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MORE SUSTAINABLE SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS' OPERATION AS A RESULT OF FAN INVOLVEMENT INTO THE PROCESSES OF DECISION-MAKING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING*

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Abstract. Sports clubs and other sports organizations are important to modern society because their activities provide important values linked to sports. This article focuses on the passive consumption of sports as a leisure activity that brings fans joy, a sense of belonging, and other values associated with their favourite sport and club. For sports club managers to achieve sustainable operation associated with sufficient funds obtained from fans, they can apply various ways of involving the fans themselves in creating a loyal community and in selected managerial issues. The article's aim is to describe the current level of knowledge in this area and follow it up with practical recommendations for the effective setting of the involvement of fans in selected processes. The applied methodology uses several methods, such as case studies, analysis of statistical data, storytelling, or the creation of flow charts describing the new setting of the processes in question. Data describing selected examples from practice and case studies were obtained from available Internet sources. However, the research results were supplemented by the analysis of data provided by the football association, which covers this sport at the national level within the Slovensk Republic. The main findings of the presented research include the fact that the involvement of fans in sports club management issues is often associated with concerns on the part of managers. Therefore, it is recommended to plan and implement the successive steps of this involvement, starting with involvement in the creation of a loyal fan community.

Keywords: sports; sports management; fans; fans involvement; sustainability

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1. Introduction

Sport serves as a tool for the development of social and economic factors. This is a fundamental reason why government bodies and other stakeholders invest in sports systems that deliver social and community values (Rowe et al., 2018). Sport can be perceived via two dimensions. These are represented by the dimension of active and passive consumption of sports. Active consumption of sports is defined as performing physical activity, or the situation when the consumer is directly involved in sports. Passive consumption, on the other hand, is characterized by watching sports on TV, via streaming platforms, watching news and searching for them on the Internet, or watching a sports event directly at the venue, or other similar ways of consuming sports. In this article the focus is on the passive consumption of sports, thus on the spectators of sports matches and competitions. A spectator who has developed an emotional bond with a club becomes a fan.

Sports fans show their devotion to their team by attending sporting events, watching competitions on television, buying products, and reading newspapers and magazines with the articles about their admired object. The investment of time and money is linked to their desire to belong to the fan community and to the object of their devotion – the selected sports club. Whether one's favourite team wins or loses also affects the feeling of the average fans' self-esteem (people's emotional perception of themselves) as well as their mood. (Levental et al., 2021; Mardosaite & Jasinskas, 2021)

Consequences of fan identification are fan loyalty, brand equity, game viewing and attendance, purchase of team merchandise, willingness to travel to the venues of the matches, satisfaction with team performance, satisfaction with participation in a sporting event, and future intentions to attend other matches and competitions. (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012)

Devotion or loyalty is important to define. It is a deep-seated willingness to repurchase or re-patronize a preferred product/service in the future, resulting in repeated purchases of the same brand, despite situational influences and marketing efforts that have the potential to cause behavioural change (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012).

The aim of this article was to provide an overview of the ways in which sports clubs can analyze the fans and their involvement, and the engagement in club issues. In the framework of fan involvement, there is a fundamental distinction between involvement in community building and the decision-making processes of the club itself within its management. The basic aim of the article and the related research is achieved by analyzing selected examples from practice and case studies meeting the set criteria for researching the chosen field of sports management. The article follows this up by analyzing data related to fan behaviour and loyalty. These data were obtained for the research from the Slovak Football Association – the national organization managing this sport in Slovakia. Additionally, foreign statistical data are used in the article in a secondary form, supplemented by the drawing of the original authors' conclusions and implications. However, the article does not end at the level of analysis. It continues with the design of processes related to the analysis of fans and their involvement in community building and in the management of sports clubs themselves. In this context, it also includes the application level of the research effort. Linking the necessarily performed analyses directly with their application to set corresponding processes represents a gap in the current state of knowledge approached in the article and forms a significant part of the overall novelty of the article and the whole research project conducted.

2. Theoretical background

A part of the theoretical background analysis contains the necessary definitions and explanations of the involvement of fans of sports clubs and organizations in the issues of management of these entities as well as in building a loyal community of people for whom the given sport, and in a narrower sense the chosen club, is a significant value associated with how they are spending their free time. In connection with the fans themselves, possible ways of analyzing the demands of the fans, which the clubs must focus on in their activities, are also collected and systematized. Only this way it is possible to achieve long-term positive results associated with high attendance at the sports events organized. Building a loyal community of club fans (with the support of fan involvement in the events) is directly connected to an important (even fundamental) pillar of the overall sustainability of the given club's operation.

2.1. Definitions and contexts of fans' involvement in club management issues

Fan involvement is a concept defined by Stevens and Rosenberger (2012) as the degree to which consumers perceive the objects or activities as a central part of their lives and how they perceive their meaningfulness, appeal, and importance. Involvement refers to the level of interest or importance a fan attaches to a sport. It represents the level that the fan values or believes that the sport is relevant and important to his/her life and lifestyle.

However, the involvement of fans can also mean their involvement in the clubs' decision-making processes. For example, Hyatt et al. (2013) recommended increasing the frequency of participation in live matches to create platforms (for example, a website) where interested parties could pay for the right to vote on the club's managerial issues. However, fans at the stadiums also could vote, which should help increase the overall attendance. At the time, the authors recommended implementing additional devices in stadiums, but nowadays fans can simply vote using mobile phones. Wi-Fi connection security is a suitable addition in this case.

Su et al. (2021) examined the effects of sports brand involvement, crisis management performance, and perceived belonging on fans' sense of hope or emptiness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the study indicate that fans' involvement with sports brands was positively associated with their psychological well-being. The involvement of fans in the sports brand alleviated the perceived emptiness. This relationship was partly mediated by the perceived co-existence, but not the performance of crisis management. In addition, sports brand crisis management performance and fans' perceived co-experience fully mediated the positive relationship between fans' sports brand involvement and hope.

Maxton (2019) investigated fans' motives for attending live rugby matches in South Africa. Based on the analysis of data obtained from an online questionnaire, the author concluded that fan satisfaction is an important factor influencing their loyalty and interest in a sports team. Fans who were satisfied with the stadium experience were more willing to stay loyal to the team and attended matches more frequently. The author advises teams to improve the fan experience in the stadium and increase interaction with fans to keep them loyal and attract new ones. The results of the study are useful for sports organizations striving for the improvement of the fan experience and the increase in their loyalty.

2.2. Approaches to the analysis of the sports clubs fans' demands

Fan requirements may vary depending on the socio-demographic, economic, cultural, and historical factors. They may differ in Europe and America, as the sports market is based on a different structure. In America, the dominant force is represented by the school or university leagues, in Europe the responsibility for the development of sports youth is often transferred to the sports clubs themselves. Thus, further research is appropriate to understand the requirements of these stakeholders.

Segmentation is the first step towards setting a unified direction of management activities so that they are aimed at achieving the main goal of the organization. The age factor also plays a role in determining segmentation. Several studies have shown a relationship between age and the willingness to spend money on sports events, even though different studies point to different age categories (Mortazavi, 2021). For example, as shown in the study by Reifurth et al. (2019), it does not make sense to target activities for children under seven years of age, as they are not able to form associations with the club's brand. Children under seven make associations mainly with sports, not with smaller subsets of the sports system. Therefore, they should not be the goal of activities to build a fan base or the club community.

According to the research conducted by Zhu et al., it is necessary for sports managers to focus, for example, on the development of the use of green funding tools, cultivation via various communication media to increase public awareness of the greening of sports management, and the development of green energy production for sports venues, such as stadiums, swimming pools, etc. (2023) These concepts are a part of the current trend. It is therefore possible to assume that the fans themselves can demand that their clubs address these concepts.

The physical participation of fans in the match is closely connected with the fan rituals. These can be divided into personal (praying for the team's victory) and social ones (singing the club's anthem). A ritual is a process that evokes emotions and is associated with symbolism. The authors recommend sports managers to find elements that could be transformed or incorporated into the service consumption process, which represents the experience of a physical visit of the stadium. (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021)

Vassiliadis et al. (2021) investigated the requirements of visitors to sporting events. From the results of the questionnaire survey, they created regression models that were supposed to have the greatest impact on the dependent variable represented by the level of satisfaction. The model with the best results involved the event taking place on a summer evening with an entry price of €25. Additionally, trade exhibits should be present at the event and visitors should have access to Wi-Fi.

