degree View of the Fan

As pointed out earlier, the Bundesliga is attractive to its fans for its unique atmosphere. Interviewee 12 stresses that the "presence and the stadium experience will always be in the foreground for fans" and that "traditional soccer fans will always want their bratwurst and beer".

Most Bundesliga fans seem to be hoping that normality will return to everyday soccer life as quickly as possible, without additional restrictions. Therefore, the fans' expectations consistently indicate that digital innovations should not replace analog activities but only present helpful supplements. Especially the so-called ultra-scenes, which represent the "die-hard fans" or "heritage fans", tend to be more traditional, making them less open towards novel digital activations. In fact, the current study shows that the Bundesliga fans present a heterogeneous group of people. As interviewee 1 states very clearly: "There is not one fan, but there is a multitude of different fans and different fan groups". Each club needs to find digital data-driven solutions to address and ultimately engage each fan as effectively and specifically as possible by understanding their individual needs and desires, such as how they want to receive their ticket, but also what type of content they are interested in on social media or other platforms, among other things. Interviewee 1 describes this challenge as creating a "360-degree view of the fan":

It is no longer appropriate for us to send out newsletters advertising a fan shirt to everyone. ... Fan XYZ is a season ticket holder with us since XYZ, always sits in block XYZ, has bought XYZ last in the store, a subscriber to our [club-owned] TV and always watches these videos. From these details, I want to know: What is the last piece of the puzzle, what is he/she still missing? ... And, in my view, that automatically ensures that a fan feels valued and gets highly engaged.

Turning Physical into Virtual Encounters

The study data show that, traditionally, most actions to foster fan engagement were analog in nature. It becomes clear that physical touchpoints, such as publicly accessible training sessions, visiting training camps, autograph sessions, or Christmas parties are highly appreciated and allow easy and close contact with the athletes. Matchdays, as a form of recurring event, are

special in this context, bringing together fans and club with athletes in a unique way. However, our study revealed that the pandemic has made interactions with fans more complex, and the reactions of the fans have been more challenging to understand, so that analog communication has suffered. As a result, many experts perceive a kind of alienation of the fans and admit that the pandemic has created a distance between clubs and fans.

In response to this, experts report that events, which used to take place in person, were digitized, using tools such as Microsoft Teams. In this case, the clubs offered various formats with relevant stakeholders, such as management, athletes, or coaches, as well as facilitating open dialogues with fans. The main focus was to continue communicating a strong sense of togetherness and ensuring a continuous exchange between the fans and clubs. In particular, the involvement and participation of coaches or athletes highly increased fans' enthusiasm. According to a fan relations experts, the participation of athletes has noticeably enhanced the digital event for the following reasons:

We felt that when an athlete or coach joined a digital Christmas party or digital fan club meeting, it definitely made the fans very happy and it went down well. Even if it still was a digital experience, they had the opportunity to ask questions in the chat, put their jersey on in front of the camera, etc. That was definitely a positive experience that we had in terms of digital activations. (Interviewee 12)

One of the experts states that, through these virtual fan events, even the fan groups in international markets could be increased:

We were able to tap into completely new target groups. The fans we have abroad, for example, were fairly unreachable before, or we reached them exclusively with a mailing. Of course, this is less personal than the live exchange and you also get

less feedback. But when you enter into a direct exchange with the fans, the club finds out completely different things. For example, once a month we digitally connect with the fans in Japan [for questions and answer opportunities].

(Interviewee 13)

In light of this digital evolution, internal changes were necessary, including staff restructuring and greater use of digital infrastructures to enable the increased digital activities. Several club managers pointed out it is now time to determine the suitable distribution and analyze which digital actions can be combined with analog procedures, thus complementing each other meaningfully to enable the most effective fan engagement: “In the future, we need to find out what balance is necessary. For example, whether 80 percent physical and 20 percent virtual meetings make sense, or even more virtual meetings? These are questions that we will have to ask ourselves in the future.” (Interviewee 5)

The Rise and Adaptation of Social Media Use

While the rise of social media for relationship marketing and fan engagement has been well documented for some time now, the pandemic has given this development a further boost, which could also be felt in the Bundesliga. Most clubs markedly increased their presences and activities on relevant social media platforms. This may not come as a surprise given that social media channels were the first choice to communicate club updates to broad fan audiences.

In particular, matchday-independent content gained significant relevance within the Bundesliga across all platforms. When the Bundesliga was interrupted, the clubs had to adapt their well-established content strategies and were forced to learn how to produce more creative and spontaneous content. As a consulting manager states:

They created more live content, not only pre-produced content, but also a lot of live stuff out of the stadiums, ... practice sessions ... presentations that they did for the athletes. So, there was a lot of content ... that the platforms did not see before the pandemic. [...] Before the crisis, it was pretty calm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. ... Now, the content plans of all our partners [changed] and ... that is not, as I said, matchday-focused, but much more 'always on'. (Interviewee 9)

Accordingly, there was no longer any communication about matchday-related aspects such as the final scores. Instead, the focus was on innovative content such as the creation of own matchdays, focusing on great and historical matches from the past or training footage of athletes showing how they keep fit at home. Moreover, the study showed a shift within platforms in favor of Instagram and TikTok, highlighting the relevance of video content. Interviewee 8 describes this development regarding TikTok as follows: "I do believe that there is a connection between the intensity of account uses and the pandemic going on. The accounts were active before, but the accounts were much, much more active and stronger during the pandemic."

