

# Outcomes of Social Media Marketing in Sport Brands

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## ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalized world, social networks appear as an indispensable tool for sports clubs, as they make it easier for them to reach a large number of supporters. The main objective of this study is to measure the impact that this commitment between supporter and club has on the social networks, on the purchase and reference intention. Based on two sequential studies (one survey and in-depth interviews), the methodology aimed to help understand both the viewpoint of the fans and decision-makers. The results show that the commitment between the supporter and the club on the social networks has a positive influence on the relationship between the two, the commitment between the supporter and the club on the social networks has a positive influence on the intention of fans to buy, and the commitment between the supporter and the club on the social networks has a positive influence on the intention of reference by the fans.

## KEYWORDS

Intention to Buy, Intention to Recommend, Relational Marketing, Social Networks

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Today, social networks are indispensable tools for any organisation, as they allow consumers to interact with various companies in a single place and without much effort (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011). Like all businesses, clubs are not immune to technological change. They must therefore seek to communicate not only through traditional media, but also through digital media (O'Shea and Alonso, 2011), especially as consumers are increasingly demanding, which means that clubs must be geared towards them and their satisfaction (Paulico, 2008). For a club, both commitment and the relationship with the fans are of extreme importance, as it is they who will not only acquire the sports products and services (e.g. merchandise, financial services, and experiences) but also provide recommendations to others, acting as disseminators. Therefore, it is important that the clubs create or develop their relationship with the fans, since this relationship will have an impact on several aspects, namely on the financial one, or on the brand itself.

The intention of fans to buy is a form of income for a club, which can manifest itself from the purchase of merchandise to the purchase of a ticket, knowing that this behaviour reflects the desire of sports consumers to demonstrate their involvement and commitment to sports organisations (Bee and Kahie, 2006). Today, the word of mouth spreads rapidly and reaches a large number of consumers

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(Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). The aim is to study the influence of the commitment between the fans and the club in the social networks on the relationship between the two, the intention to buy and the intention to refer. During the study, various concepts will be addressed taking into account the perspective of the fans and the perspective of the clubs. Thus, the results presented in this study will be based on the state of the art, a quantitative study, in which the club chosen was Football Club (anonymized), not only due to its national and international dimension, but also due to its geographical proximity and a qualitative study, which consists of three open interviews.

Nowadays, teams are in increasingly competitive environments, because while they have the competition of other sports clubs, they also have the competition of non-sporting entertainment. It is therefore important for clubs to find new alternatives, not only to reach potential supporters, but also to retain those they already have (Kim and Trail, 2011). In this context, it should be noted that social networks have changed marketing communication, having an impact on how consumers communicate, influencing purchasing behaviour (Hutter, et al., 2013). Clubs should therefore use social media to connect with fans, creating a commitment that can have implications for the relationship, the intent to buy and the intent to refer.

The research problem is to understand the antecedents of commitment between clubs and supporters on social networks, which may have consequences for the relationship between them, the intention to purchase and the intention to refer. Both the club's and the supporter's perspective on this issue will thus be analysed. The research question is therefore as follows: Does Facebook Engagement have a positive impact on the relationship between club and fan, on the intention to buy and on the Referral Intent? Therefore, the general objective of this study is to verify whether the commitment between fans and the team in Facebook has a positive influence on the level of relationship, the intention to purchase and the intention to refer.

Due to the complexity and novelty of the research problem, a deeper methodological approach is needed to obtain relevant insights. As such, two methods of data collection will be conducted: a quantitative one, which will consist of a questionnaire, and a qualitative one, which will consist of an interview. To achieve the specific objectives, i.e. those related to the hypotheses, a model will be used which contemplates 26 items, divided into four scales which relate to social networks, relational marketing, sports marketing, purchase intention and reference intention, and an interview will be carried out with three professionals related to the theme of the study.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Concepts**

#### *2.1.1 Engagement*

Consumers, when committed, demonstrate a higher level of loyalty, satisfaction and connection with a particular object, such as a brand (Brodie, et al., 2013). According to Van Doorn, et al. (2010), engagement consists of behaviours that go beyond transactions, i.e. behavioral manifestations that result from brand-focused motivations.

At the digital level, engagement is a prerequisite for success in virtual environments, namely social networks (Verhagen et al., 2015). Mollen and Wilson (2010) consider online engagement to be a cognitive and affective commitment that originates a relationship with a brand, personified through the website. Porter, et al. (2011) define online engagement as behaviour that reflects the willingness of users to participate or cooperate with others in online communities. On social networks, particularly Facebook, users demonstrate their commitment through likes, comments or sharing (Miranda, et al., 2014; Jenny, et al., 2013). At the sports level, engagement can significantly contribute to building relationships between the fan and the club (Pronschinske, Groza and Walker, 2012).

Still from a sports perspective, Yoshida, et al. (2014) cite various authors stating that engagement can manifest itself not only through the presence of supporters in sports venues, but also through the viewing of games on television, the purchase of team-related products, the reading of sports

magazines or newspapers or a simple conversation with other individuals. This way, fans with greater engagement will not only satisfy their social and relational needs but also establish a better relation with the brand, the sport team and the personnel (Meduri, 2020).

### *2.1.2 Relational Marketing*

Shank and Lyberger (2014) state that building long-term relationships with consumers is one of the most important aspects for sports marketers in today's competitive marketing environment, as their behaviour, according to Grove, et al. (2012), has not only social but also financial implications. For Barreto (2011) if a customer is satisfied with a brand, trusts it and is loyal to it, then the company has succeeded in achieving the desired involvement with the brand and in obtaining another important factor: making its customers ambassadors for the brand. Parvatiyar and Seth (2000), argue that relational marketing consists of the relationship and behavior between the marketer and the consumer. For Abeza, O'Reilly and Reid (2013), relational marketing consists of retaining consumers through mutual relationships that express satisfaction between them and the company. Shank and Lyberger (2014) say that relational marketing is a process of creating, maintaining and improving relationships with consumers or stakeholders (Asdiou and Mokhtari, 2019; Srivastava, 2021).

