



SPORT BUSINESS CHAIN

Sport Monetisation Series: Fan Engagement

**Sport Business Conference
Bucharest, Romania**

**<https://sportbusinesschain.com/>
September 2018**



Today's Talking Point: Fan Engagement

Welcome to our
Sport Monetisation Series,
a brief catch-up with industry leaders
who share their viewpoints, experiences
and top tips on how sport organisations
can find various ways to become more
financially sustainable.

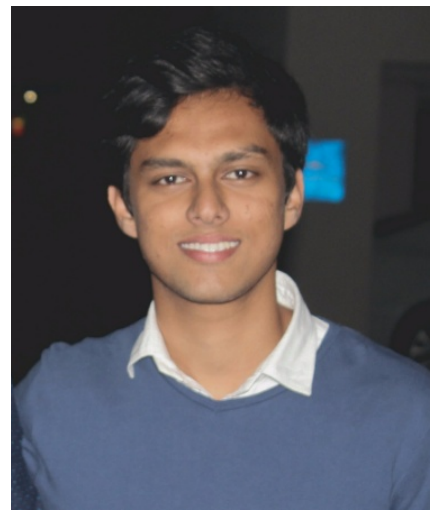
THE ROSTER



**Chief Executive of
Rugby League World
Cup 2021**



Founder of SmartReplay



**Away Fans
Communications Lead
at Hibernian FC**

We've asked three sport industry leaders about their views on fan engagement and its potential of generating positive returns, their experiences of captivating and growing fan bases, as well as their suggestions on how can sport organisations build a fan ecosystem from scratch.

Jon Dutton

Jon Dutton is the Chief Executive of Rugby League World Cup 2021, having an experience of over twenty years within the sports industry. As a Sports Management graduate of Northumbria University, his previous roles include Director of Projects & People at the Rugby Football League, Director of Readiness, a not-for-profit organisation set by UK Sport, and Operations Director at the Rugby League World Cup 2013.

Yacine Sahnoune

Yacine Sahnoune is the Founder of SmartReplay, a company based in Paris, France. SmartReplay provides the ultimate fans-first approach to digital video content with a multi-video interactive player. Users get individualised content according to their choices, whilst sports clubs generate audience retention, addiction and discovery with an engaging all-in-one video format. SmartReplay's artificial intelligence automatically

Ashish Thakur

Ashish Thakur is the Away Fans Communications Lead at the Scottish Premiership football club Hibernian. He is currently undertaking a MSc in Sport Management at the University of Sterling. With an over five years of experience in sports journalism, coverage and management, he has previously held roles such as Chief Editor at Soccersouls, Sports Journalist at Sportslens and Sports Columnist at Red Bull.

Fan Engagement Literature

Let's briefly dive into the existing literature around fan engagement before showcasing the above-presented sport practitioners' standpoints and experiences.

Sport marketing scholars have often linked fan engagement with the following three pillars of fandom, team identification and emotional connection (Yoshida et al., 2014). Highly engaged fans are considered to contribute significantly to value co-creation for sport organisations, by spreading positive word-of-mouth, displaying sport fandom, developing fan communities, sharing and consuming content, as well as ultimately becoming loyal long-term customers (Popp, Germelmann, & Jung, 2016; Abosag et al., 2012).

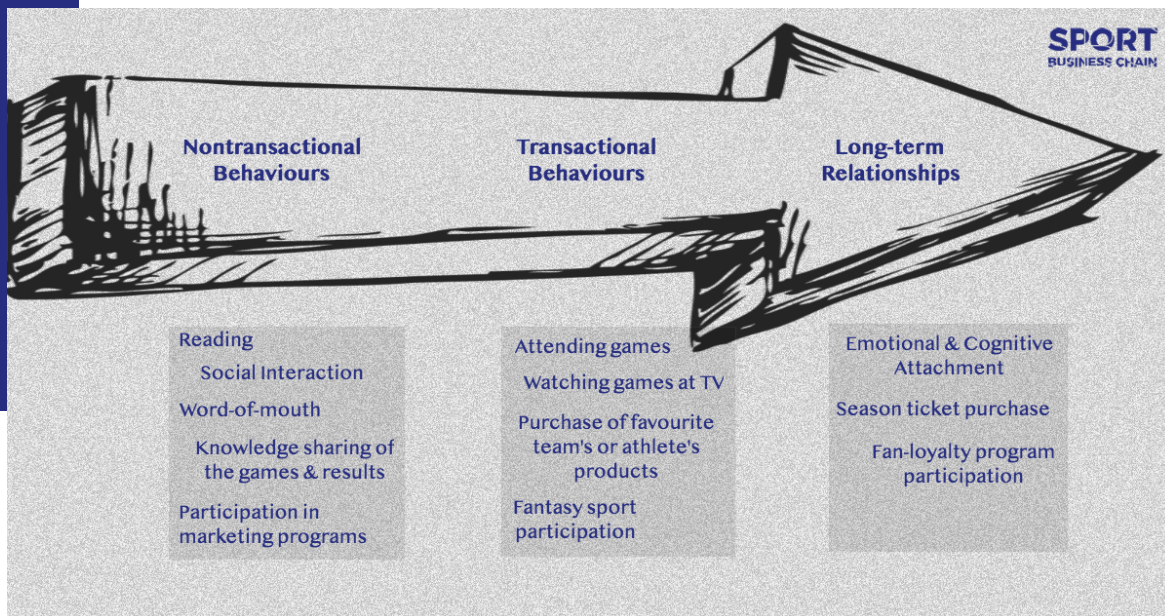
Fan engagement has three levels of expression and manifestation: nontransactional behaviours, transactional behaviours, and long-term relationships, each