For a better understanding of the requirements of visitors on the day of the match, Škorić et al. (2021) analyzed the factors that shaped satisfaction or the dissatisfaction. Most of the factors caused dissatisfaction (program and time of the event, price of the tickets, availability of the tickets, etc.) rather than satisfaction (security and promotion of the event), while one factor had the ability to cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction (preparation of the city for the event). An interesting insight is the need to choose a different approach to new visitors than to regular visitors since the factors have different weights for these groups. The authors recommend focusing on cooperation with city officials, or representatives of tourism and sports facilities. It is necessary to choose the ideal ticket price for all interested parties, which is suitable for the purchasing power of the visitors. Special attention should be paid to a less tangible factor of the atmosphere at the event.

The paragraphs below describe real examples of how sports clubs approach the analysis of their fans. The emphasis is mainly on the analysis of the examined indicators. The aim is to find out what specifically interests sports clubs about their fans. Examples are described in the following list:

- **Bayern Munich** – in 2017 created a questionnaire aimed at fans. The club tried to encourage respondents to fill in the questionnaire with the possibility of winning a signed jersey or a personalized link. The questions themselves could not be analyzed as the questionnaire was no longer available. (FACEBOOK.com, 2017)
- **Manchester City** – based on the analysis of the available documents that describe activities aimed at the fan analysis, it can be concluded that Manchester City comprehensively analyzes the satisfaction of fans with visiting the stands during the match. They analyze, for example, the fans’ attitude towards safety, the suitability of the premises for the family, and the access for women. The perceived value obtained from the ticket price is also analyzed. The club analyzes the average attendance, how many goals on average the visitor see per match, etc. According to the Manchester City’s official documents, the main stadium, Etihad Stadium, has been one of the two best stadiums in the Premier League for several years in a row. (MANCITY.com, 2019)
- **English Football League (EFL)** – in 2019, representatives of the second-highest football competition conducted an extensive survey of fan satisfaction with visiting the stands. The report on the survey states that this is the first such survey since 2010, although the process of communication with the fans served as a basis for improving the quality provided. Several statistics can be obtained from the report, which relates to the overall competition level, but the statistics also relate to individual clubs. These are referred to as case studies. The examined indicators are divided into seven units: **the relationship between the club and the fans** (reasons for club affiliation, age of first visit to the stands, motivation for visiting the stands), **visit to the stands** (factors related to activities carried out before visiting the stands – a match played at home or away, method of travelling, purchase of tickets – methods, sources of information about the tickets, factors influencing the purchase of the tickets), **the experience of visiting the stands** (factors related to the activities carried out during the visit to the stands – inclusivity and support of minorities, community activities, the role of technology in football, the roles of official staff and the perception of roles by the fans), **content and communication** (fan information channels, specific news media used, interest in the communication channels of individual clubs, information during the games, platforms used, information consumption times, access), **information about broadcasts** (where fans watch the matches, interviews, etc. – subscriptions to fan entertainment platforms such as Netflix, watching live matches, awareness of services), **competitions** (fans’ perception of competitions and cup matches – e.g. interest in the Carabao Cup), **EFL policies and their perception** (sustainability, accessibility and inclusivity policy, importance of supporting domestic players, importance of success of the England National Team, betting). (EFL.com, 2019)
- **ŠK Slovan Bratislava** – in 2013, they conducted a questionnaire survey that visitors to the match could fill in. Data collection was carried out using pencils and paper. The questions were divided into four topics, mainly related to the satisfaction with services, attendance, and fans’ perceived space for improvement. (SKSLOVAN.com, 2013)
- **HC Slovan Bratislava** – in 2018, this club teamed up with the research agency AKO and the ticketing partner Ticketportal and they conducted a questionnaire survey together. It contained 39 questions, six of which were of sociodemographic nature. The survey covered the frequency of attendance at the matches, sources of information about the club, popularity of the players, evaluation of accompanying and non-match activities, services at the stadium, spectator service, interest in the club souvenirs, and the like. The reasons for visiting home games were also examined, among which the team’s support and the high level of hockey dominated (at that time the club was a part of the second largest hockey league in the world, the KHL, which meant better opponents for HC Slovan, compared to opponents from the highest Slovak league – this raised the overall level of the game), followed by the atmosphere. Among the club souvenirs, the respondents identified textile products as the most popular ones, while smaller souvenirs included magnets

and car accessories. The main source of information for fans was the club website and the club’s profile on the Facebook social network. (HCSLOVAN.sk, 2018)

- **FC DAC 1904 Dunajská Streda** – in 2018, the club conducted a survey focused on fan satisfaction via a questionnaire survey, which should have taken respondents about 4-5 minutes. The motivation for filling in was the opportunity to win tickets to a Europe League match. (Nagy, 2018)

The following table describes the key findings obtained from the examples included. The table captures the period in which the survey was conducted. If the way in which the survey was performed was found, it is described in the third column. The examined indicators are captured in the fourth column. They represent the most important part of the summary in terms of the article’s aim.

Table 1. Key takeaways from the analysis of sports clubs fans’ analyses

Club/League name	Period of the survey conduction	Method of the survey conduction	Identified categories of the indicators examined
Bayern Munich	2017	Online questionnaire	Unknown
Manchester City	2018 – 2019	Unknown	Satisfaction with the price of tickets, perceived value obtained for tickets, feeling of safety in the stands, feeling of comfort of women in the stands
EFL	2019	Potential outsourcing by a research agency	The relationship between the club and the fans, fan activities before visiting the stands, satisfaction with visiting the stands, content and communication channels, broadcasting platforms, perceptions of specific competitions, perceptions of the EFL policy
ŠK Slovan Bratislava	2013	Pencil and paper for each respondent	Satisfaction with services, attendance and the space for improvement perceived by the fans
HC Slovan Bratislava	2018	Outsourcing by a research agency	Frequency of visits to the stands, sources of information about the club, popularity of players, evaluation of accompanying and non-match activities, services at the stadium, spectator service, interest in club souvenirs, reasons for visiting home matches
FC DAC 1904 Dunajská Streda	2018	Online questionnaire	Unknown

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on the references listed in the text above

From the analysis of the ways in which sports clubs analyze their fans, it follows that a key indicator for sports clubs is the perceived value received by fans for the price of the tickets. Indicators related to this are often repeated in club surveys. Indicators related to the experience of visiting the stands during matches are also often investigated. Surveys carried out more recently (closer to 2023) include indicators related to inclusivity, women's feeling of safety at the stadium, etc. Indicators related to sustainability should also be included in future surveys of sports clubs. It is increasingly important to examine these indicators from the perspective of sports clubs, as it is an increasingly frequent demand of fans that a sports club should fulfil. It is a highly modern concept.

2.3 Building a community and the fan base

Assuming that fans are key stakeholders whose involvement in management ensures the club's long-term sustainability, it is appropriate to focus on building the fan base. The sports club brand community brings the brand owner opportunities to implement sponsorship and branding strategies, and through the community, sports managers can create value, especially in the context of social networks (Popp and Woratschek, 2016). According to Yoshida et al. (2015), the community is built based on three elements. Two of them are formal, built by a sports club. This is the value of the brand of the sports club and the brandfest. Brandfest is defined as an event where brand users meet, and social interactions occur among them. The last, less formal element are the perceived rituals and traditions. Via these three elements, fans get involved in the community, improve products, and create a word-of-mouth effect.

Sports club communities are created either by the fans or by the sports clubs (Jang et al., 2008). Due to the growth of the sports market and globalization, more and more sports fans are connected to each other through social media, podcasts, online forums, and other communication tools that can be easily and cheaply accessed from all over the world. Therefore, according to Mastromartino and Zhang (2020), there is a need for sports managers to gain a deeper and better understanding of sports fan communities and how and why individuals identify as members of a sports fan community.

Since fans have created a certain emotional relationship with the sports club (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012) sports managers should enable the satisfaction of their needs to promote and defend the brand community. Mills et al. (2022) suggest ways of involving fans in management, such as sending products for testing and review or even providing formal training on the product use. They also recommend taking advantage of social networking features, such as the ability for users to customize their profile picture by including a frame, which allowed individuals to show their group affiliation via a branded frame on their profile picture. This public display of affective commitment to the brand community will increase brand community identification and subsequently lead to further public displays of the brand loyalty.

3. Research aim and methodology

Practical and specific recommendations for the process of managing sports fans or building a fan (or brand) community are neglected in the professional literature. Therefore, the aim of this article is to create a set of concrete recommendations for building a fan community together with models of activities contained in the corresponding management processes.

These should help better understand the activities that the sports manager has to perform to achieve the set goal. The recommendations presented in the main aim of the article build on the provided overview of the ways in which sports clubs can analyze their fans and their involvement in community building and in selected management processes of sports clubs.

The basic aim of the article and related research is realized by analyzing selected examples from practice and case studies meeting the established criteria for researching the chosen field of sports management. The article follows this up by analyzing data related to fan behaviour and loyalty.