According to Bee and Kahie (2006), relational marketing is characterized by the attraction, development and retention of consumers, and when they begin to relate to a sports institution, they mirror their commitment, which goes beyond the repetition of the act of purchase (Albakjaji, et al., 2020). It is, according to those authors, a partnership. According to Lemes and Ghisleni (2013), relational marketing aims at building long-term satisfactory relationships for both parties. Barreto (2011) argues that the main purpose is to improve consumer retention. Williams and Chinn (2010), meanwhile, state that the goal of relationship marketing is to build long-term relationships with customers in order to generate turnover and, consequently, profit. Customer retention is another aspect important dimension (Galli, 2019; Elfergany and Adl, 2020).

### *2.1.3 Intention to Purchase*

There are several authors who define intent to purchase. For Spears and Singh (2004), intent to purchase consists of an individual's conscious plan regarding the purchase of a brand. Grewal, et al. (1998) state that this is a forecast of a subsequent purchase. According to Shabbir, Kirmani, Iqbal, Khan (2009) an individual's awareness can lead to the purchase of a brand, so the authors define the purchase intention. Wu, Yeh and Hsiao (2011), citing several authors, state that the intention to purchase is the possibility of planning, or being willing to buy, a certain product or service in the future. According to Rezvani, et al. (2012), academics differentiate between attitudes and intentions, since the latter represent the motivation of the individual, which can lead to behaviour. Consumers must have the intention to buy a product or service before making the purchase action. Thus, the intention to purchase is seen as a precedent of purchasing behaviour (Dees, Bennett and Ferreira, 2010). Intention to purchase is generally used to predict purchasing behaviour (Grewal, et al., 1998). Wu, Yeh and Hsiao (2011) cite several authors, claiming that greater purchase intention may lead to greater buying possibilities. It is therefore important to measure the purchase intention, as it allows for the prediction of sales of existing and/or new products and services (Tsiotsou, 2006).

## **2.2 Theoretical Model and Hypotheses**

This research aims to assess whether Facebook Engagement has implications for various aspects of the club. In this context, a survey was carried out to obtain primary data on Football Club's followers and supporters on Facebook. In this section, the variables and study hypotheses will be presented. Afterwards, the model used for this research will be presented and described.

According to Hennig-Thurau, et al. (2010), the way consumers communicate with each other has changed over the years. New media, websites or digital communication and information platforms

(including social networks), provide companies with various ways to not only reach consumers, but also to communicate, measure this communication or understand behaviours related to the intention to buy.

Regarding social networks, Williams and Chinn (2010) consider these to be platforms that allow consumers to communicate and collaborate with each other. This rise in social networking has enabled customers to take a more active role in the market, reaching anyone, anywhere and anytime (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2010).

According to Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden (2011), social networks allow for a rapid expansion of content, allowing marketers to influence customers and potential customers more easily. The authors also say that companies should integrate social media into their strategy in order to bring the consumer experience to the forefront, as today's consumers have an influence on brands because their decision weighs on products and services (Khalifa, Abd Elghany and Abd Elghany, 2021). That's why it's important that marketing managers understand the differences between consumers, since not everyone reacts in the same way (Pereira et al., 2021).

According to Thackeray, et al. (2008), consumers increasingly control information, i.e. how it is created, organised or shared. Social networks also allow consumers to get involved with the brand, while, for example, sharing its activities (Tsai and Men, 2013). Today, technology facilitates the publication of content by institutions. Investment in sharing today can be very low or even zero (Pulizzi, 2012). According to Agichtein, et al. (2008), content shared on social networks has become indispensable for millions of users, all the more so as it goes further and further to influence customers and potential customers (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011).

For Rowley (2008), consumers' understanding of the value of digital content varies, as perceptions differ from one consumer to another. Published content also varies, but depending on the context. One of the problems with this content shared on social networks is, according to Agichtein, et al. (2008), variance, i.e. both high quality and low quality publications. Websites, blogs and social networks are some of the means available to sports marketers to build or expand existing relations between the sports institution and the supporter (O'Shea and Alonso, 2011). For O'Shea and Alonso (2011), from a sporting point of view, social networks are a means of rapid dissemination of information in order to try to increase attendance at sporting events. Thus, the authors also state that social networks should be used by clubs in order to add value to their supporters.

Thus, the first variable has five dimensions, each with an item, which is the basis of the study, all of which are interrelated. This one is related to the commitment between the fans and the club, i.e. the frequency with which they visit, read, share, put like and comment the content of the club page on the social networks.

It is necessary to understand why the target audience wants to be part of a relationship, i.e. what aspects contribute to involvement with a brand. Thus, Barreto (2011) states that there are three factors: trust, loyalty and satisfaction. Regarding companies, they no longer act without taking into account the opinions and feelings of consumers. Therefore, it is important to develop a relational strategy based on their customers. At the digital level, Barreto (2011) says that with the emergence of web 2.0, organisations have been forced to establish a long-term relationship with their consumers.

Bee and Kahie (2006) consider that relational marketing is characterized by the attraction, development and retention of consumers, and when they begin to relate to a sports institution, they mirror their commitment, which goes beyond the repetition of the act of purchase. It is, according to the authors, a partnership. According to Williams and Chinn (2010), relational marketing in a sporting context aims not only to strengthen certain behaviour of fans in relation to sporting institutions, such as repeating the purchase of tickets or merchandise, but also to strengthen relations with their fans in order to retain them as long as possible. According to the authors, sports organisations recognise that social networks are platforms that easily reach potential consumers, as they are used with the aim of communicating and building loyalty. This communication should be done in two directions (club to supporter and club supporter) in order to provide users with an opportunity to express themselves. In a sports environment, it is important to encourage the participation of fans.