Interviewee 9 goes on, referring to the social media platform Instagram: "It turned out that especially through the pandemic, Instagram was the preferred tool for fans, but also for clubs, to stay connected with the sports that they love." In addition, the growing involvement of athletes' accounts became apparent. Specifically, one club manager mentions an increased use of athlete channels to foster fan engagement:

In fact, we have made increased use of the athletes' channels. The occurrence of the pandemic was a special situation. To maintain the engagement with our fans, we not only played content through our channels, but increasingly did so through the athletes' channels. (Interviewee 5)

Nevertheless, there seem to be major differences in the use of the channels in the Bundesliga, as owning an account does not necessarily mean that the channels are used effectively. Accordingly, our analysis reveals that a few clubs have club-owned media departments and seem to be equipped very professionally:

On the digital level, it's all about content. Here, we deal with the question of what content we make available. (...) We have gigantic reach via our social media channels. That means we have an extra digital team that follows our team all day long, from morning to night, to produce the content that fans find interesting.

(Interviewee 5)

On the contrary, others have social media presences, but do not seem to leverage them in the best possible way.

We used digital channels very selectively before the pandemic, to put it kindly.

Actually, almost not at all. The only thing where fan activity took place digitally was individual calls with players via Instagram Live Videos. Fans were able to ask the athletes questions directly. But other than that, we didn't do much. Before the pandemic, we were very backward in that respect. (Interviewee 13)

This also seems to be a matter of division. For example, while some clubs from the first division have already tried to compensate sponsors' services digitally by increasing sponsors' visibility on social media channels, many clubs from the second division are still focused on expanding their social media channels and corresponding activities. Last but not least, a certain dissatisfaction with clubs' responses was evident among some consulting managers, who are calling for more creative approaches, especially when comparing the Bundesliga to other top leagues, such as the English Premier League.

Converting Tactic into Strategic Solutions

Converting short-term (tactic) actions into long-term (strategic) solutions is another theme identified in this study. During the pandemic, a number of novel tactics were implemented in the short-term, as can be seen from the results presented above. However, for most Bundesliga clubs moving forward, a key challenge is to consolidate existing initiatives. In other words, to reconsider and successively fine-tune the ideas developed quickly in order to find the most effective long-term strategies to engage fans. In the words of interviewee 3:

We need to move beyond the singularity of individual actions: Okay, let's do Twitch, let's do TikTok, let's do this, let's do that. ... A lot of single actions happened much faster due to COVID-19. In the trial period, we needed to see what works. Now it's about cleaning up. Let's keep what works – and much of it did. But what's the red line that ties all novel actions together so that they make sense in terms of fan experience? And, above all, how has the whole soccer ecosystem changed throughout the pandemic?

Another consulting expert suggests focusing on sustainable ideas. Ideally, this would mean continuing to use individual initiatives beyond and regardless of the pandemic in order to achieve the same outcomes sought during the pandemic. It remains to be seen whether this clean-up will result in clubs' differentiation of long-term strategies. The pandemic certainly provides a huge opportunity for strategic readjustments.

Need for Flexible and Innovative Environment

The last theme identified in the study is the need for changing the Bundesliga's static ecosystem into a more flexible and innovative environment. The German Bundesliga, measured by the average audience figures, presents Germany's most popular sports. Nevertheless, the

entire professional sports sector has suffered from COVID-19, exposing multiple vulnerabilities. In this context, our study reveals that the Bundesliga's static ecosystem needs to be radically rethought with help of innovative ideas. Before the pandemic, the German league has stuck to its entire and consolidated processes for years without questioning any concepts due to its above-mentioned success. However, with the pandemic outbreak, everything changed abruptly, from one day to the next, and every club was forced to adopt novel courses of action:

When we look at these exogenous risks ... it became clear that every business always has a certain risk. Our club, but more generally everyone in soccer, thought that this is the perfect business model: TV revenues keep going up and up, spectators come in masses, and all of a sudden it goes bang! and everything is different from what it used to be. (Interviewee 5)

Consequently, each club has altered its internal processes, for example, when it comes to virtual collaboration between employees. Some issues, which had been negotiated for a long time, such as entering the esports business, were quickly decided upon and brought forward. New digital platforms, such as Twitch and TikTok, were swiftly integrated into the sports ecosystem. Therefore, our study finds that the clubs have learned many essential aspects that would not have been possible before the crisis. All this happened despite the fact that "a club organization has a completely different demographic in terms of digital maturity [compared to other agencies or companies]," as Interviewee 3 pointed out.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The purpose of the study was to examine how the German Bundesliga's clubs have responded to the COVID-19 challenges in terms of engaging fans digitally. Based on the

perspective of three major stakeholders, the study identified six digital engagement principles. These include fan centricity at the core, creating a 360-degree view of the fan, turning physical into virtual encounters, the rise and adaptation of social media use, converting tactic into strategic solutions, and need for flexible and innovative environment. The findings have both scholarly and applied value, informing research consumers on the mechanisms adopted by the clubs to overcome the challenges imposed by the pandemic, while maintaining relationships with fans. The insights generated may well translate to other leagues and sports.