The data were obtained from the Slovak Football Association – the national organization managing this sport in Slovakia. Foreign statistical data are used in the article in a secondary form for drawing the original authors' conclusions. The article does not stop at the level of analysis. It continues with the design of processes related to the analysis of fans and their involvement in the community building and in the management of sports clubs themselves. To obtain the relevant knowledge needed for the article, the data provided by the Slovak Football Association (SFA), which is the highest public body for football, futsal, and beach football in Slovakia, was analyzed. The data were provided to the authors for the purpose of data analysis. The data relates to players, leagues, matches, and other events. Even though the data covers different areas, for the purposes of this article, the data related to attendance at the stands of the matches were used. Other relevant statistics were obtained from the Statista portal.

With the selection of cases and examples, the aim was to exemplify common patterns in how sports clubs tend to engage with their fan base. Authors attempt to implement narrative-based research, which recognises that we live in a world of stories and often recount our experiences as stories and these can serve as the overall design, a means for collecting data, or a platform for disseminating the findings. In the article, the concept of ethnographies was applied as well, which in this context involves remote observation of culture within a particular context to understand how groups of people interact and behave. The inspiration for using these methods comes from Hoerber and Shaw (2017) who argue that alternative qualitative approaches, which may open research to new audiences and research participants, appear to be largely absent in the current research outputs.

Along with the above-mentioned methods, the analysis of best practices is mainly present in the results and the discussion section. Analysis of scientific publications is used in the theoretical background section. To get all the necessary information to construct this article, the authors used orientational analysis. Deduction and induction are largely present mainly in the results and discussion section to gather knowledge either about parts of the system or about the whole system.

The studied system is represented by the world's sports market. In the sports market, each individual sport competes for its market share. This is achieved via various stakeholders (governments, sponsors, fans, etc.) who can be characterised as the sports market's actors. These actors are mutually interconnected since they strive for achieving similar aims. This studied reality thus creates a complex system that needs to be approached in the research so that valid recommendations for the sports clubs' managers can be designed in the application part of the study.

For a clearer understanding, the entire methodological procedure is also captured in its graphic form in Fig. 1

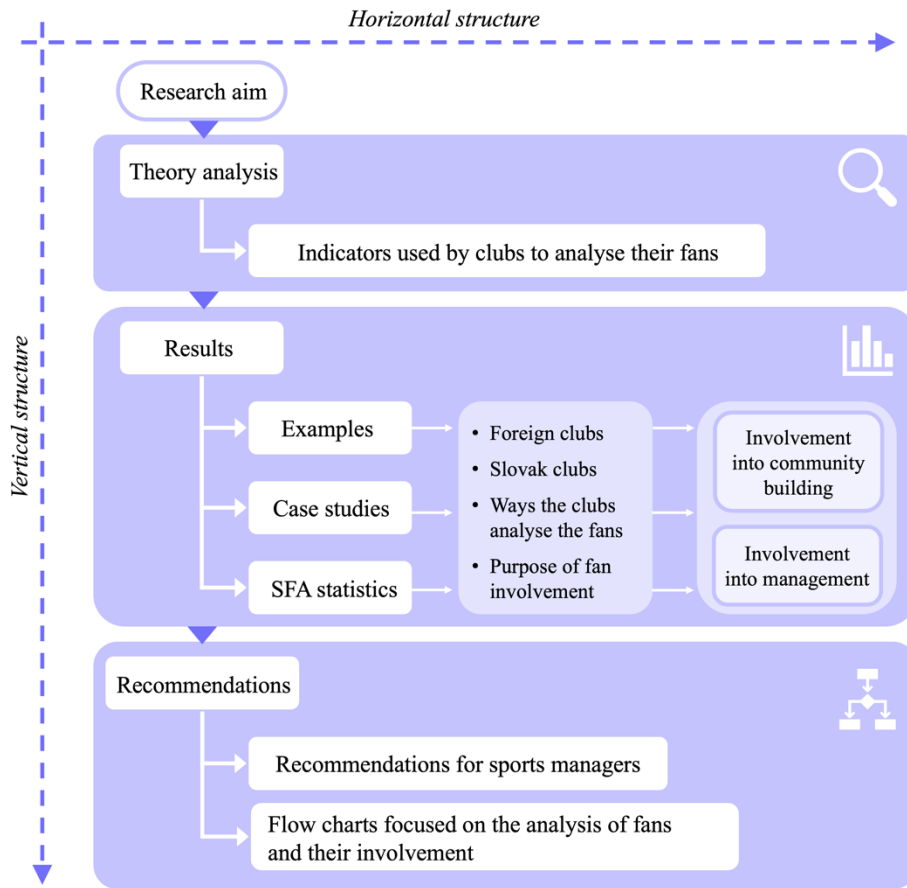


Figure 1. The structure of the publication

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The graphic description of the applied methodology contains an explanation of the vertical and horizontal structure of the overall scientific procedure. Within the vertical structure, it is a chronological succession of individual research phases performed. The horizontal structure of the description adds details of the individual parts contained in the obtained and interpreted results chapter. It is about linking individual selected data sources to create a categorized view of possible tasks and the importance of involving fans more deeply in the club's management processes to support its long-term sustainable operation.

4. Results and discussion

The presented research results are divided into several parts related to the used data sources. The first part is a comparison and systematization of selected examples of involving fans in club events. These provide a basic insight and practical grasp of fan engagement options. This is followed by created case studies bringing a deeper understanding of the investigated phenomenon. These are directly linked with relevant statistics regarding the income streams of sports clubs. Complementing the investigated reality is then the analysis of the data provided by the SFA. These data refer to attendance at football matches in individual leagues. All these analyses subsequently lead to the design of practical recommendations in the form of a proposed process of analysis and involvement of fans in management issues of sports clubs.

4.1. Examples describing the possibilities of involvement in selected issues of sports club management

The concept of involving fans in the management of a sports organization is not new. Even in the past, sports managers were aware of the benefits of this concept. Many examples can be given where clubs from different sports and backgrounds have tried to involve fans in their management at different times. In general, it is most often about the possibility of choosing the design of the jerseys, logo, colours, and team anthem, but systems for the regular involvement of fans in management are also created. This happens, for example, via regular all-star games, where fans vote for players who should be on the roster. Some clubs go a step further and create a separate fan body made up of fan representatives. These bodies then regularly communicate with the club's management.

For a better approximation of these methods, the following examples were selected:

1. **NHL Seattle Team Name Selection:** When the NHL announced it would expand to Seattle in 2021, the team held a public vote to determine the team's name. The choices were narrowed down to five and more than 100,000 fans participated in voting, resulting in the team being named the Seattle Krakens. (NHL.com, & Cotsonika, 2020)
2. **Pro Bowl Voting:** In the NFL, fans have a say in selecting players for the Pro Bowl, the league's annual all-star game. Fans vote for players online and through social media, and their votes count for one-third of the total vote, with players and coaches making up the other two-thirds. (NFL.com, n.d.)
3. **Manchester United (MU) Fan Forum:** The forum consists of 16 fan representatives from different parts of the stadium and with different opinions, who meet with club officials four times a year to discuss club matters. Other fans can ask to have their questions discussed at one of the Fan Forum meetings. Fan representatives can be contacted directly by other fans. Allegedly, every question submitted at least one month before the date of the forum should be discussed at the forum. (MANUTD.com, n.d.B)
4. **NASCAR All-Star Race Format:** NASCAR, the auto racing league in the United States, allows fans to vote on the so-called "fan-vote winner". This is a form of fan wild card. The All-Star Race competition is exclusive to the four winning clubs of the All-Star Open; this competition consists of three stages and the winner of each stage advances to the All-Star Race. The winner of the fan vote is then the last participant in the competition. If the winner of this vote advances from one of the stages, fourth place will be taken by the second winner of the All-Star Open vote in order. (NASCAR.com, 2022)
5. **NBA All-Star Game Starters:** The NBA allows fans to vote on which players will start in the annual All-Star Game. In 2023, the fan vote was assigned a weight representing 50%. The media, which was assigned a 25% weight, could also vote, but the players, whose weight represented other 25%, voted as well. The resulting numbers were therefore recalculated based on the assigned weights. (PR.NBA.com, 2023)
6. **MLB All-Star Finals Voting:** Major League Baseball allows fans to vote on which players will appear in the opening lineup of the All-Star Game. (MLB.com, n.d.)
7. **NFL Pro Bowl Rosters:** The NFL allows fans to vote on which players make the Pro Bowl roster. (OPERATIONS.NFL.com, 2022)
8. **F1 Fan Voice Formula 1 Driver of the Day:** Formula 1, the international motor racing league, allows fans to vote for a "Driver of the Day" after each race. (FORMULA1.com, n.d.)
9. **World Cup Mascots:** The FIFA World Cup, a major international football tournament, allows fans to vote for the official mascot of the tournament. An example is the vote for the mascot of the 2018 World Cup held in Russia. (ESPN.com, 2016)