illustrated in **Figure 1** (Yoshida et al., 2014). Accordingly, the first batch relates to elements such as displays of sport fandom, social interaction, community belonging, knowledge sharing of the games, sportspeople or results, word-of-mouth, as well as participation in marketing programs. The second behavioural pattern involves consuming games by attending or watching on TV, purchasing merchandise with one's favourite team or athlete, or participating in fantasy sports. Thirdly, long-term relationships between fans and sport clubs are shaped by the following: emotional and cognitive attachment, fan loyalty program participation, or season-ticket acquisition.

Furthermore, Scott et al. (2017) emphasise the key role of both database development and fan insight generation, as these can lead to a successful implementation of relationship marketing, considered to be at the heart of an organisation's long-term sustainability.

FAN ENGAGEMENT

Figure 1: Relevant Fan Engagement Points
(Adapted from Yoshida et al., 2014)



Fan Engagement Literature

Moreover, online presence is perceived as a core element to any sport organisation wishing to incorporate fan engagement initiatives; in this light, gathering insights about the fans' demographic groups, drives, motivations and behaviours represents the key area sport clubs should research, being the most effective way to benefit from the use of social media and online exposure (Vale and Fernandes, 2018).

Relationship marketing in sport organisations is concerned with how to attract, develop and retain fans as customers (Scott et al., 2017). Additionally, mirroring these with the previously mentioned levels of fan engagement manifestations could imply the following: nontransactional behaviours stem from activities pushed at the attraction stage, transactional behaviours are stimulated by activities initiated at the development level, whilst long-term relationships are generated by approaches

implemented at the retaining phase. Therefore, it is essential not to limit the impact of fan engagement to the short-term win of an individual purchase of a ticket or merchandise item. The return on investment has a much longer term perspective, as sport organisations can maximise fan engagement through word-of-mouth marketing, user-generated content and personal influence on peers and family, whilst also fostering deep consumer-brand relationships. In practice, no matter how small a sport club is, it now has the opportunity to increase its fan base, convert fans into customers, and eventually turn fans into brand evangelists.

VIRTUAL PANEL: THE NITTY-GRITTY

Now let's get down to the nitty-gritty and welcome the virtual panel. However, before opening up the floor to questions, we are taking this opportunity to thank Jon Dutton, Yacine Sahnoune and Ashish Thakur for agreeing to be a central part of this content piece!


Question 1: On a long-term basis, how can fan engagement & fan experience contribute as monetisation streams for sport organisations?

Jon Dutton

RLWC2021's vision is to stage the biggest and best ever Rugby League World Cup and leave a lasting legacy for the sport. One of the ways we will achieve that is through digital connection. We aspire to embrace the constantly evolving digital environment and in doing so engage with fans in a deeper and more meaningful way. More digital interaction giving a world class experience will in turn lead to more opportunities to monetise whether that be from OTT content, gamification or more innovative new approaches.

Yacine Sahnoune

Sports clubs, leagues and competitions have the advantage of selling




addictive products: sports teams and sports events. Their audience is strongly attached to their brands. Users are not like any other passive customers: they are fans, supporters - they strongly identify with brands. Like Apple-addicts. They want to be part of the brands' story as much as the brands are part of their personal stories. Increasing fan engagement and fan experience thanks to different tools and products (content, events) always builds upon the monetisation component, whether it has a direct approach (selling experiences, products) or an indirect one (organising events, contests) to increase the brand's value in fans' minds.

The most common way of improving fan engagement while directly generating new revenue streams is to setup a Premium digital TV with exclusive videos, content, interviews, analyses and debates. Supporters and fans become directly engaged: they can exclusively follow their favourite brand on a daily basis. Some clubs are also trying really creative and original "real-life" approaches; for example, Paris Saint-Germain football club has launched an escape game in Paris, where fans must find their way out of a room in a PSG-oriented universe.

Ashish Thakur

Fan engagement, by many, is seen as a complicated concept which requires maximum efforts and investment with minimum returns. But in reality, fan engagement serves as a way to build significant long-term relationships with its core fans.