The first engagement principle, fan centricity at the core, reveals the important role of fans, confirming that fans are the center of every club's action, as is reflected in the way the Bundesliga has been designed. As we know from the literature, fans can be clustered into different fan types. There is not one fan, but there is a multitude of different fans and different fan groups, which the study data confirmed. The strong focus on fan centricity is much in line with the current focus on customer engagement and customer centricity in the field of marketing management more generally. However, the particular focus on fan centricity during the pandemic is no coincidence, given the focus on user centricity and user experience in developing digital offerings, e.g. through design thinking methods (Rasool et al., 2020). What is more, digital solutions can be tailored to individual needs, which relates to the second theme, establishing a 360-degree view of fans.

Establishing a 360-degree view of fans is the second engagement principle. As can be seen from the examples provided in the findings, much of what is offered to fans in a digital format can be tailored to their individual needs related to areas such as content, merchandise, media offerings, and purchase options. Detailed analyses of individual customer journeys, for example, allow individual offerings to be targeted at fans. The findings are in line with Abeza et

al. (2021), who claim that an all-round view of fans is essential for sustaining fan-club relationships in the digital world. The theme, more broadly, relates to individualization, customization and data analytics in the field of online marketing.

The use of videoconferencing alone has grown rapidly during the pandemic. The third engagement principle, turning physical into virtual encounters, thus resembles a broader trend that affects both internal work processes, such as home office policies, as well as interactions with other stakeholders, such as fans. Both employees and fans are now accustomed to a hybrid reality, where some interactions take place physically and others virtually. As the results of the present study show, virtual encounters did help Bundesliga clubs to maintain contact with fans while games were interrupted and successfully engage remote fans. On the other hand, new terms, such as Zoom fatigue, have been introduced to describe the exhaustion caused by endless Zoom meetings. It remains to be seen to what extent fan preferences and customs are changing in the medium to long run, and what effect this will have on the mix of physical and virtual encounters offered by clubs.

The fourth engagement principle is the rise and adaptation of social media use. As indicated earlier, social media channels were the first choice to communicate club updates to broad fan audiences. Most clubs significantly boosted their presences and undertakings on different social media platforms during the pandemic, expanding their activities on Instagram and adopting new social media platforms, such as Twitch or TikTok, for example. Fan engagement through social media is a prominent area of research that has received significant research interest (Abeza et al, 2021). Sport marketing researchers will continue to scrutinize the type of social media content produced by different sports clubs on different platforms. Video content is likely to feature prominently in this regard.

The fifth engagement principle identified in the study highlighted the value of converting short-term tactical actions into long-term strategic solutions. While many of the responses to the pandemic seem to have been short-term fixes at first, this theme highlights the value of converting these short-term fixes into a portfolio of sustained activities or, in other words, a coherent digital strategy. The pandemic will likely boost research on digital transformation in sport (Ströbel et al., 2021).

The last engagement principle is the need for flexible and innovative environment. As findings revealed, there is a need for changing the Bundesliga's static ecosystem into a more flexible and innovative environment. The notion of the Bundesliga as an innovation ecosystem is noteworthy. Such ecosystems are often much broader in scope than traditional industry branches and they are particularly relevant for digital ecosystems, where traditional industry boundaries quickly blur. The Barça Innovation Hub is an example of how one specific club tries to build an innovation ecosystem (Chesbrough et al., 2021). But, more generally, it is a question of governance to set professional sport bodies, such as the Bundesliga, up for digital innovation, so that they can adapt to the realities of a digital world. Future studies should thus scrutinize institutional setups of professional bodies in more detail, for example, by comparing the English Premier League with the Bundesliga. Doing so would allow researchers to uncover the differences and similarities in the individual leagues, and hence, a better evaluation of the Bundesliga's unique approaches. Looking to other leagues beyond soccer, and possibly beyond sport itself, was also commonly mentioned by interviewees as a way to achieve this.

In addition to the recommendations made above, the data collection process revealed that it is worth uncovering broader insights regarding fans' perceptions of digital strategies. First, a survey of Bundesliga and Bundesliga 2 fans is recommended to get a wider perspective on the

subject matter. A qualitative investigation that focuses on specific stakeholders or fan groups could also be revealing, as it can build on the findings of this study. Second, research from a financial perspective would be insightful, particularly in light of the fact that the financial problems triggered by COVID-19 at many Bundesliga clubs have affected sponsors. Such studies should investigate the opportunities and challenges that sustained partnerships entail in the long-term. Third, the value and role of start-ups or digital tech companies in overcoming challenges imposed by COVID-19 on sport organizations should be addressed.

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