The categorization of ways of involving fans in the management, which is created based on the analysis of numerous practical examples and case studies, includes the following points:

- **Club membership:** In some European football clubs, fans can become club members and have a say in the club's decisions. For example, in FC Barcelona, members can vote for the president and board of directors of the club. Fans who meet the criteria set by the club can vote, such as: age of majority, duration of active membership for at least one year, without suspension of membership, and being included in the electoral census. To obtain the membership, it is necessary to agree on a meeting with club representatives and to identify oneself with an ID card. The membership fee was €195 per year (valid until 31/12/2022) (Jenson, 2022; FCBARCELONA.com, n.d.; FCBARCELONA.com, 2021)
- **Fan council:** In various sports and leagues, sports clubs create separate bodies to participate in the management of the club. For example, in 2023, the leadership of the NFL club Houston Texans (HT) decided to create a fifty-member board of fans. (Criswell and Chron, 2023)
- **Team name and logo:** Fans sometimes get a chance to have a say in a new team's name and logo. An example can be the aforementioned Seattle Krakens.
- **Choosing a mascot:** Some sports teams allow fans to vote on choosing a new mascot. For example, the management of the Washington Commanders (WC) team invited fans to choose a theme for a new mascot (dog, historical figure, pig, superhero). Subsequently, proposals were designed and, during the match, fans (online and in the stadium) could vote for the best proposal. (Byrum, 2022)

4.2 Case studies aimed at involving fans in the selected issues

Following the selected practical examples analyzed and compared above, this part brings a deeper insight into the involvement of sports club fans in the processes of creating loyal communities and in selected issues of the management of these clubs. Individual case studies are created by linking available information describing ways of involving fans in club management issues and relevant statistics capturing the sources of revenue of the investigated sports clubs. It is therefore the application of a qualitative approach to research with the creation of stories, enabling a higher level of understanding of the analyzed phenomenon and drawing connections between the elements revealed.

Arsenal London (AL) – Case Study

A football club from the English Premier League gives fans the opportunity to get closer to the club through membership programs. They are divided into three categories: Red, Platinum, and Junior Gunners. (ARSENAL.com, n.d. D)

Red membership is the basic program priced at £34 per season. Here, the fan mainly gets priority access to match tickets, the possibility to sell tickets due to the impossibility to attend the match, and a 10% discount for the fan online store. Another system in which the fan participates by purchasing a membership is the My Arsenal Rewards. The fan earns points for interactions with the club (ticket purchase, physical presence at the match, etc.). (ARSENAL.com, n.d. A)

Points can be used to purchase tangible rewards (match tickets, players' jerseys worn at matches or training, signed merchandise, etc.), or intangible rewards (a tour at the training facilities or the stadium, participation in a press conference after the match, etc.). (ARSENAL.com, n.d. B)

Platinum membership is a product that is meant to make the fan feel like a valued business client. In addition to the basic benefits, the Platinum member has access to "hospitality" from AL. This includes a free official program

on the day of the match or half-time drinks. The members can use the services of a team of account managers, and access to club restaurants, bars, and other areas. Some services are available for additional fees. Memberships range from £779-£1,540 for the 2023/2024 season. (HOSPITALITY.ARSENAL.com, n.d.)

However, it is not always clear which services are covered by the membership and which are those with the additional fee. Another official source puts the price at £2,865, with the price subject to change depending on who the club faces during the season. (HOSPITALITY.ARSENAL.com, 2022)

Different packages can be purchased separately, with a total of seven packages, each priced differently. For example, “The Heritage” package includes pre-match access to the restaurant including a five-course meal, with a welcome drink and half-time and post-match drinks. The price depends on the locations made available and is between £720 and £1,800 per person.

These packages are meant to enhance the match experience for a premium, which is in line with the scientific recommendations. Mostly this includes the additional access to restaurants and bars (in some cases a person can watch the match live and with a view of the field) or other VIP areas. (HOSPITALITY.ARSENAL.com, 2022)

The Junior Gunners program is further divided into age groups (0-3, 4-11, 12-16, 17-18) and the membership fee ranges from £15-£30 per season. Benefits include those of the Red membership, plus experiences (for example, behind-the-scenes at the London Colney training ground), the opportunity to become a member of the team of ball feeders during the match, or a subscription to the Junior Gunners Newsletter. (ARSENAL.com, n.d. C)

For the analysis of the success of the strategy, or system of creating a matchday experience for fans, the structures of sales over time were analyzed. Figure 2 shows the data of the sales structure of AL during the studied period.

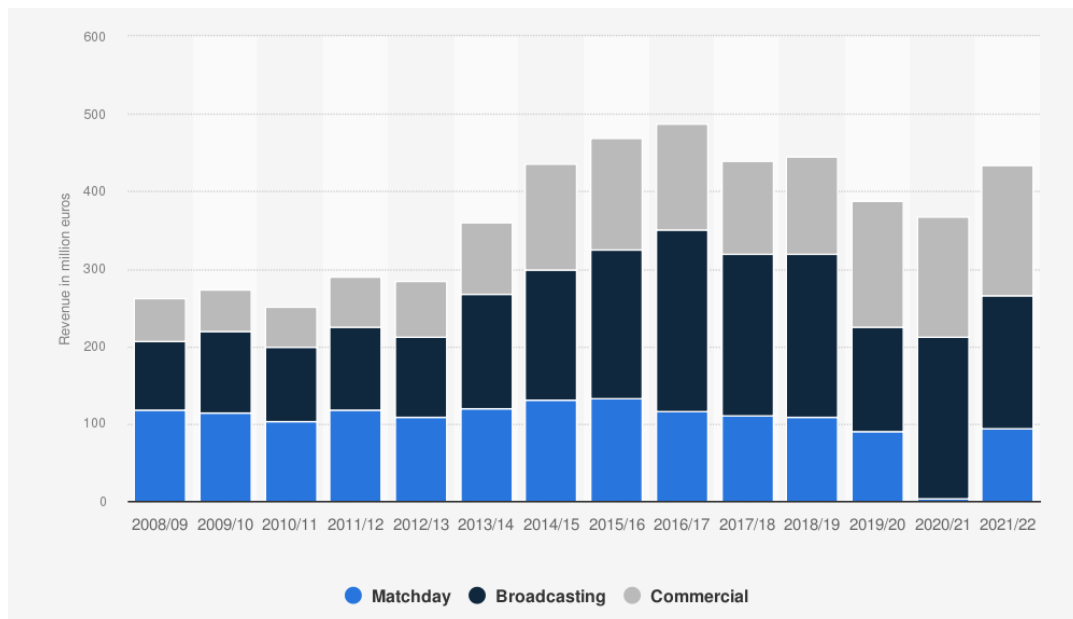


Figure 2. Revenue streams of Arsenal FC from 2008/09 to 2021/22 (in million euros)

Source: (STATISTA.com, 2023 A)

It is estimated that nearly a third of AL’s revenue regularly comes from the Matchday category, which means that it is a significant source of revenue for AL. During the COVID-19 pandemic, AL compensated for the impossibility of obtaining revenue from this source through the Broadcasting category. The club’s efforts were therefore apparently focused on the management of the broadcasting rights.

For perspective, Chelsea FC is mentioned as having a similar model of creating a match-day experience to AL – match-day hospitality packages can be purchased which include comparable benefits. With Chelsea, prices range from lower values than with AL (which does not necessarily mean that they are cheaper). (CHELSEAFC.com, n.d.) Chelsea is mentioned since the total sales can be considered similar, it is also one of the biggest clubs from the same league. Figure 3 shows Chelsea’s sales over time by category.