It is a modern day concept within the overall customer service experience and recent studies have showed that teams have



seen up to a 25% increase in ticket renewals as a result of improved customer service, while 72% of customers will share a positive experience with six or more people, according to Esteban Kolsky, the founder of ThinkJar. Thus, if executed well, fan engagement is a compelling strategic tool in the sports industry today that can generate significant revenue and serve the core customers of the company in the most effective way, simultaneously.

Question 2: What is the top fan engagement campaign you've contributed to / been a part of?

Jon Dutton

In 2016 we took our Four Nations Final to Anfield. The tournament was a round robin group between England, Scotland, Australia and New Zealand culminating in the top two playing off in the Final. It was the first time Anfield had staged a Rugby League game in over twenty years and while most fans hoped to see a game featuring the hosts the Final between the Kangaroos and Kiwis was framed by an outstanding customer experience. Wayfinders at all city entry points, post-game meet and greet the players in the tunnel and first class customer service made for a great occasion.

Yacine Sahnoune

At SmartReplay, we have worked with AS Roma, the Chicago Bulls and lately FC Barcelona on fan engagement campaigns related to digital video. The objective was to use all of their fragmented digital videos to centralise them into one single

video player, give it editorial meaning, and create beautiful interactive video experiences that generate retention and addiction. As a result, fans find all the relevant content in one single video player that reacts according to their choices. They get a fully individualised video experience on any device. Therefore, users watch and interact more, staying longer in their favourite brand's universe.

Ashish Thakur

In my role as an Away fans communications lead for Scottish Premiership side Hibernian FC, my basic objective, in a nutshell, is to increase the club's match day ticketing revenue in regard to the Easter Road stadium's visiting fans. Therefore, my target audience not only changes after each fixture but it also indicates that my clients are the ones that have an extreme hatred towards the club I represent. To solve such a complex issue, I outlined the visiting fans guide that will seek to make away fans' matchday experience much more convenient and trouble-free.

The guide provides beneficent information to the away fans regarding the Easter Road stadium, how to get to the stadium, tickets information, etc, being uploaded on the club's official website and promoted via different social media platforms.

Question 3: How can a sport club build from scratch a fan ecosystem strategy?

Jon Dutton

By making this part of their central strategy and embedding within their culture at every touch point.

Yacine Sahnoune

I would recommend having a strategy where digital engagement will drive real life engagement, because ultimately, you want your fans to support your team. Think of it like a pipe.

The first step is to show that you have a strong identity and positioning to make fans aware that you exist. Create a strong activity and visual identity on social media: publish short clips, pictures, quotes, interactive interviews on a daily basis on different social channels, and even promote some of them via paid campaigns. The second step is to make fans converge into one single place. It is where you start monetising (thanks to subscriptions or content sponsoring) and getting data about your fans. Create a Match Centre and a Premium TV on your website with exclusive content for Premium fans. There has to be a strong value add on these platforms for supporters to pay for a Premium access. Finally, on top of that, you can add another layer of "special events", contests, discounts, that will drive real life engagement (meet-ups, ticket sales, sponsored events, etc).

Ashish Thakur

Today, the digital world has already impacted every function within sport clubs, with each developing its own digital solutions to optimise revenues and operations. A fan consumes its club through various platforms and integrating many, if not all of these platforms into one business model is a highly challenging task.

Having said that, a fan is not a typical customer and clubs can expect their respective fans to get behind their experimental and innovative ecosystem strategies, if and when implemented. Optimised data is the driving force behind any successful brand ecosystem and sport club, and like any other commercial organisation, should strive to make the most of it.

WRAP-UP

Fan Engagement

Fan engagement can become a significant advantage a sport organisation could effortlessly leverage through various aspects, from social media, to bespoke video content and data collection, as identified both in the literature review and within the panel members' answers. Therefore, these contribute fundamentally to the element of value creation, not only by fostering emotional connection and team identification, but also by generating financial gains from areas such as loyalty programmes, subscriptions, premium offerings or personal influence over friends and families.

LET'S CONNECT

And let's continue the conversation around how can fan engagement improve a sport organisation's sustainability on a long-term. Do you have any examples you'd like to share?

- Facebook: Sport Business Chain
- Twitter: sbc_conference
- Instagram: sbc_conference
- LinkedIn: Sport Business Chain
- Medium: sbc_conference

WHO ARE WE?

A non-profit organisation based in Bucharest, Romania, whose aims are:

- To contribute to the development of the Eastern European sport business sector;
- To organise a sport business networking conference, which would attract: **regional sport leaders, sport entrepreneurs, sportspeople, top-management representatives of sport organisations, students and members of sport-related academic institutions.**

The conference's theme is **Monetisation of Sport Organisations through:**

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| ✓ Social Media | ✓ Digital Marketing |
| ✓ Ecommerce | ✓ Content Creation |
| ✓ Community Involvement | ✓ Fan Engagement |
| ✓ Strategic Partnerships & Sponsorships | ✓ Academia Involvement |

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