Wakefield (2007) states that not all fans identify with the team, or with certain players in the team. However, those who do identify themselves a lot have certain behaviours, like using something that identifies the team after a victory, or describing the team's victory as "ours".

Supporters are present at sporting events because of their involvement with the sport, their loyalty to the team, or their identification with the team (Wakefield, 2007). Relationship marketing, in a sporting context, is a success when the relationship between fan and team becomes stronger in order to increase the chance of consumer retention (Gray and Wert-Gray, 2012; Dias and Pereira, 2017). Sports marketing, according to Smith (2012) and Wakefield (2007), consists of a database containing sponsors, media and fans who pay to promote and support a particular sports institution and receive benefits.

Like any business, clubs benefit by monitoring competitors' practices in order to determine what they should and should not improve (Smith, 2012).

Bee and Kahle (2006), consider that sports organisations think long term, focusing on consumer retention and trying to create a relationship with the consumer. An effort should also be made to determine the needs and wishes of consumers. The authors also consider that the relationship between sports consumers and clubs is one of the most important aspects of sports marketing. Wakefield (2007) states that clubs should increase the identification of fans by recruiting good players, enhancing their reputation in the community, focusing on local involvement in the sport and presenting competitive teams so that fans feel they are winners.

According to Tomlinson, Buttle and Moores (1995), clubs can be promoted like any other 'product', selling not only products, such as merchandising, but also services, such as match tickets, in this case the materialisation of a service. Abeza, O'Reilly and Reid (2013) consider that institutions should communicate and promote dialogue with their supporters, and their presence on social networks makes it easier to have these exchanges. Abeza, O'Reilly and Reid (2013), citing several authors, also mention multiple opportunities and challenges concerning social networks and the relationship between the sports institution and its supporters in a sporting context. In this context, it is important that sports brands increasingly and better deliver the content in order to determine what motivates or demotivates fans, as they often seek benefits in their online experiences (Smith, 2012; Vasconcelos, et al., 2021).

According to Evens, et al. (2011) mobile phones were initially mainly used to send messages or make calls. The inclusion of data services allowed operators to make more content available, such as games or TV broadcasts, in order to deliver more value to the consumer. The Sports consumer-team relationship quality (SCTRQS) variable has five measures, each of which is divided into three items. This variable allows the agreement of trust, commitment, familiarity, connection and return to be measured. Thus, based on the Facebook Engagement and SCTRQS variables, the first hypothesis is born which encompasses aspects of the state of the art, such as social networks, sports marketing and relational marketing:

**H1:** The commitment between the club and the supporter, through the social networks, has a positive influence on the quality of the relationship between the two.

The intention to purchase is the combination of consumer interest and the possibility for consumers to buy a product. One of the main objectives of marketing communication is to create purchasing intentions. (Kim and Ko 2012).

Regarding the intention to purchase via the Internet and social networks, Park, Lee and Han (2007) state that new ways of purchasing have been born and that purchasing intentions are affected by the quantity and quality of criticism that potential consumers read, reflecting the importance of information in decision-making. At the sports level, Fullerton and Mertz (2008) identified sports and non-sports products. Regarding sports products, the authors divided them into three categories: sports spectators, sports participation and sports articles. Spectators are those who watch the games or sporting events both on the premises and through the media, in both cases the authors consider the sporting product to be the game itself or the sporting event.

As for sports participation, it encompasses both organised participation in leagues and tournaments and casual participation. In this situation, marketing, according to the authors, aims to increase the number of participants and the frequency with which they participate. This objective leads to the third point of sports participation, which is access to public and private sports facilities. Therefore, the more new practitioners start their activity and the more often everyone participates, the more profitable the facilities will be.

The profitability of sports facilities leads to greater consumption of sporting goods. These can range from equipment, such as balls or cones, to sportswear or footwear, to lessons or souvenirs. Finally, the authors refer to non-sporting products, stating that they are products that are not sold in the sports industry as they are not related to it. Mason (1999) also gives examples of some sports products and services such as annual passes, tickets, parking, merchandising or even consuming games on television. Also in a sporting context, Bee and Kahie (2006) concluded that high involvement among sports consumers and their institutions can lead, for example, to repeat purchases of tickets, presence at sporting events, or simply to the purchase of sports products.

Supporters have various interests, motivations and reasons for attending matches; however, consumers stop consuming if the reward is reduced, i.e. if the team's performance is low, for example (Bee and Kahie, 2006). Wakefield (2007) says that fans buy merchandise not only to reinforce their identification but also to represent themselves to other fans, or even players. In this context, the intention to purchase is measured through 3 items whose objective is to understand the fans' intentions to buy, regarding the 2017/2018 sports season. This variable, together with the initial one, gives rise to the second hypothesis which encompasses aspects of the state of the art, such as social networks, sports marketing, relational marketing and purchase intention.

**H2:** The commitment between the team and fans on Facebook has a positive influence on the buying behaviour of sports products or services.

According to Brown and Reingen (1987), the word of mouth plays an important role in shaping certain consumer behaviour and attitudes. Although, according to Soares, Pinho and Nobre (2012), it is an important communication tool outside the digital world, it acquires a relevant role in social networks, which provide the exchange of experiences and information through word of mouth (Barreto, 2011; Pina and Dias, 2020).