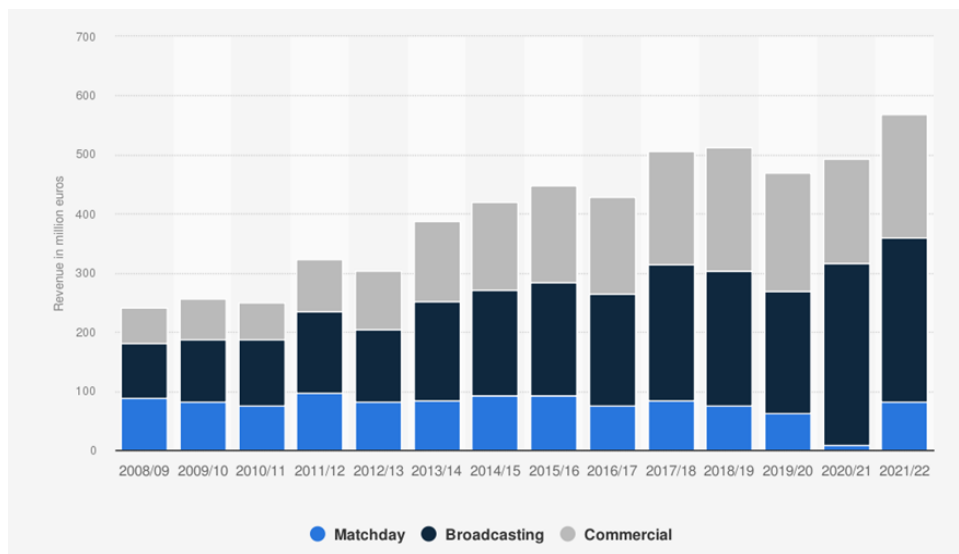


Figure 3. Revenue streams of Chelsea FC from 2008/09 to 2021/22 (in million euros)

Source: (STATISTA.com, 2023 B)

Manchester City (MC) – Case Study

MC has a membership model built differently than AL, with different benefits. MC offers three types of membership: Cityzens Membership (£25 per year), Matchday Membership (£35 per year), and Junior Membership (£20 per year). An interesting benefit of Matchday Membership is, for example, the possibility to take an additional person to one women’s club match for free, which helps to attract more attention to women’s football. (MANCITY.com, n.d.)

In the case of MC, the membership is paid annually, in the case of AL, for the season. AL also provides benefits to the sector with an above-average income at a high price. MC focuses on simpler provider services. An article by Forbes (2018) shows an effort to incorporate technology to increase interaction with fans who cannot attend matches or are not close to the MC’s hometown. As part of the plan, they already incorporated AR and VR concepts in 2018, creating an app that allowed fans to watch the winning celebration in 360°. The next application should have been aimed at children between the ages of 7 and 11. (Tobin, 2018)

Thus, an alignment with the aforementioned study can be found, when children under 7 years of age were not observed to have the ability to create a link between sport and the brand. Therefore, it makes sense to target the application to children from the age of 7, since at this age the abilities to connect a sport with a specific club are expected to be developed. As in the case of AL with the additional example of Chelsea, the revenue sources of MC were also investigated in this case. The MC’s performance by category over time is shown in Fig. 4.

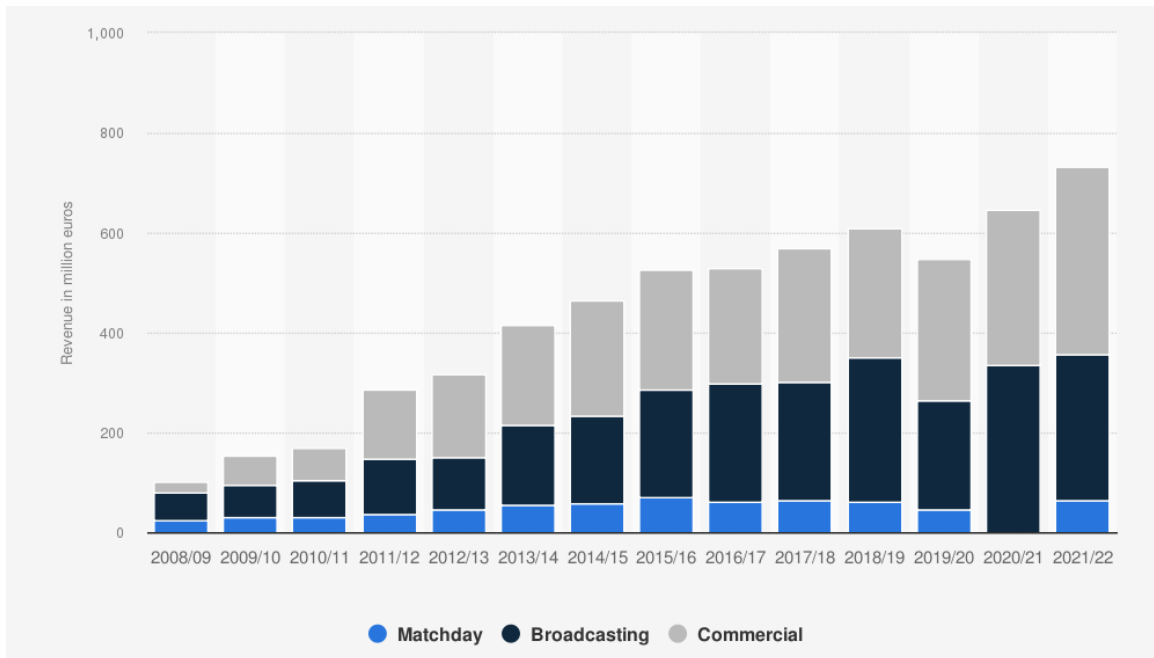


Figure 4. Revenue streams of Manchester City from 2008/09 to 2021/22 (in million euros)

Source: (STATISTA.com, 2023 C)

Compared to AL and Chelsea, in the case of MC, match-day experience revenue is a relatively small part of the total revenue. It can be concluded that MC does not put sufficient emphasis on this area. On the other hand, despite this fact, the overall level of sales is higher compared to AL and Chelsea. This means that MC has different strategic goals, or the basic business purpose (profitability) is fulfilled in a different way (since these are private clubs, basic economic principles can be applied here).

The Basketball League (TBL) – Case Study

The TBL is a relatively new American professional basketball league that emphasizes the experience for fans, local communities, and business partners. They achieve this through visits to schools and clinics (players read to children, and lecture about the negative effects of drugs), cooperation with non-profit organizations, and youth camps, or they try to create an environment suitable for family entertainment. So, the philosophy is to provide the youth with “role models”. (THEBASKETBALLLEAGUE.com, n.d.)

Based on the analysis of available official materials, it follows that the opportunity to own the club is offered to the private sector. TBL proclaims low risk with a certain return on investment. It also follows that the method of building a sponsorship network is up to the owner, as well as securing revenues from the club’s activities. Local businesses in each local market are supposed to create a source of income to cover the costs of the match. TBL describes the market situation as favourable for entry (the barrier is low). The primary value is to be generated

through communities. However, this is a description of the situation in 2019. (THEBASKETBALL LEAGUE.com, 2019)

MK Dons (MKD) – Case Study

The football club from the second highest English league realizes that it receives essential information directly from the fans, which it tries to involve in management via fan representatives. The ticket pricing strategy and promotional activities are then determined through meetings between fans and club executives. The club's ticket sales strategy is based on the highest possible price availability of tickets. It is also important to focus on families, as this way the club will get more visitors at once. Children under the age of 12 have free entry, which is communicated mainly in primary schools and junior football clubs. (EFL.com, 2019)

For the 2023/2024 season, the club has changed the ticket price strategy for younger age groups. The prices applied for the (previously) under 12 age categories are now applied for the under 14 category and the under 12 has changed to under 21. With this, the club wants to attract a larger number of young spectators to the stands. (MKDONS.com, n.d.)

Fan Controlled Football – Case Study

Fan Controlled Football (FCF) is a professional indoor American football league that is built on the decisions of the fans. They make decisions via the application. The votes are tallied and relayed to the coaches on the sideline, who then direct the game accordingly. Games are streamed live on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, which are especially popular among the virtual gaming community. It is mainly about the younger generation. This helped differentiate the FCF from traditional sports leagues and helped attract a new generation of fans.

The rules of the game have been modified to make it more dynamic (fewer players in the field, smaller fields, etc.). The fan voting system is based on the so-called FanIQ. This is a score that serves to increase the level of the fan. The higher the level, the stronger the voting right. FanIQ is increased through fan interactions with the application. (FCF.io, n.d.A)

For example, fans can decide on the following:

- Drafting players into teams: Fans can vote on players on the roster. The league has a draft where fans can vote on players in real-time. The draft takes place in the weeks leading up to the start of the FCF season.
- Real-time game tactics: Fans vote on the type of play they want to see, and the team coach must choose the play with the most votes.
- Team and jersey branding decisions: Fans can vote on various aspects of each team's branding, such as the team's name, logo, and the jersey design.
- Choosing team names and mascots: Fans can vote on each team's name and choose a team mascot.
- Selection of players to participate in the games: Fans can vote on which players they want to see in the game. Players with the most votes are more likely to be in the field.
- Game rules voting: Fans can vote on league rules and policies, such as what types of games are allowed, what the rules should be for the league over time, and how teams should be penalized for rule violations.

FCF, through its partnership with IBM, provides fans with various data and statistics about the game and players in real-time. The concepts of AI and machine learning are also involved here. Fans can view these statistics in the app during the match, where they also vote on their team's tactics. (Nehme and Adler, 2021)

According to official sources, the first season started in 2021. FCF, through the partnership with Twitch, achieved 10 million live-streaming views and over two million fan interactions (voting on game tactics, draft picks, and other voting) during this season. Four teams were present in the first season. In the second season, FCF collected USD40 million and used this money to create four more teams. (FCF.io, n.d.B)

FCF’s debut games on the Twitch platform reached more than 700 thousand live viewers. Ranked as the most-watched sporting event on Twitch during its opening weekend. FCF also achieved high levels of viewer engagement, with viewers spending an average of 30 minutes watching the games and engaging with the interactive elements of the FCF format. (SportsPro, 2021) While there are many indications of the success of the league, no profit has been generated so far, but the plan is to break even by the end of 2023. (Casey, 2022)

4.3. Summarizing the findings from the analyzed case studies and examples from the practice of the selected clubs and leagues

Table 2 lists all the mentioned examples and case studies under the relevant categories. The purpose of the table is to communicate the key findings from the analysis of examples and case studies more effectively. Individual cases were categorized based on similarity of targeting, characteristics, way of involving fans in management or community building and purpose of involvement.

Table 2. Summary of the key takeaways (pieces of knowledge) from practical case studies and examples

Category	Clubs/leagues	Segment – target audience	Characteristics – basic description of the case/example	Way of involving fans in club management/community building	Purpose of involvement
A new league based primarily on the involvement of fans in management	FCF	Generation Z, American football fans	Incorporating modern technologies to differentiate from traditional forms of fan interaction	Voting in real time through the application	Maximizing fan interaction
Social policy and approaching local communities	TBL	American teenagers, families with children	Focus on community, building local networks, delivering value	A higher level of interaction between club members and fans	Creation of local networks at the lowest levels of the system – use of the word-of-mouth effect

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<p>A separate fan body – fan representatives</p>	<p>MU, HT, MKD</p>	<p>Segment of proactive fans</p>	<p>The possibility of personal contact with the club’s management, encouraging all fans to express their opinions and questions</p>	<p>Indirect communication between management and fans at regular meetings</p>	<p>Creating a formal communication channel between the management and the fans – increasing communication</p>
<p>Focusing on the experience of visiting the stands – strengthening the feeling of belonging to the club (exclusive concepts for fans)</p>	<p>AL, MC, FC</p>	<p>Long-time fans, junior fans, fans with above-average incomes</p>	<p>Classification of fans according to socio-demographic factors; each fan should find a program for themselves; however, the middle segment may not be sufficiently fragmented in terms of age and income</p>	<p>Creating more touch points while consuming services</p>	<p>Maximization of revenues resulting from the holding of matches</p>
<p>The right to vote via membership</p>	<p>FCB</p>	<p>Long-time fans</p>	<p>The possibility for fans to directly vote for issues related to the club (e.g., the election of the president), if the fans meet certain criteria and show their ID when joining the membership</p>	<p>Fans can vote in different ways, electronically or by mail; this creates a form of independent isolated democracy</p>	<p>Using the high awareness of fans for the benefit of the club, satisfying the need of an interested party for a fee</p>
<p>Voting on player rosters or the presence of athletes on the All-star games format and choosing the best player</p>	<p>Pro Bowl (NFL), All-Star Race NASCAR, All-Star NBA, All-Star MLB, F1 Pilot of the day</p>	<p>Fans with favorite players, or fans following the performance of the players during the season</p>	<p>The possibility for fans to use their knowledge about the league, clubs and players in an isolated environment, or without affecting the course of the season</p>	<p>Roster voting, where fans choose the best players of the season</p>	<p>Involvement of fans without direct influence on the management of clubs – satisfying the need of fans to show their knowledge</p>

<p>One-time vote on the choice of logo, name, mascot of the club</p>	<p>SK, WC, FIFA</p>	<p>Fans of the league where the club in question is a participant; local residents if it is a new club of a particular place</p>	<p>The possibility for fans to participate in building the brand through voting on some elements of the brand</p>	<p>Brand building should be based on the knowledge of the segment to create associations close to it; through segment voting on the selection of brand elements, the club can get closer to the desired segment perception of a potential brand</p>	<p>Involvement of fans, direct influence on the brand – it can be a form of satisfying the demands of the segment</p>
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Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on the references listed in the text above

The findings summarized above clearly show that clubs can use various modern ICTs to implement fan voting on selected issues. Various options for involving fans in creating a loyal community are also described. For sports club managers, these summarized findings provide a source of inspiration and a wide range of ideas. From these various tools, the manager of a specific club or other organization can choose a combination that respects the conditions and restrictions of the given club.

4.4. Analysis of data provided by the SFA – visitors of football matches

The following section describes the results of the data analysis of SFA data for the purpose of obtaining knowledge about the attendance of football matches in Slovakia. Figure 5 below shows the average number of spectators in the stands at all levels from the 2016/2017 season to the 2020/2021 season. From the time series, an increasing trend can be observed from the first season to the third (2018/2019), and from the following season, there was a decrease due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

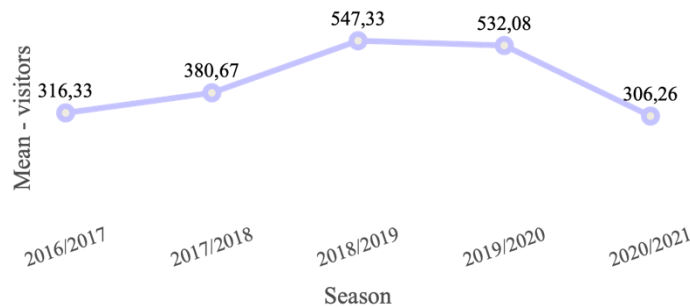


Figure 5. Visualization of the mean number of match visitors in time

Source: SFA data

However, the SFA data also provides insight into the attendance at the stands of individual leagues. The Fortuna league can be called the most visited on average (for all observed periods), as can be seen in Figure 6. It is also the highest football league in Slovakia. The second most visited league on average is the II. League. The third position in the order occupied by the 1st SK futsal league is interesting. The next place was taken by the qualification for the youth competition under the age of 19 with the designation Qualif. for I. LSD – U19. The Slovnaft cup took fifth place in average attendance throughout all seasons. This is the renamed Slovak Cup, the winner of which represents Slovakia in the UEFA European League.

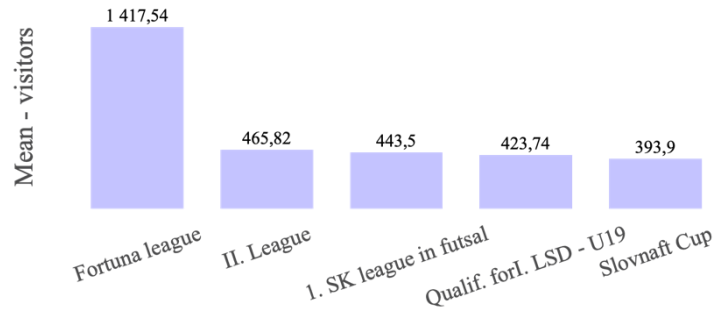


Figure 6. Visualization of the mean number of match visitors by leagues

Source: SFA data

However, it is also possible to analyze the time series of attendance at the stands of selected leagues over time. For the purposes of this study, the first two most attended leagues were selected. The following leagues in order are similar in progress and proceed similarly to the attendance of the second league. For visualization, they were therefore not included in the graph in Figure 7. An interesting phenomenon occurred in the 2018/2019 season for the Fortuna League. After an increase in the two previous seasons, there was a sharp decrease. The decline in the following seasons can be justified by the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the decline in the mentioned season is not clear.