For Anderson (1998), the word of mouth can be positive, neutral or negative, an example of the positive being recommendations and an example of the negative being the report of an unpleasant experience. According to Ahearne, Bhattacharya and Gruen (2005), the positive word of mouth is a behaviour mostly manifested through fans who are more committed to the team. In a sporting context, and according to Pimentel and Reynolds (2004), the sports consumer's experience with the brand can lead to a high level of loyalty, which can remain even if there are, for example, bad performances, club-related scandals, or high prices. Gray and Wert-Gray (2012) say the word of mouth can refer to a fan talking about any team-related aspect such as matches, players or expectations.

For their part, Shreffler and Ross (2013) concluded in their study on the presence and impact of the word of mouth in the sports context that it is important for fans to have positive experiences in order to encourage positive reports about them. Therefore, the institutions should encourage supporters who have had positive experiences to talk to other supporters. The results suggest that participants are not considering going to the games, consuming products related to the sports institution, or even recommending the institution or the experience to others after being exposed to negative word of mouth. Thus, the word of mouth is a behaviour that can be considered as a manifestation of a strong psychological attachment of the supporter to the sports institution (Gray and Wert-Gray, 2012).

The reference intention variable is also composed of 3 items in order to understand the level of recommendation of Football Club fans. Thus, the third hypothesis encompasses aspects of the state of the art, such as social networks, sports marketing and reference intention:

**H3:** The commitment between team and fans on Facebook has a positive influence on the intention of reference.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Study 1

##### 3.1.1 Procedures and Research Design

This study was initially derived from the state of the art, based on several books, articles and magazines with scientific content from various authors, which approach concepts related to sports marketing, relational marketing, social networks, purchase intention and reference intention. Thus, it was possible to define a model to support this study, which was adapted from Achen (2016).

After the state of the art on the subject, a model was determined in which the scales for the construction of the questionnaire were identified. In this way, the method of data collection for the implementation of study 1 was quantitative.

Initially, a pre-test questionnaire was prepared and submitted to 11 people in order to understand if there were any flaws or any other problem that might cause some misunderstanding. After this pre-test, changes were made, namely from some terms to synonyms, in order to avoid the similarity between some questions. Therefore, the final questionnaire was prepared through the Google Docs platform.

After obtaining a total of 203 replies, the questionnaire was closed and data processing started. As soon as the results were obtained, they were analysed using SPSS and AMOS. The quantitative data collected made it possible to convey the views of the fans, regarding the influence of Facebook Engagement on the relationship between the club and the fan, the intention to buy and the intention to refer.

##### 3.1.2 Sample, Population, and Participants

The type of methodology used in this study 1 was quantitative which, according to Dalfovo, Lana and Silveira (2008), consists of everything that can be measured in numbers, which are then classified and analysed. This data collection is often carried out through questionnaires that present different variables relevant to the research and, after analysis, the results are usually presented through tables and graphs (Dalfovo, Lana and Silveira, 2008). This form of collection is the most appropriate, taking into account the objectives of the work, because the more followers are surveyed, the more rigorous the result will be.

The universe under study, i.e. the set that is intended to study (Dalfovo, Lana and Silveira, 2008) is made up of Facebook social network users who are fans and follow the official page of Football Club. This page has more than 3 and a half million followers.

The sampling technique used in the study was non-probabilistic for convenience, since, according to Guimarães (2008), it is composed of individuals chosen by those who carry out the study, because it has them. In order to make it easier to obtain the sample, the survey was made available online, using the Google Docs tool. Access to the questionnaire was made available only through the social network in question. It was submitted both to closed groups, frequented by supporters of the club, and by message to followers of the Football Club page. The variable “geographical location” present in the questionnaire served only to characterise this sample. The data was processed from a sample of 203 answers to all the questions asked in the survey.

As regards the characterisation of the sample, the general data, namely gender, age group, marital status and geographical location, were aggregated in a first stage. After aggregation, graphs were prepared in order to illustrate these data.

The majority of the individuals participating in this study are male, i.e. 162, which corresponds to 80.2%, while the female gender is represented by only 40 individuals, corresponding to 19.8%. As for the age group, it can be seen that more than half of the answers, 102, are related to the 13-24 age group, which corresponds to 50.5% of the individuals. The next group is 25-36, with 50 replies (24.8%), 37-50 with 35 replies (17.3%) and the last group which represents the highest 50 with 15 replies (7.4%).

### 3.1.3 Measures and Tools for Data Collection and Variables

The model used was based on a model developed by Achen (2016) and aims to measure the impact of Facebook Engagement on the quality of the relationship, the intent to purchase and the intent to refer. This model brings together 4 different models, Facebook Engagement, developed by Achen (2016) based on the state of the art, SCTRQS, developed by Kim, Trail and Woo (2011), the model of intent to purchase, which was adapted from the scale of intent to purchase of Pöyry, Parvinen and Malmivaara (2013) and, finally, Achen modified a construct created by Pöyry, Parvinen and Malmivaara (2013), regarding the intent to reference.

This model is based on four scales. The first is Facebook Engagement, which evaluates the frequency of 5 measures, covering readings, visits, likes, sharing and comments and which are represented by one variable each. Thus, the aim of this point is to understand how often Facebook users, who follow the Football Club page, visit it, read, share, post like and comment on the content available.

The second scale consists of the SCTRQS model which contains 5 measures: trust, commitment, familiarity, connection and return. Each of these measures contains 3 variables, which are intended to measure the degree.

Regarding the third scale, which consists of the intention to purchase, it is divided into 3 variables, the objective of which is to measure the degree of agreement.

The last scale is the reference intention, and like the purchase intention, it is composed of 3 variables and has the purpose of measuring the degree of agreement. Table 1, of its own elaboration, presents all the scales, measures and variables related to the model.