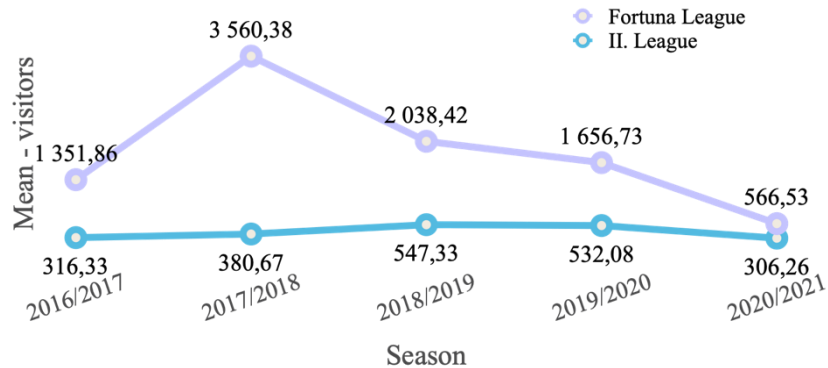


Figure 7. Visualization of the mean number of match visitors by selected leagues in time

Source: SFA data

This situation was addressed in an article from the sports section of the Pravda Daily (2019). The lack of interest was commented on by Milan Lešický, who claims that it is a general lack of interest of Slovaks in national sports competitions. In football, one of the factors is the decline in club affiliation of fans, which was maintained at a level especially in the club Dunajská Streda (visitors here increased in the 2018/2019 season compared to the previous season) and in Trnava. Another reason is the absence of football derbies, which created tension. The movement of players between clubs also did not contribute to this situation, since, according to the analyst, the fans did not have time to form a relationship with the players. Additionally, the contrast of the level of playing with the increasingly broadcast European leagues can also be considered an influential factor. (Zeman, 2019)

It can be concluded that this is a managerial failure, as the demands of the fans were not considered sufficiently. Fans seem to be under-involved in governance and community. It would be appropriate to investigate the

experience of the fans on the day of the match. According to the analyzes described in this article, this is an important factor. Underestimating it can have serious consequences. An example can also be the recent event F1 Grand Prix Miami. Here, fans criticized the too-high price of tickets, which did not correspond with the value obtained. The prices of food products and drinks were perceived negatively as well. Fans also complained about the lack of view of the track, with their seat constantly in direct sunlight. The statement of one of the fans who claimed that he did not feel “among his own” is critical. The organizers did not satisfy the demands of the fans, and because of this, the event was perceived very negatively. (Pavlík, 2023)

4.5. Recommendations in the form of the proposed process of analysis and involvement of fans in the management of sports clubs

Since the aim of the study was to focus on managerial recommendations, a process model for involving fans in club management was proposed (Fig. 8). The idea is to involve the fans in management so that the club’s strategic goals are achieved. A frequently expressed concern is the extent to which fans should be involved in governance. That is so that the fans do not get out of control. Therefore, the basic forms of involvement of fans in management are distinguished in the model. This is about ways that do not have a direct impact on the management of the club. It can be the choice of an anthem, a logo, a mascot, or a slogan. It can also be about fan events, where fans can decide on the time of the event, refreshments, etc. For example, the club can organize a fan meeting on the club’s premises.

At the beginning of the process, it is necessary to analyze the fans or viewers. The club must know its segments and find out their requirements. Based on the analyses, it is necessary to establish meaningful strategic goals with an orientation towards the fans. The next step depends on whether the club has an official or unofficial fan base. If the fans have established their fan club, it is recommended to support this club through official channels. This leads directly to involvement in management (such as the fan events).

If a club has an established official fan base, it should create (if it does not exist) or modify a community-building plan to align with strategic objectives. Subsequently, in accordance with the plan, it is necessary to start building communication channels (social networks and the web) and be active on them, trying to increase the activity of fans (increasing the number of interactions with fans).

If the community is built (indicators: number, interactions between club and fans, interactions between fans, the positivity of fan comments, etc.), it is possible to start involving fans in the management. Each involvement of fans in the management should be measured by predetermined indicators of success (number of positive feedbacks from fans, the mood of fans during the involvement process, number of involved fans, etc.). Each indicator must have its own threshold, the crossing of which indicates success. Subsequently, it is possible to measure success. If the basic management involvement is successful, it is possible to proceed to advanced types of fan involvement in management (creating a fan body, electing fan representatives, etc.).

After such involvement, it is recommended to get feedback, based on which the processes should be modified. This is followed by a verification of whether the created system fulfils the strategic goals. If so, it is good to collect the lessons learnt that can be used in the future. If not, the strategic goals should be adjusted, as they may not have been set realistically enough. The process continues again. Also, if the indicators have not been fulfilled, it is necessary to return to additional community building, as perhaps the fans have not yet developed an emotional relationship with the club and the community.

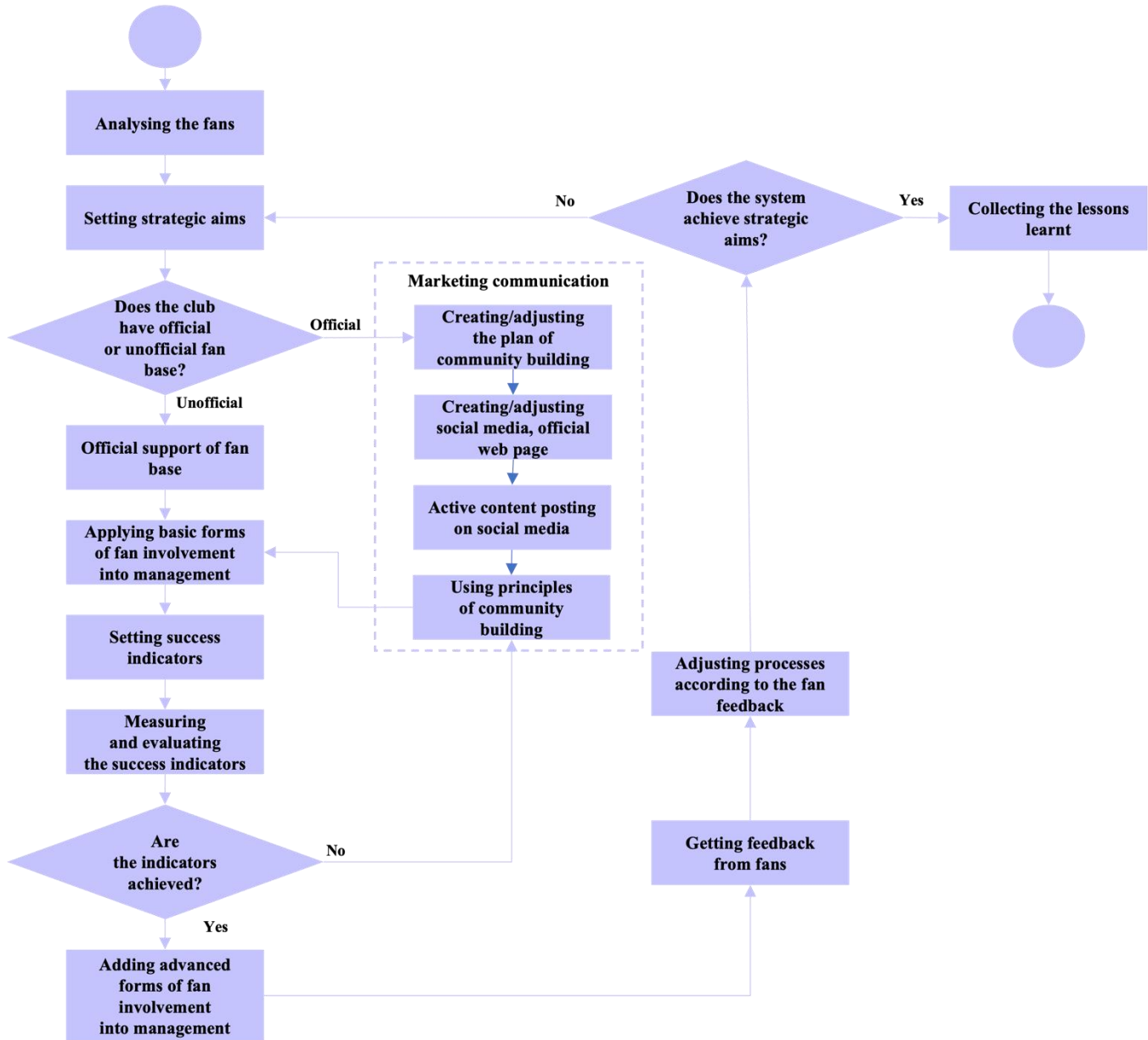


Figure 8. Proposal of the process of fans involvement into the sports club's management

Source: authors' own elaboration

For a better approximation of the audience/fan analysis process, a process diagram was created, which is shown below (Fig. 9). In the first step, it is necessary to evaluate the free resources of the club that can be used for the given process. Subsequently, with the help of brainstorming, it is recommended to establish possible variants of ways of performing the analysis of fans or viewers. Variants are evaluated using the critical success factor method. This method directs the management to choose the most suitable variant considering the club's resources. The continuation of the process depends on whether the club has decided to carry out the analysis in-house or whether it has decided to outsource the process. In their own direction, the usual managerial steps follow – planning, implementation, and evaluation of the survey. When outsourcing, the selection of a suitable company

must be performed. The sports club then plans a survey with the selected company, and then regular communication takes place. The selected company will evaluate the survey. Subsequently, managerial implications will be determined, which will serve for setting the strategic goals.

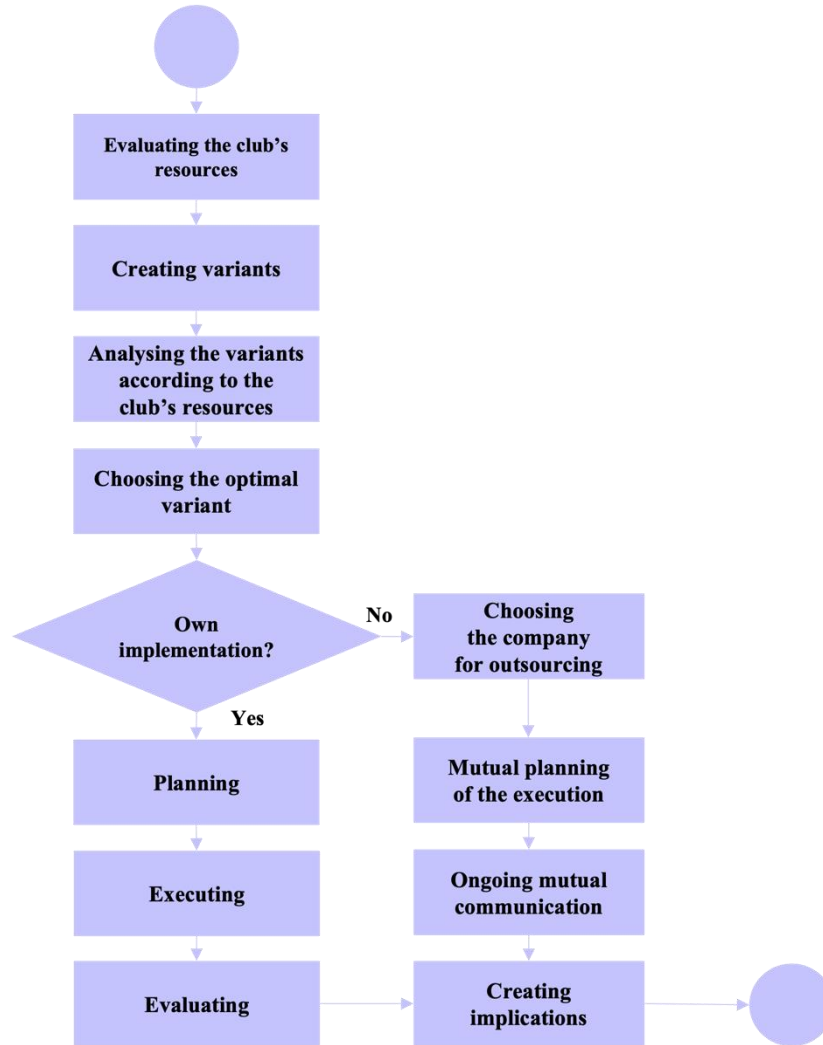


Figure 9. Proposal of the process of fans analysis from the perspective of sports club's management

Source: authors' own elaboration

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of the article was to provide an overview of current knowledge in the field of analysis and involvement of fans of sports clubs in community-building processes and in selected managerial issues for achieving the long-term sustainability of these sports organizations. This goal was fulfilled through the achieved and interpreted research results. The results led to the formulation of the following points:

- Fans are key stakeholders of a sports club as they have developed an emotional bond with the club which leads to their loyalty even when the club is not doing well (tolerance depends on the level of commitment).

- To satisfy the needs or demands of the fans towards the club, it is necessary to carry out analyses. Accurately defining the fans' needs is a prerequisite for fans involvement in management. Theoretical knowledge indicates that sports fans demand their involvement in the club management. However, the sports club should know exactly how the fan imagines being involved in the management of the club.
- Analyzes of practical examples of fan analysis by various sports clubs were carried out. Indicators of fan satisfaction with ticket prices and indicators of fan satisfaction with the experience of the match day are most often investigated. For future analyzes of fans, the authors of this article recommend including satisfaction indicators with indicators related to inclusivity or sustainability concepts.
- Fears often prevail that involving fans in management leads to anarchy. Therefore, the authors of this article propose a gradual and careful involvement of fans in management. In addition to building the community, it is possible to use simpler forms of involvement of fans in management (decision on the club's anthem, the decision on some elements of upcoming club events – what kind of refreshments the fans prefer, etc.), or such forms that will indirectly affect the operation of the club. Only when these simple forms of fan involvement in governance are successful can the club proceed to advanced forms of fan involvement in governance (e.g., by creating a fan body with voting rights).
- Analyzes of practical examples and case studies related to fan involvement in management, but also to ways of bringing fans closer to the club (e.g., how AL and Chelsea provide hospitality options to fans to create a sense that the club values the fans) were performed. A distinctive way of involving fans in the management of the sports club for the American sports markets is the opportunity to vote on the players who will participate in the All-star games. For England within football, the creation of fan bodies that have voting rights is common. In this case, systems of indirect democracy are created, where members of fan bodies are representatives of all fans. A similar element was observed in the case of the Spanish club FC Barcelona, where, however, a separate system of direct democracy is being created within the club, since every fan meeting the specified criteria can directly vote, for example, on the selection of the club's president.
- Enhancing the experience of a fan's physical participation in a match is essential for all sports clubs. This is evidenced by theory as well as examples from practice. The aforementioned AL and Chelsea place a high emphasis on this area, as a result of which their sales increase in parallel. In the article, examples were also given when incorrect or insufficient addressing of this area caused a decline in attendance (for example, Fortuna league – the decline was also demonstrated through the analysis of the SFA data), or fans publicly communicated dissatisfaction (for example, Formula 1 and the event in Miami), which can jeopardize the future level of attendance, or it may affect the brand of the event, but also the brand of the league (since they are mutually linked).

Pandita and Vapiwala (2023) also address fan involvement and engagement in global research. These authors analyze the use of digital strategies and the role of social networks within the research area and selected phenomena associated with sports club fans. These authors also used a qualitative approach to research in their study, as it is also applied in our article. An important result of the given study, which is in line with our findings, is the fact that to achieve the active involvement of fans, active presence on social networks is necessary on the part of sports clubs. Behrens and Ulrich (2022) address this in their research project as well. They draw attention to the importance of showing fans directly in stadiums when creating visual content for the media. Such content then influences the cognitive and affective components of fans' behaviour. This only confirms the value and need to focus on the creation of loyal communities of fans through their involvement in selected activities and management processes of clubs.

Zelenkov and Solntsev (2023) in the context of sports management research draw attention to the dynamics of the development of this entire research area. As part of such oriented research, researchers deal with the business and

social aspects of sports. Our article links both aspects in its content. However, according to the conclusions of the research of these authors, the interest in fan loyalty within the framework of other research projects is rapidly decreasing. Therefore, our study can also be considered as filling this identified knowledge gap in the current period.

To assess the complex results and impacts of changes in the management and (market) performance of sports clubs after the implementation of the proposed processes and steps, it is advisable to choose several relevant criteria and then evaluate them using a multicriteria evaluation (as applied by e.g., Vrabková et al., 2021; Malichová et al., 2016; Ďurišová et al., 2020). Searching for ways to achieve sustainability by looking at its diverse aspects and manifestations in the operation of various types of organizations, including sports clubs, is one of the most frequent topics in current research. This is also confirmed by the studies of the authors Tumová (2019), Soviar et al. (2018), Kucharčíková et al. (2023), Gergel et al. (2019), or Boršoš and Koman (2022).

The limitations of the presented research include those that directly result from the applied methods. The deliberate selection of concrete examples from practice and case studies is always linked to the determination of the final number of such cases and studies that can be included in one research project. At the same time, there are many other cases that could not be included. The future direction of the presented research also includes an orientation towards obtaining primary data in the form of a large new questionnaire survey carried out in Slovakia and in neighbouring countries. This way, it will be possible to supplement the qualitative findings and conclusions with a quantitative component and statistical evaluation of the obtained primary data.

This research paper interconnects theoretical findings with practical examples and multiple use cases. This approach yielded practical pieces of knowledge for sports managers, applicable in their everyday tasks in the management of various sports organizations. The scientific novelty of the article is included in the findings that sports managers are increasingly implementing means and measures to enhance the sports fans' experience. This is being done via involvement in the processes of decision-making and community-building. Application of these concepts in sports management leads to increased fan engagement and stronger relationships between sports clubs and their fans. Finally, this results in a more stable market position. Neglecting fans might negatively impact sports clubs, as it happened in the case of the Slovak football sports market, or the recent example related to the F1 Grand Prix Miami.

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