The questionnaire was developed on the basis of a model created by Achen (2016), which aims to measure the impact of the commitment via Facebook on the quality of the relationship, the purchase intent and the reference intent. The author has adapted 4 different models, Facebook Engagement, elaborated based on the state of the art, SCTQRS, developed by Kim, Trail and Woo (2011), the model of the intent to purchase, which was adapted from the scale of intent to purchase of Pöyry, Parvinen and Malmivaara (2013) and, finally, Achen which modified a construct created by Pöyry, Parvinen and Malmivaara (2013), concerning the intent to reference.

This questionnaire was only intended for Facebook users who were fans and who followed the official Football Club website. The development was done through the Google Docs platform, which made it easier to reach a larger number of users.

The questionnaire is divided into 5 parts, the first being the general data, followed by the commitment through Facebook, the quality of the relationship between the sports consumer and the team, the intention to buy and the intention to refer.

After an introduction referring to the purpose and confidentiality of the data, there follows the general data of the participants, namely gender, age group, marital status and geographical location.

The second part, concerning the commitment through Facebook (Facebook Engagement), has 5 questions measured through a frequency scale of 8 points (never; a few times a year; once a month; a few times a week; once a day and a few times a day). The objective is to understand how often sports consumers interact with the official Football Club website on the social network Facebook.

The third part is the quality of the relationship between the sports consumer and the team (SCTRQS) and is measured through a Likert scale with 7 points, 1 being “I completely disagree” and 7 being “I completely agree”. This dimension contains 4 variables (Trust, Commitment, Intimacy, Self-Connection and Reciprocity), each with 3 statements. The aim is to understand the extent to which users trust, commit, are familiar with, relate to and think they have feedback from the club.

The fourth part is related to the intention to buy and is measured using a Likert scale with 7 points (1 corresponds to “I completely disagree” and 7 to “I completely agree”). This scale has 3 statements and aims to understand whether users intend to buy sports products or services related to Football Club.

Finally, the fifth part which consists of the intention of reference, like the last two, is also measured through a Likert scale of 7 points. This also has 3 statements and aims to understand whether users not only intend to speak positively about the club, but also to recommend it.

All questions in this questionnaire were mandatory.

Table 1. Scales, measures and variables of the model

Scale	Measures	Variables
Facebook Engagement	Visits	How often do you visit your favorite team's Facebook page?
	Readings	How often do you read content posted by the team on Facebook?
	Shares	How often do you share content posted by the team on Facebook?
	Likes	How often do you like content posted by the team on Facebook?
	Comments	How often do you comment on content posted by the team on Facebook?
SCTQRS	Trust	I trust this team.
		This team is reliable.
		I can count on this team.
	Commitment	I am committed to this team.
		I am devoted to this team.
		I am dedicated to this team.
	Familiarity	I am very familiar with this team.
		I know a lot about this team.
		I feel as though I really understand this team.
	Connection	This team reminds me of who I am.
		This team's image and my self-image are similar in a lot of ways.
		This team and I have a lot in common.
	Return	This team unfailingly pays me back when I do something extra for it.
		This team gives me back equivalently what I have given them.
		This team constantly returns the favor when I do something good for it.
Intention to Purchase	-	I intend to attend the team's games during the 2017/2018 season.
	-	It is likely that I purchase tickets to the team's games during the 2017/2018 season.
	-	I intend to purchase the team's team-licensed merchandise in the next year.
Reference Intent	-	I intend to say positive things about the team to other people.
	-	I plan to recommend the team to other people.
	-	I will encourage my friends to purchase tickets or attend games.

### 3.1.4 Data Analysis Procedures

As mentioned above, after the results were obtained, they were analysed using Microsoft's Excell, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and AMOS, both from IBM.

This software made it possible to group all the data in order to subsequently carry out a test of the reliability of the variables, namely a Cronbach Alfa. Frequency tests, correlations and regressions were also developed. Finally, the reliability of the model was tested.

## 3.2 Study 2

### 3.2.1 Research Issues and Research Instruments

The second study also derived from the state of the art, based on several books, articles and magazines with scientific content from various authors, which address concepts related to sports marketing, relational marketing, social networks, purchase intention and reference intention.

After the state of the art on the subject, it was determined that the proposed objectives could also be measured through interviews. In this way, the method of data collection for study 2 was qualitative.

According to Dalfovo, Lana and Silveira (2008) qualitative research is not translatable into values. The aim is to verify the relationship between reality and the object of study, obtaining various interpretations of an inductive analysis by the researcher.

According to Godoy (1995), in qualitative research, direct contact between the researcher and the situation under study is valued. With regard to fieldwork, data can be collected by means of recording.

Initially, 3 questions were elaborated, which were submitted to 3 people, with the objective of understanding if there were situations that could cause misunderstandings. After the pre-test, no changes were made to the questions.

Therefore, the interviews were carried out, and 3 interviewees related to the digital area, communication and merchandising were identified. One of them was recorded and converted in full to text, while the other two were annotated. After this conversion, the content was analysed in order to draw the main conclusions.

Due to the lack of time on the part of the interviewees, two of them were only able to answer one question.

The qualitative data collected allow us to convey the club's view of the influence of Facebook Engagement on the relationship between the club and the supporter, the intention to purchase and the intention to refer.

This method of data collection is complemented by the quantitative method. These two methods combined allow a better understanding of the study objectives.

### 3.2.2 Interview Guide

The interview is considered a modality of interaction between at least two people (Fraser and Gondim, 2004).

Since the interviewees have knowledge on the subject, the method chosen was the open interview in which, according to Fraser and Gondim (2004), the interviewer introduces the questions relating to the research and leaves the interviewee free to comment on the subject. Regarding the script, the questions asked were based on the objectives of the study.

**Question 1:** Do you think that the commitment between fan and club on social networks has an impact on the relationship between them?

**Question 2:** Does the commitment between fan and club on social networks encourage fans to buy club merchandise?

**Question 3:** Does the commitment between supporter and club on social networks encourage fans to promote the club?

The first two interviews were recorded on March 21, 2018, with an average time of 3 minutes, while the third was recorded on May 15, 2018, containing about 12 minutes.

### 3.2.3 Participants

In order to be a reliable study, the participants in the interview are all connected to the topic. The three interviewees carry out their professional activities, directly or indirectly, in large clubs. All interviews were conducted in person.

Interviewees: Interviewee A - Digital director of a Portuguese football club; Interviewee B - Global digital director of a Spanish football club; Interviewee C - CEO of an outdoor merchandising company.

### 3.2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

After obtaining the 3 interviews, they were analysed using Microsoft’s Word program, in which all the answers were transcribed in full. The analysis of the data is summarized in 3 points, the answers of each interview were grouped by question. Each answer was analysed, both individually and together. The content was organised in such a way as to draw out the main ideas. One of the objectives of this analysis was to understand whether the interviewees referred to certain concepts in a similar way.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Study 1

#### 4.1.1 Cronbach’s Alpha

This coefficient was designed to test the reliability of the scales used in this study. Thus, an analysis of the metric qualities of each of the 4 variables was performed: Facebook Engagement, the Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale, the Purchase Intent and the Reference Intent.

The degree of reliability of the variables is between 0 and 1, and the closer the value is to 1, the greater the reliability of this value. From 0.7, the reliability is already considered acceptable. According to table 2, all the variables were quite considerable, as they are above 0.7. Therefore, it can be seen that the level of reliability of the variables is considerable.

**Table 2. Verification of the variables under study by Cronbach’s Alpha**

Variables	Alfa de Cronbach
Facebook Engagement	0.886
Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale	0.976
Intention to Purchase	0.849
Reference Intent	0.937

#### 4.1.2 Hypothesis Test

Table 3 shows the correlations between the study variables.

The correlations between the Facebook Engagement variable and the others are significant; however, they are moderate positive correlations, i.e. close to 0.5. As for the values presented, both the correlation between Facebook Engagement and Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale, and the correlation between Facebook Engagement and Intention to Buy are 0.546. The correlation between Facebook Engagement and the Benchmark is slightly lower and has a value of 0.499.

**Table 3. Results of correlations between variables**

	Facebook Engagement	Relationship Quality	Intention to Purchase
Relationship Quality	.546**		
Intention to Purchase	.546**	.678**	
Reference Intent	.499**	.874**	.634**

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (bilateral).

### 4.1.2 Regression

Using the values shown in the correlation between the variables, we regressed between the Facebook Engagement variable (constant) and the Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale variable (dependent). After testing the assumptions, and taking into account tables 4 and 5, we obtained a value of 0.498 for “B”, that is, for each “extra value” of Facebook Engagement, the Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale increases by 0.498. The p-value shown is 0.000.

**Table 4. ANOVA Facebook Engagement e Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale**

Model		Sum of squares	Gl	Middle Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	162,022	1	162,022	85,322	,000b
	Residue	381,689	201	1,899		
	Total	543,712	202			

a. Dependent Variable: Rela  
 b. Predictors: (Constant), FBE

**Table 5. Regression Facebook Engagement and Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale**

Model		Non-standard coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Standard Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.345	.231		14.478	.000
	FBE	.498	.054	.546	9.237	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Rela

In view of the regression in Facebook Engagement and the Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale, it is concluded that the greater the commitment between fan and club on Facebook, the better the relationship between them.

There was also a regression between the variable Facebook Engagement (constant) and the variable Intention to Buy (dependent). After the hypothesis test, and taking into account tables 6 and 7, the value of 0.606 for “B” was obtained, i.e. for each “extra value” of Facebook Engagement, the Purchase Intent increases by 0.606. This value is higher than the Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale variable. A p-value of 0.000 is again obtained.

Having said that, in view of this regression with regard to Facebook Engagement and Intent to Buy, it is concluded with regard to this sample that the greater the commitment between fan and club on Facebook, the greater the intention on the part of the fans to buy sports products/services related to the club.

**Table 6. ANOVA Facebook Engagement and Intent to Buy**

Model		Sum of squares	gl	Middle Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	240.407	1	240.407	85.230	.000b
	Residue	566.960	201	2.821		
	Total	807.367	202			

a. Dependent Variable: IC  
 b. Predictors: (Constant), FBE

Table 7. Regression Facebook Engagement and Intent to Buy

Model		Non-standard coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Standard Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.124	.282		7.543	.000
	FBE	.606	.066	.546	9.232	.000

a. Dependent Variable: IC

Finally, there was a regression between the Facebook Engagement variable (constant) and the Reference Intent variable (dependent). After the hypothesis test, and taking into account tables 8 and 9, the value of 0.484 for “B” was obtained, i.e. for each “extra value” of Facebook Engagement, the Benchmark increases by 0.484. This value is lower than the variables presented above, Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale and Purchase Intent. The p-value obtained was, once again, 0.000.

Thus, taking into account this regression in relation to Facebook Engagement and Reference Intent, it is concluded for this sample that the greater the commitment between fan and club on Facebook, the greater the intention on the part of the fans to purchase sports products/services related to the club.

Table 8. ANOVA Facebook Engagement and Reference Intent

Model		Sum of squares	gl	Middle Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	153.358	1	153.358	66.728	.000b
	Residue	461.952	201	2.298		
	Total	615.310	202			

a. Dependent Variable: IR

b. Predictors: (Constant), FBE

Table 9. Regression Facebook Engagement and Reference Intent

Model		Non-standard coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Standard Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.908	.254		15.375	.000
	FBE	.484	.059	.499	8.169	.000

a. Dependent Variable: IR

#### 4.1.3 Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

In this study, SEM models were also tested, with the primary objectives of estimating relationships or defining a model that explains a set of relationships. After the creation of the model, using IBM’s AMOS software, it was refined so that the AGFI approached 1. This indicator, according to Hooper, Coughlan and Mullen (2008), shows values between 0 and 1, with values above 0.9 indicating the most appropriate models. In this context, tests were made in order to delete the items with the lowest estimate, trying not to affect the model.

Compared to the original model, the “comments” items concerning the Facebook Engagement variable and the second “trust” item, the second “commitment” item, the second “familiarity” item,

the first “connection” item and the second “return” item, concerning the Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale variable, have been removed.

Regarding the model, it presents the standardised estimates, where all values are positive, i.e. the weight of each item in the variables and the influence of one variable on the other can be confirmed. Thus, the value of the correlation between Facebook Engagement and Intent to Buy is the highest (0.42), that is, each “extra point” in Facebook Engagement leads to an increase of 0.42 points in Intent to Buy. The correlation between Facebook Engagement and the Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale is 0.39, i.e. each “extra point” on Facebook Engagement leads to a 0.39 point increase on the Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale. Finally, the correlation between Facebook Engagement and the Benchmark, which, compared to other correlations, has a much lower value (0.03), i.e. each “extra point” in Facebook Engagement leads to a 0.03 point increase in the Benchmark. It can then be seen that the weight of this last correlation for the model is practically zero.

After refining the model, the AGFI value (table 10) rose from 0.492 to 0.606, but remains below the reference value to be considered acceptable.

Table 10. AGFI of the refined model

Model	GFI	AGFI
Default model	.687	.606
Saturated model	1.000	
Independence model	.127	.035

## 4.2 Study 2

### 4.2.1 Results of Interviews

**Question 1:** Do you think that the commitment between fan and club on social networks has an impact on the relationship between them?

In this first question, the answers of the interviewees were similar. According to interviewee A, social networks are inseparable from clubs. In these, clubs need to put people in the foreground and must therefore commit themselves to communicating, testing, learning, improving and interacting with supporters. In this context, Interviewee B recognises that it is important to know the fans in order to deliver relevant content, i.e. to give what matters and when it matters, in order to have an impact on the targets. Finally, he said that both players and clubs have an impact on commitment to fans. While they can work on their own, they must create synergies in order to have a greater impact.

Like interviewee A, interviewee B highlighted the importance of social networks today, stating that supporters should be at the centre and that the fundamental objective of clubs is to get to know and serve them.

The content, according to interviewee B, is the way of communicating on social networks, which must be increasingly personalised today. Therefore, he states that one of the objectives is to offer more and more value to the fans.

Interviewee C states that the commitment between fan and club on social networks always has a positive impact on the relationship between the two, adding that it is negative for clubs not to have social networks, as this would affect the relationship with fans. In this way, interviewee C highlights the various functionalities of social media by clubs in reaching supporters, such as delivering content, or receiving feedback. Finally, he concluded that the relationship at the digital level is beneficial

both for the club, which can receive feedback from all that goes on for the fans, and for the fans, who receive reliable content, which can be published, for example, in the form of information.

**Question 2:** Does the commitment between fan and club on social networks encourage fans to buy club merchandise?

In relation to this issue it is important to mention again that it was only possible to interview interviewee C, who considers that the content published by the club on social networks has an influence on the commitment between fan and club, highlighting when this is shared in the form of information, since this, because it is transmitted on the official network, is considered feasible. In this way, the content can have an impact on the purchase intention. As an example, clubs may use players, who are often references for fans, to promote a particular jersey. This may lead certain supporters to consider buying it.

Using Eusébio as an example, a publication with the launch of the number 13 jersey, which he wore in the national team, will have an impact on fans. This vintage jersey could trigger memories in the fans. According to interviewee C, the initiatives that clubs do at the digital level generally have a positive impact on merchandising.

**Question 3:** Does the commitment between supporter and club on social networks encourage fans to promote the club? As in the second question, it was only possible to interview the interviewee C. According to him, if the content is shared first on the social networks instead of the media, it will have a greater impact on the fans. In this way, he believes it is good for both parties, as the club is the first to share and the supporter the first to receive. This could lead to fans sharing this content.

Interviewee C exemplifies his point of view, stating that a fan, when reading an article, will want to be the first to share it. Another example will be the throw of a jersey, or the hiring of a player. All shared content generates communication from the fans. So whenever fans share something related to the club, the club should take advantage of it in order to know what can be improved as not all the reference made by fans is positive.

#### *4.2.2 Analysis of Interviews*

The main objective of this analysis of the interviews is to understand, from the perspective of the clubs, which factors have an impact on the commitment to the supporters, in order to understand whether these same factors contribute not only to a better relationship between the club and the supporter, but also to the purchase intention and reference intention. Taking into account the state of the art, and according to the quantitative data collected, it is possible to perceive the importance of social networks for clubs today.

In this context, the fact that the content shared by the club plays an important role in the commitment to the fans stands out in all responses. This content, in order to have an impact on the relationship, on the intention to buy and on the intention to refer, must be relevant and increasingly personalised. According to the advice gathered, if clubs put fans in the foreground and offer more value, they are helping to improve commitment to them. The presence of the players in the club's content also influences this commitment. In this way, greater commitment between fans and club can lead to a better relationship between both.

Regarding the intention to purchase, the content is again highlighted. Clubs promoting, for example, new equipment, or the presentation of a player at the exact time, using the players themselves in the promotion, are not only contributing to the commitment to the fans, but also to an increase in

the purchase intention, as this sharing may lead to fans thinking about buying merchandise relative to what was shared.

If the content is shared on social networks first, rather than the media, it could be an advantage for the club. By delivering the content first to its supporters, the club is contributing more value. In turn, by receiving quick and reliable information, supporters will want to share it with others. In this way, this sharing, by the club on the social networks, conveys greater credibility of the information to the supporters.

It should also be noted that any publication will generate a communication from the fans, because even if the content is not to their liking, they may refer it negatively to others. Clubs should also take the opportunity to gather feedback from fans on the content they publish in order to understand whether or not they have had the desired impact. In this way, it can be said that clubs should deliver content that is increasingly personalised and relevant, in order to improve commitment to fans on social networks. This commitment is beneficial to both parties as it has a positive impact on the relationship, the intent to buy and the intent to refer.

Table 11 summarises the view of the professionals interviewed, in the digital and merchandise areas, in relation to the themes under consideration.

**Table 11. Summary of interviews**

Interviewed	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Importance of social networks for clubs.</li> <li>- Supporters first.</li> <li>- Relevant content.</li> <li>- Synergy Club-Athlete.</li> </ul>	-	-
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The importance of social networks.</li> <li>- Supporters at the centre.</li> <li>- Personalized content.</li> </ul>	-	-
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social networks have a positive impact on the relationship between club and supporter</li> <li>- Importance of content.</li> <li>- Benefit for club and fan.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Influence of content.</li> <li>- Reliability.</li> <li>- Impact of the promotion of sports products/services on social networks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The importance of sharing, first and foremost, on social networks.</li> <li>- All content generates communication.</li> <li>- Supporters' references should be used by the club.</li> </ul>

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Discussion and Implications for the Theory

This study aimed to measure the impact of the commitment between supporter and club on social networks, in relation to the relationship between the two, purchase intention and reference intention.

The results obtained, through qualitative and quantitative analyses, have made it possible to validate the hypotheses, as it has been proven that the greater the commitment between fan and club on social networks, the better the relationship, that is to say, this digital commitment allows greater proximity and identification of fans in relation to the club.

The two analyses mentioned above complement each other, since the quantitative one summarises the point of view of the supporter and the qualitative one reflects the point of view of experts linked to the sports field.

As to the intention to purchase, it was found that it is greater when related to a greater commitment between fan and club on social networks, i.e. this commitment encourages fans to purchase products or services related to the club, such as merchandise or tickets.

With regard to the intention of reference, the data confirm that this is also greater when it comes to a greater commitment between fan and club on social networks. Thus, the commitment in the social networks motivates the dissemination of everything related to the club, from news to games, by the fans.

Although the correlations between the study variables do not show high values, they confirmed the influence of commitment on social networks in a sporting context. Given these correlations, the three variables Sport Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale, Purchase Intent and Benchmark Intent are little influenced by the commitment between fans and club in social networks.

This study then presents data showing that social networks are an important tool and that they should be increasingly used by clubs in order to reach supporters. This digital engagement creates a win-win relationship between club and fans, i.e. the club wins, because it improves the relationship with the fans, sells more products/services and is advertised without the need to use advertising; in turn the fans win, because they identify and become more familiar with the club, buy personalised products/services and feel motivated to advertise various aspects related to the club.

Against this background, it is important that clubs not only make their presence felt in these networks, but also deliver more and better content in order to offer more value to fans. In this way, the commitment to the fans will be greater, which will have a positive impact on the relationship, purchase intention and referral intention.

## 5.2 Practical Implications

Regarding the implications for marketing, this research shows the importance for clubs of engaging with supporters through social networks.

It is therefore necessary that those responsible for marketing, linked to the clubs, get the most out of these tools in order to reach supporters and build or improve the relationship with each of them. Therefore, social networks should not be seen only as platforms used by clubs to disseminate information. However, it is of utmost importance that information is communicated quickly.

This study therefore aims to demonstrate that commitment between club and social networking fan can have implications in a number of club-related areas. It is therefore concluded that it is beneficial for the club that this commitment is increasing. In this sense, it is necessary that marketing professionals or other areas, linked to the management of social networks of clubs, not only establish relational strategies in order to build or strengthen this commitment, but also deliver content in order to offer more value to their supporters. These measures, when well implemented, taking into account the study, will improve the relationship between club and supporter and increase the purchase intention and reference intention. It is important that clubs, after defining the relational strategy, measure the return, i.e. see whether the strategy adopted has taken into account the proposed objectives. Thus, considering the data and the sample, it is important that the clubs commit to the digital level, since the return can be very beneficial and derive in various ways.

## 5.3 Limitations and Future Investigations

The study made it possible to measure the impact of the commitment between fan and club on social networks, in relation to the relationship between the two, purchase intention and reference intention. However, it presented some limitations.

The first limitation is related to the sample size, as only 203 persons were surveyed. Thus, a larger sample would give rise to a greater number of opinions, which would strengthen the confidence of the data and allow conclusions to be drawn with a greater degree of certainty.

The second limitation stems from the fact that only one club, Football Club, has been analysed, which is to say that all the conclusions relating to this study cannot be generalised, i.e. they do not represent the opinion of all the supporters of the club, nor can they be interpreted as the opinions of supporters relating to other clubs.

Another limitation in this study is the evolution of social networks, as we all know there are social networks that are emerging and gaining more and more followers, such as Instagram. Therefore, in a future study, supporters may be surveyed, not only through Facebook, but also through other networks with equal or superior social impact.

Finally, the model should be reformulated so that the correlations show more significant values. For this to occur, it is necessary to develop some tests that validate the model by removing or adding variables or measures.

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